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Modi-fying Phase Developing Trajectories for South Asia

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Guest Column by Ravi Sundaralingam

(These are personal views of a Sri Lankan Tamil based in London. The views expressed are his own- Director)

If Indian Election results were a surprise, then how Narendra Modi was prior to the elections, and now modified as the Premier is a revelation.

The spectacle of all leaders of SAARC and Mauritius, except Bangladesh being present at Modi's inaugural ceremony signified much more than discussed by experts in the media or revealed during briefings by the foreign secretary. That the one-to-one with the leaders took place even before the first cabinet meeting is remarkable if not daring on Modi's part.

There was the usual statement of no real change to Indian foreign policy template. This sounded suspicious given the pageant and rituals, and even sort of a vision sketched out of the words by the tight lipped foreign secretary.

For us as Lankans, always held outside by Indian politicians and analysts as 'aliens' because the colonisers taught them to be so, to be considered as part of a big parivar is very welcome.

For many Mahinda Rajapakse's present was the sour note, which was more to do with our constituencies than the stage demanded. Further, human rights is an issue not too distant to those in Delhi, Muzaffarnagar, Kashmir, Gujarat, etc., therefore, we are sure to revisit the issue long before the end of Modi's project, at forum such as the SAARC at some point. Besides, more than the gruelling pace Modi set himself as BJP leader the agenda being to set for India and the region, if stretched to its full potential will be revolutionary therefore, more unpleasantness are tolerable.

What is Modi-fing

While the pace of these events and perhaps even the scale of BJP victory are unexpected, what are being considered as Indian policies could not be surprises, especially to those really closer to the ground in South Asia, particularly India.

Modi's victory has received many different descriptions.

That he represents a post-partition generation has given rise to such a claim that the victory was a kind of 'true liberation' from colonialism.

In a world where neo-colonialism set the phase and in many areas defined how people actually lived, and in a country where the young among the middle classes outstrips their old Anglophiles in their imitations of the West, this assessment seems hollow but sounds attractive.

Then, there is the claim the victory has rendered the caste, race, religious and class divides useless in one stroke by Modi's development promise.

This however, has two parts and needed to be addressed separately.

Firstly, the nature of the overwhelming support for the BJP. Some section of the wider population voting for BJP does not mean any claim of uniformity is true.

South of Deccan Plateau BJP performance is as thus:

Andhra Pradesh, 3/42 seats, 9%; Karnataka, 17/28, 43%; Kerala, 0/20, 10%; Tamil Nadu, 1/39, 5%. This amounts to less than 25% of the electorate in this region, where voters remained loyal to their locality and traditional parties, unlike the case in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Karnataka is the exception, without it the overall share would be lower than 20%. Though Kerala has voted for the Communist and Congress parties, they are 'national' parties only in name as their roots and loyalties are firmly local.

East of the Plateau was also a no go area for the BJP, where its shares are, Odisha, 1/21, 21%; West Bengal, 2/42, 16%.

Therefore, it would be truly difficult to stretch claim of broad support in all directions.

However, it is exactly right to suggest most in the Hindi-belt and above it, regardless of their vast divides have decided that one party to represent them for the near future, and it would be BJP. And no one could belittle that legitimacy.

Secondly, the claim is about 'development' and 'hope'.

The Deccan Plateau is one of the true natural-divide that separates the people on socio-cultural grounds and perhaps, provides the reasons for the voting patterns not just in the south, also in the north.

Dravidian Movement in this region may have had its flaws and contradictions. Yet, it stemmed from a deeper current of thought process that could be traced back to the Indus civilisations.

It has a social-renewal aspect to its philosophies attributable to the regional loyalty to Shiva, and the inherent matriarchal structure to social order. Thus, one of the region's characteristic is towards social-justice and against status-quo, which could be identified throughout the periods of its history.

If we want quips or quotations there are many. "There are no castes other than men and women" defied poetess Avvaiyar, and 2000 years later, "if there were a cry of hopelessness lets destroy the world", demanded poet Bharathi, a figure-head during the Indian liberation struggle.

Politically Dravidian Movement adopted an anti-north, anti-Brahmin sentiment but its real desire was always greater autonomy in its affairs. However more importantly, its natural drift towards egalitarian societies separated it from other nationalistic movements in the region.

Therefore in spite of corruption by its leaders, its economic developments are also accompanied by social developments, confirmed by the various human-index figures by Indian and international agencies.

Even for the simplistic tone, understanding "how a father greeted the birth of a daughter, then viewed her education" and, "how far his answers to these have changed over the last 20 years" would suffice for our differentiating point.

Such that, the socio-economic policies and actions in this region not only have made it into the most 'developed areas' within India but, also have brought the southerners almost on the verge of forming patches of societies similar to those associated with industrialisation, albeit within the cultural preserve of their feudal systems.

They have created conditions providing the real opportunities to breach the cast and cultural bounds than the mere tinkering with constitutions in favour of affirmative actions, which were useful at some stage.

What the people in the Hindi-belt are seeking is perhaps the same type of socio-political, socio-psychological climate, and a movement to take them out of their cultural bounds, free them to act productively without feudal hindrance.

In this sense Modi's victory represents, on the first count, the 'hope of delivery from the feudal set up particular to the north'.

Therefore, the assumption any failure to deliver jobs and livelihood for young would be an end to Modi's project is a misunderstanding of the ground situations. No doubt, young are angry and upset about their prospect but, are also more informed. For they are realistic of their immediate scope with 90,000 entering the job-market each month. The anger is about the sensitivity to their problems and the total waste of the past ten years, and not at those showing real interests in their affairs.

That is why the 'development' and 'hope' agenda have to be looked at separately.

Necessity may be the 'mother of invention' but, without 'hope' not all the productive forces can be brought into focus and creativity.

Hope in this sense is about creating level-playing fields for every community throughout India. And now having accepted the need for the big parivar if development is to achieve its full potential, bringing it to all others around India.

However, the immediate work is at home.

He needs to bring in a new political class intent on making fundamental changes to the wider society, and new culture to India's vast bureaucracy. He needs to start to set up the agenda for overall strategy based on the assessments of his ministries and academics.

On a practical level his work would be cut short if the 100 – day program did not take care of the families- based establishment centred on Delhi and other power centres in the north.

Unlike the families in the south, these are feudal in the sense of 15th century and beyond. They are not just families and entire clans that have nudged themselves in positions of power so that they can plunder the national wealth but, like a 'mafia' organisation with an army of

enforcers thus, alternative power sources.

Their link with the old-money, old-families establishment may be on quid pro quo basis, nevertheless they would see the need to preserve the network, therefore would close ranks, if not their propagation, at least to protect what they have already got. It is a situation Margret Thatcher faced when she came to power wading through the British hereditary feudal establishment.

The need to sort them out arises not because of personal hatred or ideology but, to turf out the natural inertia they had built over the years due to their lack of care for the ordinary man, woman and children.

Then there is the question is can Modi represent the rest who are not in the same conditions as the Hindi-belt?

The answer at least in vision seem to be clear by his invite of the SAARC leaders to his oath-taking but proof, as himself put it, is in the delivery.

Development of the region is a realistic prospect and India alone can ride it, even if it is the driver.

Development does not happen in one's constituency but as a region, by including those who did not vote. Within India's the cohesion in the past was coalition governments between parties, which represented various regions. Now he faces the dilemma of having the simple majority to do what he wants at the same time carries the confidence of the regions perhaps, through some sort of coalition of purpose.

While within India he must overcome the lethargy and endemic corruption, outside he must start to reverse the adverse global and regional strategic conditions.

Development of the region without internal confidence giving measures and directions, and external stability and unity in purpose in the region would be impossible.

That means recovering India's position as the trend setter and leader in the region.

In this sense if one detects correlation between Modi-phase and the neo-cons in US in terms of objectives, they would not be far wrong. If however, they try to analyse them in the same vein they would be completely wrong. For we know US and India are far apart in history, basic understanding of nature and humanity, and above all in terms of responsibilities.

US invaded any nation in the continents at will to establish its hegemony in the region as it never thought Latin Americans or Caribbeans belonged to its greater family. India is not in such a position. Besides, India is not trying establish its authority as a developed power tried and tested trough a world war but, as a developing country of billion people, surrounded by another half suffering souls.

This recovery must have a basic strategy and philosophy that underpins everything done for next two decades.

Large population is a burden only if it is unproductive, otherwise it is a boon, at least for the present until technology shifts just another gear.

However, any development plan could not have a long term future without energy and water security as the drivers of its strategy.

“Water, water, everywhere, but no drop for the thirst” is the situation for the people in the subcontinent. Akbar’s dead Fatehpur city left high and dry without water is a shining example.

Therefore, water policy must play a central role within a regional strategy, and must be considered as part of the infra-structure of each country in the region therefore, brought under overall supervision of the central governments.

The same can be said about energy as the subcontinent is surrounded by energy resources to drive the regional economy for decades to come. Thus, securing and exploiting the resources in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar for the development of the region must be the main objectives of any Indian regional strategy. The people of the region could not be left to rue their fate as the Africans, that is, to find one day when they are ready all their lands are depleted of raw materials.

The lost decades were such due to lack of initiatives, often described as policy paralysis; an overused term that aptly describes inabilities most of the time. However, it is also used to mask certain conditions that prevented policy-making and execution.

And, most often than not it is those you trust the most who exploit such situations for their benefit, and leave you senseless drained all confidence. If US had felt such inviting conditions no one can blame its strategists for exploiting them.

If an ambassador decided how Indian policy manifested on the ground contrary to its objectives it causes ‘policy paralysis’. Similarly, if a prime minister put his job on the line for particular policy it also creates the conditions towards the same end.

We suspect, the manner in which the US Indian Nuclear deal was brought in and the manner the LTTE was put out are examples that helped to create the conditions that may have given rise to the misunderstandings at home and abroad.

By that we mean such amalgam of conditions have,

(1) Given the wrong signals to Indian political classes and the bureaucrats, despite many words to dispel 'misunderstandings'.

Take the case with Tamil Nadu (TN) politicians not thinking twice when demanding India followed the US lead on Lanka in the UN and UNHCR.

We are not contradicting TN's right to protest at the treatment of their brethren, nor are we denying the human rights violations to the degree of genocide committed against Lankan Tamils.

It is, instead of demanding policy of their own they felt fine to demand Delhi simply followed US, and did not have to consider the possible adverse consequences.

If heads were made to turn misunderstandings could take hold, and even a deal with a neighbour could be scuppered as may have been in case of the water deal with Bangladesh.

Thus, policy paralysis is a poison that could have external reasons, which disorientate politicians and leaders away from their responsibilities to the overall Indian strategic positions. Consider the case of USA:

(2) Given Quarters to US – misunderstanding of Indian interests and encouraged it into penetrative regional policies.

(3) Breathed fresh fears into China's thinking, which helped to unsettle countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to think outside any regional security framework.

(4) Contributed to the devaluation of Indian assets in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka, and undermined India's 'regional authority'.

Even huge events that shaped Indian regional policies such as the nuclear tests that induced Pakistan into the nuclear club, which one can argue US tacitly approved, and the set-back in Lanka with IPKF are put into perspective by the creation of such conditions, as history moves on to make South Asia into one of the actively contested regions from outside.

The manner US exited Indochina created severe policy-paralysis for the Pentagon and experts are like. It is with Ronald Regan and George Bush I as front men neo-cons were able to re-launch US as a power that had a definitive say in the global policies.

While disregarding their methodology, one could not disagree with the two basis premises set out by the neo-cons for the project. There

should be, 1. An overarching philosophy (democracy), and 2. Means of enforcement (military strength). What were their strategies and tactics when opportunities arose are irrelevant for our purpose here.

India under Modi must include the decision on these two aspects within their 100 – day timeframe.

Democracy is fine as a word but, with people totally disenfranchised and fearful of their states are the realities around India. Yet, India cannot run to the West for ideas every time it encounters a philosophical question associated with a practical problem that is common for the region as a whole. Or leave the West to sort out the mess on its neighbourhood and still claim to be the regional leader.

As it is constantly dealing with national questions within, as birth of the Telugu state as one of the positive outcomes, India must be aware not all human rights issues are privy to the surveillance of the West. Since the new regime is aware of the greater parivar, it must also be aware of the national aspiration of future societies within its territory and outside.

Therefore, the new government of India should recognise the need to achieve for a comprehensive understanding of the rights and ownership of the people and communities in the region. This could form a charter specific to the need of the people in the region without interference from outside. This would release a huge amount of pressure on the states around India and even engage them into behaving responsibly towards the people in their domain.

Furthermore, if any development proposals without such assurances caused anxiety and concern among those outside India it is only natural. If Lankans feared the colossal Indian companies, one cannot simply dismiss it citing soothing words.

Therefore, development for India as much as for the region means the same thing, an assurance that everyone had the level playing field, and no one skewed in their way using power or influence.

The right to energy and water without conditions and compliance, and the rights to usurp their hereditary-belongings without fear of retribution must be the central theme for such a process to be successful.

In this sense at least the expectations of Modi as an Indian and the members of his greater parivar are the same.

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