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Editorial

If I Were King of India

the Editor

Enough of this pernicious rumor that i am soon to be designated the king of india.

Not that we don't need better leadership, but my vows as a sannyasin prescribe it. Better, is it not, to be the humble sovereign of one's inner realms than the king of all the world. Better for the world, as well. Still, as promised, I will list seven strategic things I would have done first as Maharaja.

1. Fire the Transportation Minister. India doesn't have a traffic problem. India is a traffic problem. Leave it alone. If India had a Swiss-like railway system leading to a German-style Autobahn, it wouldn't be India. Too sterile. Reflection leads the clear mind to a singular conclusion: India depends for her very existence on congested traffic. Why? Because life is enriched by an elephant stopped in front of you at the stoplight and helping the farmer thrash his grains with your Mercedes. Because India's curious cacophony of traffic is a kind of unofficial national anthem, modulated by taxi drivers leaning irrelevantly on their horns to provide that cosmic background noise. Because life on earth is not always user-friendly, but filled with chaos and clamoring, din and disorder, a kind of sacred pandemonium that is naturally claustrophobic and can't thrive indoors. To design this away would but destroy the last living human caravanserai, the last undammed and undamning sea of civilization.

2. Outlaw Saluting. You must cring inside as I do everytime someone salutes,

be it a doorman or a dhoby. It's so puerile, anachronistic, farcical ...military. Let them bow if they must, even scrape, but no saluting. The royal punishment is life in the army, where chronic saluting is deemed salutary.

3. Ban Plastic Water Pots. It may seem a trivial transgression to some, but the plague of plastic kumbhas is a paradigm of our cultural demise. Remember grandma's finely-tooled brass pot? Sure it was heavy and hard to clean, but it was a family artifact. If we permit pink and blue synthetic water pots, then next the masses will demand polyethylene wedding pendants, disposable paper banana leaves and pre-cooked rice from Japan. Never! His Imperiousness proclaims, "No more plastic pots."

4. Hire Alcoholics Anonymous. Don't panic. The AA evangelists would be contracted to run a 12-step program for people addicted to promises. It's a dark secret that India is wantonly promise-strewn, which the dictionary defines as "strewing about promises one never intends to fulfill." Why do we say we will do this, help with that, and then let it drop? Because it's intoxicating. A mild euphoria wells up as we say "yes, you can count on me" when we mean "not in a million years." Admit it, we're agreement junkies, and our inability to say no to a vintage vow is ruining our families and threatening national security. The new rules will require promise breakers to greet others with the admission, "My name is Rajiv, and I'm a pledgaholic." Politicians, of course, will be exempted.

5. Let India Become Bharat. Time's up on having two names, one for the aumboys and another for the rest of the world. Bharat is more beautiful and historical. Sri Lanka changed its name, shedding Colonial connotations attached to Ceylon. In 1989 Myanmar did it, changing back from Burma. Ditto Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). I have calculated that one billion man-hours are lost annually explaining the foreign origins of the name India. All that Indus River dialectic would end and the Indian economy would increase 5% due to saved intellectual resources. We can use that money to change all the atlases and signs.

6. Censor Discussions on Bribes, Caste Abuse and Dowry. We will outlaw all public and private talk about such things. Complaining of social injustice carries a Rs.1,000 fine; explaining one's position adds three months in jail. Crass censorship? Maybe, but any first-year psych student knows that legislating silence on these subjects will solve them. That's because people can live with injustice as long as

they can complain about, interpret and rationalize it. Empty talk forestalls action, soothing the conscience. When verbal palliatives are out of stock, the right medicines will be eagerly swallowed.

7. Mandate More Melas. These regional fairs are in many ways our most charming and dynamic religious encounters-colorful collisions with mile-long sweet shops, dharma dramas and roadside religionists. Just one problem. There's not nearly enough of them. So the throne will require every village to hold one major mela each year. That's fair enough, and that's enough fairs.