

Shyam Sunder
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Beyond the China Syndrome

In this fifth year of liberalization, the light of hope and confidence shines again on India. She builds her future through hard work and determination. She engages the world in friendship and in commerce and trade for mutual benefit. Once again, she 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 self-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-pheris at Gandhi's birthday, and the speeches and sweets on Republic Day, was not confined to the children alone.

It 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 Washington for help. The shock and humiliation killed Jawaharlal Nehru. Indians felt betrayed by the world and by their own government. We closed our doors and windows, 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 nationalization 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 rationalizations of India's economic failure--Japan recovered so well from post-War destruction because they 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 her Syndrome. Anything that could not be rationalized 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. Shatranj ke Khilari in Delhi remained obsessed with the domestic game of dividing a stagnant 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 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's sweeping vision of history, and remained wary of the world. This phenomenon is hardly unique to India. It took twenty years for U.S. to begin to emerge from her own Vietnam Syndrome. In the streets of Karachi and valleys 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 her military defeat.

China Syndrome drew curtains on an era that began on January 26, 1931 with Jawaharlal'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 modernize Indian economy and society. They infused India with a sense of pride and optimism and raised the spirits of her poor masses. Jawaharlal 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 Awadi Resolution on industrial policy planted the vine of license raj that spread during the Syndrome years to grip the Indian tiger in its tentacles.

Another generation earlier, Gokhale, Tilak and Gandhi struggled mightily in the first three decades of this century to modernize the semi-

feudal of the nineteenth century India. From a society riven by myriads of divisions and barriers, they forged a single national identity. In 1931, Nehru could demand that this nation become an independent republic.

India shaped her national identity in the first thirty years of this century, she 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, she is set to resume her 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. She 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.

Shyam Sunder is Richard M. Cyert Professor of Management and Economics at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA.