

What celebrating Diwali means to me.

There are so many philosophical descriptions that explain why we celebrate Diwali. One of them being that it is a time for us to reflect on the year gone by, learn from our experiences during that year so that we can move forward into the next year. I would like to state from the outset that I do not consider myself to be a religious person. Rather, I believe that our philosophy and culture teaches a 'way of life', in terms of conduct and principles. However, this is a conversation for another time and so I will not, in this article, go further into the reasons behind why I think this.

I really do not have an extensive knowledge of India. In fact, the purpose of this article is not to teach but rather to share my enthusiasm for the subjects of Indian history, philosophy, science and culture, and hopefully, open up a debate with other members of the community. I have always had an interest in these subjects areas, and just like the majority of my peers within the Mandhata community, I also attended and completed the compulsory Saturday morning Gujarati school. I think there were a few Saturday mornings where I was literally dragged to Gujarati School but I did manage to complete it! However, it was not until maybe, four or five years ago, that I started to think, why did I do all of this? Was it because my parents had told me too? Or did I just do it for the sake of doing it? What bothered me was that I had never questioned this before and therefore, I had not fully explored the reasons behind why learning such things was important.

There is a quote by a famous author, which I came across a while ago that really had an impact on me. It goes: *'A generation which ignores history has no past and no future'*. It dawned on me then just how much of my own history that I did not understand. I had learnt about British history in school; however, I did not understand or know much about Indian history and therefore, could not understand my parents' history and their parents' history and so on. Furthermore, the Indian values and ideals that my parents had taught me, I had just accepted at face-value, but I had never really challenged or questioned them, and so I also did not understand why these values and ideals were important to hold on to. I realised that in order to understand why we are here today, we have to look at our ancestors, and relatives and their respective histories. In order to move into the future, it is necessary to look to and learn from our past.

As part of my research, one of the first quotes that I came across was by Albert Einstein, who said: *'We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made.'* On reading this, I thought to myself, well if we did all that, then what else have we contributed? And how does this compare to the contributions from other great civilisations and cultures?

Well there's chess, a game of strategy and it is thought that this game originated from India, where during the 6th century it was known as caturanga, meaning the four divisions of the military in Sanskrit - the infantry, the cavalry, the elephants and the chariotry, which are today represented on the modern chess board by the pawn, the knight, the bishop and the rook.

There are the Vedas, an ancient set of books covering the topics of military science,

all-art forms (including, music, art and dance); medicine; statecraft; engineering and architecture.

I have a particular interest in military science (or strategic studies) and thought surely India must have an equivalent text to Clausewitz' 'On War', Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War', Machiavelli's 'The Prince', and Musashi's 'Book of Five Rings'. We do, it is called the Arthashastra and was written by Kautilya, an individual who is thought to have been an advisor to the Indian king Chandragupta Maurya (c. 317-293 B.C.E.). A very good translation of this text was written by Richard Boesche and can be read here: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_military_history/v067/67.1boesche.html. I am sure that this is not the only treatise on military statecraft to have been written by an Indian author. If any reader knows of additional ancient texts that have been written by Indian authors on similar subject areas, I would be extremely grateful for this information.

There are also the Mahabharata and Ramayana stories - these are not just stories, they are epics, the Indian equivalent to the Greek Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata contain debates and arguments that are presented from many different angles and perspectives.

Let us take the Gita as an example. We all know that the Gita is just a small section of the Mahabharata. If I were to ask some people to describe what the Gita is. The majority of people would likely respond by saying that it is a Hindu religious text and/or our equivalent to the Bible. Now, if I had been asked this question some years ago, I probably would have provided a very similar answer. However, after reading it in some more detail. If someone were to ask me to describe the Gita today. I would say that it is about war.

Let me summarise the Mahabharata story for some of the younger readers of this magazine (and please note that I have summarized extensively!). The Mahabharata is about two families: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Pandavas represent good and the Kauravas represent corruption and evil. The two families end up gathering supporters and then going to war. Now one of the key characters within this story is called Arjun, who is a Pandava and a warrior. The day before the great war between the two families, Arjun is with his charioteer, Krishna and he is looking out over the battlefield watching the preparations.

As he watches, he sees his family across the field and wonders whether going to war is the right thing to do. He is acutely aware that one of the major consequences of war is bloodshed and misery, and so he asks Krishna for his advice. The Gita is basically the conversation that follows between Krishna and Arjun. They both take very different moral stances. Krishna argues that it is important to carry out one's duty regardless of the consequences. Whereas Arjun argues that sometimes it is important to avoid the bad consequences and generate good ones instead. This debate between Krishna and Arjun is still relevant to us today. We all see examples of it in today's news, for example, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (people are constantly questioning whether we should have gone), and whether we are going about the war on terror in the right way. The fact that such a debate that was written so many centuries ago still has so much relevance to us today, I found fascinating.

This example, leads nicely on to Mahatma Gandhi. Now you may think - wasn't Gandhi a peaceful man? He didn't promote war! Well I should make it clear that the Gita was not promoting war. The purpose of the Gita was to discuss 'what are the right reasons for going to war'. Essentially, what the Gita says is that war should be carried out for a just cause; it should not be for the purposes of greed or power. Mahatma Gandhi realised this and demonstrated this well through his movement of non-violence.

In fact, even to this day, India continues to produce some of the world's greatest scientists/thinkers/business men etc. Take the poet, musician and playwright, Rabindranath Tagore, who was Asia's first nobel laureate, winning the nobel prize for literature in 1913. His name is still famous today and we sing one of his songs at every event - the national anthem, Jana Gana Mana. Take, Satyajit Ray, who was an Indian Bengali film-maker, he is thought to have been one of the most influential people in 20th century cinema, with directors such as Martin Scorsese and Danny Boyle having been influenced by Ray's work. And let's not even mention the multitude of famous Indian business men today, there's Lakshmi Mittal, the CEO and founder of Mittal Steel; Mukesh and Anil Ambani the owners of the Reliance Industries; Sabeer Bhatia who was one of the co-founders of hotmail.com; and Ratan Tata the Chairman of the Tata Group, which bought out Jaguar Land Rover and introduced the £1200 Tata Nano late last year. These are only just a few outstanding examples of some of today's most influential Indians - I could continue naming people for the rest of the evening.

Today, India continues to be an increasingly influential player on the world stage. There are many areas that it has made considerable advances in, for example computer science and space science. In the past I have been asked about India's space programme. People have said to me, 'surely it can't be that good, India has so many other problems to be dealing with!' I always get incredibly frustrated with this response. Yes, India has domestic problems, just like every other country. However, we must remember that it houses the second largest population in the world, it is the seventh largest country in terms of geographic size, it is the world's largest democracy and it is still relatively young, considering that its independence took place only in 1947. India is considered to be one of the top space powers along with the US, Russia, China and Europe. It has developed its own rocket launch systems, it has launched numerous satellites not only for itself but for other countries as well, and in the last few years, India has conducted successful robotic missions to the Moon. Now, having completed its initial goals, India is looking to develop a manned space programme by 2015.

People ask me, 'shouldn't the money that the Indian government has spent on the space programme be spent on something more useful?' However, what is not realised is that India's space programme was initially set up from a socio-economic perspective. When visiting the Indian Space Research Organisation's website (www.isro.org), one will see the following quote by Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, who is considered to be the father of India's space programme:

“There are some who question the relevance of space activities in a developing nation. To us, there is no ambiguity of purpose. We do not have the fantasy of competing with the economically advanced nations in the exploration of the moon or the planets or manned space-flight. But we are convinced that if we are to play a meaningful role nationally, and in the comity of nations, we must be second to none in the application of advanced technologies to the real problems of man and society.”

Remote sensing satellites have allowed Indian farmers to improve crop production; communications satellite have allowed the government to beam tele-education programmes to remote villages all over India so as to ensure that all people in India have access to a good education. The communication satellites have also enabled tele-medicine which allows people living in remote villages to receive the right medical treatment.

There are so many topics that I could talk about when it comes to India; I don't think I have even begun to scratch the surface with this article. However, my main goal was to demonstrate that there is a lot more to India, its culture, history and philosophy, than meets the eye, and I really do hope that I have achieved this.

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(Guest speaker at Mandhata Youth and Community Association Diwali Programme in Wembley, London – 2008)