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Why India is so unhappy, and how it can change

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A man walks along a wall overlooking the skyline of central Mumbai's financial district. India is regressing in global happiness rankings as a result of abysmal social capital and a lack of interpersonal trust. Photo: REUTERS

What does it take to make us happy? This holiest of holy grails has elicited explanations from everyone from prophets to counsellors and advertisers.

But befitting our present era of big data and large cross-national surveys, researchers from the United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) have popularised a precise science of happiness that is quantifiable by means of key "predictors" or factors.

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Their expert claim is that joy for most people is the outcome of a combination of economic, social and political indicators. These include gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, social capital or community support mechanisms, access to healthcare, freedom to make life choices, generosity towards others, and perceptions of corruption.

Countries that score highly on these counts are the happiest, according to the World Happiness Report 2017. Nations that fare poorly on these indices are sad.

In light of persistent criticism of the narrow focus on GDP and materialistic definitions of “development” and “progress”, the happiness index has been designed to balance economics with social caring and accountability of politicians. In other words, economic uplift, plus social trust and good governance, comprise the magic formula which guarantees a satisfied society.

Unsurprisingly, Scandinavian nations with a Goldilocks-like capacity for harmonising economies, societies and polities top the charts as the most blissful nations. In this year’s list from the SDSN, five of the 10 happiest countries where large majorities of respondents reported contentment in life are Scandinavian.

The authors of the Happiness Report single out Norway’s case. Because it chose to produce its oil slowly to invest the proceeds for the future rather than spending them in the present, it has been able to shelter its population from the boom-and-bust business cycle of many other resource-rich economies.

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Norway can consciously fashion such a mature trajectory due to high levels of mutual trust, shared purpose and good governance — all factors that help to keep it and other top Nordic countries where they are in the happiness rankings.

In comparison, the United States has dropped 16 places from No 3 to No 19 over the last 10 years. The report argues that rising inequality, corruption, isolation, and social discord are to blame.

It is worth noting that Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Sweden are not the richest countries in the world. Qatar, Singapore, Kuwait, Brunei, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have higher per capita incomes than most Nordic nations. Yet, the latter outdo the former in happiness because they blend capitalism, social democratic interventionist governments and preservation of communitarian ethics. The key is to get all three dimensions — economic, social and political — right.

Among the most disappointing cases in this year’s happiness rankings is India, the world’s second most populous nation, which comes in at 122nd place out of 155 countries.

It is way behind regional rival China (79), fellow South Asian countries such as Pakistan (80) and Bangladesh (110), and even sub-Saharan African nations such as Nigeria (95) and South Africa (101).

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Notwithstanding high GDP growth and stable governance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is regressing in the happiness rankings primarily due to abysmal social capital and a lack of interpersonal trust.

The national average for India to the question — “If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?” — is among the lowest in the world. It stands at a mere 0.61, unlike 0.74 in China and 0.80 each in Nigeria and Egypt.

Social safety nets and traditional communitarian assistance networks have eroded in India due to the disintegration of joint families and persistence of loyalties based on caste, region, language and religion that limit broad civic empathy towards all citizens. Unregulated mass migration of labour from rural to urban areas has also exacerbated social division, class distinction and polarisation.

Rapid GDP growth and modernisation have always been wrenching processes that inflict costs on social cohesiveness and equality of opportunities. But comparisons with other developing countries that underwent fast modernisation show that serious socioeconomic lacunae that hamper happiness levels can be rectified over a period of time. For example, China improved its “subjective well-being” rankings through employment-centric economic strategies such as avoiding drastic reforms that incur mass layoffs.

Indian policymakers and civil society activists have their task cut out to think of ways in which greater social trust and human-to-human compassion can be built. Mr Modi has lamented that “the biggest issue in India is trust”.

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“Why do we not trust our fellow countrymen? I want to change this,” he said. His clarion call “to strengthen our national character and do things for the benefit of the country” is a step in the right direction.

If imitating the Scandinavian model is far-fetched, Mr Modi and his advisers could examine why Latin America enjoys a relatively privileged position in the happiness rankings. Brazil (22nd place), Mexico (25) and Argentina (26) are undoubtedly in the middle-income category, but their social capital scores are leaps ahead of those of India and China.

Religiosity or ethnic makeup in Latin America does not fully capture the comparatively sky-high trust levels and social bonds there because South Asia is equally, if not more, devout and diverse.

The difference probably lies in how family units, social hierarchies and national consciousness have been designed in Latin America to be less exclusive and rigid, while fostering resilience to cope with destabilising winds of economic transformation.

Notwithstanding the current economic recession and political crises in Latin America, it has superior happiness rates than South Asia, which as a region has an average score of just 4.4 in contrast to the global average of 5.3.

South-east Asia and East Asia, which are much more industrialised than South Asia, are also ahead of the latter with averages roughly equalling the global one.

Learning lessons from Latin America, South-east Asia and East Asia, while staying inspired by Scandinavia to harmonise GDP with social trust and governance, should be the main takeaway from the “geography of happiness” — as SDSN puts it — for South Asia’s rulers and opinion makers.

Encouraging labour-intensive, employment-generating small and medium enterprises, while simultaneously forging pan-national citizenship-based identities which transcend parochial and ethnic biases, are essential for South Asia to smile more. Happiness is just a judicious mix of policies and attitudes away, and South Asia has to consciously strive to find it.

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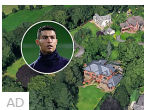
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