

## Wish someone a happy Republic Day today

GREG DAY

January 26, 2010

[Comments 29](#)

### **We can all do more to make Indian students feel at home in Australia.**

TODAY is both Australia Day and Indian Republic Day, but you would be hard pressed to find that coincidence on the agenda at the typical Aussie Day barbecue.

When Australian political leaders proclaim emphatically that Australia is among the safest places in the world, they unintentionally reinforce the perception in India that the attacks on students are racially motivated.

Their inept spin is horribly wrong because if Indians are being attacked in such a safe place, the logical perception in India must be that the violent acts are indeed racially motivated.

As the Prime Minister and premiers staunchly defend our national safety record, they unwittingly reinforce the perception of racism.

Another example of government spin gone tragically wrong is the latest Australia Day Council advertisements (see *The Age*, page 18, last Saturday) urging us all to barbecue like never before.

The advert, in the style of a 1970s Maoist propaganda poster, features three bronzed Aussies gripping their chops and snags close to their hearts in readiness for the ritual fry-up.

One can only gasp in horror at the meaning this might have for people of Hindu faith - this is tantamount to saying throw another sacred cow on the barbie, mate.

This compounds another recent insensitivity. Before Christmas, a major supermarket chain required employees to wear red T-shirts emblazoned with the jolly slogan "Merry Christmas".

My local outlet has a significant number of Indian staff, so I asked many if they celebrated Christmas, and without exception they said no. But they were happy to wear the T-shirt. They didn't complain; it was part of the job.

Last year on Australia Day, I wished a checkout operator a happy Republic Day. She beamed with recognition. Yes, it was Indian Republic Day and Australia Day simultaneously, she said with a broad grin.

Emboldened, I asked her if she was studying in Australia. Oh yes, she said, I am completing my master's degree in information technology.

It is a familiar story, Australia benefits from the best and brightest from other nations serving in our supermarkets and driving our taxis.

Yet the best we can offer on Australia Day is to throw a chop on the barbie, crack a tinnie or two and hope we flog the Pakistanis again at cricket.

But we resent suggestions by the Indian media that Australia might be racist.

Indeed there is a tone of righteous indignation among Australian officials and there is an implication that visiting students should be grateful.

There is also an undertone that the attacks are merely a minor irritation - and that the conditions for Indian students are in fact more than satisfactory.

But working in late-night convenience stores and driving taxis is risky business. And it's true that many marginalised Indian students find these are the only jobs open to them - leaving them at the front line of Friday and Saturday night "beer worshippers".

Indians too are ill-prepared to deal with the unsavoury aspects of Australian culture. The drinking, the youthful hedonism and the blatant abuse of "migrant" labour in the lowest paid jobs.

What does it say about Australia that we rely on foreign students (and recent migrants) to drive taxis, clean our shopping centres, and serve in our shops? It says we don't care.

It says you can come here and pay your uni fees but

don't expect too much - and especially don't expect us to change. We are treating Indian students like poor lodgers in the rundown, backyard bungalow - it's good to have their rent as long as they keep to themselves.

Indian students might be safe in Australia, but it's hardly surprising that they don't feel that way.

Asking them to change their perceptions or behaviour only reinforces their feelings of separation or alienation.

It is Australians that need to change. The good news is that we can start today simply by wishing Indian friends, neighbours and taxi drivers a happy Republic Day.

Then we might realise how much more we have in common.

Greg Day is a St Kilda-based communications consultant.

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## Comments

29 comments so far

»«

*»What a patronising piece of space filler. This is the best, one of the writers of Australian media can come up with. Stop patronising Australia, patronising attitude may have looked good during 80's and 90's not any more. Be pragmatic instead or prepare to get a shock within next decade.«*  
*»Anyways Happy Australian Day (Whatever that means) from an Indian in India.«*

»«

**Bappi** | Siliguri - January 26, 2010, 7:26AM

»«

*»Well written! Hats off to the writer who understands and appreciates Indian students sentiments and takes a more broad view as against some of the conservatives who have commented on similar issues in a different manner in the past.  
Keep it up and Happy Republic and Independence day to all!!!!«*

»«

**Sanj** | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 7:26AM

»«

*»Pleaseee ! Why must we be ashamed of our traditions, and moderate them for minorities. Yes we should respect their sensitivities when we're in their countries, but they should do the same when they're in our country. You'd have us like the USA where they don't have "Christmas", nobody mentions the word, it's taboo. it's all "happy holidays".«*

»«

**John** | Melb - January 26, 2010, 7:50AM

»«

»Give it a rest John. That's just the sort of arrogant attitude that causes these misunderstandings.«

»«

**Ian** | Hobart - January 26, 2010, 8:08AM

»«

»Hey, We came here coz we love the Aussie way of life, the mateship, the barbecue and the beer!! Indian culture is (or atleast used to be) known for its tolerance to multiple faiths and cultures, so there is no issue in throwing the "sacred" cow to the barbie..as long as you don't force feed the devout (rare) hindus..«

»And Christmas has outlived religion and faith.. its now a highly commercial festival that has no religious meaning at all.. We celebrate it as much as the world celebrates it..«

»So this Australia Day, wish the Indians a Happy Australia Day and make them feel at home..«

»«

**Ajith** | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 9:25AM

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»Why should we change, the only reason why Indian students come here to study is to get a visa to live here.«

»«

**Malcolm** | East of Bombay - January 26, 2010, 9:14AM

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»We do not change for the benefit of others, just as I would not expect them to change their ways in their own country to benefit us. Thats probably why we still have the concepts of "nations" and why we are not an amorphous mass administered by the U.N. ANd what jobs do you expect people to undertake whilst studying?? They can't work full time and what other jobs are available out of normal hours?«

»Happy Republic day to all Indian nationals. Happy Australia day to all citizens of this fine country«

»«

**Act Rationally** - January 26, 2010, 8:55AM

»«

»no, Ian, you give it a rest. This is Australia, a predominately Christian European culture. Yes we should be aware of cultural sensitivities but it is impossible to make everything inoffensive to everybody. Where do you draw the line? Are you saying that butchers should never advertise pork so not to offend muslims and jews? should butchers be shut so not to offend vegans? should all australian women wear burqas so not to offend those from a very conservative (not necessarily religious) background?«

»«

**muttster** | BNE - January 26, 2010, 8:52AM

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»I agree with Bappi's comments. This piece does sound patronizing. I doubt you'll find any Indian who'll be offended by others' barbecueing their choice of meat. I mean, c'mon, the streets of Muslim areas in any city in India are filled with the aroma of meat on skewers!! What is even more surprising is his somewhat naive assumption that Indians (of all people) will be offended by Christmas or what it represents. We find all the brouhaha about turning Christmas into 'Happy Holidays' in some parts of the world quite silly actually. Indians just need an excuse to celebrate...just take a look at the national holidays calendar to see what I mean.

I understand that his heart is in the right place, and the overall gist of his article is to ask Aussies to introspect and be more inclusive if they already aren't, but it exposes a fundamental lack of knowledge about what the ethos of India is.

The point of conflict for India is the brazen dismissal of crimes against its citizens. It need not have gone down this road. The initial dismissive behavior of Melbourne police and indeed, people in the Australian government, did not look like the actions of people who are as professional as they claim to be. Added to that condescending comments about how these students are 'safer here than in India' just took things through the roof.

I read today that Shane Warne is being roped in to salvage the situation. Now THAT is a good move. The man's a legend in India, and if the PR that he will provide is accompanied by actual action on the ground by Melbourne police, this entire fiasco can be put behind us.«

»«

**spaulage** | Bangalore, India - January 26, 2010, 8:44AM

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»End it.... done to death.

Workplace law is tightened on behalf of representation in the workplace for all employees. Authority placed as the focal point for grievance by both employer and employee. Not perfect, yet one which is an important aspect demanded by the electorate. All parties at present discuss, lobby and work for safety and fairness in the workplace for all working people. Theft from working students will not be cured with a furious letter to editor. Safety for all working students requires representation and a collective without fear to protect them. Australia remains the nation which employs more students and teens than any other nation. Australia is the nation which works longer hours and with fewer public holidays than any other nation. Australia is owed the greatest backlog of sick days and annual leave than any other nation. Australia has a very large representation of working mothers and a higher percentage of casual, part-time, sub contracted workforce servicing both public and private systems. On entering this nation an assumption required that this is a very highly productive nation, with a very low unemployment rate which should imply that the working population is squeezed dangerously. NSW does not have a minimum working age. Does not occur to the NSW resident to change this. More parents in NSW see benefit their children participate in paid work yet also demand vocally for decent wages, representation and an umpire which they wish to be shared by all. This whole issue has run off the rails and has been grossly mishandled. Taxi drivers have influential representation. More needed is the demand to know who exploits them, who own the licenses, give us names instead of quibbling with this useless stuff.«

»«

**Marshall** - January 26, 2010, 10:06AM

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