The 1962 war and after

Time to get on

By Shyam Sunder

As India returns to the polls amid political controversy, is this fifth year of economic liberalisation, the fight of hope and confidence shows 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, the country's 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 parade, the grandiose 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 a time for a reality check. The world did not think of India as the good guys, as we had been led to believe. Egypt, Indonesia and Sri Lanka did not trust China for attacking India as we had expected them to do. Hindi Chiti were not exactly Dhal-Bhal, and armed forces were not a dispensable luxury. As soldiers were rushed to shiver in their shirt sleeves at poorly defended Himalayan passes, we hesitantly discovered we had few friends in the world. Politicians fed people on a diet of euphemisms, even as they began for help. The shock and humiliation of beaten Nehru, Indians felt betrayed by and by their own government. We closed our doors and windows, retrenched into sullen seclusion to search for self-sufficiency and entered the denail phase of the Chinese Syndrome began.

A generation later, as we leave our Chinese 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, firmness and government, and a desire for direct control of everything. Obsession with control led to nationalisation of banks and eliminated declaration of the state of emergency in 1975. Politicians and bureaucrats closed themselves off, cut off from new ideas and secure from independent scrutiny. Stunted by the shame, 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 Burkeian rationalisation of India's economic failure in Japan recovered so well from the post-war destruction because it had industry before the war.

Social and economic injustices still challenge India. It can tackle them by rapidly developing its economy and human resources. After all, society's wealth consists of the skills of its people, not the gold in its vaults.

Canned juice & mad cows