My Turn
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The Hindu Work Ethic

Rajeev Srinivasan

India has suddenly become a fashionable investment destination. Is this a flash in the pan? I think not. There is a fundamental Hindu work ethic, and India will be a major player in the coming "Asian Century." Americans invoke the thrifty Yankee farmer's "Protestant work ethic" to embody the spirit that conquered a continent. In contrast, Western scholars presume that India's pervasive poverty is due to a Hindu ethic of self-abnegation, fatalism and other-worldliness. Hardly. Hindus are notably successful worldwide.

It is instructive to analyze historical Western attitudes towards East Asians. After the Opium Wars and World War II, the accepted wisdom was that Mongoloid peoples were inherently inferior-dull-witted, slothful, treacherous, imitative. Of course, the economic miracles in Japan, Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore have emphatically repudiated that notion. Pundits give full marks to a "Confucian work ethic."

Similary, there is a "Hindu work ethic." In ages past, India was a major producer of textiles, high-value agricultural products, steel and gems. Further, Hindus were good traders. Phoenicians and Romans came to Malabar for black pepper-worth its weight in gold. Maritime Pallavas dominated South East Asian trade. India has suffered over the last millennium from inevitable cyclical decline, invasions and outright looting, especially by the British. What are the fundamental features of this Hindu ethic? They are: thrift, hard work, sense of duty, respect for the family and education, mathematical and entrepreneurial skills.

For a poor nation, Indians are remarkably thrifty. Those who have lived overseas can testify to the industriousness of Indian small-business owners. And several of California's high-technology millionaires are workaholic Hindus. The Hindu paradigm of dharma-of doing one's duty-is quite the opposite of fatalism. If one's dharma is to be a trader, to amass wealth, there is scriptural authorization to do so.

Hindus have been castigated for being clannish and stand-offish. But the Hindu, like the Japanese or the Jew, is loyal to a unit-the extended family or community. This "tribal" consciousness is crucial in a rapidly shrinking world (note the success of the overseas Chinese).

Indians revere knowledge. Hindu science and mathematics were among the most advanced in the ancient world. Thus, the Hindu's notable predilection for science and technology despite the racist Western stereotype of Hindus as superstitious and primitive. Indians have shown tremendous entrepreneurial skills in the UK, East Africa, Silicon Valley (California, USA) and even in India.

Will all this result in prosperity? The term "the Hindu rate of growth" has been used disparagingly for India's recent history of 2-3% annual growth in GDP. But when the ravaged industrial base, poor infrastructure and stultifying bureaucracy are ameliorated, I believe the true "Hindu rate of growth" is a healthy and sustainable 6-8% a year.

There are limits to growth: environmental degradation, overpopulation, AIDS and cultural homogenization. Imported American television preaching violence, indiscipline and immorality is deleterious. There is also frightening speculation that AIDS might become a pandemic in India. If India can avoid most of these traps, the Hindu work ethic will transform the country in a single lifetime, lifting untold millions from poverty.

Rajeev Srinivasan, a strategic marketing manager in the Silicon Valley, CA, with an MBA from Stanford, is a devout Hindu who pilgrimages to India as often as possible.