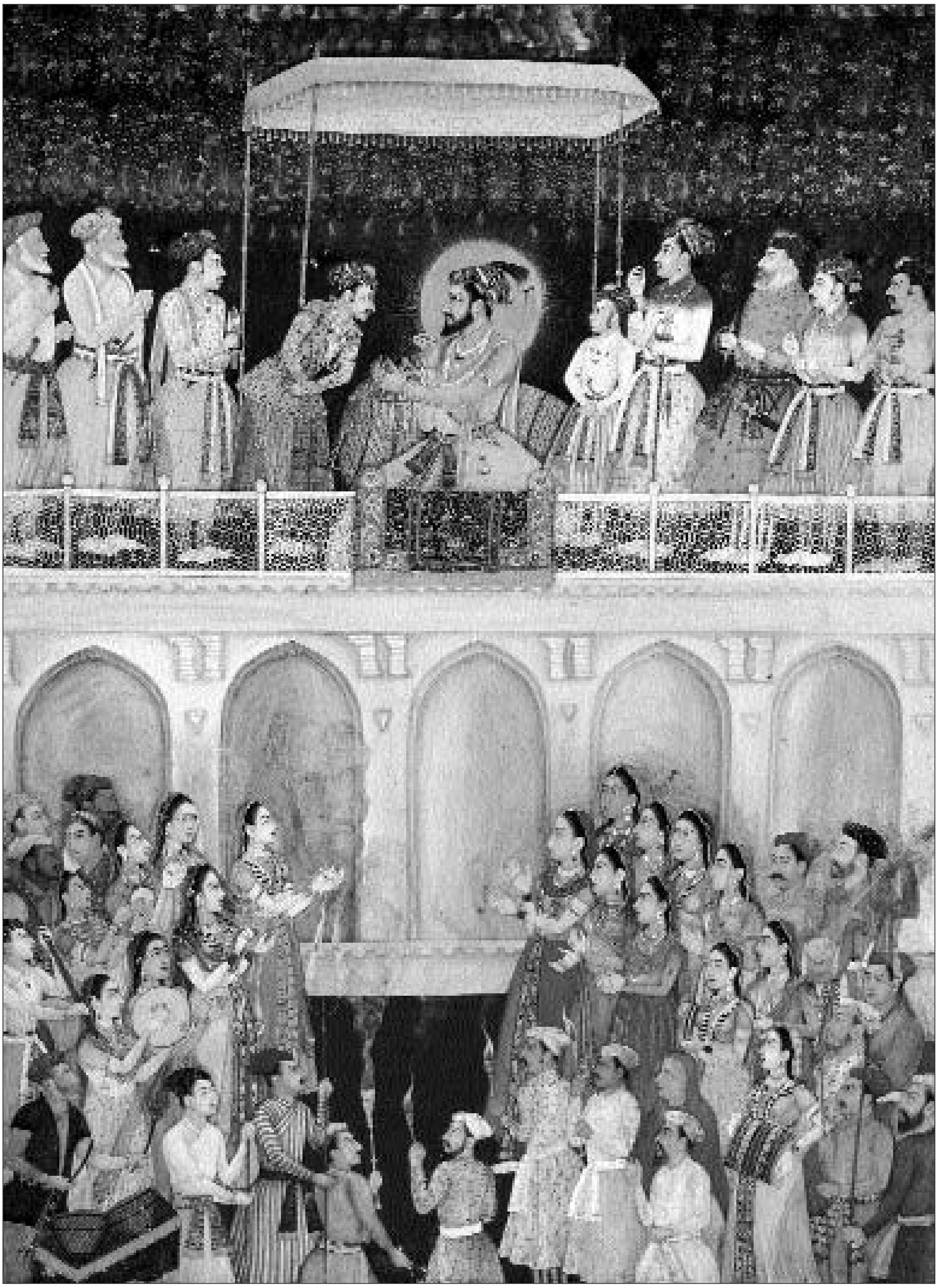
India Rising

In the wake of dramatic nuclear tests, quickening economic growth, and a highly publicized American presidential visit, India seems ready to take its place among the world's leading nations. But for that to happen, India will need to act like a major power, and the United States will need to recognize how much India has changed.

by Stephen P. Cohen

Since its birth as a nation more than 50 years ago, India has seemed poised on the edge of two very different futures. On one side lay greatness; on the other, collapse. That drama has now ended and a new one has begun. The specter of collapse has passed and India is emerging as a major Asian power, joining China and Japan. The 1998 nuclear tests in the Rajasthan desert that announced India's entry into the nuclear club only served to underscore the nation's new stature. India has begun economic reforms that promise at last to realize its vast economic potential. It possesses the world's third largest army. It occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Its population, which crossed the one billion mark this year, may surpass China's within two decades. It is the site of one of the world's oldest civilizations, a powerful influence throughout Asia for thousands of years, and for the last 53 years, against all odds, it has maintained a functioning democracy.

For most of those 53 years, the United States and India have maintained a strained relationship—a relationship that has not been helped by years of American neglect and misunderstanding. Now there are signs of change. Despite the administration's anger over India's nuclear tests, Bill Clinton in March became the first American president to visit the subcontinent in more than two decades. Addressing the Indian Parliament, he acknowledged the richness of Indian civilization, noted the country's economic and scientific progress, and praised its



Ironically, India's greatness and unity traces in part to the Mughal Empire (1526–1761), ruled by Muslim emperors who put all religions on an equal footing. It stretched almost as far south as Mumbai. Here, Emperor Shah-Jahan bestows favors on a prince in 1628.

adherence to democratic norms. "India is a leader," Clinton said, "a great nation, which by virtue of its size, its achievements, and its example, has the ability to shape the character of our time." Yet he tactfully noted areas of American concern and expressed alarm about Kashmir, India's relations with Pakistan, and nuclear proliferation. Speaking less guardedly before his visit, he had called the Indian subcontinent "perhaps the most dangerous place in the world."

Before winning independence in 1947, India was the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, an important military resource in a location of great geostrategic significance. But the Cold War diminished India's importance. Because it did not play a significant role in the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the Western alliance, the superpowers often took India for granted. At most, the two sides saw India as a potential counter to the People's Republic of China on the international chessboard—but only one of several.

American and Indian interests in China did briefly run along parallel lines. In the late 1950s, when the United States tried to weaken the Chinese hold on Tibet, the Indians provided a refuge for the Dalai Lama. When the short India-China war broke out in 1962 over what remains one of the world's longest contested borders, Washington sent a military mission to India and supplied the country with small arms and a defensive radar system. This was a period of intense cooperation, with joint military exercises, U.S. military assistance, and U.S. help in setting up India's foreign intelligence service. President John F. Kennedy saw the competition between India and China as a struggle between the world's largest democracy and communism for the future of all of Asia; he continued the shift toward India that had begun in the last years of the Eisenhower administration. Kennedy praised the "soaring idealism" of Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister from 1947 to 1964 (although his contacts with Nehru were to prove disillusioning). Some in Washington even argued that India should be encouraged to develop its own nuclear weapons program.

But India's long-simmering dispute with Pakistan (an American ally) over Kashmir kept the relationship from developing further, especially after the Sino-Indian clash ended. As the United States became increasingly entangled in Vietnam during the 1960s, interest in South Asia faded. The final break occurred after President Richard M. Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. With China enlisted against the Soviets, India seemed irrelevant. This U.S. "tilt" toward China remains a major source of Indian anti-Americanism.

On the American side, India increasingly came to be seen as a de facto ally of Moscow. After 1971, the Soviet Union stepped in to forge an alliance with India, but it too sought to use Delhi against the Chinese. Over the years, the Soviets gave India billions of dollars worth of modern warplanes, tanks, and ships, and even loaned a nuclear submarine. At the United Nations, the Soviet Union and India were close partners; in 1970, the two powers signed a 25-year treaty of peace and friendship.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 reawakened American interest in South Asia, but in reviving its alliance with

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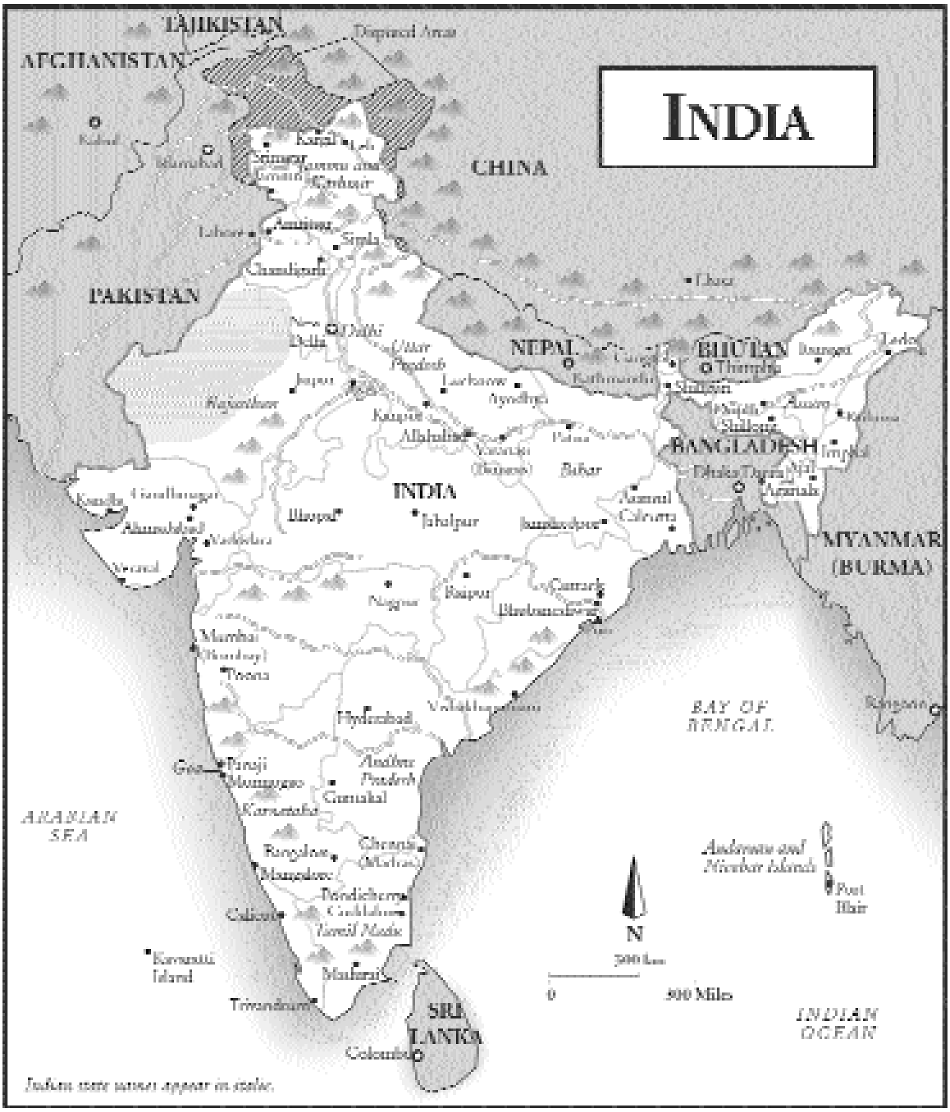
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Hyderabad
Visakhapatnam
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INDIAN OCEAN
Indian state names appear in italic.

India boasts a population of one billion and a host of outsized cities (Mumbai's population exceeds 15 million), but more than 70 percent of its people still live in rural areas.

Pakistan, the United States only further alienated India. More recently, the Clinton administration pressured India to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—which had the unintended consequence of strengthening the bomb lobby in Delhi.

In May 1998, India tested five nuclear devices. Pakistan promptly responded with its own nuclear tests. The United States reacted by imposing economic and political sanctions on Delhi. As if that weren't enough turmoil, India has had three national elections in three years, with the current government, led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), being the country's third coalition government. Events took an alarming turn in the summer of 1999, when India clashed with Pakistan in the Kargil district of Kashmir, raising fears that the war would escalate into a nuclear conflict. A few months later Pakistan's civilian government fell to a military coup, and in December 1999 Indians were unnerved by the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight by Islamic extremists.

In the United States, India's nuclear tests and the events that followed have led to a certain amount of finger pointing in foreign policy circles, but the failure of American policy goes deeper than yesterday's decisions. For most of the last 50 years, America has had a hard time "getting India right." Americans have consistently failed to understand the reasons for Indian behavior—and more often failed even to try. Whether or not India joins the ranks of major powers, and whether or not it pursues policies that are hostile to American interests, the United States will need to gain a deeper understanding of the subcontinent. That will require relinquishing a number of stereotypes that have long governed the American view of India.

India is virtually synonymous with poverty in the Western mind, and poverty will remain both a moral and a practical problem and a political embarrassment to any Indian government. More than half of the world's poorest people live in India, mostly in the rural north and east. Calcutta, the epicenter of this ocean of grief, has long been a universal metaphor for absolute poverty. The poorest 10 percent of the Indian population (more than 100 million people) earn slightly less than $1 a day, and 35 percent of all Indians—approximately 300 million people—fall below the government's own poverty line.

In the south and the west, however, many Indians are enjoying unprecedented economic growth. These are the regions, with a population much larger than that of either Indonesia or the United States, that have seen more thoroughgoing land reform. Along the coast, there is a long tradition of trade and contact with other countries. Major cities such as Hyderabad, Chennai, and Bangalore appear to be on their way to becoming world-class high-technology centers, attracting investment from dozens of American, Japanese, and Southeast Asian firms. India's 1998 gross national product of $420 billion was the world's 11th largest, and its annual growth rate exceeds five percent. (Gauged in terms of purchasing power parity, an alternative measure, India has the world's fifth largest economy, behind those of the United States, China, Japan, and Germany.)

India had a late start on economic reform. The Congress Party, which ruled India from 1947 to 1978 under Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, was deeply influenced by British Fabian socialism. The country's "top-down" approach to economic planning paralleled a political system dominated by the upper castes. The castes and classes involved in business and commerce were held in low esteem in much of the country. Such traditions are now fading fast. In 1991, Congress Party Prime Minister Narasimha Rao began a program of economic

In a rare moment of optimism around the time of Partition in 1947, Hindus and Muslims flew the flags of the emerging Pakistan (left) and India in the streets of Calcutta.

liberalization, including industry deregulation, privatization of state monopolies, and easing of foreign investment rules. There is still a danger that unbalanced growth will exacerbate economic tensions within Indian society, but the old Fabian shibboleths about the need for slow, state-led growth have been shed.

The transition to a more market-oriented economy accelerated after the BJP came to power last year. Even though elements of the party are opposed to the internationalization of the Indian economy (the BJP has the reputation of drawing key support from the small shopkeepers of India), the more liberal leadership at its top has systematically moved ahead with reform. The notorious system of quotas and import licenses for machinery and consumer goods has been dismantled. Foreign ownership of Indian firms is now possible, and international brands including Pepsi, Coca-Cola, IBM, Sony, and Phillips have entered the Indian marketplace, giving consumers a much wider range of choice. India offers overseas firms a unique asset: the talents of an educated, highly trained, English-speaking elite. (Most of the 100 million members of the middle class speak at least some English.)

Foreign trade is growing smartly, more in services than in the traditional manufacturing sector. The nascent Indian software industry is spreading from its Bangalore and Hyderabad base and finding new customers abroad, especially in the United States. Software exports have been growing at an annual rate of 50 percent. Foreign firms trying to do business in India still complain about red tape and protectionism, but they see the country as a $100 billion market, especially in infrastructure sectors such as electrical power generation and roads. The foreigners are learning the ropes; India's much-maligned bureaucracy has even earned praise from business leaders for providing stability and balance during a decade of political turmoil.

During the past 15 years, American perceptions have also been clouded by the revival of the old image of India as a violent, unstable country. Two prime ministers have been assassinated—Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards, and her son, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 by a suicide bomber sent by the insurgent Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers. Graphic television coverage has thrown a spotlight on caste and religious riots, which reached a peak with the destruction in December 1992 of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, by saffron-clad Hindu fanatics. The incident sparked Hindu-Muslim riots throughout India that left some 2,000 dead. Limited but highly publicized subsequent attacks on Indian Christians and foreign missionaries by radical (and unrepentant) Hindu extremists have received wide publicity. Crime is up sharply in Delhi and other Indian cities, especially in the north, and officials admit that more than 200 of India's 534 districts (the basic administrative units of India's 25 states) are affected by insurgency, ethnic conflict, political extremism, or caste conflicts. Increasing population pressures, along with the conflicting demands of 20 different linguistic

The eruption of Hindu violence at Ayodhya in 1992 left a scar on Indian politics.

groups, 50,000 castes, and 500,000 villages all point to the prospect of disintegration.

This turmoil, however, is at least partly an unavoidable manifestation of healthy new forces at work in India. If India used to be easy to govern but hard to change, now it is quick to change and difficult to govern. The old bureaucratic systems have collapsed, and political parties have mushroomed in number and strength by voicing the demands of newly empowered castes and ethnic groups. The results are often messy. And because India has become a major center for Asian television services, images of Indian violence are far more visible to Indians and the rest of the world.

India has endured bloody social violence before, and, if the past is any guide, today's strife does not presage the unraveling of the state. During the 1950s and 1960s, rioters clashed in several states, especially in the south, over language and caste politics. A few states had to be placed under "President's Rule" and were governed directly from Delhi. Many pundits predicted the breakup of India or the paralysis of the state, if not a movement to an authoritarian system. None of these things happened (although Indira Gandhi did impose a 15-month "emergency" rule in the 1970s). Instead, southern states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka became among the most orderly (and prosperous) in the country, in large part because the great caste and language disputes were eventually resolved or negotiated away by new political parties that developed in each of the states. Today these southern states are in the forefront of a transformation of India's federal system, as the central government yields power and influence, especially on economic matters.

The turmoil and transformation owe a great deal to the decline of the long-ruling Indian National Congress Party. By the 1980s, Congress had become a highly centralized party that relied on a strong central leader to manage party affairs from Delhi. The "old" Congress Party had grassroots support, and Nehru tolerated strong state leaders. This system was swept away by Indira Gandhi and her son (and successor) Rajiv after she came to power in 1966. Today, the states are reasserting themselves. While Congress remains one of India's most popular parties, it has lost the support of key regional leaders, many of whom have formed their own state parties, appealing to regional pride and local economic and political interests. Indians have drifted away from the idea of government as *maa-baap*—mother and father.

The decline of the Congress Party has also led to a series of fragile coalition governments in the center since 1989. The BJP, which won only two parliamentary seats in the 1984 election, thereafter embarked on a mass mobilization of voters, built around the themes of Hindu pride, Indian nationalism, and economic reform. Yet the BJP's popular vote barely matches that of Congress, and it is dependent on its

The Hindu Experience in America

In May of 1990 in a suburb of Boston, New England's first traditional Hindu temple was consecrated. Sanctified waters from hundreds of pots that bore the waters of India's Ganges River mingled with those of the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Colorado Rivers, were showered over the temple towers and the divine images within. More than 3,000 Boston-area Hindus cheered, stretching their hands heavenward to catch the blessings of the water.

In the central sanctuary of the temple sits the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. To the right is a shrine housing the image of Vishnu, the transcendent lord and husband of Lakshmi, and to the left is a shrine for the image of Ganesha, the auspicious elephant-headed remover of obstacles. These dark granite images were made in India at Mahabalipuram, south of Madras, and shipped to Boston. After years of makeshift worship—renting halls, setting up tables as altars, and invoking the temporary presence of the Divine in small images—the Hindu immigrant community of New England brought to America the most important immigrants of all: the divine embodiments of the gods. Without visas, green cards, or citizenship papers, Lakshmi, Vishnu, and Ganesha had settled permanently in Massachusetts.

The growth of the Sri Lakshmi Temple is typical of many American Hindu communities in the 35 years since the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. Today there are more than one million residents of Indian origin in the United States. In the 1970s, new Indian immigrants—mostly professionals who settled in the United States early in their careers—began to raise families and realized that their children would have no cultural or religious roots at all unless they planted the seeds.

Consecrating Sri Lakshmi Temple in 1990

These Hindus were engineers and doctors, metallurgists and biochemists, not scholars of religion or temple builders. Few thought of themselves as actively religious, and none would have been involved in building a temple in India.

The Massachusetts temple is one of more than 400 Hindu temples in the United States. Most are located in quarters transformed from other uses and would be quite invisible to the passing eye: a warehouse in Edison, New Jersey; a suburban home in Maryland; a former church in Minneapolis. In the past two decades, however, more than 30 new temples have been built from the ground up, and many more are underway. The first ones were constructed in Pittsburgh and Flushing, Queens in 1977. Within a few years, Hindu temple societies were forming in a dozen American cities. The newly built temples are the most visible markers of the life of immigrant Hindu communities in the U.S. and their public presence as religious communities.

First-generation Hindu immigrants from India are not a homogeneous group; they bring with them many different regional and sectarian traditions. In the United States, they have met in a place that is the home terrain of no one group. The term “diaspora” is often used loosely to describe the dispersal of a religious or ethnic community from its homeland to other parts of the world. The very notion of a diaspora requires a strong sense of homeland, and most Hindus from India have that sense not only culturally as Indians but also religiously as Hindus. But the dispersal of Hindus outside India is considerably more complex than the term might convey, for they were already “dispersed” in the varieties of regional and sectarian traditions that compose Hindu religious life in India. In American cities and towns, the diaspora often brings together people who never had to cooperate on a project in the scattered communities of the homeland.

Temple-centered devotional Hinduism was introduced into the United States by the Krishna consciousness movement, in many ways the most notable Hindu movement that took root in the United States, in the late 1960s. Among the Hindu teachers who first benefited from the new immigration laws was an elderly Bengali, Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta. Arriving nearly penniless in New York in 1965 and chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” in Tompkins Square Park, he opened America’s first Krishna temple in a storefront on Second Avenue. Within five years, there were “Hare Krishna” temples in 30 cities in the United States. When the new immigrants arrived, these Krishna temples were almost the only temples in America, and they soon became the first temple-homes of many new Hindu settlers. In some cities—Chicago, Dallas, Denver, and Philadelphia—Hindu immigrants have continued to participate in the life of these temples, transforming them into multiethnic Hindu communities.

In the 1890s, Americans had the opportunity to hear their first Hindu: Swami Vivekenanda came to the United States in 1893 for the World’s Parliament of Religions and stayed on to travel and lecture, eventually leaving to America its first Hindu institutions: the Vedanta societies in New York and San Francisco.

One hundred years after his visit, the Hindu tradition has taken root in America in ways Swami Vivekenanda could not have imagined. Were he to return to tour the country, perhaps he would not be surprised to find Indian professionals studying Vedanta under the pines in Pennsylvania. But he would be quite surprised to find Bengali summer picnics in Boston, a temple youth choir learning Hindi devotional songs in suburban Maryland, a group singing the Hindi Ramayana in Chicago, a procession of Lord Ganesh through the streets of San Francisco, and the marshals of the Harvard and Radcliffe graduating classes, both American-born Hindus, chanting from the Vedas at the baccalaureate service. All across the United States, a new and somehow “American” Hinduism is coming into being.

—Diana L. Eck

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coalition partners (mostly state-based parties) to continue in office. The present government, elected last year, is likely to remain in power a few more years, but it could fall quickly if its partners were to work out a power-sharing arrangement with the Congress Party. Yet neither Congress nor the BJP will be able to restore the old system of one-party predominance.

Today, the social turmoil that plagued the south 30 years ago afflicts some important northern states, especially the vast farm state of Uttar Pradesh (which would be the world's sixth most populous country if it were independent) and its neighbor, Bihar, once a superbly administered state but now the butt of jokes. (In responding to an offer by the Japanese prime minister to turn Bihar into a Japan in three years, a former chief minister of Bihar is said to have responded that, given three months, he could turn Japan into a Bihar.) These conflicts stem from a vast Indian social revolution, comparable to the civil rights movement in the United States or the antiapartheid campaigns in South Africa, that is the practical working out of the logic of democratic politics embedded in the Indian Constitution.

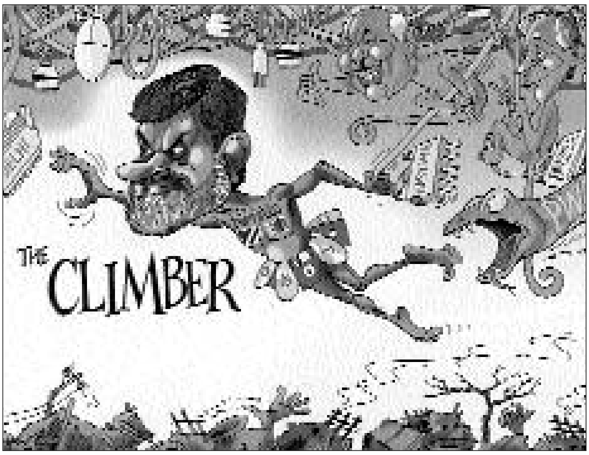
It has taken several generations, but many of India's lowest and poorest castes, including the Dalits (formerly labeled "untouchables"), are turning to the ballot and the street to gain political power. These castes—and poorer Muslims and other non-Hindu groups, including India's large heavily Christian and animist tribal population—have discovered that their one great political advantage in India's democracy is their numbers. They have learned to develop "vote banks" and negotiate with the political parties for their support, election by election, candidate by candidate. But in caste-ridden areas such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and parts of other states, the democratic revolution meets stiff resistance from middle and high castes that are reluctant to share power. Violence is one result.

The social revolutions in the north parallel and sometimes intersect with the nationwide struggle between Hindu nationalists and a variety of other forces, including India's 120 million Muslims, its Christian population, most of the Congress Party, and the vast majority of intellectuals, who are staunch secularists. This battle for the ideological soul of India has been the cause of several major religious riots, turning Hindus against Muslims and, on occasion, Christians.

Yet there are practical limits to these conflicts. India is, overall, a highly accommodating society, and its politicians are skilled at the art of compromise. Historically, Hinduism has absorbed and incorporated outside ideologies and cultures, even as it has helped spawn other faiths, including Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. There is no Hindu church, nor is there agreement on a "standard" Hinduism.

India's caste and class warfare will likely be confined to a few northern states. As for the struggle for a new Indian identity, the BJP does not want to push Muslims (who make up 12 percent of the population) into the arms of the Congress Party or alienate its coalition partners. Moderate elements of the BJP are aware that the extremism of the National Service Society (RSS), and other members of the family of Hindu organizations that provide the party's intellectual and political support could damage India's reputation abroad and hurt the party at the polls. Despite India's difficulties the BJP has been able to conduct a vigorous foreign policy and it has used foreign policy issues to rally the nation. Most recently, it turned the Kargil war into a demonstration of "Indian unity" by celebrating the valor of the Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs who fought under the Indian flag.

India's political system is a complex machine that requires an enormous amount of maintenance, but it functions well enough to satisfy most of its members most of the time. Its national elites—managers of major corporations, leaders of the larger political parties, commanders of the armed forces, and the intellectuals, scientists, and academics of the "chattering classes"—have demonstrated a flexibility that has been absent in other complex, multiethnic, multinational states such as Pakistan, Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet Union. Like a ship with many watertight compartments, it is relatively immune to the kinds of large-scale, extremist, or totalitarian movements that have afflicted more homogeneous states such as China and Cambodia.



Political decentralization is shifting power to state leaders like N. Chandrababu Naidu, the technology-minded chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, home to the city of Hyderabad.

India's growing strength has been amplified by the end of the Cold War. Today the country sits in the middle of a vast band of economic and military power unregulated by any Cold War framework. The Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons tests completed a chain of nuclear-capable states (most of which have strategic missiles) that stretches from Israel to North Korea and includes Iraq, China, Pakistan, and potentially Iran, Taiwan, and South Korea. Many of the states to India's east are economic "tigers" (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan); to the north and west are the Central Asian and Persian Gulf states with their vast reserves of oil and gas.

With its highly professional million-man army, significant naval forces, and a modern air force, India could be a strategic force in the

Asia's Exceptional Nation

In coming decades, Asia—the world's most dynamic but also most restless continent—will be the site of struggles that will decisively alter the distribution of international power. It will also be the arena where the future of democracy outside the West will be decided. Undoubtedly, China will be the mightiest protagonist in this contest for power. But, as President Bill Clinton and Washington policymakers have belatedly realized, India will also be a very significant actor in the game.

U.S. foreign policy as defined by Washington's policy wonks has long been driven by realism and realpolitik. Aside from its fellow big leaguers, the United States has only taken notice of other countries when they become a nuisance or pose a threat. Even the recent efforts, entirely salutary, by American scholars and commentators to focus more attention on India have tended to remain overconcentrated on the peculiarity of those currently in office in New Delhi. The new attentiveness toward India should—and can—rest more firmly on principles.

Since India gained independence from British rule in 1947, its sense of its place in the world has been shaped by a glaring discrepancy. In the distant past, India was a civilizational epicenter: The extensive, diffuse edges of its influence stretched from Bamiyan in Afghanistan to Borabudur in Indonesia. Its strategic location, fabled opulence, and sheer territorial and demographic scale made it an object of desire to colonists; and indeed for the British, it was the jewel in their imperial crown. Yet once independent, the Indian state was unable to translate this historical legacy into anything like a major global presence.

This predicament has motivated two sorts of Indian responses. The first was based on a profound understanding of India's inherent weakness in the international arena, and saw a need to transform this into a strength by trying to change the conventional terms of international debate. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, hoped to do this by applying Mahatma Gandhi's policy of moral one-upmanship in the international domain. It is a common mistake to think of Nehru's foreign policy as pure idealism: in fact it derived from a judgment about the distribution of power among states during the Cold War, and about India's possible role in this system. It secured for India a position outside the orbital pulls of the two superpowers, and set it up as something of a moral champion on issues such as decolonization and disarmament. This policy had some purchase during the 1950s, but was undermined by the Chinese invasion of India in 1962; subsequently, during the 1970s and 80s, it received sporadic and incoherent affirmation.

By the 1990s, this policy had lost its conceptual shape, as well as any rationale, yet no new vision emerged to take its place. At exactly the moment when the global map was undergoing nothing more than glacial shifts, India was caught in the toils of domestic political upheaval. A declining Congress Party gave way to a more complex mix: The rise of movements of Hindu chauvinism and nationalism fronted by their political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), sharp conflicts of interest focused around caste identities, and the beginnings of major economic reform, together altered the language of Indian politics. Still smarting from the humiliation of its disastrous Sri Lanka intervention of 1987–90, India let its external horizons shrink. Inwardness was all.

Throughout the decade, government was by coalition and increasingly fragile. The Hindu nationalist BJP, sensing it could no longer draw electoral profit from the issue that had brought it onto the national stage (the cry to build a temple on the site of a mosque at Ayodhya), began to dabble in international affairs.

The earlier conception had represented an effort to develop an effective policy built around the fact of weakness: Its adherents used ambiguity and equivocation, played great powers against each other, and struck moral poses. This high-minded fudging was now replaced by a more grandiose, not to say bombastic, view of India in the world. What nourished it was not empirical indicators of newfound strength but the resentment that characterizes every arriviste. A few weeks after entering government, in May 1998, the BJP chose to explode a series of nuclear devices—thus forgoing by a single act decades of carefully cultivated ambiguity about nuclearization that had served India well. The BJP wished symbolically to assert India's claim to be recognized as a great power, able to control its own security destiny; more practically and locally, the party wished to strengthen its precarious electoral position.

On both counts, the choices of the BJP-led coalition government failed. India's security now stands in more—not less—jeopardy. The studied and advantageous policy of nuclear ambiguity worked to India's favor; India's tests, and Pakistan's reply, placed both countries on an even footing. India's superiority in conventional weapons is now worthless; as its tactics make clear, Pakistan can engage in regular border skirmishing in the knowledge that India will be most reluctant to allow this to escalate. India, meanwhile—at great cost—will have to deploy more troops along its vast border. Last year's Kargil war illustrated the effects. Although touted as an Indian triumph, it was a severe setback for India's long-term interests. The Kashmir issue has been more internationalized than ever before (a long-standing goal of Pakistan's), with the United States for the first time playing a direct role in restraining Pakistan. Moreover, the war led to the fall of a (no doubt corrupt) civilian government in Islamabad and its replacement by a military government.

One should not therefore think New Delhi's policy choices are currently in the hands of the most farsighted minds. Likewise, it is a mistake to overestimate the legitimacy of the BJP and its policies: Less than a quarter of the electorate voted for the party in 1999. (In fact, its share of the vote was down compared with the 1998 elections, despite the nuclear tests and the Kargil war.) Conversely, one should not underestimate the degree to which the BJP is merely the visible form of a web of esoteric power (something Americans are not very good at comprehending). Behind the BJP lurks a movement organized with military precision and neofascist in its mindset—the National Service Society. (It was men associated with this group who were responsible for Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948.) The movement is dedicated to constructing a militaristic national state, based on a culturally and religiously uniform India that can stand up to the world.

Gauged by conventional international measures—economic power, military might—India is unlikely to achieve anything like great-power status in the foreseeable future. India is moderately powerful across a range of different fields. But there is one fact that does make it exceptional: the scale and depth of its democracy. This is the deep reason why Americans, ordinary citizens as well as the policy elite, should be interested in it. India is the most important bridgehead of democracy in Asia, the most populous continent; the future of democracy in Asia is linked to India's future. America, as the most powerful vehicle for the ideology of modern democracy, has much at stake in its vicissitudes, both in India and in the vast hinterlands of Asia. Here, for once, principles and realpolitik might come together to redefine America's policy and attitude toward India.

—Sunil Khilnani

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region. In 1990, on the eve of the Persian Gulf War, it demonstrated some of these capabilities with one of the largest airlifts in history, quickly evacuating more than 100,000 Indian nationals from Iraq and Kuwait. India also plays an important role in UN peacekeeping operations. It recently sent to Sierra Leone a contingent of battle-hardened troops authorized to use deadly force.

India's expected prosperity would allow it to add teeth to a foreign policy that has been long on rhetoric about India's global greatness but short on achievement. Delhi has long maintained a number of small aid programs (in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and several African states), and these can be expected to grow. The economy can also support a considerably larger defense budget, even after increases of 10 percent in 1997 and '98, and a 28 percent rise in 1999.

India will, for the first time, have the material means to be a major arms supplier, and to build sea-projection and airlift capabilities that could extend its military power across Asia. India could also forge alliances with other important states, providing personnel, some high-technology expertise, and an important location in exchange for political and military assistance. Delhi had expected such an arrangement to emerge from its ties to the Soviet Union. Now it is working closely with Israel; it has ties to Vietnam and other Asian middle powers, and its foreign policy experts even talk of a strategic relationship with the United States.

What will India do with its new power? Since the heady days of Nehru, all Indian leaders have proclaimed a special destiny or mission for India in Asia and the world, based on the greatness of its civilization, its strategic location, and its distinctive view of the world. The BJP's leaders are no exception, and the 1998 nuclear tests were one way of stating India's ambition to be taken seriously as a major power. But outsiders, contrasting the grand schemes of India's foreign policy establishment with the *jhuggis* (urban slums) of Delhi and Mumbai, not to mention those of Calcutta, wonder if it is serious. How can India, with a national literacy rate of only 55 percent, much lower than that in the poorest and most backward states, stake a claim to greatness?

The answer is that unlike the people of other middle powers such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Nigeria, Indians believe that their country has both a destiny and an obligation to play a large role on the international stage. India and China, after all, are the world's only major states that embody grand civilizations. India also claims to speak for the vast majority of the world, especially its poorest and most underrepresented people. Hence its demands for a seat on the UN Security Council.

India also has practical economic and strategic reasons for staking a claim to great-power status. Two years ago it joined the World Trade Organization, and with this opening to the world's markets, both as an importer and an exporter, it wants a larger voice in setting the rules and norms of the international economy.

Since the Nehru era, Indians have seen the world as unjust and dangerous. Nehru pursued a wide-ranging foreign policy with two major aims. The first was to speed up decolonization in Asia and Africa, the second to reduce the threat of nuclear war. In 1954, India became the first state to propose a comprehensive test ban treaty, and it has long been a major force in global disarmament discussions. Ironically, one of the Indian bomb lobby's arguments during the 1990s was that India had to go nuclear itself in order to put pressure on the existing nuclear powers to fulfill their obligation under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to discuss nuclear disarmament. (India, however, has refused to sign the treaty.)

Nehru's successors continue to challenge the world order, proposing schemes for nuclear disarmament and the radical restructuring of the UN Security Council. India emerged from World War II as the world's fourth largest industrial power and second most populous state, but it was not considered for a Security Council seat, nor did the Indian leadership, swamped with the politics of partition and independence, press for one. (Nehru rejected an American proposal that India take China's seat on the Security Council, believing that China would eventually be grateful for this gesture.) Now India seeks a seat both for the status it would confer and the voice (and veto) it would provide on major global issues. Not incidentally, a veto would also allow Delhi to keep the United Nations out of the Kashmir conflict.

In the past, India was a less-than-great power attempting to act like a great one, which sometimes made it look foolish. When it challenged the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in a UN vote, only two countries—renegade Libya and India's vassal, Bhutan—supported it. But the gap between Indian ambitions and capabilities is slowly narrowing. Under the more assertive leadership of the BJP, despite the constraints of a coalition government, India has demonstrated a surprising ability to undertake bold initiatives: It has tested nuclear weapons, restructured its relationship with the United States, further liberalized the economy, established close relations with once-scorned Israel, and attempted a dramatic rapprochement with Pakistan. That effort, culminating in Prime Minister Vajpayee's trip last year to the city of Lahore in eastern Pakistan, ended in failure.

A new generation of Indian strategists, politicians, and officials is increasingly aware that the hectoring style of Krishna Menon, Nehru's defense minister, is counterproductive. Slowly, a new realism is creeping into the Indian foreign ministry, hitherto famed as one of the world's most skilled bureaucracies at "getting to no." Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, for example, has held 13 meetings with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the longest sustained dialogue ever between senior Indian and American policymakers. Yet there are important areas where American and Indian policies are at cross-purposes, none more so than India's nuclear program.

No issue has contributed more to the failure of U.S. policy in South Asia than India's nuclear weapons program. But American policymakers who failed to prevent the Indian tests can plead extenuating circumstances, since the Indians themselves had long been of two minds about the pursuit of the bomb. Delhi's spokesmen traditionally had cast their opposition to all nuclear weapons in highly moralistic terms, leading many Americans to conclude that India was an ally in preventing their spread.

This was a miscalculation. While India strongly opposed "vertical" proliferation (the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States, for example), it was more tolerant of "horizontal" proliferation (the spread of nuclear weapons from state to state) and fought bitterly to retain the option of becoming a nuclear weapons state, albeit choosing not to exercise it for several decades. After 1991, however, the world looked very different to Delhi. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it had lost its major supporter in the world arena. The United States still seemed indifferent, even as Pakistan issued ambiguous nuclear threats, and China gained economic strength. Nuclear weapons suddenly had stronger appeal.

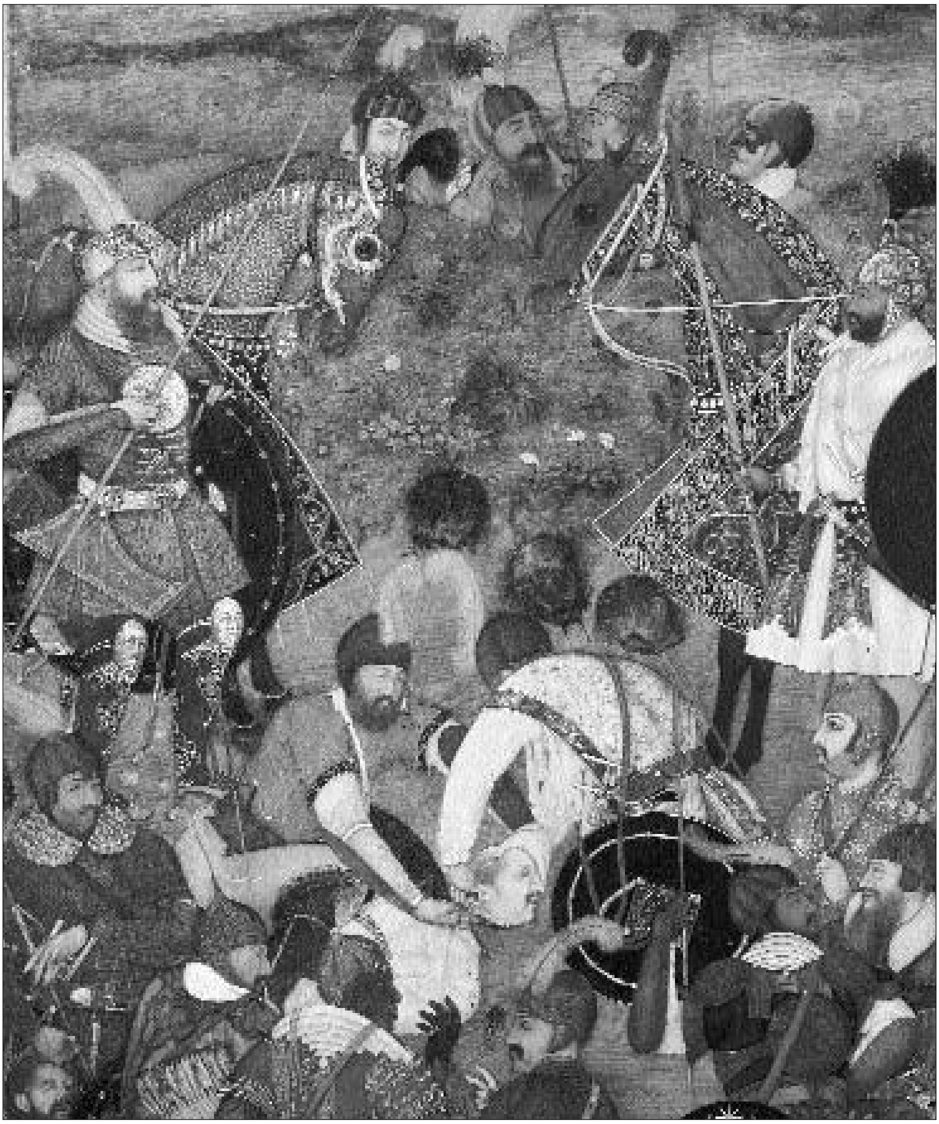
After the Cold War, Washington treated India (and Pakistan) simply like two more states that were part of the global proliferation problem. India, it was thought, could be induced—or coerced—into signing the nonproliferation and test ban treaties. Washington showed no understanding of India's acute sense of isolation, or of its feeling that the United States ranked it with Pakistan and accorded greater importance to China. The United States yielded to China during negotiations for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, yet after the Indian nuclear tests, President Clinton stood next to Chinese President Jiang Zemin as they jointly condemned Delhi.

The appearance of a Pakistan-China-U.S. axis played into the hands of Indian hawks. India's most eminent nuclear theoretician, K. Subrahmanyam, argued that the country was compelled to go nuclear because of threats to its national security from its two traditional rivals and (implicitly) the United States. The United States, he argued, wished to strip India of its nuclear option. Once India joined the nuclear club, he continued, it could force the other members, especially the United States, to take serious steps toward global disarmament.

This argument may seem hypocritical, but it was widely believed and deeply felt in India. The Clinton administration never developed an effective response. President Clinton said on one occasion that the United States and India shared the ultimate goal of nuclear abolition, but senior administration officials privately contradicted him, even as others publicly reiterated earlier presidential commitments.

India's relationship with its neighbors, especially Pakistan, will be the most important factor in determining whether it emerges as a great Asian power.

The dispute with Pakistan has many layers, beginning with the botched partition of British India more than 50 years ago. Among the



A 17th-century rebel meets his death. Political conflict is a prominent theme in the history of the Indian subcontinent—but so is the theme of political survival.

questions it left unanswered was the disposition of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Because Kashmir was primarily Muslim, Pakistan argued that it should be part of Islamic Pakistan. India claimed that since British India was not divided strictly along religious lines (India still had a vast Muslim population), Kashmir should join secular India. The land is mostly mountainous and barren, but it has military value. Both nations agreed on one thing: Self-determination (which is what most Kashmiris wanted) could be ruled out.

After India's nuclear tests in 1998, the overt nuclearization of South Asia emboldened Islamabad to launch a brilliantly conceived (but strategically disastrous) attack across the line of control that temporarily separates Indian and Pakistani forces in Kashmir. The pressure on India was further increased after Pakistan's military coup last October.

Pakistan's army chief, General Pervaiz Musharraf, who assumed the title of "chief executive," promised continued support for the separatist "freedom fighters" inside Kashmir.

Indian decisionmakers cannot bring themselves to negotiate with the new military regime, fearing that this would grant legitimacy to the idea of rule by the armed forces in South Asia, perhaps giving their own generals ideas. There are also powerful groups in both countries that oppose normalization or dialogue on almost every issue, including even people-to-people exchanges. Among them are smugglers and parts of the intelligence services, both of which stand to lose a great deal. Some diplomats and strategists in both countries fear that concessions would be the first step on a slippery slope.

As the larger power, India will have to figure out a way to initiate a credible dialogue with Pakistan, either directly or through intermediaries. The difficulty of doing this is especially evident in the case of Kashmir, where the two countries had to resort to secret diplomacy—which failed—for even the most preliminary talks. While the Indian government has issued strong statements about countering terrorism and isolating Pakistan, it is often in the position of merely reacting to Islamabad's increasingly risky measures. Instead, it needs to sort out those areas where cooperation and accommodation (by both countries) are possible from those areas where the two states have incompatible interests. And it needs to recognize that a failed Pakistan, with its potential to spread nuclear weapons and Islamic terrorism (as well as millions of refugees), would harm Indian interests.

Despite its own ambitions, India still finds itself linked with Pakistan, a country one-fifth its size. In international affairs, states are known by the enemies they keep, so India is doomed to be paired with Pakistan until it can either defeat or accommodate Islamabad.

India's other major neighbor, China, presents obstacles of a different sort to its aspirations for a larger world role. Delhi remains deeply ambivalent about Beijing. Nehru had envisioned a cooperative relationship between the two states, and some in Delhi still believe that India and China have a common interest in moderating American dominance. China, however, was responsible for India's humiliation in the 1962 war. So bad was the Indian military performance, and so incompetent India's political leadership, that this defeat ended any notion of a rivalry between the two states. If any doubt remained, it was laid to rest by China's speedier economic growth and the seat it eventually obtained on the UN Security Council.

Indians are also wary of becoming surrogates for the West as part of an anti-China alliance. If the Chinese conclude that India is actively opposing them (perhaps through increased support for Tibetan exiles, or support for ethnic minorities in western China), Beijing could easily increase its support of Islamabad and separatist movements in India itself.

Delhi is plagued by unresolved policy disagreements. After the

1998 nuclear tests, the BJP government labeled China the chief strategic threat to India. A few months later, it retreated from this confrontational line and completed another round of (fruitless) talks with Beijing on the border dispute. At the same moment, India was making a serious effort to begin a dialogue with Pakistan. That policy, too, was soon reversed. Indecision and ambiguity might have had certain advantages in the bipolar Cold War world, but they are liabilities today.

If India is slowly moving toward greatness, how should the United States respond? Traditionally, the great states of the world have resisted the entry of new members into the "club." Japan and the Soviet Union, for example, found their way blocked after World War I—which helped bring on the next world war.

The failure of the United States to reconsider how aspiring middle powers such as India might shape the emerging global order in the wake of the Cold War was a costly error. An India that did not seem to count for very much (in Washington, at least) became embroiled in crises and made itself (and thus Pakistan) a new member of the nuclear club. The time has come for the United States to reconsider its relationship with India. If it reforms its economy and comes to terms with Pakistan, India could be a force for stability in Asia and for the containment of China, as well as a strong support for humanitarian intervention in Africa and other war-torn regions. If it does not, it still will continue to have great influence in the non-Western world.

There are also negative reasons for the United States to re-examine its approach. Within the Indian military, some experts now argue that Delhi should abandon its historic restraint about exporting sensitive technologies. India, they say, can earn much-needed foreign exchange and tweak the nose of the West (and China) by selling nuclear knowledge and missile technology to Middle Eastern, Asian, and even lesser European states. And while India is unlikely ever to become an ally of China, it could side with Beijing (and Moscow) to challenge the American-dominated alliance system in East and Southeast Asia. Left to its own devices, it might also pursue a riskier strategy for dealing with Pakistan. Indian strategists have already increased tensions by embracing the idea that "limited" war between nuclear powers is possible.

The United States ought to recognize that India is not just another South Asian state but a player in the larger Asian sphere with an interest in—and influence on—the worldwide community of ex-colonial states. This does not mean abandoning important U.S. interests in Pakistan, a nuclear power that will soon be the world's fifth largest state. It means the expansion of American engagement with Delhi, including discussion of shared policy concerns (terrorism; narcotics; humanitarian intervention; political stability in fragmented, ethnically complex countries; and China). The Clinton visit produced a "vision statement" embracing such ideas, but it remains to be seen whether this commitment will extend beyond the Clinton administration, or even to its conclusion.

Treating India as a rising power means Delhi should be one of the capitals—along with London, Berlin, Beijing, Moscow, and Tokyo—that senior American officials visit and telephone about global developments. Like the French, Indians have a different and not necessarily hostile view of how the world should be organized. Regular consultation should help temper the sometimes abrasive Indian style.

The United States can also do more than merely point out the virtues of regional accommodation. It should encourage a greater sense of realism in Pakistan about possible solutions to the Kashmir conflict, while also urging the Indians to accommodate Pakistan's concerns about the treatment of Muslim Kashmiris. A more active yet low-key diplomacy is in order. It will not lead to an easy or rapid resolution of the Kashmir dispute, but it will enable the United States to retain influence in both countries should its services again be required to avert a war, or even a future nuclear crisis.

Finally, the United States must put nuclear proliferation in proper perspective. Many American officials remain embittered by what they believe to be Indian duplicity over the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the 1998 nuclear tests. Yet both countries are essentially status quo powers when it comes to the proliferation of nuclear (and other) weapons and to crises that could escalate to a nuclear conflict. The next U.S. administration may be able to strike a bargain with Delhi, obtaining Indian cooperation on nuclear proliferation in exchange for dual-use technologies such as advanced computers, aerospace technology, and even civilian nuclear assistance.

A sound prescription for the U.S.-India relationship calls for neither opposition nor alliance but for something in between. There is no need to contain or oppose an India that is still struggling to reshape its economic and political order, especially since it is in America's interest that such reforms proceed. But the United States cannot expect, nor should it seek, a strategic alliance that Delhi would view as part of an anti-Pakistan or anti-China campaign. An "in-between" relationship would require developing new understandings in several areas: The conditions under which India and the United States might jointly engage in humanitarian intervention in various parts of the world, the means of deploying new defensive military technologies (such as theater missile defenses) without triggering regional arms races in Taiwan and South Asia, and the joint steps the two might take to strengthen fragile democratic regimes in Asia and elsewhere. A relationship with India offers an opportunity to influence directly the Indian worldview on issues that are of importance to the United States. India would also provide early warning of potentially harmful policies.

But even the best-intentioned American policy will have little impact if India cannot bring itself to think and behave strategically. The most important choice it must make concerns its relationship with

The Boy in the City *(1999), by Sanjay Bhattacharyya*

Pakistan, but it must also show a greater willingness to engage with the United States. It must avail itself of its own cultural, economic, and ideological resources and not assume that great-power status will accrue because it can lay claim to a marginal nuclear weapons program or a history of accomplishments as a great civilization.

India is not a great power in the classic sense; it cannot challenge American military or economic strength. But in a transformed international order, its assets and resources are more relevant to a wide range of American interests than they have been for 50 years. They cannot be safely ignored in the future, as they have been in the past. ❑