Can India Regain its Lost Glory?

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Wed, 09/19/2012 - 10:37

Paper No. 747 17/06/2004

Guest Column: By Rajesh Tembarai Krishnamachari

The last 15 years have witnessed dramatic developments in the Indian subcontinent. Economic liberalism has firmly placed India on the fast path to prosperity and progress, notwithstanding Pakistan’s perennial corrosive proxy misadventure. Scholars have demolished the notion of any Aryan invasion, established the unparalleled achievements of our illustrious forefathers, and have veritably provided a new identity to the common people to take pride in their heritage, their culture and their past and of course their country. This has raised a pertinent query in many Indians’ minds. Can we regain our lost glory and reclaim our position as a world leader in every sphere of influence?

My answer to this question would be a resounding YES.

Historical Perspective:
Let us take a brief look at the mind blowing accomplishments of the ancient Indians. We spoke arguably the most refined and grammatically precise language till date viz Sanskrit. The Chola kings ruled over a territory extending as far as modern day Indonesia. Kalidasa ’s literary feats and Adi Sankara’s theology (not to forget ontology and epistemology) make the works of the western scholars pale into insignificance. Indian mathematicians invented negative numbers in addition to zero and infinity. Aryabhatta, Bhaskarcharya and Varahamihira ’s mathematical acumen and astrological insight have confounded modern researchers for the amazing precision that they exhibit. Udayana and other Jain thinkers excelled in Chemistry; while Katayana and Panini’s masterpieces on grammar still make the linguists drool over them. Kanada spoke of a theory of atoms which was extended to elementary particles by later Jain thinkers. It is not a mere coincidence that the concept of ‘maya’ is so strikingly similar to a modern physicist's conception of an all-pervasive invisible Higgs field.

Even in the middle ages, after the complete annihilation of the academic traditions of our country by marauding invaders and intolerant rulers, India was still better off. Visitors to Agra in Mughal times have described London and Paris as villages in front of it. As recently as in the early 1830s, Indians were involved in 30% of the world trade as compared to 1% by the United States.

Coming to the present, India stands at the threshold of a great future awaiting it. The transition from the Third World to the First World can be made within a 15 years time frame, if the people and the government realising their obligations towards posterity discharge their responsibilities sincerely and take concerted efforts in the direction of the achievement of the objective.

**Economic Front:**

Half of India’s economic woes can be summarised by a solitary Jagdish Bhagwati statement :" By contrast, those countries that turned inward and had extensive regulations of all kinds on domestic economic decision-making in production, investment and innovation, are the countries that have really not done too well." Realising the long-term benefits of a purposeful integration into the global economy, the Indian government must embrace globalisation more firmly. Further cuts in tariffs and a removal of quantitative restrictions have to be effected. Foreign Direct Investment remains at distressingly low levels; 0.5% of GDP as against 5% for China. Simplifying the approvals process, removing regulatory impediments and improving the infrastructure would definitely attract more foreign capital inflows. The pace of economic reforms must not be allowed to slacken.

The factor and product markets need significant structural reforms. Industrial deregulation (including eliminating preferences for small-scale producers), and reforms in the agricultural and power sector would be steps in the right direction. Controls over prices of agricultural commodities should be abolished and the government would do well to stop selectively patronising farmers from certain states. Tariffs must be set at economically sensible levels, and distribution of power must be commercialised.

Food need not rot away in government godowns while millions starve in stark penury. The concept of Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOOT)
must be encouraged. It is imperative on the GOI (Government of India) to reawaken the Keynesian-'animal spirits' of the private entrepreneurship.

Some serious steps must be taken to ensure that the BIMARU (Bihar+Madhya Pradesh+Rajasthan+Uttar Pradesh) states do not drag down the whole nation's economic indicators to a dismal level. The report of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council correctly notes that 'universal primary education is an effective anti-poverty measure that promotes equity.' GOI should actively promote literacy campaigns through the length and breadth of our vast nation.

As Stanley Fischer pointed out in the course of his talk in India last year, the most important lesson that we have learnt from the East Asian crisis is the importance of a strong and well-regulated financial sector. We must ensure that there is no political interference in private financial institutions. Problems with the UTI and other urban cooperatives reinforce the need for strengthening supervision and governance for the resolution of non-performing loans.

The World Health Organisation has documented in great detail the economic impact of human health. The innumerable amount of manhours lost to illness and disability could be easily averted by preventive measures that the GoI should undertake. Economic progress should be sustainable in the long run and this implies environmental concerns be given precedence over short-term pecuniary gains to a select mercenary group of benefactors. The GOI could concentrate its energies on widening the tax net rather than deepening it causing heartburn among the salaried class of this country.

Fiscal deficit must be curbed at the earliest. Reduction in subsidies and tax reform would be welcome initiatives in the direction. A burgeoning foreign exchange reserve (now in excess of $84 bn) could be used to pay back some high interest loans. Vast investments are needed in order to improve the basic infrastructure in India.

The pathetic power situation was highlighted rather bluntly by the Wipro chief recently in Bangalore. The Golden Quadrilateral project should give an impetus to the economy. China is today the fastest railway line laying country in the world. The Indians could take a leaf out of their notebook and implement similar schemes.

The GOI should give an incentive to select industries like the hardware sector. Easing of customs and making it easier to export and import items would make India at least as competitive as, if not better than Thailand.

Political Front:
The ubiquitous corruption and the widespread criminalisation of politics especially in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is a matter of great concern. The 'permit raj' which allowed the inept bureaucracy to make millions must be uprooted and eliminated. Educated people must be brought into Indian polity. There is presently a vicious cycle: Either educated people do not stand, and when they do, they are defeated by the all-
powerful electorate. The politicians need to stay away from populist schemes like the late NT Rama Rao's infamous 2 Rs a Kg rice one. The people of India could also do without demagogues who wanted the GOI to award Rs 2000 Cr to Pakistan as compensation money for the Kargil war.

Communal amity is a sine qua non for progress and development of our country. The Gujarat experience should not recur. Our nation cannot progress if 15% of the population wants to destroy it. While minority rights must be safe guarded, politicians must restrain themselves from castigating the majority community for every ill in this country.

Capital punishment for rapists, murderers and corrupt ministers would be a welcome idea. The Islamic Shariat implemented into with the punishments meted out (Saudi-style) in the full glare of the public would deter even the most incorrigible of the wrong-doers.

**Intellectual Front:**

In this information age, knowledge is power. Reduction on foreign technological dependence is essential for safeguarding the nation's interests during any eventuality. The Indians in the last 25-30 years have demonstrated their capability to go beyond chalkboard diagrams and abstract theories to apply the concepts for practical purposes. Science & Technology self-reliance has to be achieved through successive steps of adaptation/indigenisation capability and product innovations.

While the Schumpeterian paradigm advocates an oligopolistic scenario over a purely competitive one; one must realise that barring the entry of new firms dampens the incentive of the involved concerns to innovate. National laboratories can be awakened from their half a century long slumber by making them survive more and more on sponsored research from industry. The IITs and the IISC must take a lead in this matter, and at least demonstrate an absorption of 'know-how' if not 'know-why'.

Making the Param series of Supercomputers has given a huge boost to the Indian scientific community. Further strides have to be made in missile and space technology. [The next war might be fought over water and it will be fought in space.] The development of a Nuclear Missile Shield by the US is an ominous indication of the insecurities that a prosperous nation faces today. The GOI appears to have underestimated the importance of indigenous fabrication and manufacture of chips; this lacuna should be rectified. Standardisation of the unit sizes would aid the processes industry.

The 'Made in India' brand should be promoted similar to the way Japan projected it in the 70s. The newspapers must shed their negative and defeatist mentality and adopt a positive attitude. Project positive facts about our nation; refrain from portraying it as a country of beggars, and senile mendicants.

The 'great eminent secular historians' would be doing India an unparalleled favour by refraining from dubbing it 'a fascist, racist and
Communal nation ruled by despotic Hindu warmongering zealots' in stage-managed conferences in New York.

**Strategic Front:**

In a rapidly changing world, COMINT (Communication Intelligence) and TECHINT (Technical Intelligence) have superseded the traditional discipline of HUMINT (Human Intelligence). We no more need any permanent love affairs with any nation. Israeli cooperation suits our designs as we are faced with a common foe. The Jewish lobby in US could be of considerable use if its efforts and reach could be effectively utilised. The nefarious designs of the Chinese dragon have to tackled in a clever manner.

Working Groups for economic cooperation of the countries amongst the rim of the Indian Ocean should be established. India would also have to face the Pakistani crab mentality, which will prefer Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) to mutual progress. A good rapport with old allies like Malaysia, Egypt and Iraq would bolster India's case for a permanent Security Council seat.

India would have to reach out to protect the rights of its expatriate population in the rest of the world. A doctrine similar to Monroe Doctrine taking countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives under an Indian security cover would act as a leverage against growing Chinese hegemonistic designs. India cannot afford to remain neutral of any Fiji or Uganda type development.

**Social Front:**

India cannot go ahead with half of its population ie women steeped in medieval values and customs. Empowerment of women must be a top priority with the present dispensation; though it need not necessarily be attained through reservation in the parliament. Economic reservation has to replace the present scheme, the moment a fool-proof method of locating genuinely economically disadvantaged sections of society is established. Muslims have to be encouraged to provide secular education, inclusive of modern mathematics and science to their children along side Koranic instructions in madrassas.

Literacy rates are dismal, as are other indicators of human development. (India is 111th on the list slipping some 29 places in the last 30 years.) The looming catastrophe of AIDS must be countered actively using the official media. Interlinking of the rivers might provide a solution to the water problem plaguing many parts of the country today.

**Conclusion:**

Though brief, various endeavours given, if undertaken could enable India to transmigrate from its current position to a formidable place within a brief time span of 15 years. There are bound to be impediments in the way like unforeseen calamities, intransigent psuedo-secular leaders and corrupt bureaucracy. There shall also be status quoist ideologues and privileged business groups who may be disadvantaged by any change in the present order. It is upto the Indian common folk to rise to this challenge and reciprocate in an appropriate measure. India cannot be driven ahead by a small group of ivory tower seated intellectuals. The feeling of nationhood and the emotion of collective responsibility have to sink in to every Indian's psyche.
Only a concerted effort by all of us can realise our fond dream of India surpassing every other nation in its way. Truly destiny and fate have thrown down the gauntlet and the ball is in the people's court.

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