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India has, for nearly a decade, been seen as not only the pre-eminent power in South Asia but as an increasingly significant player on the world stage. (Why the obviousness of its surpassing the power of all the other countries of the region combined has been for so long not even been accepted is a story in its own right). What kind of role it has the desire or the ability to play, curiously enough evokes more analysis and discussion in circles abroad than at home. The outside attention is of course in contrast to previous decades, when India's views frankly received not so much serious as polite attention (and not always so polite.) Mr. Olivier Louis' brilliant note summarizes key elements most succinctly but it does attribute to us some shortcomings and some "pretensions" which we Indians would definitely modify. The implication that India can best fulfill its potential- or ambition- if it settles with Pakistan is more complex than the observation suggests.) It is true that some people fond of their voices have made it appear as though India seeks a global role, if indeed it does not already believe it has one. True also that our size, strategic situation, civilizational stature and human talents give us major inherent potential, so that any surprise at our playing a noticeable role in world affairs should be not at India wanting it but in taking so long in reaching it. Certainly it is our military capabilities and above all our economic rise that has made the world look at us afresh. But the fact is that India has been, and in most Indian minds still is, one of the world's most isolationist countries. That will raise eyebrows: we have long been considered a kind of international busybody. But to understand where we are and where we are headed it is advisable to consider India in its historical perspective.

If you look at all the centuries of India's history as an independent state, you will notice it has never sought to exercise power beyond its natural borders. We had some "expansion" in South East Asia but these were trading or cultural extensions – there was no "imperium" exercised over overseas territories as parts of an Indian Empire. Hegel observed that "India, as a sought-after land, has been a major principle of history". This brings out the key point: how we have always been acted upon by others, from Alexander the Great to the European colonizers of recent times, and have not acted upon others ourselves.

Our experience of subjugation gave rise to three equally powerful tendencies: anti-colonialism, a profound aversion to power politics, and the insistence that only the right to think things out for oneself could give us complete independence. Mistrust of western powers was nurtured by the first two of these (along with fears of economic imperialism and neo colonialism) while in the third lay the seeds of non-alignment.

Another major influences arose from the nature of our nationalist movement, specifically the teachings of Gandhi and the appeal of non- violence. This led us from the view that power-politics is evil, to an abhorrence of power itself. Again and again, our leaders of that time spoke out against both as the cause of international conflict. And since power was largely seen as military force, we deprecated the latter as an instrument for ourselves.

Nor should we fail to note the role of socialism. In the decades preceding our independence its appeal was world-wide, more so to a colonized people whose principal friends and advocates were to be found among socialists. Apart from its theoretical attractiveness, Marxism was seen as the enemy of imperialism, and had the added value of providing cut and dried analyses of world developments to people inexperienced in such matters – a complete frame of reference in itself.

Not least, the belief that our long-suppressed energies, talents and viewpoints could at last operate on the world stage, encouraged a conviction that India had something new to offer in determining the interaction between states and the evolution of a new world. This was further encouraged by the coincidental ending of the Second World War and the creation of the United Nations, when not only in India but the world over a spirit of idealism, of hope for an international order based on peace and justice flickered for a while. On the other hand, as we looked at the world around us for what loomed largest on its horizons was the threat of yet another major conflagration, containing among all its terrible consequences the destruction of all our hopes for rapid economic development.



The effects of Partition were also far-reaching. The division of India not only strengthened our unspoken fears regarding our unity, it brought with it the still continuing problem of Kashmir, the immediate effect of which was to make our leaders turn to the one instrument of state policy which they most denounced. The need for our military forces became quickly evident when the fledgling government had to cope with the massacres and migrations accompanying Partition.

The 1962 fiasco with China finally forced recognition of the need for a strong military force, but old hesitations about the role of the military in our polity or our policy-making prevented the development of any mechanism or systems for making strategic military thinking a part of governmental planning. The point of significance was that our leaders hoped to produce a method of handling India's external relations in which military capability was at a discount.

These, then, were the inputs that determined our attitude to the world, our sense of India's place in it and of the contribution we should make to it: an overwhelming concentration on India as a world unto itself; inexperience in dealing with the world as it is combined with a profound mistrust of it; a particular suspicion of the only part of it that had entered our consciousness, namely the West; a predilection for socialism and therefore a hope, if not an established sense, of affinity with those elements in the world – writers and thinkers, political parties or states and government – in whom we saw a fellow-feeling; the belief that the world needed a new message and that India could provide it; a special sense of mission in working with other victims of colonialism to end it; fear of militarism in general and of the armed confrontation developing in the world into which we had emerged, countering which was high priority; above all the longing to be left alone to advance our economy and consolidate our Indian nationhood.

When Britain became masters of India, we were no longer just an object of power, we became a base of power, enabling Britain to exercise its influence from Aden to Singapore, indeed from Suez to Shanghai. On independence, we rejected such a strategic concept as an imperialist legacy and, our busy-ness in international forums notwithstanding, we turned inward again. I could explain how non-alignment was a form of isolationism, but it would take another conference! The point here is that we were averse to the use of power in its traditional sense.

Things are finally changing. I do not mean for a moment that we are now developing any role for power in our international interactions.

We are becoming more aware of the world around us, of the challenges and the opportunities our increasing economic and military capabilities as well as our national needs, give rise to. Not least, it is that external recognition of what we have become, which our invitation to this session of this conference illustrates, that is almost forcing us to think afresh. We have not really exercised power in shaping our region, and have no illusions about what we can do on the wider stage. But we are finally feeling part of the world, and feeling our way towards being a constructive part of its evolution. This is not a matter of ambition, or assertiveness, or of projecting power. It is the natural fall out of our development as a nation- in full consciousness of our internal needs. Let's perhaps call it a work in progress.