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Podium : Lopsided reporting on India (by Mr W. Saleh)

I regularly read the columns and reports on India by Anil Ramdas. What strikes me is the biased and lopsided reporting, usually stressing the negative aspects of Indian society. Besides problems, there must also be positive aspects to Indian society? Or does Ramdas not come across these? Or are they not interesting enough for Dutch readers?

For example, in one of his articles ('Alone in the world') Ramdas wrote that Indian democracy offers no vision for India's development. How then can it be that despite a tripling of the population from 300 million in 1947 to over 1 billion in 2003, India is self-sufficient in the food requirements of its population?

Last year over US\$ 1 billion in foodproducts were exported to over 25 countries. At present India is the second biggest rice producer in the world. According to Prime Minister Vajpayee his country should be fully developed by 2020, free of poverty and hunger and offering ample opportunities to its over 1 billion inhabitants.

But what of the political vision of the Netherlands? Take, for example, the construction of the 'Betuwelijn' [transl.: the controversial multibillion-dollar railway line plagued by huge cost-overruns]. "The Betuwelijn will be built, because it will be built, so it will be built (NRC Handelsblad, 22/2/03)." Now, is that a vision? 'The people without vision' are, however, in the process of realising the biggest road construction project in the world. It is the 5,874-km long 'Golden Quadrilateral'-project that will link all the important Indian cities from north to south and west to east by means of a highway.

Ayurvedic medicine, which Ramdas scorned, is recognised by the WHO as a science and is also practised in the Netherlands. Including by qualified Dutch doctors. The 700 million people who live in the countryside are not exclusively 'voting robots', as Ramdas wrote, but also make an important contribution to the economic growth and development of India. Despite drought in 14 of the 28 states in India there have hardly been price rises for food products this past year. Inflation was 3%. At present the Indian economy is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Despite a global recession and natural disasters at home, such as drought and floods, exports have grown by 19% in the past year. In 1999 economic growth was 6.3% and 5.4% in 2002. A much better result than in some industrialised countries. Ten years ago India's foreign reserves were less than US\$ 4 billion; now over US\$ 73 billion. The developments in the ICT-sector are amazing. According to the report entitled 'The Next Trillion-Dollar Economy', published by J.M. Morgan Stanley, India will reach the magic of 'Trillion-Dollar' threshold by 2010. That is also the expectation of McKinsey and 'The National Association of Software and Services Companies'. Realising this also requires vision. Doesn't it?

India is not alone in the world. Nearly all well-known and less well-known foreign companies are trying to conquer the market comprising the enormous Indian middle

class. Trend-setting companies from Europe and America have shifted their call centres, helpdesks and in some cases their administration to India. This because of the excellent quality of work by Indian workers at very favourable prices. Mr Ramdas' doubts notwithstanding, democracy in India functions just as it does in Europe. Inasmuch as the basic principles of Hinduism are tolerance and openness towards other religions, India will remain a secular state despite the recent riots. That is also the wish of the silent majority. The people will be capable of handling their own affairs, with or without an egalitarian society; with or without a laissez-faire economy or a free market. Naturally with the involvement of at least some of the 700 million people, who live in the villages. In order to see that, Mr Ramdas must first try to shed the perspective of the all-knowing Westerner.

(Article published in Hindorama and translated by the Indian Embassy, The Hague)