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Mendacity in our Midst

Treatments in Ramanujan, Max Muller and in Ancient Indian Behaviour Codes

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Abstract

   Cultural observers like Ramanujan and Max Muller have implied that untruthfulness amongst Indians is prevalent because of its approval by ancient behaviour codes. Ramanujan also attributed a lack of universality in Indian thought to the same codes. While the ancient codes contain many assertions we would consider problematic today, lack of universality is not one of them as far as preference for truthfulness is concerned. The only occasion wherein any of the ancient codes prefer lies to truth is when someone's life was at stake. The quantitative prevalence of untruthfulness in different groups can only be empirically estimated by carefully designed questionnaires or experimentally. To minimize getting answers that the respondents will assume are expected of them, the first investigations should deal with instances of petty untruthfulness, where the consequences are trivial.

I

I. The charges cited by Ramanujan

In an essay brimming with insights, A. K. Ramanujan (1999) cites three common observations of the Indian way of thinking: inconsistency, an apparent inability to distinguish self from non-self, and a lack of universality. These criticisms have been levelled not only by foreigners but also by many modern Indian intellectuals as well. Inconsistency is revealed by being unbothered by simultaneous incompatible beliefs, as in astronomy and astrology. Alongside this charge of inconsistency, Ramanujan cites also the charge of hypocrisy—"Indians do not mean what they say and say different things at different times". On the lack of universality in Indian thought, this is what Ramanujan has to say:

> One has only to read Manu after a bit of Kant to be struck by the former's lack of universality. He seems to have no clear notion of a universal human nature from which one can deduce ethical decrees like 'Man shall not kill', or 'Man shall not tell an untruth'. One is aware of no notion of a 'state', no unitary law of all men . . .

Ramanujan goes on to quote from Max Muller's second lecture to the students of Cambridge University.

> Even truth-telling is not an unconditional imperative, as Muller's correspondents discovered.

An untruth spoken by people under the influence of anger, excessive joy, fear, pain, or grief, by infants, by very old men, by persons labouring under a delusion, being under the influence of drink, or by mad men, does not cause the speaker to fall, or as we should say, is a venial not a mortal sin. (Gautama paraphrased in Muller, 1883, 70). Alexander Wilder adds, in a footnote, further extensions: "At the time of marriage, during dalliance, when life is in danger, when loss of property is threatened, and for the sake of a Brahmana . . . Manu declared . . . whenever the death of a man of any of the four castes would be occasioned by true evidence, falsehood was even better than truth. (Muller 1883, 89)."

In answer to these criticisms, Ramanujan showed effectively how the dominant cultural tendency in India seems to favour context-specific systems, and the lack of distinction between self and not-self (or between nature and culture) is intentional and stems from a refusal to see things in black and white, from a preference for continuums, and may sometimes be a source of vision and strength. While Ramanujan was masterful in refuting the arguments put forward by the critics, he was more or less silent on his asides on untruthfulness, implying that the refutation had been provided by Max Muller. Again to quote:

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In Max Muller's lectures on India (1883), the second chapter was called 'Truthful character of the Hindus', in answer to many complaints.

The Ramanujan essay leaves a reader with the impression that untruthfulness[1] amongst Indians is prevalent widely because of its sanction by the ancient Indian code-givers. In the following four sections, I summarize what Max Muller and the ancient code-givers had to say on the subject of untruthful behaviour.

II. Max Muller's Defence

The Max Muller lectures were delivered in 1882 to a group of English students at Cambridge University considering taking the competitive examination for the Indian Civil Service. In the second lecture titled "Truthful Character of the Hindus", Max Muller's stated intention was to remove the prejudice that Hindus are "totally different from ourselves in their moral character, and more

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[1] It would be useful first to distinguish between hypocrisy, inconsistency and untruthfulness. Saying one thing while believing another is the usual definition of hypocrisy. Saying different things at different times in similar situations, while being inconsistent, does not automatically connote untruthfulness. When either of two opposing explanations will do for an otherwise inexplicable event, choosing different explanations at different times for similar events is at best merely a matter of convenience, or at worst, a reflection of cliché-ed thinking. Thus when villagers choose alternately either karma or *talaividi* (fate) to explain similar events around them, they are not being untruthful, just picking one of the two possible explanations at random. If confronted, they could just as easily choose the other. For a statement to be untruthful, the intention to mislead is crucial.

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particularly in what forms the very foundation of the English character, respect for truth." He goes on to say that "it has become an article of faith with every Indian Civil servant that all Indians are liars; nay, I know, I shall never be forgiven for venturing to doubt it." Again, "so often has the charge of untruthfulness been repeated, and so generally is it now accepted, that it seems Quixotic to try and fight against it."

Max Muller did a remarkable job in "selling" India to Cambridge students. He also succeeded in helping many Indians to think well of their cultural heritage; his book of lectures sold more copies in India than it did in England. Muller had never visited India and had to rely on written sources and hearsay to make his case in these lectures. However, when it comes to defending 'Hindus' (in those days the word Hindus was also applied to include Sikhs, Parsees, Buddhists, etc.) against the charge of untruthfulness, he displays a queer ambivalence. While he provides many quotes that Indians/Hindus have several admirable qualities, whenever he makes too spirited a defence of their truthfulness, he feels compelled to give-- not equal time, but mention a qualification or an opposing point of view that diminishes, if not undermines, the defence. It is instructive to go through his arguments.

The first concession he makes is that "some hundreds, say even some thousands of Indians, when they are brought before an English court of law, on suspicion of

having committed a theft or murder, do not speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." He then goes on to say that an English sailor would do the same if brought before a foreign judge.

Indians were more likely to lie in an English court, Max Muller argued, because the courts were located in towns and a man taken out of his village community was removed from all restraints of society and public opinion. Muller quotes approvingly the reply Colonel Sleeman received from an Indian lawyer in the eighteen thirties when asked about the impact of replacing an oath on the Koran or Ganges water by a solemn declaration made in the name of God. With characteristic proficiency, the Indian lawyer classified witnesses into three groups (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Impact of Oaths on the Truthfulness of Indian Witnesses in Colonial Courts

Type of Oath	Groups that will testify truthfully	Groups that will testify falsely
If under oath on the Koran or Ganges water	I, II	III, (IV)
Under solemn declaration in the name of God	I, (IV)	II, III

The change would have no effect on two groups of witnesses, those who will tell the truth regardless (Group

I) and those who would tell lies whenever they have a sufficient motive (Group III). However, he claims that the class that is most numerous (Group II) would tell the truth under an oath but would lie if asked to testify under a solemn declaration. The lawyer however felt that "three-fourths of those who do not scruple to lie in the courts would be ashamed to tell lies before their neighbours, or the elders of their village." (A fourth group of a tiny minority that might take perverse pleasure in telling lies only when asked to take an oath but told the truth under solemn declaration is not discussed.)

After quoting several Greek, Chinese, Arab and European travellers who testify about the positive qualities of Indians they encountered, Muller quotes Meer Salamat Ali that "a Hindu may feel himself authorized to take in a Mussulman, and might even think it meritorious to do so; but he would never think it meritorious to take in one of his own religion." After more adulatory passages, he goes on to quote Mountstuart Elphinstone, the early 19th century Governor of Bombay:

> ...at present, want of veracity is one of their prominent vices. Such deceit is most common in people connected with government, a class which spreads far in India, as, from the nature of land-revenue, the lowest villager is often obliged to resist force by fraud.

In the last part of his "defence", Max Muller cites Indian sources. "Were I to quote from all the law-books,

and from still later works, everywhere you would hear the same keynote of truthfulness vibrating through them all." And again, lest he "should seem to be pleading too much on the native side of the question", he admits that "under certain circumstances a lie was allowed, or at all events, excused by Indian lawgivers." He then quotes Gautama that Ramanujan reproduced in his essay.

From all this Max Muller concludes that the character of the natives of India is truthful, *when left to themselves,* or at least was so in ancient times, until about 1000 A.D. If one were to add all the exceptions mentioned in the lecture it would add up to this: Hindus are truthful except when they reside in towns; except on matters of land revenue when they reside in villages; except when they testify in courts; except when they deal with people of other religions; except when they are in government; and except when allowed or excused by their ancient code-givers. Hardly a resounding endorsement that one would have expected after reading the dust jacket of a recent Indian edition of his book (1991) which says: "On the basis of facts and testimonies from Hindu scriptures, foreign accounts and Colonel Sleeman's observations, he clearly showed the truthful character of the Hindus". The editors too must have had doubts though, for the title of the second lecture in this Indian edition was changed from the original "Truthful Character of the Hindus" to the more non-committal "Character of the Hindus".

III. Ancient Indian Sources of Behaviour Codes

Let us now consider what ancient Indian compilers of behaviour codes had to say about truthfulness. In addition to the famous code of Manu, there are four other surviving codes of proper individual and social behaviour as determined by one's age, gender, caste, marital status and order of life (Olivelle, 1999). These are the codes attributed to Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vasistha. They were followed by Manu Smriti, composed at the turn of the Common Era (Doniger, 1991). As is common with ancient Indian texts, both the absolute and the relative chronologies are shrouded in controversy.

Table 2 below shows that only a small fraction, about 1.1% on an average (range 0.4%-2.3%) of the sutras in these codes deal with statements about truthfulness and lying. In every code, the number of sutras that either praise truth, or condemn lies, or specify a punishment for a lapse, far exceeds the number of sutras that seem to condone lies in certain circumstances.

Numbers undoubtedly convey only a partial and inadequate picture. One must carefully analyse what the sutras say. There are no sutras in Apastamba and Baudhayana that specify circumstances where lying is condoned. The four sutras in Gautama, 1 in Vasistha and the 4 in Manu that fail to condemn lying unequivocally are reproduced in Table 3.

The first set (first row in Table 3) specifies circumstances when a verbal promise could be broken. For

Gautama, it could be broken if the request were made for unlawful (*adharmic*) purposes (5.23). For Manu, it was enough for the agreement to be outside the bounds of justice or outside customary business practice (8.164).

The second set specifies circumstances that reduce the culpability of the liar based on his condition at the time. Thus for Gautama, there are ten conditions which will not cause a person to lose his caste (a very severe punishment) when he utters an untrue statement: anger, jubilance, fear, pain, greed, feeble-mindedness, drunkenness, madness, childhood or old age. The corresponding sutra in Manu restricts the validity of contracts if they are made by an unauthorized person or someone drunk, crazy, in pain, or totally dependent, or a child or an old man (8.163). The first five states mentioned by Gautama do not qualify to nullify a contract in Manu. Interestingly, none of the codes specifies the kind of instances of untruthful behaviour that would cause a man to lose his caste.

The third set, the least defensible today, describes the types of lies that were not considered criminal or sinful. The three codes agree that marriages and sexual encounters provide extenuating circumstances for lying. They differ in assessing their seriousness. For Gautama, they are not sins; for Vasistha, they do not entail loss of caste; and for Manu, they are not crimes. Gautama also puts lies told in grief and in jest in his listing. Vasistha excludes these two, but includes three others:

Table 2: Sutras in Ancient Behaviour Codes dealing with truthfulness and untruthfulness (from Oliville, 1999; Doniger, 1991)

Code	Sutras that praise truth, condemn lies or specify a punishment for a lapse		Sutras that specify when truth is undesirable, when lies are preferred, or contracts invalid		Sutras dealing with truth and lying out of Total		
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Total
Apastamba	6	0.4%	--	--	6	0.4%	1364
Gautama	19	1.9%	4	0.4%	23	2.3%	999
Baudhayana	7	0.6%	--	--	7	0.6%	1236
Vasistha	9	0.9%	1	0.1%	10	1.0%	1038
Manu	34	1.3%	4	0.1%	38	1.4%	2685
Total	75	1.0%	9	0.1%	84	1.1%	7322

Table 3: The Nine Sutras where lying is not unequivocally condemned (Oliville, 1999; Doniger, 1991)

Situation	Gautama	Vasistha	Manu
1. When could a verbal promise be broken?	When a request is made for an unlawful (*adharma*) purpose, he should not give, even if has already promised to do so (5.23).	--	A verbal agreement does not become binding, even when it is well supported, if what is said is outside the bounds of justice and outside customary business practice (8.164).
2. What circumstances extenuate the telling of a lie or invalidate a contract?	Untrue statements made by people who are angry, jubilant, afraid, in pain, greedy, young, old, feeble-minded, drunk, or mad are not sins causing loss of caste (5.24).	--	A contract is not valid when it is made by an unauthorized person or someone drunk, crazy, in pain, or totally dependent, or a child or an old man (8.163).

3. What types of lies are not criminal or sinful?	According to some, telling a lie at marriage, during sex, in jest, or in grief is not a sin (23.29), but not if it concerns an elder (23.30).	A man may tell a lie at marriage, during a sexual encounter, when his life is at stake, when there is a risk of losing all his property, and for the sake of a Brahmin. These five types of lies, they say, do not entail the loss of caste (16.36).	But there is no crime in (false) oath about women one desires, marriages, fodder for cows, fuel, and helping a priest (8.112).
4. When is it not an offence, or even desirable, to give false testimony?	It is not an offence to give false testimony if a man's life depended on it (13.24), but not if it is the life of an evil man (13.25).	--	In a case where the telling the truth would cause the death of a servant, commoner, ruler, or priest, one should tell a lie, for that is better than the truth (8.104).

when the person's "life is at stake, when there is a risk of losing all his property, and for the sake of a Brahmin." Manu agrees with Vasistha on the need for lies if they would help a priest, but substitutes for property the greatly more trivial circumstances when untrue statements would not constitute a crime – in connection with fodder for cows and fuel.

The fourth set of circumstances listed by Gautama and Manu concern testimony in a case that could lead to capital punishment. In such a case, Gautama says it is not an offence to give false testimony but not if an evil man is being tried. Manu specifies that one should lie if telling the truth would cause the death of a servant, commoner, ruler or priest. He calls this lying as being better than the truth. *This is however, the only occasion wherein any of the ancient code-givers expresses a clear preference for lies over truth.* Otherwise, the statements are double negatives – not a sin, not a sin causing loss of caste, not an offence, not a crime, etc. If one were to rank order the three code-givers in order of leniency, one would have to choose Vasistha, Gautama and Manu in that order.

IV. Positive Features of Ancient Indian Behaviour Codes

Ancient Indian behaviour codes state a general rule then follow it up with exceptions (Doniger, 1991). Even in Manu, the most "lenient" of the ancient behaviour codes, untruthfulness was the not the preferred mode; it was preferred only when someone's life was at stake. The

Alexander Wilder footnote from the Max Muller lectures quoted by Ramanujan (on page 3) actually combines a sutra from Vasistha (16.36) with one from Manu (8.104) as reproduced on page 13, and makes it appear that Manu approves lying in more circumstances than he actually did. There was universality in ancient Indian behaviour codes, at least for truthfulness. Had they confined themselves to universal statements, their codes would have been limited to a few sutras or commandments. Having made statements that favour truthfulness (see next paragraph), the code-givers, being pragmatic in the extreme, recognize that lapses will occur and largely concern themselves with describing those lapses and prescribing appropriate punishments or penances.

The texts reveal a preference for truth over lying. Baudhayana (Book III, 1.27), Vasistha (3.60) and Manu (5.109) concur that "as the body is cleaned by water, the intellect is cleaned or purified by knowledge and the mind by truth." If this still seems too abstract and non-binding, Vasistha (4.4) stipulates that "speaking the truth, refraining from anger, giving gifts, not killing living creatures and fathering children—these (duties) are common to all classes." Similarly, Manu (10.63) specifies, "Non-violence, truth, non-stealing, purification and the suppression of sensory powers is the duty of the four classes, in a nutshell." Only non-violence and truthfulness are duties common to both codes. Manu further specifies another duty that "A man should tell the truth and speak

with kindness; he should not tell the truth unkindly, nor utter lies out of kindness. This is a constant duty" (4.138). While he presumes that it is not worthwhile to deal with the possibility of lies told unkindly, these statements come as close to universal statements one could expect from people writing in that social milieu.

These ancient Indian texts acknowledge that not all lies are morally equal. The seriousness of the crime (or sin) depended on the things about which the lie was told and the punishment depended not only on the thing lied about but also on the motivation for doing so. Since the intention to mislead is crucial in a lie, Gautama's ten circumstances where untruthfulness does not lead to a loss of caste are those that extenuate intentionality.

V. Negative Features of Ancient Indian Behaviour Codes

This essay is not an apology for ancient Indian codes. Its writing is motivated by the demand for being fair in appraising them. There is much in these codes that we would find unacceptable today. They have many unresolved inconsistencies both within and between the codes. Let us consider just a few of these that concern truthfulness and falsehood.

We have already seen in Table 3 the differences that exist in Gautama, in Vasistha and in Manu when it comes to determining the seriousness of a lie and the conditions that extenuate it. The contradictions exist not just between codes but within any one given text as well.

Consider the five verses from Chapter 8 in Manu (Doniger, 1991).

> He kills the born and the unborn by lying about a matter that concerns gold, and he kills everything by lying about land; therefore you certainly should not lie about land (8.99). And they say that lying about water, about sexual union and the carnal enjoyment of women, about all jewels that are born in water or are made of stone, is like lying about land (8.100).
> But there is no crime in a (false) oath about women whom one desires, marriages, fodder for cows, fuel, and helping a priest (8.112).
> For giving false evidence through naiveté, a man should be fined just 100 pennies, if through greed, full two hundred, confusion, 250, if through fear, friendship or greed, a thousand, if through lust, 2500, and if through anger, he should be fined 3000 (8.120).
> If one girl is shown but another is given to the bridegroom, he may marry both of them for the single bride price; that is what Manu says. (8.204).

In verse 8.100, he says that lying about sexual union and carnal enjoyment of women is very bad; in verse 8.112, he says it is not a crime, but then in verse 8.120, he specifies a fine for false evidence given through lust. Similarly, in verse 8.112 he says false oaths about marriages do not constitute a crime, but then goes on to specify a resolution when one girl is shown and another given to the bridegroom.

Some sutras call upon a witness to make a judgement on the moral worth of the accused in capital punishment cases. As we have seen, Gautama says that (Oliville, 1999):

> It is not an offence to give false testimony if a man's life depended on it (13.24), but not if it is the life of an evil man (13.25).

Apart from the context, punishments prescribed in the ancient behaviour codes were also dependent on the caste of the wrongdoer. So Manu advises "a just king should fine and banish the three classes if they give false evidence, but he should merely banish a priest (8.123)". Also, we would find unacceptable Manu's assertion that "if a witness who has testified (about a debt) is seen to experience a sickness, a fire, or a death in the family within seven days, he (the witness) must pay the debt and a fine (8.108)". Although we would consider Manu's faith in divine retribution an uncertain guide to judicial action today, the Indian disinclination to testify continues to this day. There are, of course, other reasons for this reluctance that have to do with the relative reaches of the state and the society.

Another limitation of the codes by Gautama, Vasistha and Manu, is that when they state the circumstances when a lie is not a crime, or not a sin, or does not entail a loss of caste, they leave open the specification of its seriousness, or of a punishment. Contrary to what Max

Muller asserted (p.60), there appears to be an insufficient sense of guilt arising from untruthful statements. Atonement for having told at least some lies is trivial (presumably in circumstances other than those for which a punishment was specified). Two examples will suffice. Gautama specifies the penance for telling a lie is austerities for a maximum of three days.

> If someone uses abusive words, tells a lie, or inflicts an injury, he shall practice austerities for a maximum of three days (23.27).

It seems difficult to believe this is not a problem with the translation and the author is really recommending a minimum. Characteristically, Manu is even more understanding:

> Even if a man is purified, after he has slept and sneezed, eaten and spat, told lies, drunk water, or prepared to recite the Veda, he should rinse his mouth (5.145).

VI. Context-free and Context-specific Systems

Despite its great facility in classifications, at some deeper level the Indian tradition has been distrustful of dichotomies or polar opposites. Apastamba recommends that the wandering ascetic should "abandon truth and falsehood, pleasure and pain, this world and next, and seek the Self (21.13)." For those of us not ready to

renounce the world yet, these categories continue to be of concern.

Ramanujan's achievement was to show that cultures have preferred modes of thinking and that in India context-specific modes were preferred over context-free systems. Cultures undergo much pain when they choose systems (or when these are imposed upon them) that are opposed to their natural inclination or when they continue to rely on systems long after they have ceased to be useful. The contractual demands of modern management, the demand (on grounds of fairness) for a uniform countrywide judicial system are instances of the need for context-free systems. It would be instructive to look at the characteristics of these systems before determining if a shift is desirable.

Table 4 summarizes the differences between the two modes on nine different criteria. Life is certainly too complex now to have lists (even with computers) that will be comprehensive enough to mandate appropriate behaviour for each occasion. The same complexity also ensures that situations will arise when universal laws will not be applicable. The risks of error in the two systems are also complementary: in one, we may tell a lie when truth may be desirable and in the other, we may tell the truth when something else may be desirable (e.g., silence, evasion, equivocation, kindness, etc.).

Context-specific systems can flourish in time-rich societies but make for enormous inefficiencies in time-

Table 4: Comparison of Context-free and Context-specific Systems

Criterion	Context-specific Systems	Context-free Systems
1. Applicability	Specific lists cannot be comprehensive enough	Universal laws cannot apply in all circumstances
2. Risk of Error	May tell a lie when truth may be desirable	May tell the truth when something else may be desirable
3. Residues left by past transactions	Discounted	Weighted
4. Predictability of Outcomes	Low	Higher
5. Transaction Costs	Outcome unpredictability entails adaptations that make costs high.	Usually low, but very high for the exceptions to the rules.
6. Lapses	Characterized by insufficient guilt	Often associated with excessive guilt
7. Worries about Slippery Slopes	Low (effective compart-mentalization reduces risks)	High
8. Perception of Fairness	Perceived to be unjust if the goal is equal punishment, just if reparation	Perceived to be just if the goal is equal punishment, unjust if reparation
9. Result of Excessive Reliance	Anarchy (each rule becomes negotiable)	Hypocrisy (if rules are too rigid, people will find loopholes)

constrained modern societies. Moreover, while it does not have to be so, observational evidence seems to indicate that these societies greatly discount the residues left by past interpersonal transactions. (These societies also tend to be a-historical.) Treating each transaction afresh causes considerable unpredictability in outcomes, in their timing, or in both. Therefore, transaction costs are high. While in most instances in context-free systems, transaction costs will be low; they are extremely high when it comes to exceptions to the rules, for example the abortion debate in the United States.

Lapses in context-free systems seem also to be more characterized by guilt and worries about slippery slopes. If one allows dilution in some universal rule, one does not know where it will end. Context-specific systems on the contrary seem characterized by more effective compartmentali-zation, the same kind that permits simultaneous incompatible beliefs in cosmology and astrology. There are boundaries that most people will not cross, even if they are lax about breaking some rules. Context-specific systems also have the advantage of case-by-case approaches. Their judicial systems will appear to be fair if just reparation is assumed to have a higher value than equal punishment for the same crime and vice versa. Excessive reliance on context-specific systems, however, could lead to anarchy when every rule becomes negotiable. Hypocrisy is the danger of excessive reliance on context-free systems. When the rules are too rigid,

people invariably find loopholes (Bok, 1999). Excessive reliance on each system gives rise to a longing for the other.

On balance, it would appear that the societal adaptations required to counter the unpredictability of outcomes greatly increase transactions costs, and modernizing context-specific cultures could derive considerable benefits from the more predictable outcomes of context-free systems. Nonetheless, there is nothing inherent in the nature of context-specific systems that justifies untruthful behaviour.

VII. Estimating the Prevalence of Untruthfulness

In conclusion, neither Ramanujan's assertions prove that Indians are untruthful, nor do Max Muller's tortuous efforts certify that we are truthful. No amount of quoting from the scriptures will settle this question, which cannot avoid being plagued by over-generalization. The empirical questions are – how much lying is there? Of what type? Under what circumstances? Are the different types increasing or decreasing? In which groups? Are these questions answerable with some certainty? Towards the end of his lecture, Max Muller said that he believed that "to appeal to international statistics would be a dangerous game". In fact, it seems that these questions can only be answered, and international comparisons made, statistically.

It is undoubtedly true that all societies could do with

less untruthfulness. In Max Muller's lecture, one can detect a snide aside about his British hosts – "What would be falsehood or trickery in private life is honoured by the name of policy and diplomacy if successful against strangers". It is a truism that there is some partial truth in most prejudices, even in those quoted by Ramanujan and Max Muller. Many of us have encountered instances in urbanized India wherein lies are told about exceedingly trivial and inconsequential matters (for example, to control a child's behaviour, as excuses for being late, as a response to a request for directions, as a response to an invitation, etc.) where less deceitful responses could have been preferable.

We have also seen that strict compartmentalization helps maintain boundaries and these trivial lies do not extend easily to other misdemeanours. There are numerous anecdotal instances of verbal commitments being honoured in India even when large sums are at stake without written or enforceable contracts, something that rarely happens in context-free societies. As Sarukkai (1999) has written, "given the plethora of tiny lies we are embedded in, it is surprising that the· jump to more serious deception does not take place more routinely and as a matter of fact".

A beginning can be made by trying to estimate the prevalence of lying in different groups with the means of a carefully designed questionnaire. In order to minimize getting answers that the respondents will immediately

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figure out are expected of them (these antennae are extremely finely tuned in context-specific societies), the first investigations should deal with instances of petty untruthfulness, where the consequences of the lie are trivial.

Neither context-specificity nor ancient behavior codes *justifies* untruthfulness today. To ferret out reasons for these behaviours is a second order empirical exercise. The alternatives provided in the questionnaire should help to seek out the reasons why such "tiny lies" are prevalent, what is it that the respondents are really trying to protect or optimise. Where questionnaires are not found to work, data obtained from actual experimental settings might provide the relevant estimates.

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