

*May 23, 2004*

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## **From feel good to feel better**

It feels good to be an Indian abroad this week, much better than it usually does these days. A tempestuous finale to the world's largest electoral exercise, a result that caught everyone slack-jawed, and a denouement that did a world of good for India's image.

Where does one begin the thanks? To the NDA for bowing out with poise – one newspaper here called it a "classy exit" -- despite the tantrums by a section of the BJP on the foreign origin issue? To Sonia Gandhi and her family, for their graceful realization that now is not the time to push the envelope? Or the Indian electorate, the usual victors?

After yawning through most of the month-long election process, the world media was jolted last week by the drama in New Delhi. Forget New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Time, and the Economist (which carries Dr Manmohan Singh on its cover this week), there were editorials in as little known newspapers as the Lebanon Daily News of Pennsylvania and the Register-Guard of Eugene, Oregon.

For a country that has received much bad press for communal (dis)harmony, the story that unfolded last week was a bonanza. Not that the rest of the world is a paragon of religious amity, but the scale and intensity of any violence in India is such that it makes headlines.

So when an Italy-born Roman Catholic woman presented a Sikh who was born in what is now Pakistan to a Tamil-speaking Muslim President as her prime ministerial choice, the world's curiosity was piqued. What ever happened to the "mostly/largely/ predominantly Hindu India" as reporters from the "mostly Christian white United States" put it?

"In a turn of events seemingly tailor-made to demonstrate India's diversity and capacity for coexistence, Mrs. Gandhi, raised a Roman Catholic, is making way for a Sikh prime minister who will be sworn in by a Muslim president, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam," gushed NYT. From the Wall Street Journal: "When Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh saw APJ Abdul Kalam this week for talks on appointing Mr. Singh to lead the Indian government, there wasn't a Hindu in sight. It was simply the Italian-born, Christian leader of the Congress Party that won elections meeting the Muslim president, and proposing a Sikh as prime minister."

Such moments of unchoreographed religious harmony have occurred before in India, most notably during the 1971 war with Pakistan when the top tier of the all-conquering Indian military included a Parsi, a Sikh, a Jew and a Hindu. But that was before the era of live television and Internet. Alas and alack, the western media hasn't paid attention to the Indian cricket and hockey teams, the best showcase of the country's pluralism.

So does this mean we have arrived at utopia? Of course not. As Gujarat showed, we have our bestial moments. So does the United States, as the events in Iraq indicate. But such incidents are aberrations in societies that are largely secular, civil, and plural, no matter what the ideological inclinations of the political parties that call the shots momentarily.

In fact, one particular commentary in the American press caught my eye for an unusual formulation. Writing in the Seattle Times, syndicated columnist Tom Plate spoke of how "While more than 100,000 American and other troops were splashing around Iraq ostensibly to create a democracy...a Hindu-Muslim nation of more than 1 billion people was actually committing democracy."

It was the first time I had heard anyone call India as a Hindu-Muslim nation, a not entirely inaccurate description. A "multireligious nation," would be better and more apt.

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