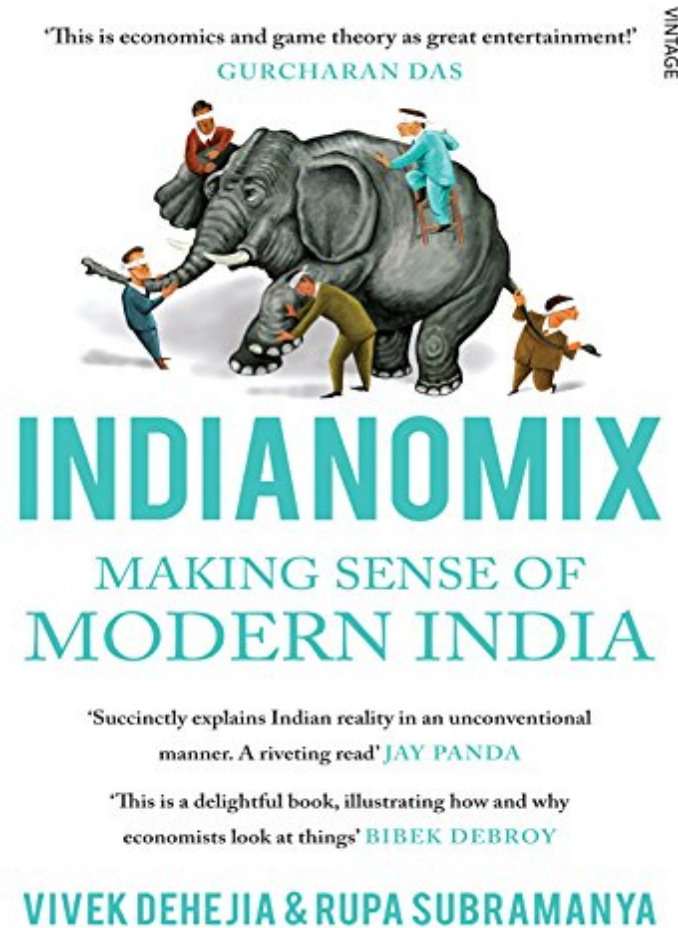


Indianomix: Making Sense of Modern India

Vivek Dehejia, Rupa Subramanya
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Vivek Dehejia, Rupa Subramanya : Indianomix: Making Sense of Modern India before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Indianomix: Making Sense of Modern India:

18 of 19 people found the following review helpful. A Good Freakonomics-Style Book on India Will Have to Wait By Abhinav Agarwal The trend, the craze, the fashion, that Freakonomics and The Undercover Economist sparked makes it way to an Indian context with this book, but the effects are less than spectacular. A plethora of problems mar what could have been an otherwise successful pop-economics-and-behavioral-psychology book. Applying economics and blending it with research gleamed from the still nascent field of behavioral economics - in itself a blend of behavioral psychology and economics - to everyday topics can yield fascinating insights that do a better job of explaining how people behave than traditional models that rely on the mythical "rational economic person". It would be an understatement to make the case that we need different, and more rational, models of behavior in the Indian context. As India changes - socially, economically, and politically - providing models of human behavior, in both individual

and collective contexts, can help everyone better understand, explain, and perhaps correct undesirable orthodoxy in though. This book attempts to do just that, but is stymied by several, several factors. When explaining economic concepts, it tends to fall over in talking down to the reader. There is a plethora of phrases like "what economists call a...", "economists are used to ..." - liable to give the reader the impression that he is not supposed to be intelligent enough to know these concepts. When introducing behavioral economics, it sprays basic concepts all over the book, making it very, very difficult for someone who has not already some knowledge of the topic to truly grasp the profoundness of the work of people like Kahnemann and Tversky. When applying these models to Indian problems and behaviors, the arguments put forth are never quite fully fleshed out. Some explanations are simply dropped midway, abruptly. Some are never carried to some logical conclusion. And some are plain wrong. Add to this prose that at times leaves you gasping for semantic clarity, and the result is a miasma of confusion and a picture that never reveals itself. The section where the book is at its best is when it treads territory pertaining to failures arising out of depletion of cognitive resources. This is a topic that has been covered in other books like "Switch", where willpower is compared to a muscle, albeit a mental muscle. This means that the effort required to suppress our impulses - like resisting a chocolate pie when dieting, can themselves tax and tire our cognitive resources to the extent that we can end up lowering our guard in other areas. This is of great value when trying to understand why poor, very poor people, indulge in impulse decisions that are very costly. The cognitive restraint required to resist temptations, so very constant and so very tempting, is much greater for the poor than it is for the better off. "They found that the farmers scored noticeably better after the harvest than before. In other words, their cognitive failures and biases were more pronounced when they were more constrained (and poorer) than when they were less so." Let us look at some examples of the problems I found with and in the book. Take the example of the QWERTY keyboard and its very sticky ubiquity, despite the so many obvious inefficiencies with its design and the availability, for decades now, of demonstrably better alternatives. "It turns out that this is what worked best on a typewriter given the position of the metal keys as they struck the paper, not for the ease of the typist," Now, this is not strictly correct. The reason that the QWERTY layout was designed was to reduce the incidence of these typewriters jamming. This was especially true of the cheaper typewriters, not so much an issue with the more expensive, and better quality, typewriters. And if you are talking about the QWERTY keyboard, you have to talk about the most popular, relatively speaking, alternative - the DVORAK keyboard - to understand why the QWERTY keyboard has remained to persistently popular. Which the book does not. One of the cognitive biases that we humans suffer from is "the law of small numbers" - our haste in drawing conclusions from very few observations. The book talks about the probability of getting four heads in a row and how it is fallacious to assume on that basis that the coin is biased - because the chances of a fair coin landing heads four times in succession are 6.25% - not impossibly low by any means. To generalize from randomness is not good. But the example is uninteresting. It's plain boring. As a contrast, look at Leonard Mlodinow's "The Drunkard's Walk", where he writes, "...mathematician George Spencer-Brown, who wrote that in a random series of 10 (to the power 1000007) zeroes and ones, you should expect at least 10 nonoverlapping subsequences of 1 million consecutive zeros. " That does arrest your attention, doesn't it? A million consecutive zeroes is NOT evidence of a biased coin, or a non-random process? Math can amaze us. Even this brilliant Dibert cartoon on randomness brings out the point in a more memorable way than the book's example. When talking of the differences between autocracies and democracies, the book touches on the topic of the skewed sex-ratio in India being partly the result of the easy and cheap availability to ultrasound machines. These machines made it easy to tell the gender of the foetus, with lethal consequences for the unborn female child. What they fail to mention, and it is incredibly germane to a discussion that includes behavioral economics, is that the government of India actually encouraged the use of these machines and the resulting sex-selective abortions as a means of population control. "Nudges" from the government had unintended consequences. Mara Hvistendahl's excellent book "Unnatural Selections" covers this in some detail, and describes a young doctor's harrowing experience of watching a dog make off with an aborted foetus at the country's most prestigious hospital, AIIMS. Another potential pitfall with the book is its over-reliance on sole experts. When talking about road safety and accidents, their sole Indian expert in this field seems to be Dinesh Mohan. Nor could they find a psephologist other than Yogendra Yadav, who - while possessing the requisite sartorial skills required of an intellectual, also sports a very sombre and serious beard - it should be noted, is a regular fixture on a cable news channel that has had repeated problems with lapses of ethics and objectivity. When the credibility of an argument is seen to rest on solitary experts, the edifice is on a shaky foundation. A book that encourages the reader to ask questions is a good thing. But questions about the quality of arguments presented tend to undermine the credibility of the book itself. When such questions start popping up on almost every single page, on almost every single topic, I, as the reader, had to make a serious call on what exactly would the returns on the investment in my time be. After going through approximately two-thirds of the book, I had to stop. Let me add three more issues I found with the book, and I will stop at that. 1.) The book's intellectual credibility takes a deep, deep dive when it veers into colonialism, and whether it was good or bad for India. One of their premises is that it is difficult to do a strict apples-to-apples comparison in several situations. The issue of the efficacy of seat-belts is one such topic that they cover and the difficulty of doing a credible assessment of its success without having a "credible counter-factual" history to compare with. In simple language, it means having a

time machine and running some very interesting "Back to the Future" style experiments. The authors do note that where it is somewhat possible to do such a comparison, albeit on a very isolated and perhaps non-representative manner, between regions under direct British rule and between those under the rule of princely states, the results do suggest that "the regions that were under direct British rule have higher rates of poverty and infant mortality into the present day." Fair enough. But, in the interests of being even-handed, they let loose this thermonuclear of a controversial statement - "But does this tell us that British rule caused India's economic stagnation, and the country would have prospered otherwise? There's no way to tell, unless we come up with a plausible and credible counterfactual history." I am sorry - no, I am not, actually - but this is a complete "Are you effing kidding me?!" I will not say much other than to refer them to Madhushree Mukherjee's excellent book, "Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II", and my equally magnificent review of the book (note the non-self-deprecating sarcasm here).²) The authors describe the unfounded optimism that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, exhibited towards an increasingly hostile China's aggressive gestures in words and deeds. They quote Pt. Nehru's confession, "With great candour and self-awareness" that "he'd been living in a dream world before the war broke out." They then question whether the great man had suffered from cognitive failures? Yes, perhaps so. But wouldn't it be also reasonable to mention that several people, and not just Vallabhai Patel (not "Sardar" Patel, mind you), had in the decade preceding India's military humiliation warned Panditji, and repeatedly? Arun Shourie's "Are We Deceiving Ourselves Again?" uses Panditji's own words and correspondence to document his persistent blindness to the inevitability of coming events. Is it not possible that Panditji did not want India to be militarily prepared because doing so would have contradicted his self-image in the world as an international man of peace? Isn't that a more believable explanation of Panditji's cognitive failings? Whether or not one agrees with it, it certainly merits an inclusion in a book that is supposed to teach us how to think about events like economists? As an aside, note that noted security expert Brahma Chellaney writes that the Chinese chose their time of attack to coincide with the preoccupation of the West with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire on November 20, 1962. The USA ended its blockade of Cuba on November 20, 1962. Coincidental? Diabolically Chanakyan?³) The book, when talking about random events, dwells a bit on Sonia Gandhi's entry and rise in politics. They write, and I quote: "Even after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination on May 21, 1991, she declined to jump into the fray and stayed out of politics for the next decade and a half. It wasn't until the Congress's unexpected victory that we've talked about, in 2004, that she stepped into public life as the head of the UPA." Are they serious? Are they serious??⁴ Firstly, a decade and a half from 1991 would take us to 2006, not 2004. Sonia Gandhi had stepped into public life long before 2004. Sonia Gandhi became the leader of the Congress party in 1998. She contested elections to the Lok Sabha in 1999. Even the events surrounding her accession as the leader of the Congress Party is a story most unedifying. If these were not indications of her "stepping into public life", I wonder what else would qualify. Perhaps Tavleen Singh's "Durbar" may help them shed light on why she chose not to enter politics in 1991. Journalist Kanchan Gupta also may have some informed opinion to share on the amount of political influence Sonia Gandhi wielded in the years before 1997/8 also. Writing good English is difficult. Which is why good writers are rare. Good writers in the sciences are even rarer. Which is why an Atul Gawande (read "Better" and "Complications" to know what I am talking about) is so admired. One reason Freakonomics was as big a blockbuster bestseller as it was had to do with its language. Sample this somewhat risque passage from Freakonomics: "The delicate balance between these factors helps explain why, for instance, the typical prostitute earns more than the typical architect. ... As for demand? Let's just say that an architect is more likely to hire a prostitute than vice-versa." In Indianomix however, you come across instances where you have to think - surely these gaffes could have been avoided. At times the text gets just stops flowing, and gets mired in the prepositional quicksands of grammar, like in the sentence below. "... if you're not en route to where he needs to go to hand off to the next driver," Or you don't know if you are going or you need to 'comma'." She was in Cambridge not at the fabled university but taking English language classes at a private college." Or when the literal collides with slang, and you're not quite sure what to make of the resulting, err, loaf of a sentence. "What was once a bread basket has become a basket case." In conclusion, I have to admit to at least a little bit of guilt when writing this review. It's not quite glowing. It's harsh. I am not paid to write reviews, good or bad, scathing or adulatory. I understand the effort it takes to put together a book, especially when it's not someone's full-time job. To then have someone, a blogger, a non-entity, rip it to pieces is harsh. This is one reason I spend more time on the negative reviews - to put forth my point of view that does not make it seem like an armchair pronouncement. In the final analysis, a review is a very subjective pronouncement on a book, biased by the reader's own views, knowledge, cognitive blindspots, and so many other factors. In some ways, a review is a very conceited act of a post-fact justification of one's opinions.² of 2 people found the following review helpful. AvoidableBy inza Comes across as a stunningly uneducated take on India and its situations. It is true that Dahejia is from the Bhagwati school but given his other scholarship I hoped this will be a balanced view, sadly its economic propoganda of a rather poor variety.³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. A Poorly done Freakonomics on India By gulabo This is an attempt to write a Freakonomics for India. Besides being a me-too book, it is poorly executed. The whole premise of this kind of book is that makes its case using interesting data analysis. The authors here have totally failed to do this and their conclusions are more often than not

just their opinions - perhaps more appropriate for a newspaper op-ed column. This is a poor effort and readers who like this genre are advised to read the original *Freakonomics* by Levitt.

A quirky look at India using popular economics. Why does the stock exchange dip during a lunar eclipse? Why don't cars with safety features lead to fewer injuries? Why did Nehru ignore the Chinese threat in the lead-up to the 1962 war? Why is it that a stranger might risk his life to save yours on one day, and a street full of passers-by might casually watch you bleed to death on another? Why did pollsters wrongly predict a BJP victory in 2004, and what was the real reason for their defeat? And why is India's Independence Day not, in fact, on the day on which it's celebrated? In pithy, sparkling, bite-sized chapters, economists Vivek Dehejia and Rupa Subramanya tackle these seeming mysteries and unearth the real reasons why we are like this only. The answers are entertaining and surprising at every turn, and reveal a picture of modern India as never seen before.

Succinctly explains Indian reality in an unconventional manner. The authors use everyday examples to explain complex problems. A riveting read, indeed. --Jay Panda This is economics and game theory as great entertainment! --Gurcharan Das A quirky, thoughtful little book that is sometimes provocative, often surprising and always interesting. Shashi Tharoor Economics needn't be boring. Economics can be real, not abstract and esoteric. This is a delightful book, illustrating how and why economists look at things. It isn't just about India, it is also about how economics works. --Bibek Debroy About the Author Vivek Dehejia is an economics professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, and a columnist for *Mint*. Vivek is from Mumbai and at present lives between Ottawa and Mumbai. Rupa Subramanya is an economist, analyst, and writer. Previously she was a columnist for *Wall Street Journal India*. At