

Zenith in Indo-Lanka ties



—by—
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Sri Lankan foreign policy is once more in the crosshairs these days with the Geneva UNHRC sessions under-way, and the events in Ukraine. Pundits are imparting advice on how the foreign policy mandarins should react to both events.

However, in the past few months our foreign policy in this writer's estimation already underwent a paradigm shift of sorts.

Words could be parsed in many ways to explain our foreign policy tilt, but in the estimation of this columnist we threw in our lot with India 'unequivocally.'

That does not mean that we have ceased our close, historical ties with other powerful neighbours and friends both near and not so near, but when we made a choice to get closer to the largest, nearest neighbour during a time of crisis, we sent a signal — and that was heard loud and clear by everybody who is watching us.

Having greater ties with India has several positives some of which are obvious that they do not bear mention — our closest historically most significant neighbour, kin more than a friend, and all that and more which had been articulated more eloquently than I can ever do here by many analysts and historians before me.

But, in my estimation there is one more reason being close to India has an inherent advantage. When we deal with India, we don't deal with one India we deal with several Indias. Similarly sentiments I'm afraid cannot be voiced about our relations with some other countries.

Several Indias? I mean that India is pluralistic, and that Indians engage in healthy debate about the options available for the future shape of the country, and it's political contours if you will.

Summits

Take the current debate now taking place about the Modi transformation in India, which is decried in intellectual circles in Delhi and so on particularly among the English speaking elite. What we can all be glad about is that the debate is taking place.

They all say that premier Modi is gaining the upper hand and that since he is having his way India would end up losing its essential, pluralistic, multi-ethnic character soon.

However, others such as writer Arundathy Roy have said that the people would 'fight back' and ensure that Modi's Hinduthva would be stopped in its tracks.

What we can all be glad about is that the debate is taking place — no, that it is raging. There are several Indias, and I'm guessing that there would be, forever.

That's the nature of the Indian experiment. That does not mean that Prime Minister Modi may or may not change the

face of India essentially and convert the country into a quasi-religious State, may be in the extreme case a Hindu version of Pakistan.

He may attempt to go there, but it's extremely unlikely, and perhaps it could safely be said that such an outcome will almost be impossible.

But, even in the extremely unlikely chance that India ends up there, there would still be several Indias because there would be vast segments of Indian society pushing back, and that is a certainty.

That's the nature of Indian democracy and the essentially pluralistic nature of the Indian polity. Modi brand Hinduthva may predominate for a while, but it's likely that in any event things would return to the status quo ante once PM Modi is one day out of the political picture, because nothing or nobody lasts forever.

It would be best to desist from passing any value judgments on PM Modi's current Indian experiment. That's for Indians to do, and there are arguments to be made on both sides. For every Arundathy Roy, there is always a Sapwan Dasgupta in India these days.

Threaten

But that's what's good about having good relations with India. We can relate to India's multi faceted society. There is healthy debate and a cacophony of voices, and even if we don't go so far as to say as Galbraith did that India is a functioning anarchy, you get the idea.

Premier Modi's current Indian experiment has a considerable fan-base in this country too, no matter what the reader's particular take on the Modi brand may be.

A country that often identifies itself as Sinhala Buddhist in the main could identify with premier Modi hoping to establish Hinduthva pride even though a majority of the intellectual left would say that the Prime Minister's interference with the Nehruvian secular brand is reprehensible. It's anathema to them no doubt, but the majority of Indians don't seem to be complaining and a lot turns on that.

However, things are much like they are here. The debate is fierce and it is acrimonious and the combined signs are ominous — the polarisations in the future may even threaten the very existence of the Indian social fabric, though the latter

eventuality is unlikely.

But, even so, the beauty of India is that there is so much diversity and yet there is so much dissent. Whatever happens there are still 'several Indias' and there always would be, and that's a brand that we are used to and could deal with.

For those who say that this is all Indian politics and has no bearing on our relations with the country or India's relations with any nation in the region or the world for that matter, it's not true that internal politics so called has no implications for the broader issues of international relations. It would be fallacious to assert such a position because all international relations have among other things a fundamentally 'organic basis' if you will, to them.

Daresay

People to people contact also impacts on international relations and if Sri Lankan people feel they can identify with the concept of 'several Indias' i.e. that the country is not a monolith despite its size, that helps things when leaders meet, summits are held, and aid and mutual cooperation is discussed.

Even as the issues are discussed the Indian politics of today a la Modi has an impact as well, it seems, on the way Indo-Lanka relations seem to have developed in the last year or so under the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

At the moment there seems to be some special mutual empathy between the Indian and Sri Lankan leaderships because both leaders are on the same page about the way they see their countries being shaped by majoritarian political considerations if you will, but with India, as in Sri Lanka, politics is forever in flux and these current realities could change over time.

But there is the possibility of change in democracies such as India and that's what policymakers here can relate to. At the moment the vibrancy of the debate in India on whether the country is going to remain essentially secular or not and so on is having special resonance here.

We love that cacophony I daresay because we've heard it here too and it's something we can tune into. Even if it doesn't impact the larger reality of our

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relations with each other as nations as some would say, who cares — because there are vibes between a people that cannot be discounted.

India is a spiritual nation and many in that country would I'm sure nod their heads. Vibes matter, and sometimes they are the basis for cultural connectivities and so on that may on the long run trump hard-headed geopolitical realities and so on.

When people are open to change no possibilities can be discounted, and it seems this is what the current phase of good relations between India and Sri Lanka seems to be reflecting. Several Indias, several Sri Lankas and several possibilities to choose from.