

BEFRIENDING THE SAFFRON TIGER

— Balance in Teaching the India Economy

By Christopher L. Shaw

Slumdog Millionaire did more to introduce modern India to students in American schools than anything in recent history. The 2008 Academy Award winner for Best Picture highlighted a society poised between poverty and wealth, tradition and modernity, medieval torture and twenty-first century technology. For some, the film confirmed the worst stereotypes of a poor, developing nation wracked by class conflict. Others saw the film as the latest manifestation of India's debut as a nuclear superpower and economic juggernaut.

Teachers walk a fine line as they teach India. This nation defies stereotypes. We need to prepare students for a global economy dominated by four powers—the US, EU, China, and India; at the same time, we must acknowledge a nation in a dynamic transition, where elderly women still break rocks by hand to build highways that will connect some of the most important information technology centers in the world.¹ To complicate the task further, India's modern economic and political history is unique: a former British colony is now the planet's largest democracy; an avowed socialist economy at independence has turned twenty-first century free market locomotive—yet with strong vestiges of a bloated public sector rife with corruption.

A three-part approach follows for teaching India and its current economy: income growth, social equity, and emerging superpower status. Each approach highlights the apparent paradox that is India. Teachers and students must embrace the paradox in order to begin to understand this vitally important place and its peoples.

INCOME

A few stark statistics illustrate the extraordinary growth of income and output:

- Income in 2008 exceeded 1.2 trillion US dollars²
- Income grew that year by more than seven percent on a per person basis
- Robust growth continued in 2009 in the five to six percent range even in the midst of the global recession³

Growth does not say much about living standards, and these have improved markedly in the last two generations. The World Bank reports that the proportion of Indian citizens living on less than one dollar a day declined over the last quarter century from forty-two percent in 1981 to twenty-four percent in 2005.⁴ Poverty remains, however. Even as a smaller proportion of the population is poor, the absolute number of poor has remained more or less constant, at more than 600 million people. More than eighty-five percent of the working population works in the unorganized sector—a catch-all term referring to sidewalk barbers, fruit stands, and other undocumented commerce—and live on less than

twenty rupees a day (the current exchange rate is approximately forty-five rupees to the US dollar). Income inequality appears to have grown in both rural and urban areas in the past fifteen years.⁵

Population growth is an issue. Unlike China, India has never attempted to control population growth systematically; indeed in a democracy as large, diffuse, and diverse as India, targeted, top-down policies are difficult to pass, let alone implement nationwide. A majority of the population (though a shrinking majority) works in the agricultural sector, and thereby continues to view children as an economic asset rather than a liability. In economic terms, families that see children as assets—sources of work or income—tend to have more; families who send their children to school incur significant costs to do so. In 1978, India's population totaled about 640 million people, and it was growing at more than one million people per month. That has slowed considerably, to an estimated 1.34 percent per year in 2008, compared to 0.55 percent in China. A quarter of the population had less than an acre on which to grow food. Thirty years later, India's population has almost doubled. Hunger is still an issue. So is obesity.

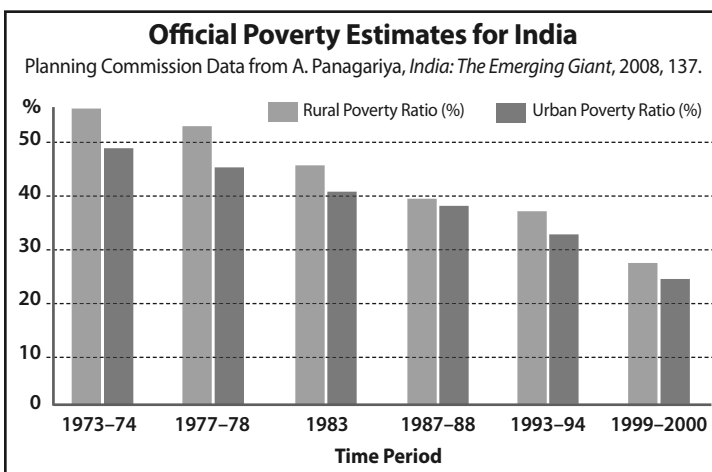


Chart source: <http://www.theleftcoaster.com/archives/013819.php>.

By some such measures, India is already a developed country. *The Star* reported in November 2008 that based on a nationwide survey by the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), one of India's most renowned research hospitals, some 125 million adolescents—about half of all teenagers—are overweight and vulnerable to Type II diabetes. The survey found that fifty-six percent of Indians opt for fast food when they go out; McDonald's outlets in India serve 13,000 customers per minute, one of the world's highest averages.⁶

At the same time, hunger is a major and growing problem. According to the 2008 Global Hunger Index compiled by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, India ranked sixty-six out of eighty-eight developing nations in terms of food security—a measure not only of food availability for a given population but also its access to that food.⁷ Despite years of robust economic growth, India scored worse than nearly twenty-five Sub-Saharan African countries and all of South Asia, except Bangladesh. Comparing Indian states to countries, Madhya Pradesh falls between Ethiopia and Chad. The Punjab region, the least hungry in India, ranks below Gabon, Honduras, and Việt Nam. IFPRI cites “high levels of child under-nutrition and calorie insufficiency” as the reasons for India's low ranking; malnutrition among Indian children is more severe than in most sub-Saharan African countries.⁸

SOCIAL EQUITY

In other measures of living standards, too, India presents a mixed and potentially confusing picture. Clean water ranks among the most critical factors contributing to a reduction in poverty; without clean water, mothers and children are more often sick, under-nourished, and unfit for school or work. In India, virtually one hundred percent of city dwellers have access to clean water when non-piped sources are included (that is, water gathered in rain barrels and such); excluding non-piped sources, the rate remains high at eighty to eighty-five percent of urban residents. In contrast, in rural areas access to sanitation rose from five percent in 1991 to about twenty percent ten years later, a stunning accomplishment. However, the stated goal of the Indian government to increase that rate to fifty-three percent by 2017 is, according to a World Bank report, “unlikely without massive new investment.”⁹

One major thrust in Delhi has been a nationwide push in elementary education. In 2001, the government debuted *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All), a program designed to ensure one hundred percent enrollment in grades one through eight for the 200 million children in this age group.¹⁰ This program, among the most ambitious anywhere in the world, seeks to have all children enrolled by 2010. The government wants to ensure that a primary school exists within one kilometer of all towns, villages, and habitations, is led by trained teachers, and generates support from the surrounding community. While the global recession has slowed progress, the government remains committed to achieving basic literacy and numeracy for all Indian children.¹¹

A major obstacle to social equity in India is the caste system. Although the new Republic of India rendered “untouchability” illegal in 1949, the caste system is bound up in the same ancient complex social systems from which Hinduism itself evolved, and it has continued to play a central role in the functioning of local and regional economies. The very concept of secular human rights and self-determination that emerged in the last half-millennium and drove Gandhi's non-violence movement and Indian independence from Britain runs directly counter to the notion of caste. Historical patterns of gender inequity also continue in many parts of

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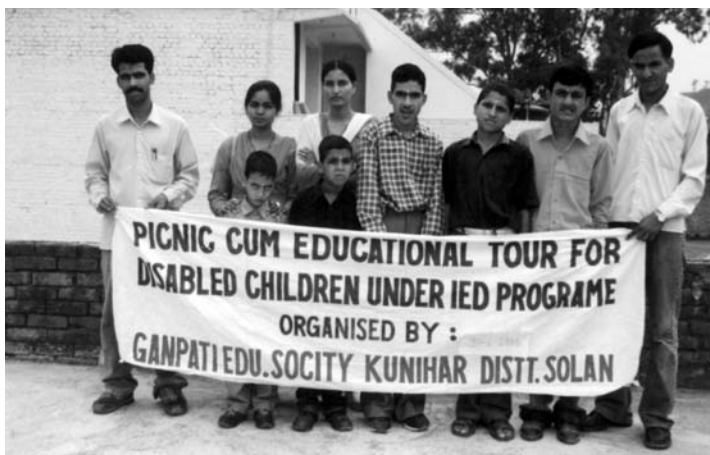


McDonalds' advertisement in India.

Image source: <http://www.eatnineghost.com/mcdonalds-menu-around-the-world/>.



After sharing a meal of seasoned rice, the little girl gives her brother a drink of water in Varanasi, India. Image source: The Web site of Food Justice: Permanent People's Tribunal on the Right to Food and the Rule of Law in Asia at http://www.foodjustice.net/photo-story%20from%20the%20field/india/starvation-malnutrition-and-death/hungry-children-in-varanasi/DSC_2779.JPG/view. © Asian Legal Resource



Disabled children and their families. Image source: The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Government of Himachal Pradesh Web site at <http://himachal.nic.in/ssa/images/ied/p24.jpg>.

Indian society. Notwithstanding these ingrained patterns, gender equity has almost been achieved in primary schools, as now ninety-six girls are enrolled for every one hundred boys in primary school. This compares with only ninety as recently as the year 2000. Children from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities—categories referring to the most historically underprivileged—now attend school alongside their higher caste peers in numbers that more closely reflect their proportion in the society. By 2006, almost 2.2 million disabled children had enrolled in school, out of a total 2.5 million identified as disabled across the country. To date, twenty million more children are in school than before the SSA program began.¹²

INDIA, A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SUPERPOWER

While India's nuclear experiments began in 1974, it was not until May 11, 1998, when Delhi tested three separate nuclear devices, that the world knew for sure that India had arrived on the world stage as a nuclear power.¹³ Days later, Pakistan conducted its own nuclear weapons test. Since then, India has continued to develop its nuclear capacity. According to the World Nuclear Organization, an organization dedicated to nuclear energy advocacy, India seeks to supply one-quarter of its electricity supply with nuclear power by 2050.¹⁴

New Delhi has also made highway infrastructure a priority in the coming century. Five years ago, the country embarked on the first major upgrade of the national roadway system, a fifteen-year project to link the capital with India's three other largest cities: Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai. The highway spans more than 3,600 miles, a distance farther than traveling from LA to New York via Phoenix, Denver, Omaha, Chicago, or Philadelphia. It is called "the most ambitious infrastructure project since . . . the British building of the subcontinent's railway network."¹⁵

India is transitioning from aid recipient to donor nation. In 2008, the government extended a five-billion-dollar credit line to some African countries for infrastructure development. This came on top of some one billion dollars in direct aid and loans, and a duty-free import plan for fifty least developed nations.¹⁶ Should a nation that received more than four billion dollars in concessional loans from the World Bank give away billions to the even less fortunate? India makes no apologies for its aid program; each package granted or received responds to a specific need or interest. Nuclear power, first-world highways, and aid are only three signs of how India is emerging as a superpower; students can be challenged to name even more.

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It is no accident that the Obama White House welcomed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the first state visit of this administration. India is not only a major destiny for foreign direct investment by Americans, as well as American exports, but also shares a large and growing interdependence through extended family and cultural ties with South Asian families living in both countries. Americans of Asian-Indian descent are the third largest Asian-American population in the country, and are far more evenly distributed across all regions of the country than their Chinese and Filipino counterparts, whose communities are largest on the east and west coasts.¹⁷ From one angle, India poses a potential threat to US economic power; call centers are just a step away from outsourced legal, financial, and other services, striking American white-collar jobs in the solar plexus. However, from a more pragmatic standpoint, India represents a formidable strategic, diplomatic, and economic partner as the US negotiates a new century of ever-shifting security concerns and unprecedented global competition in technology and other knowledge industries.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The complex paradox that is India's economy must not deter teachers from introducing students to this new Asian tiger. Literacy about India is critical to a comprehensive worldview in the twenty-first century, and complexity is part of the picture. Approaching the topic in a balanced and incremental fashion can acknowledge that richness, and also ensure that the lessons are manageable. I have included teaching activities on the next two pages that help students address India's economic complexities. ■

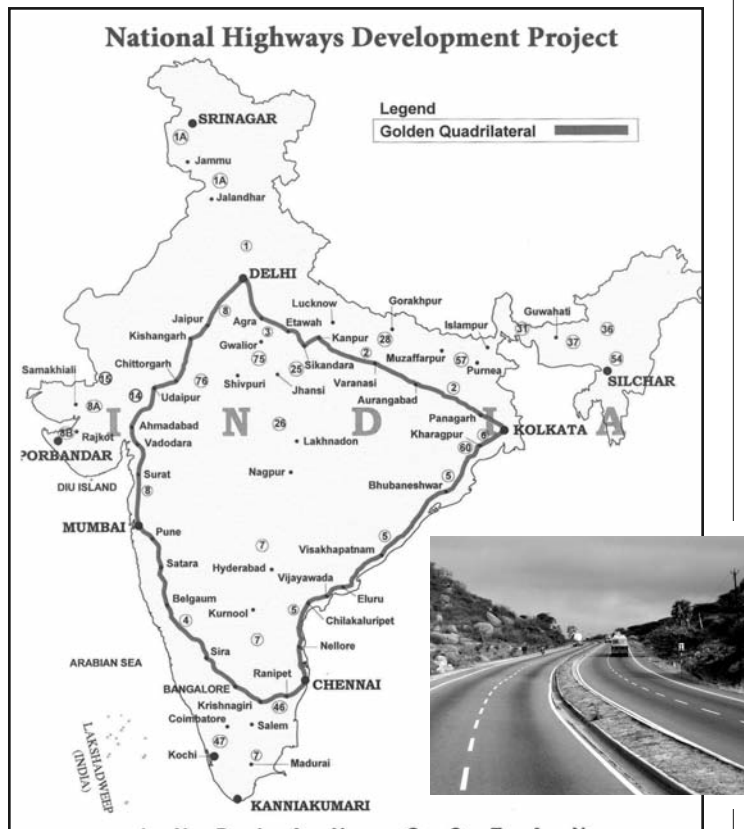
NOTES

1. What about Japan? The jury is still out. Japan undoubtedly will continue as a major exporter; high labor costs and competition from China and India, however, are likely to reduce Japan's relative importance in the global economy. The same could well prove true for the US.
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Map: Prepared by the Information Technology & Planning Division, Government of India.
©2003. Image source: http://ridingtheelephant.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/gq_m2.jpg.
Golden Quadrilateral highway. Photo by Soham Banerjee, used under Creative Commons License.
Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Highway_Chennai_Bangalore.jpg.

FOR SIXTH THROUGH TENTH GRADES

Classroom Activity: Building a Highway

A free, narrated slide show and graphic developed by Eric Owles, Monica Evanchik, and Judith Levitt for the *New York Times* provide a flexible teaching tool for middle and high school audiences.¹⁹ Show one or all four parts and ask students to make a list of questions that the program raises in their minds. It is highly likely that the ensuing discussion will include elements of economics, politics, development, equity, "modernity," and what it means to be a global economic power.

High school students might research one or more questions in greater depth for a short paper. Assigned topics could include a compare/contrast between the Golden Quadrilateral highway network and the American highway system developed in the 1950s, or an exploration of the legal, humanitarian, or financial obstacles to—and benefits from—such a large-scale project.

Editor's Note: The links for these activities are available online at the EAA Web site. For further information on India pedagogical online materials, visit the EAA Web site at <http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/India-Resources.htm>.

FOR ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH GRADES

Debate: India remains one of the poorest nations on earth. Growth is only letting a small elite class become even richer.

Assign every student to prepare a one-minute pro or con argument to this statement using selections from the online references in "notes." In class the following day, invite each student to draw a card from a hat. The cards will be labeled "Jury," "Questioner," or "Presenter." Assign up to three pros and three cons; jury members should be odd in number, and questioners the remainder of the class. After alternating arguments, invite questions. Ask the jury to cast their confidential votes on slips of paper; only you will know the final count. Make sure to give each presenter the opportunity to express his or her real opinion, and ask the class to reflect on the exercise afterwards.

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