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INDIA: Beyond the Sea Wall Chronic neglect and Australia-India relations

Hamish McDonald

In 1955, the future novelist Christopher Koch and his travelling companions took an impulsive decision to disembark in Colombo from the passenger liner that was taking them on the post-graduation rite of passage for young Australians, a spell in Britain with forays into continental Europe.

Together with a young Sikh they met on board, they set off on a long journey by ferry and rail the length of India that was to last months. It was regarded as “madness” by their fellow passengers, Koch recalled. “Their faces, staring down from the rail, wore expressions of doubt and concern: I think they believed India would literally swallow us up.”

Ten years later, the experience in India and earlier on port-calls in Java was transformed into Koch’s novel *Across the Sea Wall*. A further two decades on, in his essay “Crossing the Gap” published in 1987, Koch further distilled his encounters with India, Java and Hinduism into a sense of shared duality about Europe and Asia. “...I concluded that Australia and India, in at least one way, might be akin in spirit. Australians might well become the Hindus of the south.”

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A half-century after Koch's impulse, another Australian writer, Christopher Kremmer, embarked on an exploration of Hinduism. Eventually he is asked by a mahant (holy man) in Varanasi whether he has decided to become Hindu. "I think I am a Hindu," Kremmer replied. "Always have been. No need to become one." The following morning, he takes his first ritual dip in the Ganges. "It felt good to be home, good to be free. I would be keeping the name my parents gave me, the wisdom of India's sages, a healthy scepticism, and the secret of how a polluted river can make you clean, grinding it all down until it resembled something I could call my own."

For their part, Indian writers have so far seen little spiritual to explore in Australia, not even in the Aboriginal mythology and cave-art that might have pre-historic kinship or affinities. For example, the novelist Salman Rushdie's visit to northern Australia, accompanying his friend Bruce Chatwin on the research for *The Songlines*, resulted in a wry travel narrative focussed on unreflective White Australians in the Outback.

The 95,000 Indians who enrolled in Australian universities and colleges in 2008 came for the most part for explicitly vocational courses, many in business or information technology. The 235,000 settlers of Indian origin are merged into the predominant urban life-style of Australia as professionals, entrepreneurs, executives, bureaucrats and small businessmen, with their creative element tending to be drawn back to India.

This is natural enough, given Australia's overwhelming materialism and the slowness with which any mythology of the land is emerging among its non-indigenous people. But it does help explain, also, the sense of unrequitedness that periodically emerges in Australian studies of that amorphous thing, the relationship between the two nations.

Commentators and newly-elected governments regularly discover a "neglected" relationship, and in the usual reversion to cricket metaphors, talk of "dropped catches" in the games of diplomacy and trade. "The rhythm of Australia's dealings with India is a constant series of rediscoveries, matched by regular disjunctions and disappointments," noted the ABC's Graeme Dobell, on the eve of a prime ministerial visit, by John Howard in 2006, aimed at picking up the ball again.

The sense of closeness has certainly waxed and waned with the affinity between Indian and Australian leaders of the day.

There was cordiality around the time of India's independence from British rule in 1947. An Australian, Richard Casey, had been appointed governor of Bengal in early 1944; together with a new viceroy in New Delhi, he had alleviated the notorious famine caused by the neglect of their predecessors and shown a new openness to contact across racial lines.

The Australian Labor Party government had reached out to the new Indian government, with prime minister Ben Chifley and foreign minister Herbert Evatt getting on well with Indian prime minister Jawarharlal Nehru, a relationship that no doubt played a part in Nehru's decision to keep India in the new Commonwealth that was replacing the British empire.

By the time Koch made his trip in 1955, things were cooling. The prime minister elected in 1949 at the head of a conservative coalition, Robert Menzies, felt India had been unready for independence, was showing its immaturity in its openness to the Communist countries and its role in the emerging Non-Aligned Movement. Pakistan – anti-communist, pro-American – seemed a more reliable prospect.

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Australia has bigger merchandise trade flows with some much smaller Southeast Asian nations: \$11.5 billion with Malaysia, nearly \$13.5 billion with Thailand, and \$19 billion with Singapore in the same year. Clearly there is much potential for growth as India opens its economy further, and Australian enterprises pay more attention to this market.

Sentiment reached a low point in 1960 when Nehru took the podium in the United Nations to tear apart a draft resolution on the Cold War sponsored by Australia. Menzies sat in the General Assembly seething, later writing to his wife about Nehru's speech: "All the primitive came out in him."

There was a bounceback in 1962 after China's surprise attacks across the Himalayan border, when Australia along with the big Western powers took India's side. But this was dissipated by developments in subsequent years, notably the Indo-Soviet agreement of 1971 that gave India preferred access to modern Soviet arms. A new Labor prime minister, Gough Whitlam, sought to rebuild relations with the democratic India, now led by Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, to balance his new ties with China, but again misgivings set in over India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" in 1974 and Indira's suspension of democracy under her Emergency rule declared in 1975.

Whitlam's conservative successor, Malcolm Fraser, found an unlikely fellow soul in Indira's replacement after the restoration of democracy, Moraji Desai, visiting India three times as prime minister. So did the next Labor prime minister, Bob Hawke, with Rajiv Gandhi, who became India's prime minister after his mother's assassination in 1984.

Rajiv's visit to Australia in 1986, the most recent by an Indian prime minister, was marked by effusive oratory, and several concrete steps through the remainder of Labor's 13-year rule under Hawke and then Paul Keating. A modern open-cut coal mine at Piparwar, Bihar, was opened by Australia's White Industries, with Australia providing 40 percent of the A\$500 million funding. A new Australia-India Council and a National Centre for South Asian Studies were set up in 1992.

The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union over 1989–92, plus a balance of payments crisis in India in 1990–91, lessened Australian concerns about the ambitious naval expansion India had sketched out in the mid-1980s – a concern used by Australia's navy to clinch a decision on its A\$6 billion acquisition of new submarines.

Then India's economic reforms from mid-1991 signalled a decisive turn from the autarchic development policies begun under Nehru, and a new openness to trade and foreign investment. As Meg Gurry asked, was this the "end of neglect"? A study by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's economic unit in 1994, *India's Economy at the Midnight Hour*, set new utilitarian agenda for the relationship. Keating, by then prime minister, was focussed more on East Asia and didn't visit India during his three years in office, but his government launched a multi-million dollar trade and cultural expo in India, titled *New Horizons*.

When it was held, in December 1996, Keating's conservative successor, John Howard, did not attend. In 1997, his government's first Foreign Affairs White Paper did not rank India as one of the states that "most substantially engage Australia". Later that year, Australia took a leading role against India's application to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, supporting the 10-year moratorium on new members. It was back to neglect.

When a new Indian government led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party carried out overt nuclear tests in May 1998, Howard called them "outrageous acts" in search of a "grotesque status symbol" and imposed sanctions that included cutting all military-to-military ties, even hauling an Indian officer out of a defence college classroom in Canberra. "Australia's response to India's nuclear tests is the most abrasive of all the responses at

the international level,” noted the Jawarharlal Nehru University’s Professor Man Mohini Kaul.

The pendulum swung back quickly with Howard visiting India and dropping sanctions in 2000, and again visiting in 2006. By 2005, it was India that was facilitating Australia’s entry to a regional forum. Its admission to the East Asian Summit (initially grouping the 10 ASEAN nations with China, Japan and South Korea) made it easier for Australia and New Zealand to get in. Canberra is now explicitly in favour of India’s admission to APEC when the new membership moratorium is lifted in 2010. This contact may even out the “fits and starts” of the relationship. As Meg Gurry observed in her 1996 study, it needs a multilateral, regional setting: “Leadership affinity and unilateral diplomatic initiatives are not enough.”

But the relationship today can no longer be described as neglected, though it is far from full potential. Indians represent the second largest body of foreign students in Australia with 17.8 percent of the total in 2008 (behind Chinese students, 23.4 percent), and were by far the fastest growing source of international enrolments, up 54 percent in number on the previous year. The Indian community is the ninth largest minority community in Australia. Indian books, film, home decoration, and food have a widening popularity.

India became Australia’s 11th largest partner in merchandise trade in the year ended June 2008, with two-way trade nearly A\$11 billion, of which 85 percent were Australian exports. Likewise trade in services was heavily weighted in Australia’s favour, with about \$2.5 billion earned from India, mostly in education, and India selling \$488 million in IT and other services.

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But to put this in perspective, Australia has bigger merchandise trade flows with some much smaller Southeast Asian nations: \$11.5 billion with Malaysia, nearly \$13.5 billion with Thailand, and \$19 billion with Singapore in the same year. All of these countries, along with Indonesia, were much more successful in selling services to Australia than India. Clearly there is much potential for growth as India opens its economy further, and Australian enterprises pay more attention to this market. In August 2007 it was agreed to study a bilateral free trade agreement, which should be completed this year.

Investment is more evenly balanced, but still at modest levels in manufacturing, IT, car components, mining, metal processing, agribusiness and tourism. The biggest Australian investment in India had been through the ANZ Bank’s acquisition of the British bank Grindlays in 1984, which gave it at one time the biggest retail presence in India of any foreign bank, with 56 branches. Heavy liabilities from a bond-market dispute and a protracted legal dispute led to ANZ selling out off the Grindlays assets in 2000. The exercise is not mentioned much in Australian banking circles, but has left a lingering impression among many influential Indians that Australian business lacks “staying power”.

At government level, Labor’s Kevin Rudd, elected in November 2007, has set out to reverse what he labels as the “neglect” of the previous Howard era. Like Whitlam, India became valuable insurance against any perceived tilt to China. “It is absolutely essential in the course of this century that Australia takes its relationship with India to a new level, that we take our relationship with India to the front line of our international partnerships,” declared his foreign minister, Stephen Smith, in 2008.

“..That period of fits and starts is over. Australia’s past approach to India has been like a 20/20 cricket match: short bursts of enthusiasm followed by lengthy periods of inactivity.”

A visit by India’s external affairs minister, Pranab Mukherjee, came amid a flurry of ministerial visits, and agreements covering defence cooperation, air services, customs, terrorism, and scientific research. Still, there are expressions of unfulfilled partnership, at least on the Australian side. “The complementarity between our countries rests on much more than the English language, cricket, hockey and burgeoning economic, educational and scientific linkages,” Smith said. “That complementarity rests on profound values and virtues we have in common, including democracy, pluralism and the rule of law. They include our shared wish to play constructive roles in regional and world affairs.”

Yet the perception of equivocation is not entirely on the Australian side. In India, there is a view that Australia is not its own man in foreign policy, that it follows the American lead in its relationships. This was compounded by the coincidence that both of John Howard’s official visits to New Delhi followed closely on those of American presidents, in 2000 after Bill Clinton and in 2006 after George Bush, and that on both occasions, Canberra’s decisions – to forgive the 1998 nuclear tests and later to endorse civil nuclear programs with India – also followed similar steps by the United States.

If, as Howard’s foreign minister Alexander Downer recently claimed in opposition, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs tends to dismiss Australia as a significant independent regional player, his government hardly acted to dispel such thinking.

That no Indian prime minister has visited Australia in 23 years is a sad reflection on Canberra’s oft-repeated claim under both Labor and Coalition governments to be a fountainhead of expertise and sound policy formation about the emerging powers of Asia. Partly it reflects the domestic preoccupations of India’s fragile coalition governments since the mid-1990s, all under much older and less vigorous prime ministers than Rajiv Gandhi. But it shows that Canberra must work harder than the periodic flutters of attention around prime ministerial visits (two by Howard in 11 years), and business must take a longer view than shown in the ANZ Grindlays case, to convince Indian leaders that Australia has something to offer.

Indian patience will eventually run out too if the Rudd Government remains caught in a policy dilemma of its own making on nuclear issues. Support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty has acquired totemic status in Labor policy. Yet it has become anachronistic with the American acceptance of India’s weapon status, domestic pressure in Australia to lift the ban on uranium trade (with NPT-like safeguards), and nuclear energy’s new environmental credentials in the era of global warming. The Labor policy can only grow as an obstacle to closer relations as India brings more nuclear power plants on line in coming years.

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Australia's peak intelligence body, the Office of National Assessments, is said to be struggling to build its analytical expertise on India. Australian diplomats are learning about India after they arrive in their postings. This can only get worse if the current woeful state of Indian studies in Australian universities is not reversed.

Rudd and Smith have bought time by supporting an opening of civil nuclear exchanges with India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, while maintaining the uranium export ban. It will be some years before India has the new reactors that might need uranium imports, but eventually something will have to give – either Australia by changing its policy, or the NPT signatories by agreeing to admit India as a weapons state. The return of Manmohan Singh's Congress government in May 2009, with a bigger electoral mandate enabling it to dispense with parliamentary support from the Left, brings this moment of decision closer.

Canberra also has to think through the rise of Indian strategic power, especially now that former budgetary constraints on the Indian defence forces are slipping. Rudd has explicitly rejected the idea of drawing India into a strategic alignment of democracies with the United States, Japan and Australia – an idea with antecedents promoted by Canberra and Washington after the 1962 border war, and briefly pushed by former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2006–07 – on the grounds it could be self-fulfilling in creating a belligerent China.

Yet as India builds its capacity to project power, through acquisition of new aircraft carriers and missile-carrying submarines, the need to understand its defence doctrines, its foreign policy formulation, its interaction with other powers to the East and West, will become more pressing.

At present Australia's peak intelligence body, the Office of National Assessments, is said to be struggling to build its analytical expertise on India. Australian diplomats are learning about India after they arrive in their postings. The arrest of the Indian doctor Mohammed Haneef in 2007 exposed the tenuous ability of the Australian Federal Police to handle interviews in Hindi or Urdu, surely a necessary expertise in the anti-terrorism field.

This can only get worse if the current woeful state of Indian studies in Australian universities is not reversed. With an ageing faculty either retiring or being lured off to Singapore's new Indian centre, the only offerings are modern Indian history at the University of NSW and fully-taught Hindi and Sanskrit at ANU. Twenty years ago, in 1989, the Ingleson Report into the state of Asian Studies found that 15 out of Australia's then 19 universities offered intensive teaching on South Asian topics, notes Kama Maclean, who teaches the UNSW course. "At that time, Australia was a place in which research on Indian history had attained international attention, much of the early work of the Subaltern Studies collective was based at Australian National University, in Canberra, and researchers such as A. L. Basham, Ravinder Kumar, D. A. Low, Robin Moore, Robin Jeffrey, Tom Weber and Peter Reeves achieved global recognition for their scholarship."

Cricket and Commonwealth have always been the fallback. But the controversy in January 2008, when the Indian cricket tour was put in doubt over the alleged “racist” comments of Indian player Harbhajan Singh, suggests a new competitive nationalism is pushing out the “gentlemanly”, elite aspect of the game, and that Australia is yet to appreciate the power of India’s new media mass audience.

This point was re-emphasised in May 2009 when a spate of assaults and robberies against Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney set off a mass media frenzy in India about “racist” Australia. What seemed an entirely positive trend – the rapid growth of Indian student numbers – was shown to have an underside of exploitation by fee-collecting institutions and unscrupulous employers, indifference by police, and possibly some envy of foreign students by less advantaged local youth. It pointed in particular to a wider concept of pastoral care being needed among authorities towards foreign students. Indians, being the most articulate and versed in democratic protest, turned out to be the ones least likely to lie down and take abuse or neglect.

More widely, it showed again that India is changing much faster than Australian institutions are presently equipped to assess. The “sea wall” and the “gap” in Koch’s titles referred to more than the ocean between Australia and Asia. Rather than equipping ourselves to embark across the seas of ignorance, we’ve recently been burning our boats

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