

A trillion atoms, one percent of your dollars, and please be selfish

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The future looks bright for the three million non-resident Indians in the U.S. If you have doubts, then look at the odds. Would you bet against a group that consists of 600,000 engineers; 50,000 doctors; 20,000 dentists; 6,000 lawyers; 5,000 pharmacists; 2,000 veterinarians; 2,000 professors; and 60,000 self employed business owners and entrepreneurs? And, remember that this group is living in a country that is the undisputed engine of the world economy and has captured 30% of the world GDP with only 5% of the world's population.

Yes, America is great, and an average American enjoys eight times more prosperity than an average person living outside of America. The financial story of this lucky Indian group is somewhat unique in comparison. The income of the 3 million

Indians in the U.S. is more than the income of 300 million people in India who are breathing at the bottom of the pyramid.

Congratulations, we have arrived. And since researchers tell us that happiness is measured by two scales – actual wealth, and how much richer we are than others, we should be very happy. So what then is the purpose of life, from here on end?

The first 99% of purpose

The first purpose of life is simple and clear. Let's be selfish and enjoy the heck out of life. Nothing is wrong with this simple thinking. We are educated. We are smart. We are lucky. We worked, and worked very hard. We have earned it. We deserve it.

Life is a box of chocolates, says Forrest Gump. Let's leave no chocolate unturned. A vacation house, a 12-cylinder car, a vineyard. Let's have it all. You only live once, some people say.

Let's not feel an ounce of guilt. Let's relish 99% of our income or wealth.

The last one percent

If there is commonality in all religions, then it is akin to the trio my Sikh faith believes in: Do good deeds, Remember God, and Share Your Wealth.

Most religions advocate giving of 10% or so of your income. Maybe the 10% works for non-Indians; but for sure, it does not work for Indians.

Why not? Well, if your country has been ruled by foreigners for 2,300 years, then expect your DNA to have a gene code that does not trust organizations and institutions. That is what makes us Indian.

My favorite aunt always says, "If the story is over a year old, I don't want to hear it." Since the 2,300 years foreign rule is now a story that turned 60 years old on August 15, 2007, can we move on?

Forget the non-Indian American rule of 10%, can we start the rehabilitation into human faith with at least one percent?

As my 12-year old son, Veeraj, says, "you came from India, you lived there, and now that you can help, you should do it."

If your gene code still screams at 1%, then ask the fella, what is the percentage of the 1% in which you have lack of trust and faith? Hope the answer is not more than 40%, because George Bush is offering you a tax break of 40% on your giving.

I can't, my kids need it

Of course they need it, just like you did! Remember your "I came with \$200 in my pocket" story.

The proudest thing in almost every affluent NRI's life is that we are all "self made". Yes, we beat all odds. Yet we are bent upon robbing that precious joy from the lives of our children. Why, we may ask?

Actually, why don't we go ahead and tell our kids the truth. "Dear Beta /Beti: Mom and Dad are leaving you all of our net assets and the million dollar life insurance policy so that you will always have food on your table. We came with nothing, but we are smart, we made it. We love you, and we want you to make it, but really don't know if you will be able to make it on your own, so we are leaving you enough so that you will never have to worry about money in your life."

Imagine we are gone, and our kids have our wealth. What might they do with it, what are the options? Only five: spend it, lose it, live off it, give it to charity, or invest it.

The last option is enticing. They will have money to invest, and will become really wealthy! Somehow the world's richest - Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Lakshmi Mittal - didn't need their parents's money.

There are two other issues in leaving kids our wealth. By the time we die, our kids are going to be over 50!

The shocking part is that we feel that our kids will need the last one percent. Almost a full majority of our kids disagree with us. Ask them.

You will need it

Forget your kids. Be really truly selfish. You will need it.

We are all coming back in some form for sure. Yes, 100% for sure. An average human being stays alive for 650,000 hours. Then, one not so fine day, the trillion atoms that is you, will pull the plug on you and you will be cremated or buried. You will be dead, but your atoms will move on.

Hindus cremate their dead because they believe that the body is made up of five elements which are earth, water, air, fire, and ether and that cremation transports these five elements to their respective sources at death.

Every single atom will find a place in this universe. In a leaf, in a Lamborghini, in lead, in a laddoo, in a lion, or in a HIV positive orphaned six year old girl named Lavanya who has a limited life left in the dreadful slums of Lucknow.

There are so many atoms in each one of us, that the odds are almost 100% that some of your lifeless atoms will end up again in a human body. 135 million babies were born in the world in 2006, out of which 26 million were born in India. There is 20% chance that the next human body, in which some of your atoms end up, will be in India.

Then, odds are 70% that you will be poor or very poor, and you will have to live on less money all your life, than what is spent on an average dog's life in America.

Forget charity with the last one percent, because that is doing something for someone else. Let's make an investment with that last one percent so that our own atoms can have a better future.

Where is this one percent?

There are many worthwhile charities in the U.S.A. that are focused on assisting India, like AIF and Pratham. We could outsource our charity needs to them.

The total amount given to all India-centric charities in the U.S. last year was U.S. \$35 million. The net income of the three million Indians in 2006 was U.S. \$120 billion, one percent of which is U.S. \$1.2 billion.

Shortfall: One billion, one hundred and sixty five million dollars. Even at one percent, we have a very long way to go.

Why do we hoard? Why don't we give? Why don't we share? Why don't we care about the millions in India who live not only in poverty, but absolute poverty? Why don't we give back to the Motherland that gave us so much even when she didn't have enough?

As I write this, my 9-year old daughter comes and sits with me and starts reading from the screen. I casually ask her, "Sabrina, should we give money to a charity to help Indians in India?" She replies, "Yes we should," I ask her another question, "Why?" She quips without hesitation, "Because, it is the right thing to do."