

To The Americans Does India Count?

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

When Richard Celeste was the United States Ambassador in India he spent some time with me at Bhopal. I asked him why in American eyes India was not very important, especially because it is a democracy, but in matters of U.S. State policy India seemed to have a low priority and the US Government was only concerned about those countries which were prepared to toe the American line. His answer was quite interesting. He said that so far as America is concerned its closest links were with Europe. The Middle East was of importance because of its oil reserves and America was not prepared for any other country to have any say in the management and exploitation of oil. In Asia, with Japan America had a long standing relationship and both because of historic links with China and because of China's new found economic strength, in the matter of foreign policy China had the highest priority for the US Government. Pakistan was considered a strategic partner, initially for the Middle East oil but subsequently for Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan, whilst being given a vassal status in some ways, still attracts high priority attention from U.S. policy makers. Russia had moved off centre stage with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but for the Americans Russia remained very important both because of its potential and because America needs it to counter balance China. That left the rest of the world in which America had only marginal interests, but within that limitation India enjoyed a prime place. The sum total of his argument was that for America India is at best a country which is marginal, but with some local importance.

I thought that Richard Celeste's argument was frank, rational and worthy of attention. It is we Indians who are trying to reach out to the Americans and have, in the process, deluded ourselves that we are very important to the United States. We have even been taken in by the American rhetoric that India and America have a strategic partnership because the fact is that America does not care tuppence for India and that this is conveniently lost sight of. Once in a while the Americans throw a crumb to us just to keep us quiet and the fools that we are we accept this as a whole banquet. It is for this reason that we were so easily flattered when President George W. Bush reached out to India both as a so called strategic partner and in the context of the nuclear deal with our Prime Minister. Of course, with the exception of Richard Nixon, India seems to have better relationships with the United States when there is a Republican President there. Our experience with a President from the Democratic Party has not always been happy and certainly after President Obama took office we have had a somewhat bumpy ride with the Americans. Perhaps the reason is that the Republicans have always tended to have a higher international profile and there India does find a place, whereas the Democrats are more attuned to domestic problems. That is why President Obama has been systematically targeting India in the matter of outsourcing. When one looks deep into the American official psyche one finds that very often commercial interests determine foreign policy. In the case of China trade is paramount and in the case of India after Pokhran II and the positive impact of Narsimha Rao's liberalisation policy a few years earlier India gained respect in the eyes of the world, which showed up despite the harsh sanctions imposed on India by America and the European Union after Pokhran II. In fact in 2007 I had visited the United States and whereas in the past Indians were treated with contempt as being poor cousins or even beggars, in 2007 India was eyed very differently as a potential power and this permeated down to even people like taxi drivers. That is why there was

some American outreach to India because of its markets, its enormous pool of technically educated people and the building up of the Indian economy.

In the second term of UPA Government as domestically we lurched from one crisis to another, as the global slow-down began to affect our own development agenda, as government itself moved from rational policy to populism, once again India began to lose ground in the eyes of the Americans. That is why the US Government could have the nerve to refuse a visa to Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat, by being judgemental on his role in failing to control the riots of 2002. Can the United States dare refuse a visa to any of the top leadership of China on the grounds of atrocities on Uyigurs or forcible displacement of people from their homes in Beijing and Shanghai when the cities were being rebuilt, or on the issue of human rights in Tibet? Because China is seen to be an economic powerhouse which is militarily strong, the United States is as careful with China as walking on eggshells. So long as India appeared to be a lucrative market there was greater interest of the West, including the United States, in doing business with India. Where China scored over us in attracting overseas Chinese investment in China, then offering itself as prime location for off-shore production of goods which have a ready market in the West, permitting such outsourcing to retain the original brand name and thus swamping the markets of the world with goods made in China, though bearing well known brand names. Today the balance of payment has tilted so heavily in China's favour that the Western World spares no effort in wooing China. We, on the other hand, with a suspicion of capital and especially foreign capital, our somewhat antiquated ideology of socialism in which neither are we socialist nor are we capitalist, with our deep suspicion of all multinational corporations, have kept our markets closed and this has prevented the kind of massive investment in the secondary sector which China has witnessed. Our over dependence on the tertiary sector has made America suspicious on account of perceived job losses to India's high skilled manpower and this has prevented a healthy commercial relation developing between India and the United States to the extent that has happened in the Sino-U.S. business relationship.

Another major issue which has prevented India from becoming an economic giant is that we have equated democracy with populism rather than with purposive government in which the final say is with the electorate. Much of Western Europe has a democratic polity, as does the United States. In a true democracy there has to be an agreement to disagree, which means that on certain national fundamentals all parties agree, but dissent and disagreement on matters of detail are both legitimate and encouraged. One does not have to be a totalitarian one party ruled China to be able to take hard decisions. Democracies do it all the time, but we have distorted democratic governance to an extent where there is no agreement even to disagree and all decision making is brought to a halt because some group on the lunatic fringe opposes the proposal and in order not to annoy that group the decision is put on hold. Whether it be infrastructure development, setting up of industry, building major irrigation and power projects or even in allowing a road to be widened from two lanes to four lanes our government, our political parties, whose mantra is immediate expediency, bend over backwards to accommodate even those who are nihilists at heart. This has certainly slowed down the decision making process and in the eyes of the world when India and China are compared, China is looked at as a country which has adopted "can do, will do, have done" as a motto, whereas India is looked upon as a wavering nation ruled by dithering dunderheads. It is also viewed as a nation which is weak

in responding to the most atrocious provocation and whose leaders can be pushed around at will. In terms of international relations this is only one step above outright colonialism.

Let us look at certain Indian realities. We are a democracy which is a prisoner to populism but which has the capacity to think big and act big. Indira Gandhi's family will never credit anyone else with having done anything for India, but the fact is that Narsimha Rao as Prime Minister pushed through a programme of economic liberalisation and a loosening of the stranglehold of government over the economy. That is what caused a rediscovery of India by its entrepreneurs and the explosion of economic expansion that took place. It has once again run into the dreary desert sands of irrational populism, fueled by a coalition whose lead partner is reluctant to relinquish power. But that does not mean that we cannot recover and once again become decisive. Ultimately it is an international perception of India being determined, decisive, forward looking and active which will bring international respect, even from the United States. Clearly, therefore, we have to set our government structure in order, learn to be decisive in decision making and then consistent in action. In five years we can bounce back and then watch how the United States treats us.

Which brings me to the unfortunate affair of Devyani Khobragade, Deputy Consul General in the Indian Consulate General in New York. There is so much which has been written about her that I need not elaborate on the case, except for one point which is that an officer of the Indian Foreign Service, a diplomat posted in New York, has been arrested, handcuffed, strip-searched and subjected to humiliation on the specious grounds that she did not pay her Indian domestic servant the wages which are paid in the United States. If the United States wages are to be benchmarked, then no Indian domestic employee of the U.S. Embassy and the Consulates General in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay is paid the wages that would be applicable in the United States. How many U.S. diplomats have we arrested, handcuffed, strip-searched? None. When our Ambassador to the United States, Meera Shankar, was physically frisked at an airport in U.S despite identifying herself, when Hardeep Singh Puri, our permanent representative to the United Nations was asked to take off his turban and subsequently the turban was prodded and pawed, how many American diplomats were subjected to similar searches at Indian airports? None. The Americans always say that they were following standard procedures. Do the standard procedures in India lay down that our security personnel will lie down and become doormats for American diplomats? Our Defence Minister, George Fernandes was subjected to a humiliating body search at an American airport. The American Defence Secretary has come quite often to India. Was he subjected to a similar search?

When Eva Machado was the Brazilian Ambassador in India she and her husband were taken by me to Mandu for a brief holiday. She told me that when the Americans started doing digital finger printing of Brazilian visitors her government decided to do finger printing of American visitors, but by using a normal ink pad. When the United States protested that Brazilians were not being singled out and that digital finger printing was done of all entrants to the United States, whereas in Brazil it is only American citizens who are being finger printed, the Brazilian Government replied that whom the Americans finger printed was for them to decide, but Brazil would continue to finger print all American citizens as a reciprocal measure. As for the technology, America was technically advanced and used digital finger printing, but Brazil was happier with manual finger printing using an ink pad. Of course it is another matter that the

Brazilians used semi indelible ink which took about a fortnight to wash off. The Brazilians showed more courage than we ever do.

I give this case as an example of how self confident nations behave when defending the dignity of their citizens. In the present case it is an Indian diplomat who has been targeted. Removing a concrete crash barrier from outside the U.S. Embassy is hardly an answer. A better answer would be to put on hold some major commercial deals with the U.S, perhaps recall our Ambassador and keep the post vacant for a few months, declare a few American diplomats persona non grata and adopt a clear-cut tit for tat policy viz-a-viz the United States, at least till that government begins to treat Indian nationals and Indian diplomats with courtesy and dignity. Trade may bring us dollars, but the national insult rubs our noses in the dirt, a practice which the U.S. now seems to have adopted without compunction viz-a-viz India.

I know that there will be many who think that retaliation by India will only lead to inflicting of sanctions on us. Well, I can give two examples of how sanctions actually helped India. The first was when Lyndon B. Johnson, the then U.S. President, withdrew PL480 Food Assistance. We did not starve because we accepted this as a challenge, from which emerged the Green Revolution and made India self sufficient in food. Then came the Pokhran II nuclear tests when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. Whereas internationally India earned the approbation of the world for its advanced technology, from the United States we earned crippling sanctions. The scientific establishment rose to the challenge, went in for upgrading all obsolete technology and innovation of new technology in the Indian context and proved that our scientists were not dependent on the West. That being the case if we give America a harsh answer for what it has done to an Indian diplomat that would be a legitimate exercise of sovereignty. We as a nation are capable of meeting the consequences of any American reaction. Let us not hesitate in action.
