

Notes and Commentaries

Obama's Visit to Modi: An American View

Mark Lindley*

When President Obama visited New Delhi for three days last January, we requested an American member of our Editorial Board, Prof. Mark Lindley, to write his reactions. He outlined some of the historical and current background.

I followed Mr. Obama's visit from a slightly unusual perspective as an elderly American visiting professor in India, concerned mostly with ecological economics. I am glad it happened, but I think it may well have been less important than the Indian media made out.

Appearances can deceive, however. I hope this is true of the apparent lack of progress toward bilateral cooperation in dealing with our greatest 21st-century enemy in common: Mother Nature hell bent.

Mr. Obama's remark that the USA can be India's "best friend" was salutary after the Khobragade flap, and was also (in my humble opinion) well grounded in the history of our national relations. We have so much in common. The first time I went abroad – which was in 1953 – I happened to visit one afternoon a small public library in London and, since I had studied English history in secondary school, looked in the subject catalogue for books on American history. (I thought, "I know what we say about them. What do they say about us?") The cards weren't in the "A" or "U" drawer but in the "C" drawer together with the ones for the books about India and the other former colonies; and indeed the man who surrendered to George Washington in 1781 became a few years later your viceroy; and then 150 years later, Gandhi drew an analogy between the two independence movements by putting a pinch of salt, "in honour of the Boston Tea Party", in the tea which Lord Irwin poured for him. (The "Boston Tea Party" had consisted of throwing boxfuls of tea leaves into the salt water of the Boston harbor.) The analogy is defective – the USA's founding fathers were nearly all of English descent – but because of it we Americans supported the Independence Movement notwithstanding our ties with Britain and our adulation of Winston Churchill; so in 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt obliged Churchill to declare, in the Atlantic Charter, that they both wished "to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those [peoples] who have been forcibly deprived of them". (Churchill didn't expect it to apply to India, but it did.)

Ten years after that, the USA sent food to India for famine relief, and sent as our first ambassador here a man who believed that political strings shouldn't be attached to it. (The first choice for that post had been a journalist, Ernest Lindley, who thought they *should* be attached and who had interviewed Nehru more than once. I helped him get rejected. The conversation was like this: Averell Harriman (warmly): "Ernie, why don't you go out there for us?" ... Lindley: "I know Nehru prefers Freedom to the Communist way. He should come out and say so if he wants our aid." Lindley's son: "Sometimes you have a friend and you want him to do something but he can't do what you want. If you let him be, he'll be a better friend." Harriman (with a chuckle): "Ernie, I agree with the boy. How about Morocco?") And then American military forces entered Indian territory in support of India during and after the Sino-Indian War. It was only under President Nixon (serving from 1969 to 1974) that my government took a substantially dim view of yours. He and Mrs. Gandhi hated each other. Mr. Obama and Mr. Modi have set a very different course, and the millions of Desais in the USA love it.

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Notwithstanding the friendship, however, both governments remain captivated by neo-classical economic thinking with its inherent “pre-classical” sense of mercantile competition. Presidents and prime ministers are sworn to promote the interests of their respective nations, not the interest of humankind. *Nationalökonomie* is still the order of the day. (Friedrich List, championing the concept in the nineteenth century, held that individuals attain “spiritual education, productive strength, security, and well-being mainly through and in the nation”. How true is that nowadays?) This is why the top dog says, “The American way of life is not subject to negotiation” (George Bush at Rio in 1991; Profligacy forever!), while the others who want to catch up and surpass it say, “We need to develop our economy; so, the emissions will need to grow for a period of time” (Su Wei at Doha in 2012).

I see an analogy between the chemical conditions – in relation to human welfare – of (a) the outer layers of the Earth nowadays, and (b) the Bhopal pesticide plant toward the end of 1982: there have been some mishaps here and there, and the Cassandras have issued their warnings, but the owners’ profits are still mounting.

At the book release function in the Harvard Book Store for *Why Nations Fail*, I asked the economist who co-authored it, Daron Açıemoğlu, “What about why civilizations fail?”, and his reply, admirably candid and perfectly cordial, was, “We don’t deal with such problems in this book, because they call for international cooperation and this book doesn’t treat international relations.”

Mr. Obama and Mr. Modi clearly want the USA and India to cooperate in various ways, and I imagine that Mr. Obama, who reads a lot, shares my own awareness of how tragic it was that Indira Gandhi and Richard Nixon failed so dismally to cooperate (not to mention their other tragic failings). She understood that India’s extraordinary (for a big country) population density was problematic. (Too bad about how she tried to keep it from rising to its present level!) And she delivered in 1972 a well informed and obviously heartfelt speech in Stockholm at a U.N. Conference on the Human Environment, citing the “Hymn to Earth” from the *Atharva Veda* and calling for “modern man” to be “conscious of his responsibility” to the Earth. President Nixon, for his part, had a remarkable sense of awareness and executive activism in regard to environmental degradation. He didn’t just seek to encourage “changes of attitude which will lead to effective family planning programs abroad”. (The Indian Ministry of Health now aims, with no prodding from the USA, to see the total fertility rate here reduced by 2017 to 2.1 from the current of 2.3. In the USA it is 2; worldwide, *ca.*2½.) He also promoted the Clean Air Act of 1970 and established the Department of Natural Resources and the Environmental Protection Agency, and he declared, in his second Inaugural speech, that “to the extent possible, the price[s] of goods should be made to include the costs of producing and disposing them without damage to the environment”, and that the great question of ’70s would be “Shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water?”.

It was indeed a great question. The answer was “No”, and so both countries now have a pretty clear prospect of destructive weather and other dismaying environmental conditions for the next few decades, or for much longer unless there is a sharp increase of international cooperation.

It is fun to draw comparisons between important people with such strong personalities as the African-American Christian from Hawaii and the RSS Pracharak from Gujarat. Mr. Obama is eleven years younger but has had five and a half years more seasoning as a national CEO. I hope that behind the scenes of the speeches and the big hug, he will have shared with Mr. Modi some insights about economic and environmental issues which he has gained during his tenure in the White House (at the beginning of which he was remarkably ignorant about those subjects); and I hope they stay in touch.