

India's Self-Confident Avatar

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[BY SREERAM CHAULIA]

In the historical evolution of a country, there come junctures when the nation as a whole stakes claim to its rightful place in the world and takes decisive action. Global stature is never conferred through charity but earned through purposeful acts emanating not only from the rhetoric of a government but also from the aspirations and wishes of its people. A synergy of initiative between the government and the population can work wonders and has more lasting value than state-driven gimmicks for aggrandisement that lack social backing.

When the energies of rulers and ruled coordinate with the aim of enhancing national self-confidence and well being, one gets to witness the magic of progress. For instance, West Germany's Wirtschaftswunder ('economic miracle') after the devastation of World War II was generated through a combination of conducive government policies and hard work at full capacity for long hours by an entire generation of citizens. This strategy transformed West Germany from a paralysed country into one of the world's richest and most important powers.

In the new millennium, can India be considered to have reached such a take-off point to become a self-confident force in the world? There are some visible signs of the country intentionally acting to a plan as a more assertive entity instead of hoping to fortuitously gain recognition through individual acts of brilliance of a handful of achievers. India has never had a dearth of bright and creative persons who go on to dazzle the world through genius. What it lacked for long was a design to harness the people's talents and work towards an image change at the international level. Three examples from recent years offer reasons for future hope.

Firstly, as *Chandrayaan-1* prepares to head for its destination by April 2008, India is on its way to join an exclusive club of countries that have launched missions to the moon. In addition, New Delhi is planning a manned spacecraft to orbit low-earth by 2014 and also has

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ambitions to send an Indian astronaut (or "gaganaut") to the moon by 2020. Space exploration remained confined to a select few Western countries for decades, but Japan, South Korea, and China have made dramatic inroads into satellites in the last few years. Since national space programmes are seen as prestige symbols that enhance scientific know-how as well as military preparedness, the advent of Asian powers into the race has suddenly opened up a new competitive milieu not seen since the Cold War era.

The *Chandrayaan* project is spurred by knowledge that China is 'going forward' with its own lunar adventure and that India cannot afford to lag. As Jeff Foust, editor of *The Space Review* states, "Japan feels it has fallen behind China, South Korea is developing its own launch vehicle, and India slots in very close to China as a rising power." Such a competitive environment demands the best from each country and places a premium on leaping across delays and hiccups.

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Foundry, and Shoma Industries. Private players have a 30-percent share of the total project cost and are producing many cutting-edge components. The close involvement of non-governmental enterprises in a national endeavour carrying reputation benefits augurs well for India's new self-confident emergence.

A second example of a more emphatic India comes from the refusal of the government to accept foreign relief aid after the devastating tsunami disaster hit the coast of Tamil Nadu at the end of 2004. New Delhi not only issued polite declinations to international donors but also went on to offer its own aid to other tsunami-affected neighbours

like Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Fourteen Indian naval vessels and 1,700 Indian relief workers maintained a continuous flow of assistance to these countries in a gesture that not only raised the country's moral standing but also sent a clear message that it has the resources to manage its own situations.

Like the mission to the moon, the self-reliant post-tsunami reconstruction marked a changeover from the days when India was seen by wealthy countries as a large, exotic 'basket case' that subsisted on their benevolence. The rehabilitation of victims in Tamil Nadu was assisted by a range of voluntary organisations based in India with Indian specialists and proved to be fairly successful at bringing about rapid recovery. It should be seen as a matter of pride that, in the initial few weeks after the tragedy, concerned Indian citizens and charities from around the country outdid the government machinery and sent truckloads of essential supplies to hundreds of suffering villagers. Voluntary civic action for a national cause made foreign aid, which often comes with strings attached, look worse than a second-best solution. More relevant to our theme, it unequivocally announced that India is not an object of pity for the high and mighty in the world.

A third instance of India's refreshing freedom of thought and actions is its declining dependence on international financial institutions and bilateral creditors. During the Vajpayee administration, the Government effected premature repayment of 'high-cost' currency pool loans of the World Bank and of the Asian Development Bank totalling around \$3 billion. Since July 2003, India has become a net creditor to the IMF after having been a borrower in the past. What is more, New Delhi is campaigning fervently against voting rights at the IMF that do not reflect India's growing economic importance in the world. The struggle to make international lending giants more equitable and just to developing countries is, in effect, a turning of the tables. The former applicant is now demanding a seat in the board rooms.

In February 2003, the Indian government wrote off debt worth \$30 million due to it from seven heavily indebted countries as part of the 'India Development Initiative'. That India can be a creditor to fellow developing countries will be a major departure from the time when it was viewed as an empty vessel that made much noise without delivering anything concrete. The tremendous goodwill India enjoyed in Africa, for example, can only be rejuvenated if it is backed up by assistance-based loans and grants. This shift is not just a change of direction piloted by top policymakers but a larger mental leap whereby India is projecting itself as a responsible ally that is simultaneously righteous and generous.

Given India's healthy foreign exchange reserves, there is a rising

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opinion among Indian intellectuals against knocking on the doors of the World Bank with a begging bowl. India still happens to be the largest recipient of World Bank loans in absolute terms, but thanks to the country's improving economy, the irritating conditionalities and undemocratic influence that foreign lending threatens, are now avoidable. While public and private sector corruption are enormous hurdles to India's development, there should be no illusion that it needs the external hand of the World Bank to set its house in order. India is blessed with ample public mobilisation for transparent and accountable governance to be able to enjoy a good riddance of foreign arbiters.

Years ago, I heard former Indian President A.P.J Abdul Kalam talk about the process through which the country's scientific establishment arrived at the decision of building its own supercomputer, PARAM. It was assembled in the late 1980s using off-the-shelf U.S. manufactured components after Washington resiled on transferring the technology owing to fears that it could be used for military ends. Kalam clenched his fist in animated fashion as I watched from the audience and said, "Then and there, we decided that we will make our own super-computer." Later versions of PARAM went on to be exported by India to eight countries, including Russia, Canada, Singapore, and Germany.

If one were to recall Swami Vivekananda's call to action, it was primarily to believe and act upon one's *amour-propre* at a time when colonialism and fall from global greatness had numbed the mind of the nation. While his vision of a national renaissance was primarily spiritual, the notion that India has something unique with which to inspire the rest of the

world can be reinterpreted for the task which lies ahead.

Self-belief should not be mistaken for autarchy or withdrawal into global isolation. Such regressive movements are irrelevant in an interconnected world. As the volume of India's foreign trade multiplies with different regions, the option is not to batten down the protectionist hatches but to unleash the productive capacities of the people so that they can compete with the best in the world. The present sits uneasily between an era in which India's markets were flooded with imported goods and one in which Indian commodities and services will be demanded abroad as the default choice of consumers. India will stutter and stumble along the way, but it can trot and march if the culture of self-confidence seeps into the national veins. ☐

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