



How India Became America

By AKASH KAPUR (New York Times – March 9, 2012)

(Adapted for the use of students by Marilyn Carmody, NOVA Academy, CA)

Starbucks and Amazon have entered the Indian market. As one Indian newspaper put it, this could be “the final stamp of globalization.” The arrival of these two companies, a symbol of American consumerism, is a sign of something more distinctive. It signals the latest episode in India’s remarkable process of Americanization.

I grew up in rural India, the son of an Indian father and American mother. I always considered both countries home. For much of my life, my two homes were literally, culturally, and socially on opposite sides of the planet.

All that began changing in the early 1990s, when India liberalized its economy. Indian cities are filled with shopping malls and glass-paneled office buildings. In the countryside, thatch huts had given way to concrete homes, and cashew and mango plantations were being replaced by gated communities. In both city and country, a newly liberated population was indulging in a frenzy of consumerism and self-expression.

The Americanization of India had both tangible and intangible manifestations. The tangible signs included an increase in the availability of American brands. In outsourcing companies across the country, Indians were being taught to speak more slowly and stretch their O’s. I found myself turning my head when I heard young Indians call their colleagues “dude.”

But the intangible evidence of Americanization was even more remarkable. Something had changed in the very spirit of the country. The India in which I grew up was, in many respects, an isolated and dour place of limited opportunity. Now it is infused with an energy of a can-do ambition. The villages around my home have undeniably grown more prosperous, but they are also more troubled. Abandoned fields and plantations are indications of a looming agricultural and environmental crisis. Ancient social structures are collapsing under the weight of new money. Bonds of caste and religion and family have frayed; the village assemblies made up of elders, have lost their traditional authority. Often, lawlessness and violence step into the vacuum left behind.

I recently spoke with a woman in her mid-50s who lives in a nearby village. She leads a simple life (impoverished even, by American standards), but she is immeasurably better off than she was a couple of decades ago. She grew up in a thatch hut. Now she lives in a house with a concrete roof, running water and electricity. Her son owns a cellphone and drives a motorcycle. Her niece is going to college.

But not long before we talked, there had been a murder in the area, the latest in a series of violent attacks and killings. Shops that hadn’t existed a decade ago were boarded up in anticipation of further violence; police patrolled newly tarred roads. The woman was scared to leave her home.

“This is what all the money has brought to us,” she said to me. “We were poor, but at least we didn’t need to worry about our lives. I think it was better that way.”

India’s Americanization has in so many ways been a wonderful thing. It has lifted millions from poverty but has also begun the process of dismantling an old and often repressive order. The American promise of renewal and reinvention is deeply seductive — but, as I have learned since coming back home, it is also profoundly menacing.

QUESTIONS:

1. In a couple of sentences, describe how the title of the article itself describes the idea of globalization?
2. Describe the different ways that the author claims that India is becoming more Americanized.
3. With regards to India, is globalization a pro or a con? Provide a couple of examples for each argument.
4. EXTRA CREDIT QUESTION: Based on the article and your own feelings, describe how globalization of culture (being exposed to different types of food, clothing, religions, languages, technology, dress, etc.) can be both positive and negative for individuals and their cultures.