

comment

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A dark side to this advertising

Film actors are sending out a negative message by endorsing fairness creams

In the wake of BJP leader Tarun Vijay's comments about dark-skinned people in southern India and the assertion that Indians are not racist, cross-over actor Abhay Deol has taken on Bollywood stars who endorse fairness creams to bolster their brand earnings. Those who endorse these brands include some of the biggest stars on the Hindi movie marquee such as Shah Rukh Khan, Hrithik Roshan, Deepika Padukone, Katrina Kaif, Shahid Kapoor and John Abraham. Millions of fans look up to stars such as Khan, who've stayed on top of their game for decades as role models. His career trajectory from being the perpetual outsider to the Badshah of Bollywood is seen as a success story. Given this, it would be appropriate for him to turn down assignments that convey the wrong message, that whitening one's skin is something to be sought after.

If he had not agreed to endorse fairness creams, Khan may have had to forgo a sizeable amount of money, but he would have earned the respect of millions of admirers. He would have also joined the select club of younger, conscientious actors such as Kangana Ranaut, Ranbir Kapoor, Randeep Hooda and Swara Bhaskar who've reportedly turned down offers to endorse fairness creams. Then there are actors like Nandita Das who champion campaigns against discrimination on the basis of colour. Das wrote on her blog: "I am shocked to see the rise in the number of dark actresses looking paler and paler with every film and magazines, hoardings, films and advertisements showing only fair women." Bollywood stars have a disproportionate influence on the young in India. So, to suggest that fair skin is somehow more desirable is to the detriment of those who are dark and encouragement to them to change their skin tone.

Our obsession with fairness can no longer be blamed on a colonial hangover. We are inherently racist and we should accept this if we have to change. From students from Africa to south Indians, many Indians are positively insulting on the issue of colour. In the past we've seen politicians encouraging discrimination as was the case with the Ugandan students in Delhi who were targeted by a former AAP minister. Our matrimonial advertisements are a giveaway. A dark skinned partner is never sought, but fair and wheatish ones are. The parents of dark children are objects of pity as this is seen as a negative in the marriage market. Our stars should be changing stereotypes, instead many of them are reinforcing them.

ourtake

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SUNNY HUNDAL



Two sides of the same coin

The Theresa May government feels that it can give little and yet get a lot. It wants Indian money, but not Indians themselves

Ever wondered why authentic Scotch whisky is so expensive in India? Have you sat at a bar and asked why in god's name a glass of good alcohol costs that much? If the answer is yes then you have stumbled across an illustration of India's peculiar trade relationship with Great Britain. It is a relationship set to become even more bizarre, thanks to British politics.

Every year Indians consume more whisky than any other country in the world. Yet the Indian government imposes a 150% tariff on Scotch whisky, far higher than most products imported from Britain, which on an average have a 15% import tax.

We don't know exactly why whisky connoisseurs in India are punished — a mixture of anti-alcohol morality and lobbying from local producers are usually blamed — but we do know Britain is desperate to change the situation. This haggling over the price of whisky illustrates something bigger: An attempt by Britain to find a new place in the world.

A fortnight ago the British chancellor of the exchequer and Member of Parliament Philip Hammond and commercial secretary Baroness Neville-Rolfe both flew over to try and set the stage for a big trade deal with India. Trade secretary Liam Fox has also been doing the rounds. And these visits come after British Prime Minister Theresa May herself came to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November. So why are British politicians suddenly so interested in trade with India? It's because of the state of British politics.

The cold reality is that with Britain poised to leave the European Union, its government is desperate to show that Brexit can be a success. This is no longer about national survival. For the pro-Brexit figures who have conducted

LONDON HAS CREATED AN ALTERNATIVE REALITY IN WHICH BRITAIN WILL RECAPTURE ITS FORMER GLORY BY TRADING ACROSS THE WORLD. SUCH IS THEIR ARROGANCE THAT SOME IN GOVERNMENT HAVE DUBBED THE PROJECT "EMPIRE 2.0"

a hostile takeover of the government, this is a matter of personal pride. If Brexit fails, then so do their political dreams. So they have created an alternative reality in which Britain will recapture its former glory by trading aggressively across the world. Such is their arrogance that some in government have dubbed the project "Empire 2.0".

This is why, for Britain's Brexiters, a big trade deal with one of the world's largest economies would be hailed as a victory. But what they haven't done is to tell their supporters that trade deals usually involve giving up something in return. As Boris Johnson, secretary of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs, recently told a newspaper: "Our policy is having our cake and eating it." They want Indian money, but not Indians themselves.

Let's be clear: There is little doubt that India would benefit from more trade with Britain. It would reduce prices of manufactured goods and food in both countries. It would also create new jobs and investment. Besides, Britain's citizens of Indian origin have also long worked hard to forge a closer relationship between the two countries. There is a strong case for Britain's tilt to India.

But it would be a betrayal for Indians if their government did not make their own demands for a trade deal.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his British counterpart Theresa May, Hyderabad House, New Delhi, November 7, 2016
REUTERS

India needs easier visa access for its business community, for scientists, engineers and doctors travelling to the UK. It needs to ask why the British home office threatened Indian students with detention and deportation in claiming they had fraudulently completed English language tests (which they hadn't). The number of Indian students going to Britain for higher education has fallen dramatically in the last few years.

And last but not least, New Delhi should ask why London has consistently made it harder for Indians to visit or join family members in Britain. The wellbeing of Indians abroad should matter much more to the Centre, given their outsized contribution to the Indian economy.

Indian ministers should point out that what the British government craves from Brexit is highly contradictory. One side wants global trade and economic growth, the other wants a closed economy with little immigration. The two are mutually exclusive. Britain cannot reap all the benefits from globalisation without the difficulties that come with it. They are two sides of the same coin. So far its ministers are sailing through by steadfastly ignoring reality, but they can only do that for so long.

International trade can be a bit like drinking alcohol: What you want from it is not always what you get. It has its benefits but can also be hazardous to your health. Five years ago, during trade negotiations with the EU (which are still ongoing, by the way), New Delhi suggested reducing import duty on spirits in return for easier access for visas and Indian goods. But little progress has been made. It's not just whisky drinkers but workers everywhere who are losing out.

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The views expressed are personal

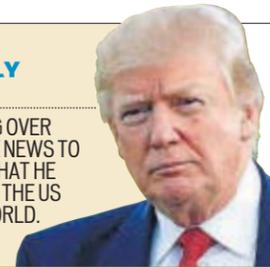
newsmaker

DONALD TRUMP US President

WE HAD THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF CHOCOLATE CAKE THAT YOU'VE EVER SEEN. AND PRESIDENT XI [JINPING] WAS ENJOYING IT... I SAID, 'WE'VE JUST LAUNCHED 59 MISSILES HEADING TO IRAQ... SYRIA'

WHAT HE REALLY MEANT »

WHILE I WAS BONDING OVER DESSERT I BROKE THE NEWS TO XI TO LET HIM KNOW THAT HE DARE NOT MESS WITH THE US ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.



WHAT HE DEFINITELY DIDN'T »

WHO CARES IF ITS IRAQ OR SYRIA... THE POINT I WANT TO MAKE IS THAT FOR ME BOMBING ANOTHER COUNTRY IS A PIECE OF CAKE. WHAT'S MORE, MY RATINGS HAVE GONE UP.

Recast and modernise India's foreign service

We need experts, and not generalists, to handle the changing profile of international diplomacy and trade

Martand Jha

The Indian Foreign Service is considered to be the most prestigious of the civil services. To become a career diplomat one needs to clear the Union Public Service Commission's examination. This single-window system of clearing a general examination being followed for decades needs to change.

Diplomacy is not a generalist's job — it's a high-stakes one which needs specialised understanding and delicate handling. A diplomat is a representative of her country and is a foot soldier of its foreign policy. As good armies fight wars and win, a good diplomat deters wars and wins. Given the specialised nature of the job, theoretical understanding before an on-the-job training is an advantage — a prerequisite, some would argue.

In August, a parliamentary panel expressed concerns over the "deterioration" in the quality of recruits to the IFS. The panel noted the low sanctioned strength (912 officers) of the IFS as one of the lowest among the all-India. It noted that there were only 770 current officers.

For an emerging power like India, which is expanding its global presence, its diplomats need a deeper understanding of the areas they are serving. Many ideas have been floated to address this, one of which is a lateral entry into the service.

Lateral entry means giving crucial postings in the foreign service to an officer from any other service, say railway, revenue or police. This has both advantages and disadvantages.

While the advantage is that the official is already trained in the civil service environment, she would lack the diplomatic prowess the job demands. To solve this dilemma, the government could introduce the "revolving door" concept in the foreign service.

Subject-matter experts working in different fields of international relations, be it in academia, think-tanks, etc, should be given the option to work for the service. The walls that prevent such inter-operability need to be pulled down. The United States has been following a similar model for decades now.

Another change that could improve the profile and efficacy of the foreign service is to

rework the entry rules. Only candidates who have an academic background in subjects of international relations, strategic studies, security studies or foreign policy studies should be allowed to appear for the examination, which could either be taken by a separate body or can be a separate exam within the UPSC. This will mean that every fresh IFS recruit will have a theoretical understanding of a relevant area. This would improve the quality of the foreign service.

It's not like the government hasn't tried specialisation in other fields. For getting into the Indian Engineering Services or Indian Geological Services, candidates need have an engineering or geography/geology background respectively.

It's high time the rules for entry into the IFS changed. With changing times and the evolving stature of India in the international system, there is a need for revamping the structure of these services.

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The views expressed are personal

innervoice



Spend more time with people who value your presence

Rajesh Krishan

About a month ago, our neighbour died of a heart attack. He was barely in his fifties and in good health. A few months before this, in a similar incident, one of my friend's father, while on his usual morning walk, collapsed and died. My wedding photographer's fate, who lost his life in a car accident, was no less tragic; he was 37, married, and had a child.

We all have witnessed such instances at some point of time, and were brought face to face with life's terrible uncertainties.

When faced with unexpected events, all too often, most of us have probably found ourselves left only with questions, and no answers. It's so because we've no choice in the matter, we're but helpless bystanders, and that is the toughest thing of all to deal with.

Hence, when faced with adversities, we even challenge god and blame him for unkindness. Once the tragedy subsides, we go back to the routine of our everyday lives, selfishly pursuing our petty desires, and taking for granted the true gift received from god — family, friends and relatives.

We fool ourselves into believing that bad things won't happen to us. The reality is that our lives are as fragile as a clay pot, and, thus, we should try to make the best of what's within our control. We should strive to make our lives as wonderful as we can. We should care for each other, find time to be together, and share each other's hardships not only in the face of adversities, but at all times.

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Robots as the new masters

Many dread the future. Among them is Stephen Hawking, who told the BBC: "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race". Tesla founder Elon Musk and Microsoft's Bill Gates are also anxious

Sally makes salads. Sally is green-and-brown and weighs about 350 pounds. Sally is a robot from Chowbotics, founded by IIT-Madras alum Deepak Sekar. Bloomberg recently reported that Sally's origin lies in a robot that prepped ingredients for a homemade Indian meal. Sally is among the robots setting the table for a revolution in robotics that's imminent.

This, of course, is just the appetiser of what the mechanical evolution will mean, especially when the garnishing of artificial intelligence (AI) is added to the menu. Some are hungering for more; others may not think what's served up next as palatable.

Either way, there will be plenty of moving

parts to the age of the machines.

Among those examining this is Vivek Wadhwa, former entrepreneur, egghead and tech evangelist. Wadhwa co-authored The Driver in the Driverless Car: How our Technology Choices Will Create the Future.

There are two science fiction scenarios that await us: As Wadhwa argues, either a Star Trek utopia or the dystopian world of Mad Max. He delves into depths of tech next, from the autonomous vehicles of the title, to 3D printing, a power surge caused by energy that's no longer alternative, bionics, genomics, drones, and of course, robots and AI.

Those last two, taken with the advances in sheer brute computing power, make for the perfect storm for a new age of technology. As Wadhwa points out, "the rate at which computers are advancing, the iPhone 11 or 12 will have greater computing power than our brains do." AI that goes beyond narrow applications, is only about a decade away, and the coming Siris on steroids may be systems that will "synthesize inputs to arrive at something resembling original works or to solve unstructured problems without benefit of specific rules or guidance."

Many dread that future. Among them is Stephen Hawking, who told the BBC: "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race." Tesla founder Elon Musk and Microsoft's Bill Gates are anxious, while Tim Berners-Lee, who created the world wide web, believes machines could become the new "masters" of the financial universe.

These developments will also deepen the angst of many, buttressing the numbers of those who have caused recent political upheavals searching for retreat into the past. But the future is inexorable.

As Wadhwa points out, we've been here. "The oldest technology of all is probably fire, even older than the stone tools that our ancestors invented. It could cook meat and provide warmth; and it could burn down forests." Those flames were licked and a dystopian wildfire doesn't have to consume us.

Even the smartest machines can't deal with simple human tasks like climbing a ladder or opening a door, as Wadhwa writes, "That is because robots struggle to perform tasks — even tasks that humans take for granted — that are without explicit rules."

Rules could actually regulate the future. Among those could be from the late grandmaster of sci-fi Isaac Asimov, and his three laws of robotics, the first of which states: "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm." Wadhwa informs: "The tech luminaries who are developing AI systems are devising things such as kill switches and discussing ethical guidelines."

There's plenty of promise ahead — in the fields of education, medicine, food production, potable water availability. One of the problems that will have to be overcome is that of political gridlock, perhaps one reason a quarter of those surveyed by the firm OpenText in Britain recently believed robots "would make better decisions than their elected representatives."

We have a headstart of a couple of decades before the science evolves from fiction to reality. That's an opportunity to use intelligence, human, perhaps humane, rather than artificial, to make things work.

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The views expressed are personal