

Canada-India entente cordiale in a troubled world

Contributed by Salim Mansur, for the Canada India Foundation
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India looms large on the global scene where Asia regains its place in world history that was lost to Europe from about the 18th century when Europeans pioneered the scientific-industrial revolutions and re-invented democracy in the making of the modern world.

As the world's largest democracy India has moved forward on a path of democratic development which could be a model for other post-colonial developing countries of Asia and Africa. India's democracy is a lesson for countries frustrated with difficulties in making the transition from pre-modern traditional politics to a rule-based representative and constitutional order.

India's political achievement is significant as it has laid a foundation for her economic growth in the years ahead. Indians in sufficient numbers have acquired the fundamentals of modern science, have contributed to its advancement, and even in greater numbers have acquired the skills of modern technology and applying them positively to meet India's needs.

In its immediate neighbourhood India strides as a regional giant with an ability to project her military and naval power well beyond her borders. Yet, more importantly, India is not a revisionist power seeking to alter its boundaries at the expense of her neighbours, and her wars have been waged reluctantly in defense of her interests and unity.

India actively seeks peace as the cornerstone of her foreign and domestic policies. Despite her border war with China, India's political leaders have sought to engage with Beijing in the spirit of peaceful co-existence that leaders of both countries strived for once in the early years of their independence.

And while India has been victimized by terrorism, her leaders felled by terrorist violence, her people burdened by the painful costs of communal rage, religious-based conflicts and insurgencies arising from politics of caste and class divisions, yet the majority of India's ethno-linguistically diverse population has embraced her secular identity and given democracy an Asian face. This is remarkable since India could have splintered in many different ways; it is even more remarkable that despite her innumerable contradictions, the debilitating poverty of a large segment of her population and the persistence of ancient manners of her people, India and Indians in ever increasing numbers are at peace with the world, reconciled with modernity, optimistic of the future and embracing of others in the making of a composite culture for a country larger than Europe as a continent and a population more than twice the number of that in North America.

It is in India's democratic politics and her composite culture, not in her military capabilities and nuclear arsenal, reside the essential strength and vitality of modern India. Sixty years after independence from British rule the world has begun to take notice of India in keeping with her achievements and her even greater potential. It is left to the imagination of others the place India will likely occupy in the centenary year of her independence four decades into the future.

The interest of states, particularly of democratic states such as Canada and India, suggests that Ottawa and New Delhi forge a relationship fitting to the needs and dignity of both their people.

There was a time not so long ago - a fleeting moment perhaps in the rapidly changing circumstances of global politics - Canadians fondly remember as the "golden years" of her foreign policy. It was then when Prime Minister Lester Pearson worked on the world stage his brand of diplomacy that reached out to others in demonstrating the appeal of multilateralism as a means to soften the hard edges of confrontational international politics. Pearson found in India's first and longest serving Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, a friend and partner, and Canada and India as members of the British Commonwealth with common practice of parliamentary democracy drew near in bonds of friendship and shared values.

The years since Pearson-Nehru partnership Canada and India have somewhat drifted apart. There have been recriminations and grievances from both sides and both, in some degree, have not paid enough attention to what drew them close to one another. But differences between Ottawa and New Delhi are of less weight when the shared values of democracy between Canada and India are so much more compelling, especially in a world of nation-states where the instincts of Pearson and Nehru remain alien. It is, therefore, of mutual interests for the present generation of Canadians and Indians, and their respective leaders, to strengthen their entente cordiale in a world where peaceful coexistence still remains a goal to be sought rather than a wish realized.