

OpEd UnMade in USA//Freebooting India's growth story

Beware of snake oil salesmen selling solutions that are sinking America

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Cabinet ministers from India visiting Washington DC for sundry official programs usually stay at the Willard, a historic hotel next to the White House that originated the term lobbying. It was to the lobby of Willard that President Ulysses Grant (1869-1877) repaired for R&R to escape the vexing issues of office, only to be besieged by favor-seekers stalking him. Although VVIPs from India typically remain ensconced in its plush sixth floor suites, lobbied they are. Across from the White House and Willard is another historic building which houses the U.S Chamber of Commerce. Here, in its ornate Hall of Flags that celebrates a dozen exploitative explorers, from Columbus to Cabot to Cortez, U.S Presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, and world leaders from Anwar Sadat to Rajiv Gandhi, have paid their dues at the altar of capitalism.

It is to this building that Indian ministers and bureaucrats minding the economic and financial portfolios gravitate to make their case -- with verve and swagger till some years back about India's "inevitable" rise, and lately with much trepidation and unease about India's growing problems. In either case, they are plied with the usual pabulum about the need for New Delhi to throw open its doors to freebooting foreign capital and goods because (we are told) that is the only way to rise to the dizzy -- ditz? -- heights scaled by western society. So it was this time when Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and Commerce Minister Anand Sharma, accompanied by India's own buccaneering businessmen and babus, arrived in the U.S capital, ostensibly to soothe American disquiet about Indian "protectionism."

A particularly galling moment during the engagement came when an Indian tycoon, clearly in thrall of the American model (the obese one), spoke about the potential to grow trade between the two countries from the current sub-\$ 100 billion to \$ 500 billion by the end of the decade. To illustrate the point, he spoke of a pizza venture he brought to India, making the country the second largest market for the chain outside the U.S., with more than 500 outlets and many more in the offing. The profitable chain, he boasted, had introduced to India cold chain methods that enabled preserving ingredients such as cheese and chicken, making them virtually imperishable.

Yet, just a day before this presentation, 100 yards away in the White House, the Obamas hosted a "kids state lunch" for 50 American pre-teens. They were finalists of a contest that emphasized eating fresh and healthy instead of packing in cheap, industrial grade food -- particularly meat and drink of uncertain provenance and vintage the U.S readily parcels out to the world -- that has left the country with a staggering health care bill. In fact, ever since they took office, the First Couple has been belaboring the message: eat fresh produce, consume more vegetables, abjure sugary sodas and soft drinks, *grow* your own food. But for India, pizza and Pepsi are just fine.

It is not just American food habits that are clogging Indian arteries (our own nutritional recklessness has contributed too). Blindly following America's car-rich legacy has also clogged our roads, befouled our air, and emptied our wallet. Think about it. The automobile is one of the most atrociously devised and standardized contraption: A car meant for four or five people is typically driven by one person 90 per cent of the time with no change in its basic design; it is also idle some 98 per cent of its lifespan. It was a great breakthrough when it was designed a century ago because the U.S -- a thinly populated country of vast open spaces and great distances -- had just stumbled into the discovery of oil when nuclear families were in vogue. It led to a development of a lifestyle and economic credo that worked well for the U.S for decades before the pressure to maintain it led to its many follies. But for India...now?

Yet, snake oil salesmen in Washington DC are selling us the same "one-size fits all" economic model. Eat and drink more of the wasteful, sugar-laden, carcinogenic junk, own poorly-designed vehicles forsaking the commons approach, buy more of everything in big-box stores suckering us into surplus etc., -- as if such conspicuous consumption and sybaritic excess will solve our economic woes, and in the process somehow address our basic issues. Meanwhile, America itself is trying to tear away in some small measure from the model it continues to promote vigorously, with new emphasis on consuming clean, healthy, self-grown food, promoting walking, biking, public transport etc. -- everything India did in abundance till recently when the American dream, or nightmare, took hold.

Foreign (American) investment may temporarily rescue Indian economy. But there will be a price to pay for aping America when the U.S itself -- effete and enervated by its excesses -- is having second thoughts about its model. The best American exports are not its goods or capital but its small, nifty, universal ideas -- from garage start-ups to open source -- that elevates the commons and reduces the dominance of monopolies. That is what India needs to tap into. The solution to India's problems does not lie in Willard, much less the Hall of Flags where India is waving a white one of surrender to American monopolist prescriptions.

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