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On a different track

Abhijit Banerjee October 05, 2010

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Jagat Mehta, one of the most morally and intellectually engaged human beings I have had the privilege to know, has just published his memoirs. He calls it The Tryst Betrayed. The reference, obviously, is to Jawaharlal Nehru's famous midnight pronouncement. Yet this is by no means an anti-Nehru book — quite the reverse. Jagatsaheb, as most people call him, was in the first batch of the Indian Foreign Service, hand-picked by Nehru, who was also our first foreign minister. Like many civil servants of that generation, he adored Nehru. And reading the book makes it clear that for Nehru as well, Jagatsaheb was special: he was the only foreign service officer to accompany Nehru on his election campaigns in 1957; the only one to ride horse-back to Bhutan with him and Ms Gandhi too (there were no roads then).

It's also not an anti-India book. Jagatsaheb recognises India's achievements as a democracy and, in more recent years, as an economy. If he titled the closing chapter of his book 'Why has India underperformed', it's because he has such lofty hopes for us. As the nation of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, he believes we should aim higher — a more democratic economy, a more profound democracy, a more moral foreign policy.

One could argue that this is being too idealistic, but one thesis of the book is precisely that we have often run into problems by not being idealistic enough. Jagatsaheb's most-telling example is our relation with our smaller neighbours — Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The book is full of instances where we found it difficult to resist the urge to bully them, even though in the long run this only undermined our interests. Farakka Barrage, for example, was more or less explicitly imposed on Bangladesh, despite the fact that the Bangladeshis saw this as a tax on their nation's lifeblood. The Farakka waters did little to 'flush' the silt out of Hooghly, certainly not enough to save the Kolkata port. In the end, we just made sure that a lot of useable water ended up in the Bay of Bengal, and earned the enduring hostility of a large proportion of the Bangladeshi population.

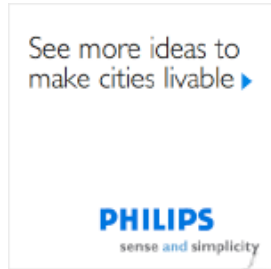
Our reluctance to allow Nepal free transit for its exports and imports — even though unrestricted transit is a widely-respected right of landlocked sovereign nations — made us many enemies in Nepal. This is one reason why we haven't yet been able to negotiate with Nepal on building dams on the rivers originating in the Nepalese Himalayas. These dams would generate electricity that we desperately need and slow down the rivers that are the source of so much erosion in the Nepalese Himalayas and annual floods in the north Bihar plains. The reason they never get built in part is that the Nepalese don't trust us enough to be willing to enter an agreement where we are monopoly buyers of the power that they have to sell.

Afghanistan is another example. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, we chose not to complain, at the cost of abandoning our commitment to non-alignment, and our long-term alliance with the Afghan people, in order to show the Soviets that we were with them. Jagatsaheb, who was foreign secretary at that time, feels that the Soviets would have understood if we had chosen to stand by our principles, and argues that this decision drove the Afghans into the willing arms of the Pakistanis, and thereby contributed directly to the Afghan involvement in the Kargil war and beyond. Had we stuck to our principles in 1979, the book speculates, 9/11 might never have happened.

There is, however, another sense in which we were not idealistic enough. We idolised Nehru but lacked faith in what he stood for — rationalism, intellectual engagement, being open to ideas. We didn't challenge him enough when he was wrong; instead, even the professionals who were supposed to be his source of information and advice convinced themselves that "Panditji knows best".

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This is what led to the fatal misunderstanding about China's intentions in 1962. Panditji misread the signals that Chinese were sending us ever since the Tibet issue arose, and no one dared to tell him otherwise.

But it had much wider consequences. As Jagatsaheb put it: "Panditji was the greatest democratic dictator in history, but twelve years of his Prime Ministership were largely wasted." We failed to make use of his charisma, his enthusiasm, his ability to inspire, to achieve social goals that would otherwise have been difficult. Because delivering basic health and education weren't Nehru's priorities — he was entirely in favour, but seemingly hadn't grasped the sheer magnitude of the challenge of universalising quality education and healthcare in a vast and multifariously divided country like ours — and his advisers and colleagues did not force him to rethink, we still remain tragically backward in those areas. We celebrate Nehru's birthday as Children's Day, but it was the children's tryst that was most egregiously betrayed.

Jagatsaheb remains optimistic. He thinks "we can retrieve our standing", by returning to the legacy of idealism that we inherited from Gandhi and Nehru. He insists that idealism does need to be naïve — it's about holding ourselves to a standard that we hope but don't expect of others. That is certainly how he lives his own life.

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