

Our ability to adapt other cuisines to our tastes: Hot and Sour Chinese soup has *desi tadka*. Sandwiches aren't thinly sliced and lightly buttered slices of bread with slivers of cucumber.

We add green

chutney

and sliced aloo and beetroot. We invented Chicken and Veg Manchurian, developed Udipi pizzas, concocted onion omelettes, created veg

kheema

, de-Japanesed Japanese food by cooking up

gajjar-ka-sushi

, and now are well on the way to Indianising the seafood diet of penguins in Antarctica just in case that becomes the hot new

phoren

cuisine of 2010.

Faith and spirituality: Tell someone you don't believe in God. Go on. You'll find yourself arguing so vehemently to make your case that you could well be accused of having a severe case of faith – faith in no God in this case. Because that's what we do – believe. Hard. With passion. In anything we want to believe. Which is why practically every faith known to God is right here in India, and we're not above inventing several more if we think we haven't enough.

The way we are so flexible: Checked anyone's filofax lately? Know anyone who has a filofax? We may set off in the morning expecting to follow a strict schedule of assignments and appointments, but we are always happy to chuck all our plans at a moment's notice, particularly if the alternative involves partying.

Our many and varied stories: Our history goes back 5,000 years – and so do our epics that contain every emotion, possibility and philosophy that humans have ever managed to come up with. Not to mention a frightening amount of maths, if we're considering the ages that make up the four yugas. Add to that the epics of Islam and Christianity, local folk traditions and tales that simply emerge from our fertile brains, and we're wondering why our TV channels need to import bad reality shows from *phoren* and inflict them on us.

Chai: It's raining. We need *chai*. It's cold. We need *chai*. It's hot and sweaty and miserable. We need *chai*. Yes *chai*, not tea. The over-boiled, over-milked and over-sweetened stuff that could rot our teeth and turn our insides into shoe leather, yet never fails to put life back into our tired frames. Then there's also tea. Darjeeling, Assam, Nilgiri, Kangra... Mmmm, the fragrance.

Monsoon mania: Who needs marijuana or Ecstasy? The monsoon is what we get high on. After a long summer spent gazing up at the sky through a magnifying glass looking for the

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merest hint of a cloud (and in imminent danger of setting our eyebrows on fire), we see the sky begin to darken, then the first drops of rain hit the earth, then we breathe deep and our nostrils fill with the delicious scent of wet earth... and then we complain bitterly about floods.

Weddings and family occasions: Our weddings are attended by family, relatives, friends, past and present neighbours, people who invited you to their or their siblings' weddings, past and present colleagues, random strangers because we had 300 wedding cards extra and didn't want to waste them, plus gatecrashers – a guestlist so long it rivals the population of the whole of Africa. If however, our homes are filled with the population of only one small country, like Bangladesh, we're just having a family dinner.

Bollywood *jhatkas*: Hips swirl in one direction while the torso twists in another and the shoulders go somewhere else entirely even as the head moves so violently, it could spin off the neck entirely. We'd make excellent weather vanes, only no one would know where the wind was actually coming from.

Autos: Germany had its cute little Volkswagen Beetle, we have our cute little autos – three-wheelers packed with hi-tech music systems and disco lights that would put nightclubs to shame, which trundle up and down roads as their drivers overcharge everyone in sight, including themselves by mistake.

Bargaining: Worry about being cheated, who us? It's the people we're buying from who are tense. That's because we don't see bargaining only as a legitimate means of lowering prices. We see it as a sport. So we will not move an inch from the *thelawalla* even if the sun is blazing down at 53 degrees. We want that 30 paise off our kilo of apples and that is that.

Desi hospitality: *Atithi devo bhava...* and we will be devo-ed till our stomachs burst. (Perhaps because our hosts bargained so hard with the *thelawalla* th at the apples were practically free?) When we step into anyone's house we are fed, watered and pampered so much, we'd never believe there was a single nasty person on this planet. The only difficulty is getting away – if they could, our hosts would adopt us on the spot.

Tel maalish: Even as we read the stories by our lifestyle journalists on the joys of spa massages, we are getting our hair cut in full anticipation of the head massage that will follow. It's hard to fathom why the phoren people get so excited about massages. Haven't we been *tel-maalished* from the second we were born?

We're child-friendly: Aside from the fact that we love children so much that we're soon going to produce enough to populate the entire world, everything in our lives is geared towards their happiness. So much so that our parents never want us to leave home.

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So many newspapers and magazines: Whatever the rest of the world may think about reading, we have so much respect for knowledge that many of us literally worship our books (i.e., take them to temples to be blessed, instead of actually opening them). This may explain why new newspapers and magazines are constantly being launched even as marketing people complain that nobody reads any more.

We survived the recession: That's because even though we are clambering up the conspicuous consumption ladder just like those phoren people who drove their economies to the brink of extinction, unlike them we have a culture of caution and saving that pulled us through when entire countries had to declare bankruptcy. That's why. Our stash of black money certainly had nothing to do with it.

We're a democracy, thank God!: You say, I say, she says... we all can say. And many of us do say – very, very loudly. Ideas and arguments are alive and though some of us (call them Party A) feel a great desire to clonk some others (call them Party B) over the head for having foolish opinions, we're lucky because still others (call them Party C) are just as thrilled by the idea of clonking some of us (Party A) over the head for their ideas, as meanwhile, Party D lurks about, thinking hard thoughts about Party C. So a balance is maintained at all times.

We're miserly and extravagant at the same time: We spend approximately the amount required for a new house on a new handbag, but we turn purple with rage and start throwing things about (though not our new handbag) when the auto driver suggests Rs 25 as a fair fare.

Raddiwalas: When those phoren people start making noises about our carbon credits – ours, for heaven's sake, when we are the most frugal people on this planet always trying to save 10 paise here and 20 paise there, never mind that there are actually no coins in those denominations any more – we can tell them that we are green without even trying because ours is a country where recycling has always been a business, thanks to the raddiwalla.

Jugaad: Nothing in India need only be what it was originally meant to be. A motorcycle can be attached to a cart and become a *bael-gaadi*, a tangle of wires could become a satellite dish, and when prissy parents refuse to serve alcohol at weddings, the boot of a car is a bar.

The sheer number of holidays: There's a New Year's Day practically every month, not to mention some festival or the other courtesy one community or the other. And if we don't take the holiday, we are nasty exclusionists who do not believe in unity in diversity. So there is a minimum of three holidays every month not counting weekends and if we live in Kolkata, we also have *bandhs*.

Our values are still (mostly) intact: Family – check (see the millions who turn up for our weddings). Friends – check (see movies like *3 Idiots*).

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Frugality – check (ask the thelawalla if you need proof). Hospitality – check (look at the size of our stomachs and we haven't been home for weeks). Modesty – uh oh. What's that we keep telling ourselves about Asian tigers?

Our patriotic songs: They can be truly heart-rending. Just the first few bars of *Saare Jahaan Se Achcha* can make us weep – and not only because our neighbour sings it so badly that we're convinced she's a Pakistani terrorist. And they are also so rousing that it takes just one hearing of *Hum Hindustani* to make us grab anything at home that might serve as a weapon and queue up at the Defence HQ, ready to sign up for the Army.

Amazing diversity of food taboos: We have vegetarians who won't touch anything that once had the potential to move (though we don't understand this too well – don't palak leaves flutter in the breeze?), we have vegetarians who will eat all vegetables but won't touch garlic or onion, we have eggetarians who will only eat vegetables and eggs, we have chickenatarians who only eat vegetables and chicken but not eggs, we have fishitarians who will not touch dairy with a bargepole and non-vegetarians who think green veggies are a form of mould. We have so many people with so many dietary problems that it's a wonder we get to eat anything at all.

Amazing diversity of food: Food taboos, shood taboos! When we set off for school or the office clutching our tiffin boxes, we know very well we're not going to eat anything that's in them. Because the second it's time for lunch, tiffins are exchanged for what our classmates or colleagues have brought. Which is why, in one day, we could find we have eaten anything from *akoori* (Parsi) to *aloo poshto* (Bengal), to *sai bhaji* (Sindh), to *bisi bele bhaath* (Karnataka), to *aloo-bhaji* (UP), to *tandoori chicken* (Punjabi), to *biryani* (Muslim) to de-Japanesed Japanese like *gajjar-ka-sushi* (wholly Indian, *mera Bharat mahaan*).

Amazing diversity of us!: For a people who have so much in common, we come from a wide

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variety of races. Across the world, we are mistaken for Chinese (anyone from the North-East), Caucasian (Parsis and Sindhis), Italian and Spanish (Goan people, especially with curly hair)... You name it, we've got the gene.

Amazing belief that anything worthwhile could have originated only in india: We don't care what anyone says about Africa being the cradle of civilisation, we know for a fact that we invented everything in the world – including the world's genes, so there! We're responsible for shampoo (*ampi* *ch*), bungalow (*bangla*), thug (*thugee*), *chicken tikka masala* ... Err... Well, we're responsible for the *chicken tikka* and the *masala* and since the combination is so ghastly, we're fine if the Brits take the credit for that.

We're a nation of ideas: Tired of the sheer boringness of branded shoes? Someone will paint your keds for you. Want a poem for a loved one but can't rhyme anything but moon and loon? Call the poet-for-hire. Ordered 3,00,000 wedding cards and find you actually know only 2,50,000 potential invitees for the wedding (oh, the shame of it)? Call the rent-a-*baraati* company in Ambala. We are short of many things in our lives, but we'll never run out of ideas.

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