Mr. Clinton Goes to Delhi
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Twenty two years after the botched visit of a friendly, well-meaning U.S. president, Mr. Clinton arrives in Delhi this month. In spite of their shared values and hopes for friendly relations, India and U.S. remain wary and skittish of each other.

Fifty years after independence, and numerous missed opportunities, there is a real chance now to base Indo-U.S. relations on a clear acceptance of their mutual interests. A misunderstanding of these interests, captured well by the Indian stereotype of four varnas, has marred repeated efforts at reconciliation. Perhaps recognition of these stereotypes may help the Indian and U.S. leaders avoid them in the future, and inch closer.

United States sees India, and the other developing countries, as poor and uneducated harijans in rags. They are equal only in theory. It is their place to perform the low-paid menial work, follow the orders, be happy with the crumbs thrown to them, speak only when spoken to, and to stay out of the way of the mighty.

India sees the United States as the vaishya without a pedigree, grown rich by good fortune or trickery. It is wistful about the days when it, too, was the sone ki chiriya that Columbus set out to look for. But Karma caught up. Wonder what good deeds did the Americans do in their previous life?

The United States sees itself as the kshatriya who rules the world. It believes in the king’s divine right to tell the world to do its bidding. Its democratic system is the moral foundation for this right; the capitalist system provides the economic wherewithal. The subjects may not see it that way, but that is their problem.

India, on the other hand, sees itself as the brahmin, morally superior to all. Every time the United States touts democracy as the moral currency of the international system, India sees itself sitting at the top of the hill. Even the king, with all his wealth and power, ought to take a bow and listen respectfully to his sermon when the brahmin comes knocking at the door for alms. Too bad that the philistines ignore his exalted origins and vast learning, and confuse his brahminical austerity for a harijan’s deprivation. Sure, he is sending the kids to the trade schools in the United States to learn some usable skills and get green cards. In the meantime, it would be nice if the yajman gave him, instead of a cow and a piece of land, a visa for his programmer son.

The king may put up with a private sermon or two, but a public rebuke from a lowly citizen is not charming. But the life must go on. Streets must be cleaned, taxes must be collected, and Coke must be sold. Clinton asked India to give up nuclear arms, and Rao told the U.S. Congress the story of how Mahatma Gandhi gave up eating sugar himself before asking a boy to do the same. Both sides remain trapped in the cycle of their high-minded rhetoric, each shy to confess to the primacy of its own economic motives. Is moksha in sight yet?

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