
INDIA - A NASCENT POWER: A STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

On the eve of India's independence, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made the memorable tryst with destiny speech in the Constituent Assembly. "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."¹ However, since 1947, there had existed vocal prophets of doom and gloom who had predicted that neither freedom nor democracy, nor socialism, would survive in India for long.

In the 40s and 50s, these doomsayers tended to be old Raj hands. The last commander-in-chief of the British army in India, Field Marshal Claude Auchinlek, believed that 1947 marked only the first of many partitions of India. He thought that sooner rather than later, "India will split into several states or countries as it was before the British intervention."

As the Republic of India moved into its second decade, the doomsayers were more likely to be Americans. The brothers Paddock, biologists both, wrote in 1967 that "India is the first of the hungry nations to stand at the brink of famine and disaster." Many claimed that India would be the clinching proof of Thomas Malthus's theory. Here, if nowhere else, population growth would outstrip the growth in food production, leading to mass famine.²

In 1960, the American scholar-journalist Selig S. Harisson predicted: "The odds are wholly against the survival of freedom and... the issue is in fact, whether any state can survive at all." In 1967, Neville Maxwell, the Times correspondent, in a series of articles entitled Disintegrating Democracy declared: "The great experiment of developing India within the democratic framework has failed."³

Many of the Cassandras felt justified when the Emergency was imposed in India by Indira Gandhi in 1975.

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India, mourned the Sydney Morning Herald in September 1976, has “relapsed into traditional Asian autocracy.” The Observer (London) thought that were the emergency to end, “the most likely successor to Congress remains the Army.” The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, and the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, once again prompted fears that India would indeed (or, at last) break up into many parts; or come to be ruled by men in uniform.⁴

However, five decades down the line, India seems to have belied all these predictions. In the past years, it has survived four wars, some of the worst natural and man-made disasters, floods, droughts, terrorism, majoritarianism, fundamentalism, language riots, division of states, the Emergency, stifling bureaucracy, coalition politics et al. It has emerged through all this as a multicultural democracy acclaimed the world over. Hence, in the corridors of international powers, there is a new discourse emerging about the inexorable rise of China and India. As far as India is concerned, the rationale for the current discourse is founded mainly on the following factors: a new international profile based on its dynamic foreign policy including its nuclear capability, democratic resilience, economic dynamism, and also its soft power.

FROM PORCUPINE TO A TIGER

If a single image catches India’s strategic style in the past, it was that of a porcupine - vegetarian, slow-footed and prickly. The famous defensiveness of the porcupine became the hallmark of India’s approach to the world. India was a reactive power; when the world impinged on it, India used to put up its sharp quills to ward off the threats. The quills symbolized the principles of fairness, justice and equality as defense against what India saw an unacceptable demand from the international system. India, it was widely believed at home and abroad, would not seek opportunities or be opportunistic in pursuit of its national interests. In the domain of the foreign policy the decade of the 1990s, however, saw a sea-change in the India’s foreign policy. It was as if the porcupine became a tiger.⁷

The end of the Cold War, the international security situation after the terrorist attacks of 2001, and the rapid advance of globalization are impacting every state. India remains one of the few major states that have emerged stronger from the three tectonic events. It has broken away from its ideologically stultified foreign policy, and has made a transition from ‘moralspeak to realpolitik’. In fact, keeping with the times, five major transitions have been incorporated in India’s foreign policy: consensus on building a capitalistic order; fresh emphasis on economics;

shedding of ‘Third Worldism’; return to the West; and a movement from idealism to pragmatism.⁸

(i) Nuclear Capability - The first manifestation of this change was seen in the decision of India to cross the nuclear rubicon after almost two decades of vacillation. Though power has many forms; nuclear weapons since their birth have remained the bedrock of national power in international relations. Moral conduct, ideals, and economic success can add to a country’s power, but they are no substitutes to military power.⁹ Japan’s rising anxiety about China today is not because China can surpass it, but because China can combine economic and military strength in a way Japan simply cannot.

Critics argue that nuclear weapons have made India less, not more, secure. As a result of India’s tests, they say, Pakistan too acquired nuclear weapons, and the two came close to a full-blooded war over Kargil in 1999. This reasoning has two major flaws. First, the Kargil incursion did not become a war precisely because of nuclear weapons, which forced the US to restrain Pakistan from going further. The US had no reasons to intervene, except to prevent a possible nuclear conflagration. What scholars call nuclear deterrence - the capacity of nuclear weapons to dissuade potential aggressors - can emerge either directly through the decision-makers of feuding countries, or via overwhelming external pressure.

Second, the decision to go nuclear was ultimately based on a long-run security calculus. Pakistan is only one fragment of India’s strategic universe; China is another and a more potent one. India’s nuclear weapons buy insurance against China, whose future moves simply cannot be predicted. A full-scale war against India is now virtually impossible, thanks to its nuclear capability to deter aggression. Only low-intensity conflicts can occur, not wars, unless India elects to declare war against a non-nuclear state in pursuit of its own national interests. Having the capacity to deter future aggressors against itself, but retaining the capacity to do so against others, if needed, is a huge component of India’s future power.¹⁰

(ii) Indo-US Relations: The Changing Dynamics - After India went nuclear, it faced great international outrage. The Clinton administration led the world in slamming the door on India’s face. “India has dug itself into a hole” with the nuclear tests, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright seethed. But India and US - dubbed as ‘estranged democracies’ (Dennis Kux) during the Cold War - turned into ‘empathetic democracies’ after the end of Cold War; and post-9/11, India’s changing profile was written into the US National Security Strategy

in 2002. For the first time, a US administration began ticking off India's geo-political virtues and strengths: a thriving, secular, stable democracy in an arc of unstable countries, many of them fundamentalist; demographically as weighty as China with a better age profile and English language skills to boot; and a growing free-market economy which, if tweaked right, could be a win-win for both countries.¹¹

Thus, the US has been among the first nations to recognize that India's technological prowess in areas like software and pharmaceuticals and its success as a democratic polity mean that India is destined to become not only the pre-eminent nation in South Asia but also a major global player. As president Bush has said: "This century shall see democratic India's arrival as a force in the world."¹²

However, the pariah nuclear status of India was a big wrinkle which India wanted to erase. Hence, the momentous nuclear deal signed by George Bush and Manmohan Singh (during US president's visit to India on 2nd March 2006) in the teeth of domestic opposition is very laudable. It is the culmination of the agreement signed between the two leaders on 18 July 2005. It inter alia provides for the separation of India's nuclear and civilian facilities. Thus, it accords India special status in the matter, creating a separate category for this country in the nuclear club. While Washington officially does not recognize India as a formal nuclear weapons power still, but informally, the US has "walked up to the table for five and placed a sixth chair - perhaps a high stool".¹³ The July agreement was the turning point in terms of Indo-US strategic partnership; and India's decision to separate the civilian from military nuclear programme is significant in meeting the growing energy needs of India. In reference to Indo-US nuclear cooperation agreement, it is said that: (i) India was not a signatory to NPT and, therefore, broke no laws in going nuclear; (ii) it has a sterling record of not proliferating despite blandishments and provocations; and (iii) there is no other abler, stabler democracy that can bring balance and stability to the world order and serve as a multi-religious and free market role model.¹⁴

While Bush gave a warm heart to India during his visit, it cold-shouldered Pakistan on the issue of democracy and non-proliferation. He also declined to interfere in the Kashmir dispute, declaring it to be a bilateral issue. The clearly differentiated approach to the two South Asian neighbors (unlike in the past when both were treated as 'Siamese twins') shows how India has pulled away into a different orbit and is now not to be routinely linked to its neighbor.

In this connection, it might be noted that last year, a bold new report by noted US defense and nuclear expert Ashley J. Tellis entitled, *India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States*, had acknowledged India's emerging superpower status. It declared inter alia, that by 2015, India would have the fourth most capable 'concentration of power'. It will be among the five major economies in 25-50 years. The CIA analysis also calls India the most important 'swing state' in the international system - a country that could tilt the balance between war and peace, between chaos and order. The National Intelligence Council, CIA's brain trust, compared the emergence of India and China to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the US in the 20th century in mapping the *Global Future* - a public report.¹⁵

(iii) Aid Diplomacy - India's rising profile in the world was also reflected in two events of recent past - its positive response to the killer Tsunami that struck India on 26 December 2004; and its IAEA vote against Iran in September 2005. The Tsunami catastrophe was an event that drew attention to India as a big country that can move swiftly to assist others in need. Far from the image of an India with a bowl, seeking relief from grinding poverty, to an India, self-assured of its economic prowess, emerged to provide succour to those around who needed it. There was a recourse to what is called "aid diploinacy".¹⁶ For a country that aspires to a permanent seat at the highest international table, the UN Security Council, India seized the chance to show its immense capabilities, viz massive disciplined military machinery with considerable skills in disaster management, a well-trained medical community and huge material resources.

This raised India's stock in the comity of nations. Whether it was to neighbors in South and South-east Asia, or to the United States; most politically significant, India's aid efforts gained notice and emerged as a significant gesture prompting a new respect and high praise from the Presidents of the United States and Pakistan.

(iv) Anti-Iran Vote in the IAEA Resolution - Similarly, India voted in favor of an IAEA resolution, critical of Iran. The vote wasn't a one-off, ad hoc reflex; rather, it was backed by a coherent sense of India's foreign policy priorities - those that aimed to be independent of both America's and Iran's and putting Indian interests first." India calculated that it has to do business with both US and Iran. And the two have to be balanced. Also as a regional power and a wannabe global one, New Delhi has to be on the right side of the non-proliferation argument. This vote proved a shining example of India shedding its moral baggage and giving premium to realpolitik over moralspeak."¹⁸

New Delhi in recent times, has also tried to achieve major breakthroughs with its pesky neighbors - Pakistan and China - and thus come out of the 'two front problem' that has hobbled it for long.¹⁹ The misplaced nostalgia over Indo-Russian ties has given way to a pragmatic one, based on mutual defense and trade needs.

(v) Manmohan Doctrine - The watchword of Indian foreign policy today is what is dubbed as 'Manmohan Doctrine'.²⁰ Economics lies at the heart of it. Ever since the Indian Prime Minister took charge, he had argued that India needs to rack up economic growth of at least eight per cent over a decade. His foreign policy goal, in short, is: keeps the economy shining and the great power status is inevitable for India.

Hence the buzzword these days is economic diplomacy, as the newly-created trade and economic relations council indicates. The giant emerging Indian market exerts a gravitational pull for economic interests everywhere. While India may not share warm relations with all its neighbors, they realize that the Indian economy is capable of changing South Asia. With its high growth rate and large foreign exchange reserves, India is now proactively seeking markets as far afield as Africa in areas like energy and education.²¹

Democratic Resilience

India's democracy has been an important element in its new and self-confident image as an economic player of consequence in a globalised world. Democracy has given India politically the competitive edge that it lacks in the economic domain vis-a-vis China - its neighbor and commercial rival. For China, to get a seat at the highest table in a post-Cold War world, its polity will have to become democratic. India's edge on this score is massive. The key role played by democracy in the global perception of India is also reflected in its new relationship with the United States whose leadership has, in recent times, frequently hailed India as a fellow democracy.

This contrasts sharply, of course, with the days of the Cold War when India's democracy (albeit briefly blemished) went curiously unremarked. In general, Western proselytizers of democracy, many of whom feel threatened by the towering economic presence of China, have of late been eagerly handing out testimonials to India's democracy.²²

India's democratic record also seems laudable when seen in the context of South Asia. India stands as an island of "democratic values and political stability in a region convulsed by religious fanaticism, illiberal governments, state-sponsored terrorism and economic stasis."²³ Every state

on India's periphery has a "need to cope with state failure." Afghanistan remains threatened by Taliban because of Pakistan's meddling. Pakistan's own experiment with 'enlightened moderation' is by no means a guaranteed success. Bangladesh could be the "next major cause of political implosion." Myanmar remains in the iron grip of the military Junta.

In this context, it needs to be pointed out that India's democratic progress in the 1970s and 1980s was halting and unclear. Rigging and other malpractices in elections had reached noticeable proportions. Over the last 10-15 years, India's elections have become cleaner, and incumbents have been regularly defeated. India's democratic claims look formidable now. And no other developing country matches India's democratic record, however faulty it may seem in theory. For all its imperfections, India's democracy is a shining jewel in the nation's crown.²⁴

ECONOMIC POWERHOUSE

In the nineties, India was dubbed as a 'caged Tiger'. The former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew had addressed India as a 'sleeping giant'.²⁵ If the present trends are anything to go by, it seems almost a cinch that the giant has finally woken up and is bestriding the world stage as a mighty colossus. A look at the statistics bears this out. In the twenty-first century, every sixth human being will be an Indian. The country's economy is already the fourth largest in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). It is in the top ten in overall gross national product. With more degree-holders than the entire population of France, India has found a place for itself in the field of information technology, and in several other internationally competitive industries.²⁶ On CNN'S Larry King Live, former president Bill Clinton has made the stunning claim that half the world's software is made in India. Perhaps an overstatement, but even if it is half true, it shows the perception in elite circles all over the world.²⁷ India is also likely to emerge as the second largest consumer market in the world, with a buying middle class numbering half a billion. As rates of growth inch towards double digits, the burgeoning market in the country is expected to grow by one Australia every year.

Today, India is already the biggest future fear for native workers across the US and Europe. After forcing and even blackmailing developing nations to be a part of WTO, the same countries are talking of barriers to outsourcing and off-shoring - a completely non-free market oriented thought. This is all thanks to a country called India. Different states in the USA are now forming their own laws and passing bills against the outsourcing of work (targeting only India),

announcing that national treaties signed by the US are not applicable to them at the state level. That's the kind of fear India is evoking around the world.²⁸

It is germane to note here that India is not winning outsourcing work only because it's a low-wage economy but also because it's a high-skill economy. It has also been recognized that India has not tried to make its way as a clone of China or the South-east Asian tigers, starting with low-end manufacturing before moving on to bigger things. India has started on the upward path in IT, where it has moved rapidly from simple programming to complex design and strategic activity that was once regarded as an American preserve.²⁹ Its' ability to match advanced countries at a fraction of the cost of their operations will ensure that outsourcing highly skilled jobs to India would continue.

Also while India is getting younger and smarter (50 per cent of its population is below 25 years and 70 per cent below 35), Europe is getting older and wearier. The US, bolstered by immigration, remains young and energetic but, alas for the neo-conservatives, it's getting blacker and browner. By 2050, for the first time since the Mayflower pilgrims sailed from England to settle in the US in 1620, over 50 per cent of Americans will be coloured.³⁰

India has been able to prevent the multinational corporations from decimating its domestic industries through denial of technology, predatory pricing, etc. They have not been able to slip the noose of profit repatriation and royalty payments around its neck. Nevertheless, the competition has prompted Indian businesses to upgrade and India is reaching a position where it can challenge the might of the MNCs in their home turf. It is quite likely that in the next 10-20 years, Indian MNCs like those of Tatas and Lakshmi Mittal will be feared just as Microsoft, General Electric and General Motors are feared across the world. According to a report of the Reserve Bank of India, Indian companies have purchased 36 foreign companies while foreign companies bought only 20 Indian companies in the same period.³¹

Tatas are an example of how Indian companies are making a space for themselves in the world economy. In the last few years, the Tatas have acquired Tetley Tea in the UK, Daewoo Motors in South Korea, Natsteel in Singapore and Pierre Hotel in Manljattan. Tatas are working on making large investments in energy, steel and fertilizers in Bangladesh. Indica cars made by Tata Motors are being exported to South Africa, Russia and Europe.

However, India will have to define its foreign commercial relations clearly if it has to create a friendly relationship with the world of tomorrow. Perhaps the Tatas can give a lead here too.

Sixty-six per cent of the profits of the holding company Tata Sons are spent in charity. Tatas are planning to make big investments in Bangladesh. If India has to emerge as a big power, a condition may be imposed that Indian companies investing abroad will not impoverish the host country by large scale remittance of profits and royalties. At least 75 per cent of income will be reinvested in the host country. Two, heavy export tax should be imposed on items that are harmful for mankind such as opium, wine, etc. This will ensure that India is not seen as a cruel imperial power in the world of tomorrow.³² In 2005, the stock of India (and, indeed, the stock market in India) rode high, and India was the flavor of the year. Following ‘Goldman Sacks’ BRIC Report’, which prophesied the rise of Brazil, Russia, India and China, the board of every major global company is formulating an ‘India strategy’.

Bountiful rains have ensured that economic growth will be well over 70 per cent even as the sensex continually sets new records. Meanwhile, multiplexes and malls multiply, software soars, air-travel arrives and even manufacturing makes its mark. Talk about an ‘Indian century’ and ‘resurgent India’ no longer expresses dreams or hopes, but expectations.³³

Some are now arguing that India has finally reached what is called ‘the take-off stage’. With the success of the IT industry, and manufacturing at last competing in price and quality in international markets, there are grounds for suggesting that the Indian emblem should be changed from the elephant lumbering ahead at its own stately pace to the tiger leaping into the future.³⁴

After all, Ireland, until recently the ‘sick man’ of Western Europe, is now the Celtic Tiger. Even if India’s speed is not going to match Ireland’s, it makes arithmetical sense to estimate that the economy will expand faster and faster provided the current growth rates are maintained. Each year the percentage growth rate will be a percentage of a bigger figure. It will be compound, not simple interest.

Thomas Friedman, the intrepid New York Times correspondent’s book ‘The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty First Century’ has put India at the centre of the global debate on who will rule the world in the next few riveting decades. The short answer is: China and India. He writes: “When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, ‘Tom, finish your dinner. People in China are starving.’ But now I am telling my daughters, ‘Girls, finish your homework. People in China and India are starving for your jobs’”.³⁵

In the same vein, Jairam Ramesh, author of *Making Sense of Chindia*, points out: “In 1950, the debate was over China or India. In 2005, the debate is on China and India. It will be a while before they can take on the US in terms of hard or soft power. Their emergence as demographic giants and economic dynamos will have implications for the rest the world.”

For Friedman, the world may be ‘flat’ and this global-level playing-field is certainly to India’s advantage. But within India itself, business is not flat. It is elliptical. While the IT sector is free of government interference, grows at over 23 per cent a year, industry in general expands at roughly half that rate. The reason: a plethora of anachronistic controls and regulations - on labor policy, FDI restrictions - that prevent Indian companies from collaring the benefits of economies of scale and competing globally. The Indian Government’s agenda must, therefore, unequivocally be to create a level playing field for Indian business across all sectors so that it can truly conquer the flat world out there.³⁶

Joseph Nye has stated that a nation’s ‘soft power’ is derived from its culture, political values and foreign policy. According to Nye, ‘soft power’ is a power of persuasion whereas ‘hard power’ is one of coercion. It’s the difference between getting someone to want to do your bidding as opposed to forcing them to do so. India has vast cultural assets. It has political credibility as a democracy, as a leader in the developing world, and is perceived as a country with a fundamentally multilateral approach to meeting global challenges.³⁷ India’s cultural heritage is attracting the world in this age of globalization. The NRIs of today in many countries start their day with Surya Namaskar, swear by Indian curries and kebabs, dance to bhangra pop, cry over Bollywood weepies, devour every word written by award-winning Indian novelists, and dish out millions to buy Indian art. In short, romance with everything Indian. It seems that the great Indian cultural caravan has finally made its grand entry on the world stage.³⁸

CHALLENGES

However, the euphoria about the rapid changes in India during the past 15 years, has to be tampered with in three ways.³⁹ Firstly, the rapid change in some fields has gone hand-in-hand with sluggish change in others. For instance, if one looks at country’s GDP, or international trade, or urban lifestyle, there is much evidence of fast change. But not in areas like, child nutrition, or the unemployment rate, or the infant mortality rate. The decline of infant mortality has been so slow in the last 10 years that Bangladesh, which used to have a much higher infant

mortality rate, is now way ahead of India. And there is little indication of any rapid improvement in child nutrition. India still has some of the highest levels of under-nutrition in the world.

Secondly, ‘change’ must be distinguished from ‘progresses’. Some recent changes are not particularly heartening. For instance, massive environmental degradation is taking place in many forms - decimation of forests, river pollution, and urban congestion, among others. This seriously affects the quality of life in ways that are not always captured in the standard economic statistics, or even social indicators.

Thirdly, life has certainly become freer for substantial sections of the population. On 20th October 2010, The New York Times had a front page lead celebrating the birth of a class of people in India who spend their weekends at malls. But the signs of improvement get fainter and fainter as one moves away from the centers of power and privilege to the periphery. Among the Sahariyas of western Madhya Pradesh, or the Musahars of Bihar, or the Mils of southern Rajasthan, life goes on much as before, with all its dreadful hardships. UN Human Development Report had found that for the bulk of the Indian population, living standards are lower than those of Botswana - or even the occupied territories of Palestine. So paradoxically, while some of the richest people in the world live in India, so do the largest number of the world’s poor.

DESIRED REFORMS

Hence, correcting the national priorities is the crying need of the hour.

Since independence, India has been plagued by ‘India versus Bharat divide’ or the ‘urban versus rural’ divide. One of the biggest failures of the Indian policy makers has been the disproportionate attention to the former at the cost of the latter, as a result of which a ‘million mutinies’ - to use V.S Naipaul’s evocative phrase - have been taking place in the rural areas. The obsession for ‘India’ therefore needs to be replaced by compassion for ‘Bharat’. If the above happens, India can dream to be a country “where the small children are taken to a poverty museum like science museum where they shiver at the plight of the way people used to live in the last millennium”.⁴⁰

The 21st century has been heralded as the ‘knowledge century’. That is, not military or economic power but ‘brain power’ will determine a nation’s place in the world. ‘Brain power’ is reflected most importantly in, what Amartya Sen has called, “human capabilities”. Hence, investment in human resource development (HRD) - education and health - would act as a catalyst in making India the ‘Knowledge Engine’ of the world. The task ahead is at many levels - from primary

schools to higher education and research institutions of national excellence. At all levels, there is a need to improve both access and excellence.⁴¹

Also, replacement of GDP with a more holistic index - of GNH (gross national happiness) - may also be considered as India's long-term national goal.⁴² The parameters for achieving GNH are environmental preservation, cultural promotion, family life, access to healthcare and good governance. Bhutan's reigning monarchs' has adopted it successfully since 1972. As a result, life expectancy in Bhutan increased by 19 years; gross enrolment rate in primary schools has reached 72 per cent; and the literacy rate has grown from 17 per cent to 47.5 per cent. Bhutan has shown that people-centric development is a workable economic model.

CONCLUSION

All said and done, India has come a long way from being a land of snake charmers and elephants. The subtlest minds reflecting on its state a hundred odd years ago had no doubt that 'Tamas' the 'dark and heavy demon of inertia' (as Sri Aurobindo called it) had paralyzed its reflexes. Now, however, the mood is distinctly buoyant. India still faces awesome problems. But today one detects a burgeoning confidence that they can be managed, that they will not be allowed to stifle its spirit. A new vigour is palpable in the air, a willingness to take on challenges and, no less significant, a yearning to celebrate the creative genius of India. In short, a 'second Republic', seems to be in the making.⁴³

Thus, India's true greatness lies in its self-reliant, resilient people. They are able to pull themselves up by their chappals and survive, nay, even flourish, when the state fails them at every turn. When teachers and doctors don't show up in government primary schools and health centers, Indians don't complain. They just open up cheap private schools and clinics in their slums, and get on with it. Fortunately, India is a young nation and the young Indian's mind is now decolonized and liberated.

India's former president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had proclaimed the goal of India becoming a developed country by 2020. However, true development and greatness would come only when every Indian has access to health, education and employment security in an environment of a functional judicial system. Having access to health security will give an average Indian right to live.⁴⁵ Having access to education and employment security enhances his 'right to live' to a 'right to live with dignity'. And perhaps most importantly, having a functional judiciary helps

him to live with a ‘mind without fear and with his head held high’. If that happens, India would indeed become a juggernaut on the roll simply unstoppable.

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