The 1962 war and after

Time to get on
By Shyam Sunder

As India returns to the polls amid political controversy, in this fifth year of economic liberalisation, the flight 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. Childhood growing up, the Indian independence saw a bright and prosperous future. Poverty hardly distributed its 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 prabha phores on Gandhi's birthday, and the speaches and ands 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 stand behind India as we had expected them to do. Hindi Chhiti were not exactly bhish-land, and armed forces were not a dispensable luxury. As soldiers were rushing to dioloner 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 beg for help. The shock and humiliated Nehru. Indians felt betrayed by and by their own government. We closed our doors and windows, retreating into suffused sections to search for self-sufficiency and entered the denial phase of the Chinese war.

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 in government, and divided counsel of everyone. Obsession with control led to nationalisation of banks and in denialism in the declaration of the state of emergency in 1975. Politicians and bureaucrats cloistered 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 the utopian rationalisations of India's economic failure. Japan recovered well from the post-war destruction because it had industry before the war.

Taiwan and Korea did well only because they were deterministic: 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-hierarchical machinery, could see the contradiction, but could not shake India out of its syndrome. Anything that could not be regionalised was simply ignored. India's frustrated legions of talent opened up at Palam and Sathar for the nighttune 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 metal leaving the country at the departure gates. Starving in Allahabad, India remained obsessed with the domestic game of dividing a stagnate 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's of India and Rajiv Gandhi restored 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 valley of Kashmir, Pakistan remains mired in the aftermath of Bangladesh. The spirit of a whole generation is lost when a native refuses to die and face up to its military defeat.

The China Syndrome drew curtales on an era that began on January 26, 1911, with Nehru's stirring call to India on the banks of River, to seek complete independence from the British rule. His generation led the independence struggle and built a vision of India a place in the world. They defeated aberrant forces, and introduced science and technology to modernise Indian economy and society. They propelled India with sense of pride and optimism and poured the spirit of its poor masses. Nehru brought the notion of Asia, Africa and South America together to build 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 1962 Awal Revolution 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, Thiru Godh乡村 and Gandhi struggled mightily in the first three decades of this century to modernise the semi-feudal 19th century India. From a society given by prayers of divisions and barriers, they forged a single national identity. But in 1951, Nehru could demand that this nation become an independent republic.

India shaped its national identity in the first 39 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 sentences. In spite of efforts of Gandhi, Nehru's generation, divisions and fragmentation with social and economic injustices still challenge India. It can shatter 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 his or her potential, India may yet start the next millennium as if there had been no China Syndrome at all.

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Canned juice & mad cows