

RIVER FALLS JOURNAL

“A lesson from India”
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March 8, 2007

India is a vast market and an almost limitless classroom. This country of one billion is about one third our size and has multiple cultures and histories within its borders. With 25 languages (18 listed on the currency) and 500 dialects, India is bound together legislatively by Hindi, but practically by English. The English language is one of the strongest national assets India brings to the global system.

Since the early 1990s, India has been open for business. Its market is both internal and external. Young, educated, ambitious Indians see themselves as at home in the world as their grandparents were in their village. These budding entrepreneurs demonstrate a vital work ethic, a thirst for knowledge, and an appetite for success coupled with accomplished networking skills.

Some estimates place the number of Indians in the middle class and above at about 300 million. This is only 30 per cent of the current Indian total, but equal to the entire US population.

A UW-River Falls delegation recently visited the “tech triangle” in south India, pursuing new educational partners in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and Mysore. Each city was a kaleidoscopic study in vivid contrast, with the trappings of technology and prosperity co-mingling with the unavoidable realities of poverty and underdevelopment.

Mammoth billboards and dozens of television channels shout out the good life of perfume, travel, fast motorcycles, trendy sunglasses, and beautiful people everywhere, even though those sitting by the roadside, or pushing a dilapidated cart burdened by an impossible load, will likely never live that way.

Technology is changing India everywhere as exemplified by a cell phone in nearly every hand. Competing companies have driven the cost of calling to 2 cents or less per minute. No charge for incoming calls and almost nothing for text messaging, the preferred mode of communication for young Indians. University students there tell us they text message 60-75 percent of the time.

Cellular technology has changed the ability of Indians and people around the globe to connect, to be bit players in the globalized world. We visited with many groups of Indian college students and none of them knew anyone who is without “mobile phone.”

We will be sharing our world, its possibilities and problems, with India, China, Brazil, Russia and other rising regional/global powers more than ever before. Our challenges are global and interrelated. They defy borders and leap oceans. Be they poverty, terrorism, global warming, or pandemic health issues, they all demand collaboration and global responsibility. So we now prepare our students to live, prosper and learn in the world, and not apart from it, to swim with confidence in the global sea.

One way is to teach how to learn. Information is increasing faster than anyone can absorb. So we teach critical analysis, context, perspective, cultural awareness, effective writing, speaking, reading, and listening, and to respond with agility and to tackle ambiguity. Our curriculum at all levels must anticipate what our students will need to know and communicate well into the mid-century.

Throughout these next decades, India and other world regions previously not the focus of our attention and education will assume global importance and particular relevance to our children and our livelihood. These emerging contacts and the connections are among the ways that we will fulfill our responsibility to educate for understanding and success in this global century.

Our region and Wisconsin will prosper to the extent that we comprehend the rate and breadth of change and prepare ourselves to lead change. We now must focus on meeting the challenge of change.

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