

The 1962 war and after Time to get on

By Shyam Sunder

AS India returns to the polls amid political commotion, in this fifth year of economic liberalisation, the light of hope and confidence shines again on it. The country builds its future through hard work and determination. It engages the world in friendship and in commerce and trade for mutual benefit. Once again, it is an equal among nations.

This spirit resonates the memory of the fifties. Children growing up in post-independence India saw a bright and prosperous future. Poverty hardly diminished their confidence in India and themselves. There was a willingness to sacrifice the present to build a better future. The excitement and symbolism of the Independence Day parades, the prabhat-phenis on Gandhi's birthday, and the speeches and sweets on Republic Day, were not confined to the children.

All this ended with India's defeat in the 1962 border war with China. It was time for a reality check. The world did not think of Indians as the good guys, as we had been led to believe. Egypt, Indonesia and Sri Lanka did not fault China for attacking India as we had expected them to do. Hindi Chini were not exactly bhai-bhai, and armed forces were not a dispensable luxury. As soldiers were rushed to shiver in their shirt sleeves at poorly-defended Himalayan passes, we belatedly discovered we had few friends in the world. Politicians fed people on a diet of euphemisms, even as they begged for help. The shock and humiliation of the 1962 war, and the betrayal by the government, settled back into sullen seclusion to search for self-sufficiency and entered the denial phase. The China Syndrome had begun.

A generation later, as we leave our China Syndrome behind, it is easier to discern its symptoms—lack of self-confidence, extreme sensitivity to external criticism, suspicion of all, fear of foreign trade, firms and governments, and desire for direct control of everything. Obsession with control led to nationalisation of banks and climaxed in declaration of the state of emergency in 1975. Politicians and bureaucrats closeted themselves, cut off from new ideas and secure from independent scrutiny. Starved of sunshine, India's nascent political and administrative institutions began to decay and crumble as corruption began to flourish in the dark corridors of power. Brilliant minds directed their energies to pathetic rationalisations of India's economic failure—Japan recovered so well from the post-war destruction because it had industry before the war,

Taiwan and Korea did well only because they were dictatorships; the city states of Singapore and Hong Kong could not be compared to India's continental economy, etc., etc.

But what about the economic resurgence of China itself? Rajiv Gandhi, as an outsider to India's political-bureaucratic machinery, could see the contradiction, but could not shake India out of its syndrome. Anything that could not be rationalised was simply ignored. India's frustrated legions of talent queued up at Palam and Sahar for midnight jumbo jet flights out of the country. Customs officials were busy extorting bribes or collecting duties at confiscatory rates, oblivious to the 60-kilo pieces of most precious material leaving the country at the departure gates. *Sharanji ke Khilari* in Delhi remained obsessed with the domestic game of dividing a stag-

valley of Kashmir, Pakistan remains mired in the aftermath of Bangladesh. The spirit of a whole generation is lost when a nation refuses to admit and face up to its military defeat.

The China Syndrome drew curtains on an era that began on January 26, 1931, with Nehru's stirring call to India, on the banks of Ravi, to seek complete independence from the British rule. His generation led the independence struggle and built a vision of India's place in the world. They defeated obscurantist forces, and introduced science and technology to modernise Indian economy and society. They infused India with a sense of pride and optimism and raised the spirits of its poor masses. Nehru brought the nations of Asia, Africa and South America together to seek a non-aligned world that would not become a reality until a quarter century after he died.

Nehru, the idealist and visionary leader, was no administrator. His hopes and aspirations clouded what he saw. His socialist ideals did not permit him to see that placing social justice before economic growth may leave India's masses hungry. He knew the weaknesses of capitalism but not of the state bureaucracy. The 1956 Awaad Resolution on industrial policy planted the vine of licence raj that spread during the syndrome years to grip the Indian tiger in its tentacles.

Another generation earlier, Tilak, Gokhale, and Gandhi struggled mightily in the first three decades of this century to modernise the semi-feudal 19th century India. From a society riven by myriads of divisions and barriers, they forged a single national identity so, in 1931, Nehru could demand that this nation become an independent republic.

India shaped its national identity in the first 30 years of this century, it found a vision and became a republic in the second, and then stumbled into the China Syndrome in the third. In this last decade of the century, India is set to resume its journey of the first two interludes. In spite of efforts of Gandhi and Nehru's generations, divisiveness and frustration with social and economic injustices still challenge India. It can abate these forces by rapidly developing its economy and human resources. Society's wealth consists of the skills of its people, not of the gold in its vaults. By giving every citizen opportunity to develop to his or her full potential, India may yet start the next millennium as if there had been no China Syndrome at all.

● The writer is the Richard M. Cyert Professor of Management and Economics at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA.

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nant economic pie among a fast-growing population. During this period of spectacular economic growth in Asia, India sank to economic and political irrelevance. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the loss of trade, and the consequent foreign exchange crisis in 1991 rang the wake-up call.

India did not recover from the syndrome until the players in the events of 1962 had passed from the scene. India of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi retreated from Jawaharlal Nehru's sweeping vision of history, and remained wary of the world. This phenomenon is hardly unique to India. It took 20 years for the United States to begin to emerge from its own Vietnam Syndrome. In the streets of Karachi and the

Canned juice & mad cows