

Book Review

“Games Indians Play: Why We Are the Way We Are”

V. Raghunathan, Penguin Portfolio (Dec 2006)

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What counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight - it's the size of the fight in the dog.

-Dwight D. Eisenhower

“Games Indians Play: Why We Are the Way We Are” by V Raghunathan is a rather compact book that stands tall in its offering. The book aims at answering some questions that would have occurred to us at some point, in living the-daily-life-as-an-Indian. The author wonders “Why are we a nation that is individually so smart and collectively so naive? Why do we mistake talk for action? Why is our self-worth massaged only if we have the 'authority' to break rules? Why are we among the world's most corrupt? Why do we jump red lights? Why do we dump our garbage at the neighbor's doorstep? Can it be our climate, population density, poverty, colonial past or even genetic encoding?”

The attempt at unraveling the baffling mysteries behind what makes Indians the way they are, is interesting to begin with. Like Hofstadter (Raghunathan's impetus to studying game theory), the author has successfully slipped in game theory and behavioral economics in a highly readable manner. The book is amply interspersed with examples from social behavior and puts into perspective the innumerable economic and social challenges caused by such behavior.

The book begins with a plethora of questions and really gets us wondering if the author will actually be able to find an answer to all of them! Then in an attempt to classify the questions posed, he draws them into a twelve pointer, which he calls the 'canons' of Indianness.

1. Low trustworthiness
2. Being privately smart and publicly dumb
3. Fatalist outlook
4. Being too intelligent for our own good

5. Abysmal sense of public hygiene
6. Lack of self-regulation and sense of fairness
7. Reluctance to penalize wrong conduct in others
8. Mistaking talk for action
9. Deep-rooted corruption and a flair for free-riding
10. Inability to follow or implement systems
11. A sense of self-worth that is massaged only if we have the 'authority' to break rules
12. Propensity to look for loop holes in laws

Over the next three chapters, Raghunathan focuses on how Indian minds rationalize (much to their own detriment), the Prisoner's Dilemma and the Iterative Prisoner's Dilemma through Axelrod's experiment and the Gentleman Strategy. All of these chapters are theory heavy, nevertheless in easy reach of even somebody who is completely new to the concept.

Chapter 5 is about competition and cooperation. The chapter provides varied examples to discuss whether “being simple, nice and forgiving and self-righteously provoked gets us much further.” Chapter 6 attempts at putting into perspective fairness, trust, self-regulation and the Indians. Somewhere around Chapter 7 after a rather long Chapter 6 I started to wonder if Raghunathan wasn't getting iterative himself and almost at a loss for what else to say.

The last chapter is about Game theory and the Bhagwatgita. It clearly reinforces to us Indians, that no matter how rational we may be about anything, we cannot keep away from binding it into a spiritual context. However in the given context the author has skillfully made an interesting connection.

Given that it is an interesting subject and the right kind of tools to study it are available, the contribution of the book would have been much more if the author had chosen to approach the topic empirically. However as said in the fourth disclaimer, “most of the conclusions arrived at are at worst conjectural and at best plausible hypotheses for further research,” is a thought that can be taken forward.

At the end of it all, what one must appreciate is that, though the author may have slipped in a few-places in the execution of the book, his heart was definitely in the right place. Its immense readability (considering that most parts of the book deal with game theory and behavioral economics), makes it a must read for everybody interested in understanding the contemporary Indian.

