

Thin Skinned Nation

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On May 2, the President of the United States weighed in on the eating habits of Indians. Explaining the worldwide rise in food prices, he said, “There are 350 million people in India who are classified as middle class. That's bigger than America ... and when you start getting wealth, you start demanding better nutrition and better food. And so demand is high, and that causes the price to go up.”

It took no time for Indians, or those who represent them, to jump all over this claim in self-righteous indignation. Bush was quickly accused of “interference” with India’s internal affairs, as if the per-capita consumption of rice, roti and Kentucky Fried Chicken were a state secret. The Defence Minister called it a cruel joke; Hindu Nationalists demanded that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should “stand up to protect the country’s honour and dignity”; foaming at the mouth, the Left declared that Bush had “gone out of his mind” and demanded a “strong reply” by India, whatever that might be.

Now, Bush is not known for intellectual rigour, in America or anywhere else, but for once his claims were not in contradiction with expert opinion. Writing in the *New York Times*, Paul Krugman listed several reasons for “grains gone wild”: increased meat consumption in China (and, by implication, India), the high price of oil (caused in part by growing demand in China and India), misguided American subsidies for turning crops into biofuels, and government oversight, leading to the depletion of buffer stock. Although India’s exact contribution may be debated, there is little doubt that increased consumption in Asia is contributing to the rise in food prices. It is true, after all, that India has now begun to import wheat, its edible-oil imports are rising, and exports of non-basmati rice have been banned to meet domestic demand.

Taking off their “national honour” spectacles, Indians might note that the amount an Indian eats is really a matter of national shame, and that Bush’s remark is a compliment, even if he did not mean it that way. It is an acknowledgement that middle-class Indians (and let us ignore his wild over-estimate of their numbers) can finally afford to eat well, or at least better than their parents did.

So why did politicians on all sides engage in competitive chest-thumping? Indians have a history with Bush. In 2001, when he named his cat India, much patriotic blood came to a boil at this “insult” to national honour. In the southern state of Kerala, a hundred-and-one dogs were named “Bush” in retaliation. The White House explanation, on its website, was that the cat was named for former Texas Rangers baseball player, Ruben Sierra, who was called “El Indio”. The US Consulate in India floated a second theory: the cat, being

black, was named after India Ink. No matter, national pride was wounded, and Indians did what they do when pride suffers: they burnt effigies, stomped on the American flag, shouted slogans and brandished banners. Hindu Nationalist politician Nitin Gadkari, charged with safeguarding “culture” in the state of Maharashtra, organised a raucous demonstration outside the US Consulate in Mumbai. Among the banners etched in my mind was one that said, “Mr. Bush, India is lion, not cat.” And this was not mere posturing by attention-seeking politicians. Even my faculty colleagues at the Indian Institute of Technology, an elite engineering college, circulated a petition condemning Bush.

Consider that the Indian prime minister were to get himself a dog and name it America. You can be certain that no one will march through New York or San Francisco in protest (“Mr. Singh, America is tiger, not dog”). So, let us overlook Nitin Gadkari’s want of lessons in English grammar and ask: why are Indians so quick to take offence? Even if Bush’s cat had been named explicitly after the country called India, how on earth does that insult the country? I am reminded of an old story from the British Raj in which an Indian babu must go to meet an English Sahib in his bungalow in Calcutta. Deeply conscious of his lack of western refinement, the babu asks his wife, “Should I sit when asked, or remain standing? May I eat with my fingers? Will the Sahib let me inside wearing a dhoti? How should I conduct myself?” The wife rolls her tongue over a betel-leaf and says, “Take offence.” Thus it is now, sixty years after the Sahib departed. And it tells us everything we need to know about India’s position in the world.

About The Author

Sujit Saraf’s novel, *The Peacock Throne*, was published recently by Sceptre.