



ASIA PACIFIC | LETTER FROM INDIA

## High Intelligence Not Limited by Class

By MANU JOSEPH FEB. 13, 2014

NEW DELHI — Among the Indians who have documentary proof that they possess high intelligence, there are a few hundred from the deepest rungs of society, whose way of life is from another time, and whom even the poor regard as very poor.

They are from a section of the population commonly known as “tribals,” the type of people who are called “indigenous” and on occasion coaxed by the tourism department to dance on shifting bamboo sticks. Yet, some of their children have scored so well on I.Q. tests that they have qualified to join Mensa, a global community for those who are generally accepted as more intelligent than most of humanity.

The discovery of these children is a consequence of an experiment that Narayan Desai, an ecologist, conducted about 12 years ago. Mr. Desai was concerned about the preservation of forests and their environment. He realized that urban academic interest in ecology and hard-won funding would be less effective in protecting the environment than the engagement of the impoverished people who lived off those lands. He decided to seek out the very smartest among them whom he could then groom.

Mr. Desai, who is a member of Mensa, decided that he would use the very I.Q. tests that guarded the gates of Mensa to choose the gifted from pools of 10- to 15-year-olds who were fortunate enough to go to the free schools in their localities run by the government or charities.

In 2002, he said, he tested about 200 students. Four — all girls — scored high enough to qualify for Mensa. One married before the legally permissible age and ended her education. But the rest persevered, in part because of his assistance. Two of the girls are teachers today, and one is pursuing higher studies.

Over the years, Mr. Desai and his associates have screened 9,647 students from four Indian states, of whom 505 qualified for Mensa. Some of these children are in the care of the Pune chapter of Mensa in western India, where they are provided food and counseling and undergo various activities to improve their physical and mental states.

Most of the chosen students are offered financial support by a program Mr. Desai runs with funding from non-governmental organizations and individuals. The support is modest — about 6,000 rupees, or less than \$100, per student per year in the form of reimbursement of school fees and other expenses.

The Mensa tests, which are designed to identify the top 2 percent of the general population, differ from region to region to neutralize the effects of

culture. But all versions must be cleared by Mensa International.

The tests that Mr. Desai administers to India's poorest children ensure that the limitations of their formal education do not interfere with the evaluation of their mental abilities. He declined a request for sample questions because, he said, Mensa International does not allow him to share that information.

From his hints, though, the type of question that would certainly not be a part of the tribal Mensa test is, "What's the anagram of Britney Spears?" A more likely question is to identify geometric patterns in a given diagram.

Sujala Watve, the national supervisory psychologist of Mensa India, told me in an email: "Concurrent validity for tests used for urban and rural population" has been established, and tribal and urban Mensa members stand on the same platform as far as their results on the Mensa test are considered.

This month, Mr. Desai's associates presented a paper in New Delhi. In their analysis of the gifted tribal children they found nothing exotic about them when compared with smart urban children. These children pursue or hope to pursue engineering or enter government service or other professions that guarantee job security.

The tribal Mensa project has underlined the fact that high intelligence is a mathematical probability in any given population. What is exotic in India is that only a fraction of its smart children find the opportunities to excel. The rest are doomed, making success undeservedly easy for the rich.

*Manu Joseph is author of the novel "The Illicit Happiness of Other People."*

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