

"Time" for a Sensitivity Check?

Contributed by Chitra Raman
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Like many whose responses roiled the blogosphere, I was outraged by Joel Stein's column in TIME magazine (July 5, 2010) in which he described how Indian immigrants have altered his hometown of Edison, New Jersey. But when I shared the letter of protest I sent TIME's editors, I found to my surprise that several on my email list thought I had overreacted to the column. I found similar sentiments reflected in the Wall Street Journal blog India Real Time. A commentary on the furor by Pranay Gupte appeared in the Indian newspaper, The Hindu. (July 1 2010). In it, Mr. Gupte says "I know Mr. Stein well, and he is scarcely a racist." I'm sure that is true. I'm sure too, that Mr. Stein has soft puppy-brown eyes; that he is kind to his grandmother; and that he writes columns that many find hilarious. All of the above does not change the fact that the column in question is just plain offensive. Which is why it baffles me when, instead of rapping him on the knuckles for knuckleheaded writing, fellow Indians jump up to provide more creative excuses for Stein than does Stein himself.

"TIME" FOR A SENSITIVITY CHECK?

By

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If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed and color, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon.

George David Aiken (1892 -1984)
Republican Senator from Vermont

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What

Mr. Gupte terms "cultural defensiveness" is what I term self-respect.

One can have pride in one's unique culture, experience solidarity with one's community and still feel part of a larger national identity. Anyone who doubts that is possible really ought to take another look at India.

Yes, yes, Americans know all about the poverty and periodic flare-ups of communalism. What they also should be told is that Indian citizens are not expected to conform to some bland, homogenized national standard that defines "Indianness." And that in what is a majority Hindu nation, mosques and churches are not tucked away from main roads and hidden behind trees and hills.

I'd remind Indian-Americans who are acutely embarrassed by public displays of "cultural defensiveness" that immigrants to America from every corner of the world also celebrate their festivals, observe their religion, practice their social norms, and preserve their cuisine. Elementary school children in my neighborhood celebrate Cinco de Mayo with Mexicans, Fat Tuesday or Paczki Day with the Polish, and St. Patrick's Day with the Irish. What is so uniquely intolerable about Indian Hindus wanting to preserve the symbols and customs of their culture?

Mr.

Stein, who portrays the Indian immigrant as akin to an invasive weed, describes his feelings upon returning to his altered hometown as "a sense of loss and anomie." He says he understands "why India is so damn poor" based on his observation of certain "not-as-brilliant" Indians; and tops it all by presenting Hindu gods as bizarre. Mr.

Stein wonders why he and his classmates at school were unable to coin a "better" epithet than "dot heads" for a group "whose gods have multiple arms and an elephant nose." It is hard to imagine any other ethnic or religious minority in America meekly tolerating similar potshots in a leading magazine

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disagree with Mr. Gupte's view that Indians "often tend to be bereft of irony and a self-deprecating sense of humour; they are given to being far too readily offended as a tribe." I think we are world leaders in self-deprecation.

Many of us hugely enjoy the cultural caricatures of Canadian standup comedian Russell Peters and other emerging jokesters of Indian origin. We smile and shake our heads when Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert embellish their wickedly funny satire with absurd depictions of Hindu iconography. But what can be laughed off as humor when expressed with a shrug and a sly wink on a stage, or on a television channel marked "Comedy," can sound repugnant when it appears in a column that represents "Opinion." Readers of TIME magazine have come to expect somewhat higher standards of taste and subtlety.

To see how easily the Indian genius for self-deprecation can slide into outright loathing, one must read Sagarika Ghose's defence of Stein in the Hindustan Times. (July 13, 2010). Her vitriolic overgeneralizations of Indian-Americans are so depthless and stereotype-driven as to be more cartoonish than offensive. She could star in her very own Saturday Night Live standup routine showing the wimpy Joel Steins of the world what real bigotry looks like.

Ghose's tantrum in print points out that "The distinctive cultural traits of the Italian American or an Irish American are far more acceptable in the American salad bowl than the distinctive cultural markers of the Indian American."

To the extent that is true, it is due more to the self-doubt and reticence of the urbanized Indian with respect to his cultural heritage (possibly because of being ignorant of it). It is not as if Italian Americans and Irish Americans were spared their share of prejudice and exclusion. They've just been around longer. Upton Sinclair's searing novel "The Jungle", set in the early 1900's, chronicled the ruthless exploitation of Chicago's working-class Lithuanian immigrants. The record of bigotry and racism in America predates alien gods and dot heads. It is offset by the American capacity to evolve through relentless self-examination and truly representative public discourse.

Ghose's own scorn for the "distinctive cultural traits" of Indian-Americans couldn't be clearer. Their identity, according to her, is summed up by "Bollywood" and "vindaloo" which, she reminds us mockingly, have yet to make it into mainstream America. I know some mainstream Americans who would disagree, such as those who attended a fundraising Bharatanatyam concert by a local high school student in honor of her classmate with autism, or those who mob Indian restaurants during lunch hour.

What then does the model of successful Indian - American assimilation look like? Judging from Ghose's mindset, the answer would be "Impossible." She simultaneously derides the "Americanized Indian with his secret belief in his own whiteness" whose "elephant-nosed identity is best practiced in secret at home" - while admonishing those who do actually possess the spine to wear their culture on their sleeve - "Want to wallow in identity and culture? Don't venture out beyond home." It is remarkable to find the same rhetoric that spouts from the conservative political pulpit in the United States, expressed by a writer whom some Indian-Americans might call a niece, a cousin, a friend.

As

we are often reminded, the reality about standards in journalism is that they are not standard. Remember what happened to veteran journalist Helen Thomas when she told Israelis to "get out of Palestine?" As someone known to make irreverent references to the Old Testament, Mr. Stein must nonetheless be aware of what awaits non-Jewish journalists who publicly criticize or malign Jews or the Jewish faith. They might as well sign their personal professional death warrant.

If

publicly aired ignorance is distasteful, private hatred that grows unchecked by public scrutiny can be devastating. We should reflect on that fact when coming up with palliative excuses for irresponsible journalism. On the night of June 26, 49-year old computer scientist and IIT Kharagpur alumnus Divyendu Sinha was savagely beaten to death by five high school aged boys while taking a walk with his wife and sons. Sinha was a resident of Middlesex County, New Jersey, an area with one of the largest concentrations of Indian Americans in the country.

Mr.

Stein's statement on his Facebook page was telling: "Didn't mean to insult Indians with my column this week. Also stupidly assumed their emails would follow that Gandhi non-violence thing."

See? What he's really saying is that he didn't expect Indians to react. Indians are expected not only to turn the other cheek, but to point helpfully to a fellow Indian and say "Oh wait -- you missed that one."