

The Resurgent India

A Monthly National Review

August 2018



“Let us all work for the Greatness of India.”
- The Mother

Year 9

Issue 5

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email: sadlecjnn@gmail.com, info@resurgentindia.org, URL :
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Editor : Ms. Garima Sharma, B-45, Batra Colony, Village Bharatpur, P.O. Kaushal Ganj, Bilaspur Distt. Rampur (U.P)

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SUCCESSFUL FUTURE

(Full of Promise and Joyful Surprises)

Botanical name: Gaillardia Pulchella

Common name: Indian blanket, Blanket flower, Fire-wheels

Year 9

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A Declaration

We do not fight against any creed, any religion.

We do not fight against any form of government.

We do not fight against any social class.

We do not fight against any nation or civilisation.

We are fighting division, unconsciousness, ignorance, inertia and falsehood.

We are endeavouring to establish upon earth union, knowledge, consciousness, Truth, and we fight whatever opposes the advent of this new creation of Light, Peace, Truth and Love.

— The Mother

(Collected works of the Mother 13, p. 124-25)

THE ASSAM NRC: A LONG AND BLIGHTED HISTORY

The publication of the draft National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the state of Assam has hit several important issues with one stone. It has paved the way for a frank and honest conversation on the threat of illegal immigration, on the communalism spawned by such immigration, and the need to implement a pan-India NRC. It damns while questioning how citizenship politics has been conducted in the country.

That PM Modi could promise to promulgate a Citizenship Bill – to allow non-Muslim religious minorities who face persecution in neighbouring Muslim countries, entry into the state – and secure a good amount of support for it, shows how deeply the incursion Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants has scarred several parts of the state. For long, erstwhile political parties have tried to paint the issue as one of ethnic rivalry between Assamese and Bengali, while sheltering illegal Bangladeshis to increase their Muslim vote-bank. However, historically, and especially after 1971, the two terms viz. ‘illegal immigrant’ and ‘Bengali Muslim’ have become synonymous with each other.

Political attempts, by secularist lobbies, to protest against the NRC and term it as ‘exclusionary’ or communal ceased soon after the NRC publication on July 30, with some political parties even subsequently attempting to claim credit for the exercise. They have also been silenced in the wake of the realization that there was overwhelming public support for the NRC, both, within and beyond Assam.

THE PROBLEM OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

Assam has been riven by ethnic hostilities since colonial

times. The British policy of ruthlessness towards the tribal areas, their arbitrary re-drawing of India's internal maps and systematic alienation of tribal areas from mainland British India, were actions whose effects continue to be felt even today. In 1874, the British transferred Sylhet – in present day Bangladesh – from Bengal to Assam, in order to shore up the latter's incomes through plantations. This was a part of a general move towards the British policy of re-settling scores of eastern Bengalis in large parts of Assam's Brahmaputra Valley, and giving them uncultivated and fertile lands of Assam. It was seen as a move that would reduce Bengal's burden and benefit Assam's income. However, the immigrants' encroachment on the lands of the indigenous Assamese led to social tensions by the 1920s between Bengali Muslim cultivators and the Assamese people.

The Britishers further worsened the problem. While paying lip service to easing the immigration pressures, in reality, they enacted the 'Colonisation Scheme' in 1928, thus opening large parts of the present day Nangaon, Barpeta and Mangaldoi to the Muslim immigrants, and repeating it in Goalpara and Darrang as well.

The Britishers by turning a completely deaf ear to the Assamese demands to protect their lands from the Muslim cultivators had set up a ripe field for the Muslim League to carry out its machinations of demographic change in Assam from the 1930s onwards. Syed Mohammad Saadulla became the Prime Minister of Assam in 1937. Thereafter, concerted attempts were made to increase the inflow of Muslims into the state (Misra 2018). Around that time, the Hockenull committee report, which had cautioned against settling or giving land to post-1938 migrants at the cost of alienating the Assamese tribals, was completely ignored.

Once the Muslim League adopted the Lahore Resolution of 1940, Saadulla introduced rapid changes in Assam – while keeping in touch with MA Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan. This included opening up the reserved tribal lands, under the garb of land development scheme, and removing further restrictions on settling immigrants on tribal lands. Between 1940-41, the Saadulla government settled Muslim immigrants on 1,50,000 bighas of land in the Brahmaputra Valley and introduced many such land-related schemes to settle the Muslims till 1945, with even Muslim League loyalists like Saadulla himself acknowledging that this level of immigration might soon create a Palestine-like situation in Assam by completely driving out the indigenes (Misra 2018).

Once Congress's Gopinath Bardoloi took over after Saadulla's government fell in 1946, he took measures to evict Muslim immigrants from the reserved tribal lands and faced the Muslim League's call for 'civil disobedience' as its ploy to create tensions and ensure that the whole of Assam went to Pakistan after the Partition (Misra 2018). This did not take off successfully as Sylhet was transferred to Pakistan.

During the 1947 Partition, Sylhet chose to be a part of Pakistan's East Bengal, since Assam had been insisting for a long time that it did not want to retain Sylhet – with its Bengali majority – and would instead prefer to preserve its homogenous Assamese culture. Ironically, subsequent years after 1947, again began to see widespread migration of Hindu and Muslim Bengalis to Assam. This stopped when there was a communal riot in 1950, but all the displaced immigrants came back after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950. The immigration further intensified in the years leading up to and after the 1971 war. Subsequent census reports have shown a marked rise in the Muslim

population of Assam and a decline in the Hindu population (Misra 2018).

In the subsequent years, while the Muslim Bengalis began to register their language as Assamese in order to integrate, the Hindu Bengalis – especially of the Barak Valley – continued to retain Bengali as their language and kept up the demands for a separate Bengali state. The Muslim Bengalis also – under the influence of their leaders and maulanas – steadily kept buying land from the Assamese people. The subtle attempt was to create Muslim majority pockets to reap electoral benefits. However, with the weakening of the Hindu elites, the increasing influx of Muslims from Bangladesh and attempts by opportunistic political parties to carve out a minority vote-bank out of illegal immigrants, the fault lines between Assamese and Bangladeshi Muslims have acquired a nearly permanent character, which continues till date.

Thus, if the Britishers' high-handed approach towards Assam – and the Muslim League's unmitigated social engineering before Independence – created these problems in the first place, the subsequent transfer of power to the Congress party continued this policy, which intensified the most during the regime of Manmohan Singh.

The rule of the present dispensation across most of north-east, preceded by the intensive work done by the RSS, has, to a great extent, integrated the north-eastern tribal states with the rest of the country. Cultivating friendly relations with governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar has further put an end to insurgent activities and cut their supply of arms. Modi's framework agreement with NSCN (I-M) of Nagaland has been a big step forward in tackling a persistent problem and has generated goodwill for the present regime.

In Assam, the subtle attempts to change the terms of the political discourse by attempting linguistic and national unity and pinning the real problem onto communalism, through the introduction and debate over the Citizenship Bill, has also helped in blurring the traditional Bengali-Ahom divide to an extent. The divide was engineered by the Britishers when Bengali was made the colonial national language and droves of Bengali Muslims were brought into Assam and given agricultural lands and all the prime administrative and professional positions. Such systematic discrimination led to the anti-Bengali 'Bongol Kheda' movement of the 1960s – which spread across other north-eastern states as well – in which nearly 45000 Bengali settlers were displaced from Assam to West Bengal (Chakravarty 2018).

This ethnic nationalism hardened after the 1971 war as did the inflow of Muslim Bengali refugees into Assam. In fact, it soon become more about the Bengali Muslim migrant from Bangladesh and less about the mere anti-Bengali sentiment – which even pre-Independence history can testify to. For the first time, militancy began to develop in the Assam movement.

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) emerged specifically in response to the Bangladeshi infiltration. After 1985, it formed its own party – the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and contested elections and came to power – but the militancy continued. With the rise in Bengali Muslim influx, communal incidents increased. Temple desecrations and the immigrants' ability to encroach on the state's resources with impunity and support from the then ruling Congress government further increased the Assamese angst and intensified the militancy. This enabled the RSS to spearhead the anti-migrant movement in Assam, in tandem with the All Assam Students Union (AASU), after the 1970s.

That the current West Bengal Chief Minister is now making

political references to the much earlier Bongol Kheda movement to refer to the NRC exercise in Assam is like playing with fire and attempting to divide the country, much like the Britishers and the Muslim League did. In 2018, she conveniently ignored the drastic changes in history after the 1971 war, which made the problem of Bangladeshi Muslim immigration the root cause of discontent, which gave birth to organizations like United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1979. She even disregarded the fact that the so-called anti-Bengali sentiment was never simply anti-Bengali and that the Muslim League's machinations had always pitted the Muslims against the Assamese since the 20th century.

In fact, the 1983 Nellie massacre in which about 2000 Muslim immigrants were killed by the tribals in central Assam, had made it clear that illegal immigration – and not language politics – was the main issue. This is how a politician – to preserve her Muslim vote-bank – could cherry-pick a small chunk out of history, ignoring all the earlier and later developments which determined the course of the movement and the original Assamese sentiment. Attempts, in 2018, to make it look like an internal Bengali versus Assamese issue will pale, since the Assamese have claimed several times that their ire was against the 'foreigner'.

Since 1985, Assam has struggled and been betrayed by the politicians promise to get an NRC to filter out the illegal immigrants. The goal of drafting an NRC for Assam was agreed upon as a part of the 1985 Assam Accord signed between the then ruling Rajiv Gandhi government and the All Assam Students Union (AASU), based on the agreement that the outdated 1951 NRC would be updated to reflect the immense illegal immigration from Bangladesh that has occurred since the 1971 war and the

creation of Bangladesh. As per the Accord, all those who entered the state before 1966 would be regularized. Those who entered between 1966 and 1971 – the time when migrations from East Pakistan intensified during the Mukti Bahini liberation struggle against the Pakistani state – would be deleted from the electoral rolls and lose their voting rights for 10 years. And finally, those who entered on or after March 24, 1971, would be considered foreigners and deported (Chakravarty 2018).

But there was a catch. The ruling Congress government of the time – in an effort to appear pro-Muslim migrant – had, in 1983, enacted the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act (IMDT Act). According to it, no one could be effectively deported even after they were detected as being foreigners. The onus was on the complainant to prove the accused a foreigner. If a foreigner was detected, the police had no power to search and seize and the migrant managed to flee to another district.

Even though the Assam Accord of 1985 was enacted two years after the IMDT Act and allowed the police the freedom to search, seize and arrest, it was never implemented in spirit. It was a toothless Accord and remained a paper tiger – with numerous exploitable flaws and no strict timelines. The spirit of the IMDT Act was encouraged and the state became a mute spectator to the incoming Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants. The result was that while over 300,000 migrants were deported from Assam between 1962-84, in the decade post-1983, a mere 1500 were deported (Jain 2018).

Also, the voter numbers in Assam grew by more than 50 per cent in less than a decade, from 5,701,805 in 1970 to 8,537,493 in 1979 – which is simply a watered-down reflection on the extent of illegal immigration that had actually occurred. The Election Commission and the government of the day failed

to play a proactive role. Despite the complaints filed against the illegal infiltrators in the voters list, the tribunals set up for adjudicating the cases rarely reached any decision. Many infiltrators even contested elections in the state and even came back to file court cases even after they were deported to Bangladesh (Bhattacharyya 2018).

According to the Census 2011, Assam had recorded the country's highest rise in the Muslim population, with Muslims being the majority in nine districts of the state (Northeast Today 2017).

MUSLIM POPULATION IN ASSAM:

YEAR	MUSLIMS
1901	12.4
1911	16.69
1921	19.41
1931	23.41
1941	25.72
1951	24.68
1961	25.26
1971	24.56
1981	0
1991	28.43
2001	30.92
2011	34.22

Source: Scroll.in (Ashraf 2018).

Note: Census was not conducted in the year 1981 in Assam.

The IMDT Act was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2005, resulting from the present Assam CM, Sarbananda Sonowal's petition against it, with the Court calling the numbers of illegal immigrants as an 'aggression on the state of Assam'. In 2009, another PIL was filed by an Assamese NGO stating that 4.1 million illegal Bangladeshis had found their way into Assam's voter list. National landmarks such as the Kaziranga National Park, birthplace of the Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva were openly encroached upon by illegal immigrants (Deka 2018).

Yet, subsequent political regimes of that time continued with a soft approach towards illegal immigration. Political parties like AGP and BJP which were in power in the state and the centre during the late 1990s could have done much to bring about change, yet even they provided soft cushion to the infiltrators and did nothing about the issue, only engaging in cosmetic changes. During the time of the UPA government, it became even worse. During the 2006 state election, Congress President, Sonia Gandhi, went on record saying that "her party is committed to minority rights and has introduced the Foreigners' (Tribunals for Assam) Order 2006 under the Foreigners Act. This order will protect illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, making the process for identification of an illegal migrant and possible deportation, too difficult and time-consuming to implement" (Jain 2018). This opportunism continues till date. As per its usual strategy, half the Congress leadership – mostly from the state – is speaking in favour of the NRC and trying to take credit for it, while the other half – mostly the national leaders – are speaking against it, harping on the usual discourse of secularism and divisiveness.

The politicking belies the explosive ground situation that Assam is facing, where the numbers of illegal immigrants range anywhere between 4 to 10 million people. Despite the Assam

Accord's promise of an NRC, nothing was done till 2015.

CHALLENGES AFTER THE NRC

Even though the July 30 NRC draft was the final draft, it does not automatically make anyone a 'foreigner' and people would be allowed to file claims between August and September, and the final list is yet to come out. The biggest challenge facing the government is what it would do with people who are ultimately declared illegal immigrants. They would effectively become 'stateless' since Bangladesh has refused to take them back. And because India has extremely cordial and close relations with the Hasina government in Bangladesh, it would not make sense to force these migrants back across the border.

Much would depend on what happens in the Bangladesh elections in 2019. While Hasina's opponent Khaleda Zia and her main opposition party, the BNP, may have been effectively decimated, Hasina has little control over external enemies – like hostile foreign governments, such those of US, UK and EU – and the hardline political Islamic lobby within Bangladesh. If these hostile foreign governments join hands with the Islamists – and there are already signs of that, with the US Ambassador in Bangladesh hobnobbing with anti-government NGOs at odd hours and the Western countries issuing human rights condemnations against Hasina with regularity and pressurizing her to have fair elections – then, it may become difficult for Hasina's Awami League to come back to power. Pakistan's ISI – Hasina's sworn enemy – will also try to engineer something covert against her.

That is a problem which all less developed, politically authoritarian countries face. Despite right intentions, they become a convenient prey for the West. China and India – whose

influence in Bangladesh is also increasing, unlike the West which operates through NGO and Islamic proxies, and who support Hasina on most of her measures – can effectively counter the anti-Hasina West and Islamists. But that is to be seen.

For India, if Hasina is unable to come back to power in 2019 and a hostile dispensation (like the earlier anti-India government of BNP and Islamist coalition) comes, it will easily make sense to push the illegal immigrants – as deemed by the NRC – back into Bangladesh.

If that does not happen, India will have to do something about these immigrants. That is not such a difficult task either. The lengthy litigation process before the tribunals will itself take time, so, at least for a few years, nobody will be declared stateless. In the immediate context, post-NRC, illegal immigrants will be effectively stripped of their citizenship privileges and voting rights and, most importantly, they will be identifiable, which would prevent them from illegally encroaching on public property. The longstanding demand of protecting the land rights of the Assamese from these immigrants would be achieved, since, in Lower Assam, Bangladeshi immigrants engaged as agricultural labour have often instigated bloody ethnic conflicts over land.

The H.S. Brahma committee report of 2017* stated that illegal Bangladeshis dominated in as many as 15 of the 33

** The committee members were divided over how to present the issue, with many wanting a clear expose of how land encroachments by Bangladeshis with the connivance of power centres within the state will make the Assamese a landless people soon. The result was that two reports from the same committee were sent to the Chief Minister. They did not want anything diluted. Predictably, the reports generated widespread stir in Assam and the demand on the government to conduct the NRC and take action further increased.*

districts of Assam. The report stated that “illegal Bangladeshis descend on the land like an army of marauding invaders armed with dangerous weapons, set up illegal villages, mostly on the char lands overnight, in the full view and with the tacit, if not active, connivance and encouragement of the corrupt government officers as also with abetment of communal political leaders” (Deka 2018).

Upamanyu Hazarika, in his report to the Supreme Court, in 2015, highlighted how a Bangladeshi passport holder can not only own land in Assam but can also contest Assembly elections (Mishra 2015). This shows how there has been a nexus, with the administration supporting it to further their corrupt gains and the earlier governments supporting it to further expand their Muslim vote-bank through a demographic change in the state. The state of Assam has been subjected to systematic injustice and high-handedness at the hands of certain secularist national political parties.

Thus, Assamese have long insisted that these immigrants be completely denied a stake and share in the state’s resources. If the current dispensation and momentum continues and India does not lapse back to the morbid UPA-like era, then the police will also work energetically to keep their activities in check. They can then – as the government is considering – be issued work permits based on their biometric registration and profiling. They can, thus, work and yet be kept track of.

And if – as the Modi government has been trying persistently since 2015, despite opposition from the ‘right to privacy’ activists – the government succeeds in passing the DNA profiling bill in the Parliament, it would be a huge complement to the NRC, and would help to keep the criminals profiled and in the public domain, by retaining their DNA details.

The entire purpose is to clearly differentiate the citizens from the non-citizens. The earlier scenario where the latter have – as the recent Brahma and Hazarika reports vividly describe – had the impunity and daring to behave as invading marauders, usurp land, vote and contest elections, and increase their religious population by leaps and bounds, has to end. It is a gross injustice to India as well as to Assam and it is incredible that any national political party or a bureaucratic administration can knowingly allow and abet this situation. It is so big a stain on our claims of nationalism and makes hypocritical all those who have now set out to question the NRC.

THE FAIRNESS OF THE NRC EXERCISE

Despite the politics that was played out over the NRC's second draft list which left out approximately 40 lakh people from the citizens' register, it soon became evident that minorities had indeed been included and rumours of communalization were just a myth. The result was that parties like TMC had to face opposition from Hindus, Muslims and indigenous Assamese people in Assam, across both Barak and Brahmaputra valleys. Instead of doubting the NRC, it came as a boon for many migrants, since the final draft contained the names of most of the pre-1971 immigrants of East Pakistan origin who have been living all these years with the tag of a foreigner and could finally get citizenship (Misra 2018).

Even though both the valleys have, historically, been bitterly divided – with the Barak Valley dominated more by Hindu Bengalis and Brahmaputra Valley having more of Muslim majority villages – the issue of NRC brought them together. In the Barak Valley, while there was some initial backlash from the Hindu Bengalis who felt insecure about the execution of the NRC

and the non-implementation of their cherished Citizenship Bill, they yet decided to trust the BJP and recognized the necessity of the NRC for Assam. In the Brahmaputra Valley, it soon became apparent that in lot of Muslim majority villages like BARPETA the NRC had mostly fairly included the linguistic and religious minorities – therefore, communalization attempts by opposition parties on the basis of a few high-profile cases completely failed.

Furthermore, in districts like Morigaon, Karimganj, Goalpara, BARPETA, Cachar which have always been seen as dominated by illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh, the deletions from the NRC have been fewer (Misra 2018). This has reassured the Muslims that there has been no discrimination.

The upshot has been that, despite the rumour mongering carried out in the run up to the NRC publication and immediately afterwards, there has been unexpected peace, calm and support for the NRC across Assam, including across religions as well.

Notwithstanding the smoothness and fairness of the NRC exercise, Assam is now beginning to realize that NRC alone cannot suffice in bringing it justice. NRC is simply the first, basic step in identifying and clamping down on illegal immigrants. Many of these infiltrators had, according to the Home Ministry reports, already fled the state after 2015 – when the NRC was announced – to other states, and have thus necessitated the Home Ministry proposal that NRC be conducted in other states too.

But for Assam, it is no longer simply about NRC. The extreme injustices meted out to Assam since the colonial times combined with decades of inaction in cracking down on these infiltrators, have dramatically increased the Muslim population of the state at the cost of the Hindus, while basic entitlements of the

indigenes over their own natural resources has been systematically diluted. With the complicity of a corrupt administration and a biased political class, illegal infiltrators – as described in detail in the recent Brahma reports – have encroached on Assam’s heritage sites and vast tribal lands with impunity.

The land question was important during the colonial times too, when the Muslim League was trying to engineer demographic and social changes in Assam by introducing numerous land-development, food and agriculture related schemes – all with the real aim of de-reserving tribal areas and allotting land to the Muslim cultivators. This has continued till date and the extent of damage is immense. Simply identifying illegal infiltrators through the NRC will not address the issue of these damages – although it may prevent further such usurpations in the future. Therefore, the focus in Assam has shifted now to focusing on the damning injustices detailed in the Brahma reports and righting many of the wrongs which have resulted from illegal infiltration from Bangladesh and due to the rise of Muslim population in the state.

Thus, the logic of the NRC must be carried forward and the lost pride and cultural and heritage resources of Assam must be restored and the long history of historical degradation righted. The ruling coalition in Assam is well-positioned to take these further, even tougher steps.

Any future course of action must involve placing the future of Assam in the context of the larger national interest. While the RSS is working among the 61% tribal Hindu population of the state for the last 3 decades, political or vote-bank considerations must not be allowed to dent the project of Hindu cultural solidarity, which is necessary for bridging the current

divisions. If this solidarity does not take place, the NRC would have failed its purpose and relevance and would simply become a temporary bureaucratic exercise to provide fleeting relief. The population of Assam will have become chauvinist and isolationist, encouraging little beyond petty regionalism. The current changes in Assam have placed it in a position where it can become an example and gateway for the rest of the north-eastern states to emerge out of their sharply isolated – and many times, artificially engineered and nurtured – tribal identities and integrate with the mainstream of the country.

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THE EFFECTS OF WUHAN IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

The mistrust that has clouded the India-China relationship for the last several decades – mainly due to India’s skepticism and tendency to see China as its rival in every sphere – is witnessing a rapid reversal during the last one year, particularly after the resolution of the Doklam crisis last year and the informal Wuhan summit this year. The latter has laid important groundwork for guiding the relationship between the two countries. While China has always insisted on pursuing cooperation and shared goals in Asia with India, it is India that has repeatedly repudiated this idea of cooperation. India has been hemmed in by its longstanding attachment to the idea of non-alignment on the one hand and the gullible belief that strife and competition are the only basis on which to conduct international relations.

In such a view, countries have been seen as allies or rivals based on the perception of ‘strategic interest’ and pure calculation. The international and foreign policy of India – much like that in the West – has been based on pure calculation. This unquestioned view of international order has been dictated and dominated by the West, most notably the US. It has been in vogue not because there is merit in it, but because it was born out of the civilizational hegemony of the West in all fields ranging from politics, economics and diplomacy to culture and religion. In its essence, it harks back to the Western idea of individualism – born in the age of Scientific rationality of the modern era – which is based on the philosophy of the sovereignty of the individualism. In practice, it translates into a powerful justification for the advancement of selfish interests and viewing

the collectivity as a sphere of continuous strife and dominance. Even the Communism of the West was born out of such a fossilized world view of selfish individualism, whose principles it blindly applied to collectivity.

Asia, having been subjugated to the West – materially, culturally and through a dormancy of its spirituality – for the last few centuries, has been blindly following this model. The disasters in material fields are fast culminating in increasingly intense psychological perversions, deprivations and degradation leading to major changes in both Western democracies as well as in Asia. In Asia, the perfect Japanese democracy had to bear a huge cost of being a passive recipient of the Western impulses, but having still retained the powerful crux of their culture and temperament, they, like other Asian countries are rising to meet the new era of the dismantling of the Western ideas.

In this unfolding scenario, China is, perhaps, one of those Asian countries which has actively taken the lead in asserting its dominance through Asia and of propagating a discourse of the revival of the ancient Asiatic cultures. For this resurgence, it has been much reviled, especially through the concerted campaigns by the Western governments and media. In particular, its economic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative have been labelled as being ruthless in their geopolitical ambitions by systematically laying out a debt trap for the participating poorer countries – by charging extremely high interest rates and later purchasing a chunk of the indebted countries' sovereignty on a lease, as was allegedly done in Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. China has similarly shaken the West in its ambitions like 'Made in China 2025' which the West alleges would be facilitated by stealing intellectual property from the Western companies. In other spheres by playing an active role

in global politics in not only neighbourhood countries like North Korea, but even Afghanistan and Central Asia, China is displaying an active zeal in re-shaping world affairs.

Trump's concerted efforts to use trade war as a weapon to rein in China, to play the Indo-Pacific card and alienate India, Japan and Australia from China – and Europe's quick siding with the Trump administration – are yet being tolerated by the Chinese magnanimously. Whatever ambition China is currently displaying in leading international affairs, there is not a single trace of confrontation or antagonism in its approach. In fact, when India recently declared a slew of investments initiatives in Africa, especially Rwanda, China was quick to welcome them and suggested that India and China can partner well in Africa. If there is one thing about China, it is that it declares its intent well and directly. This is evident from the fact that China has repeatedly and strongly protested against any kind of Indo-Pacific grouping to target China. There is no evidence of manipulation, unlike in the West – especially the US – whose governments are extremely unreliable.

To take another example, let us revisit the Doklam crisis which unfolded last year. It was clear that India, by taking the plea of defending Bhutan – despite the latter's foreign policy having been independent for long – interfered in an area where India had no sovereignty and which was an area of dispute and negotiation between China and Bhutan. The plea that China's road construction in this area would threaten India's northeast, even if true, could not justify India's arbitrary foray into a territory not its own. In doing so, India not only interfered in what China viewed as its own territory, but also rode roughshod over Bhutan. The logic of northeast being threatened could have been resolved by talking to China.

Little highlighted was the fact that before starting the road construction, China repeatedly tried to get in touch with India to inform them of the same. But with no response from India after multiple attempts, they started the work. In an exclusive exchange with a media editor, a Chinese embassy official said the following, in July 2017:

“We reached out to your (Indian Army) local commanders thrice to discuss matters, before starting the road construction on 16 June 2017 in Doklam, which belongs to China. But we got no response. On June 18, the Indian side blocked our construction party by bringing nearly 200 soldiers about 180m inside our territory in Doklam, and hundreds of soldiers were reinforced behind in layers as back-up. China does not want war but wants to solve the problem by diplomatic channel. However, we will not stop construction on our side. You (India) have always misjudged China even when we always reach out...You overstate your strength.” (Sawhney 2018).

Irrespective of how Indians would perceive this exchange, what becomes rather obvious is the shoddy approach taken by India - the jump into confrontation and the later transition to diplomatic talks only once it became clear that China will not back down.

India has come a long way since Doklam. After Doklam, India has paid attention to its relationship with China, rather than just dismissing it as a transactional and economic relationship which was marked by competition. China’s insistence on adopting a closer cooperative approach and its high regard for India, despite the latter stand against BRI, has finally begun to be mirrored in India as well. The Wuhan summit this year between Modi and Xi was a turning point in this regard.

It has by now come to be known as the ‘Wuhan consensus’. China – having found the present government in India receptive – has repeatedly sent out a message saying that diplomatic obstructions will not be allowed to sully the relationship between India and China. Most recently, a Chinese minister emphasized, in this context and in the context of the BRI that, “We are neighbours, we are partners. Historically we were together and in the future, I never believe that anybody can separate India and China...China has repeatedly stated the CPEC is an economic initiative. Implementing CPEC does not jeopardise China’s position on Kashmir” (Hindustan Times 2018).

This is, yet again, a clear reiteration of China’s consistent position on India and the CPEC. The two countries have also pursued, in accordance with the ‘Wuhan consensus’, active cooperation in other third countries.

While such promises and declarations of joint engagement are mostly superficial and are often seen in most bilateral agreements, in this case, they were pursued more robustly, with the initiative coming from China. When Nepal’s Prime Minister, Mr. Oli, visited China last month, to appease China and seek investments, China highlighted the fact that Chinese activities and investments in Nepal would follow a ‘2+1’ model viz. China and India jointly engaging a third country like Nepal. Later, this was once again stressed in the context of Afghanistan as well. This ‘2+1’ model is being applied as a new foreign policy instrument for joint China-India engagement in any third country in the South Asian region.

The immediate implication was that this has brought in immense stability to India’s relationships with its neighbours. These relationships have been on a turbulent course – as was to be expected due to India’s pursuance of a competition-based

model ingrained by the West – for a long time now. It has been so since after Nehru's death. India has always been resented for its 'big brother' attitude towards its neighbours. The Indian governments' behaviour implying the complacent suggestion that being the heart of the India subcontinent, India has the right to raise objections to economic and foreign policies of countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, has been resented by the latter countries.

This sense of privilege has historically come from the fact that, inevitably, it is in India that regime changes in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are determined. Politicians from these countries invariably rush to India to win the latter's graces before their elections, even as the public in these countries seethe against Indian hegemony. The last elections in Bhutan were, in fact, fought on the issue of India's say in Bhutanese affairs. Similarly, Bangladesh's public opinion is sharply polarized on the question of India – the advantage that India could have gained through the 1971 war was somewhat diluted due to India's high-handedness. In Nepal, the antagonism is very obvious, especially after the 2015 Madhesi agitation.

Under such conditions, when China – in its natural course of pursuing foreign investments in upcoming markets with a huge consumer base and cheap labour and flexible terms and conditions – started making heavy investments in these countries, India was initially unwelcoming. In recent years, China and Bangladesh have developed a close economic relationship which has now turned into a defence partnership as well – Bangladesh's first and only such partnership. A similar pattern of investments is being pursued in Nepal and in Bhutan, China has left no stone unturned to gain the trust of the Bhutanese leadership. None of this was done to counter India. But for a

country that has historically retained its regional fiefdom, this was immediately perceived as a threat. That India's forays into these countries was not based on good will, but on their unwilling dependency on India, did not seem to matter.

However, while India may not actively acknowledge it, these changes have actually made India a more mature democracy in the region, rather than being just a dominant power, privately resented by its neighbours. After 2015, India's relations with Bangladesh have touched new heights, especially in the area of counter-terror cooperation. Bhutan and Nepal too have seen a winding down of anti-India rhetoric, like in Bangladesh. ***China's entry has lent more dynamism to the region as a whole, encouraged better India-China relations and an actual implementation of the spirit of cooperation and solidarity across South Asia.***

In this context, China's proposal of a new format of '2+1' model shows that it is serious about following a cooperative approach with India. It is important to remember that had China so chosen, it could have simply retained the status-quo – since it is much more equipped with resources and has India's neighbours much more favourably disposed towards itself – yet such rational wisdom is beginning to lose out to the approach of the larger spirit. China has rarely been predisposed towards regional antagonisms or competition. While in words, the country has always reiterated the support for joint cooperative action involving all countries, it has also been implementing it in action. When China proposed this format to Nepal, the latter changed its mindset and stopped subtly playing India and China against each other. ***These are the kind of changes that are necessary for the dream of Asian resurgence to even begin to realise itself – the old mentality of division has to go, and in***

current times, the developing relations between India and China have become an instrument for that.

The pursuit of shared Indo-China interests in Nepal has already revealed the areas where they have natural synergies. One of the major common goals of all three countries is to resist the spread of West-funded evangelical missions in Nepal. Nepal has been under intense pressure to amend its Constitution to allow conversions. The British ambassador in Nepal, in 2014, demanded that the country include “right to conversion” as a fundamental right. This would make easy the mission of Christian missionaries working relentlessly in the Hindu-majority country. According to a report, “At 10.93, Nepal has the fastest average annual growth rate of Christian conversions in Asia. Currently comprising 3.8 per cent of the Nepali population, the proportion of Christians is expected to double by 2020” (Ghimire 2018). The West has deployed endless human rights organizations and NGOs who can promote the cause of Christianity.

The Nepali government officials have alleged that in the wake of the 2015 earthquake, several Bibles and other religious materials were distributed tactfully along with “aid” by these NGOs. Things have reached such a point that, in June this year, the Nepali government shut down the controversial United Nations Department of Political Affairs (UN-DPA) operating in its territory, for subversive activities to fund secessionism in the Tarai region and for inflating the Maoist insurgents. Nepal also told off the EU for its recent temerity to suggest that the government remove the privileged castes and groups from the list of beneficiaries in representation to elected bodies. The country has now also stopped receiving donations from Western governments (Ghimire 2018).

Nepal has had little room to assert itself against the West,

due its immense poverty and heavy dependence on development aid given by the UN and Western agencies and NGOs. Under this immense pressure from the West, Nepal has strengthened the efforts to push the Western interventionist activities out of the country because of China-India cooperation in helping Nepal and since neither China nor India are favourably disposed towards sinister evangelical spread in the nation and Western influence in their backyard.

The Nepalese case was important to highlight. Keeping Nepal's unwanted compulsions in mind, can we still resent Chinese efforts to invest in the country? At the very least, there is a certainty that the Chinese will not change the Hindu-majority character of Nepal. For some reason, India has not been able to keep the West out of Nepal. The process has only started now.

It is the same in Muslim countries as well. The BRI has done a great service in ensuring that Muslim extremism and terrorist expansion in the region remains in check. Today, not only are Muslim countries not protesting against China's efforts to keep its Uighur Muslims in check, but are even actively helping China to crackdown on this population. The expansion of Chinese projects in Muslim countries like Pakistan and the developing relationship of China with these countries, will likely keep the extremist tendencies under control.

If today, countries like Egypt, Kazakhstan and Turkey and Saudi Arabia – which traditionally used to export Wahhabism to Asia – are instead helping China in keeping Islamic extremism in check, that means an immense positive change is underway. Tomorrow, Pakistan may also finally follow such a trajectory. Closer relationship of Pakistan with China will increase Pakistan's cooperation in cracking down on terrorists instead of encouraging them – as it has traditionally done.

For India, such a scenario would be particularly useful towards better relations between India and Pakistan. Already, as a part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the two countries agreed to participate in a joint military exercise and contribute to peace in the region.

Another area where India will benefit from greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, where China is playing a pro-active role. Much to the chagrin of the West, China seems to have disregarded the US's historical Afghan ultimatum and policy that any engagement with Taliban has to be an Afghan-led process – a policy which has led to a stalemate, since Taliban refuses to recognize the Afghan leadership and would rather talk directly with America. Filling this vacuum, China, which would prefer to ensure that its BRI investments are not threatened, has started talking to Taliban. The US has further been sidelined.

For India, the increasing Chinese role in Afghanistan is good news, especially in the aftermath of the cooperative spirit heralded by the Wuhan summit. To bring peace in Afghanistan – which is a precursor to any economic investments – China would not only neutralize Taliban, but also other Pakistan-sponsored terror groups in the region, like Haqqani Network, al-Qaeda, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – terror groups whose infestation is a threat to India, as much as to Afghanistan.

The US's shoddy approach, since Obama days, had brought things to such a pass. Therefore, Chinese presence in Afghanistan should not only be welcome, but is the need of the hour. China can also broker peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with Russia – which has been accused of supplying arms to

Taliban – and Iran, which would drive out these terror groups to an extent.

At the Wuhan summit, India and China jointly signaled to work together in Afghanistan. India gets more leverage through the Chinese approach than via the US. So far, India has displayed a reluctant, purely minimalistic economic approach in Afghanistan and would like to see peace in the country. The US's obstinacy was a hindrance and resulted in a multiplication of terror groups, right in India's backyard, while Russia continued to selfishly exploit the situation. Any solution will have to involve Pakistan. Under this broken scenario, the efforts by China to bring all on board, is a boon for India. India can never play a direct role in Afghan affairs due to its limited access, and such an ambition is not needed currently.

The benefits of India-China relationship have already been seen in the context of big changes it can bring in countries like Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan and changing India's attitude itself in the neighbourhood. These are just a few visible cases where the effects of the Wuhan summit are slowly becoming visible. This trend will further grow as India and China keep deepening their relationship and China has always treated India as an equal and, in many respects, as its cultural superior – which cannot be said of China's relationship with any other country.

India is tangibly reciprocating China's efforts, now. The positive effect of the Wuhan summit is being seen in several other areas of engagement as well, such as India's decision to not join the US-led trilateral launched on July 30th, along with Japan and Australia, to counter-balance China BRI's in the Indo-Pacific. India's refusal to endorse US's Indo-Pacific proposal was a good decision. The figure of '\$ 113 million' that the US – in a high profile event – supposedly committed to digital economy,

energy and infrastructure development projects in the region is a miniscule, token amount, and certainly nothing to rival the BRI. It is just as well that India has seen through their insincerity and token approach and is keeping out of it.

The Wuhan summit – and a series of diplomatic exchanges between the two countries after that – have taken their relationship to the best level in so many years and a degree of goodwill that was last seen only during Nehru’s initial years. The power-packed India-China relationship – as seen through the above cases – has the potential to solve many of the ills of the region, as well as mitigate many of India’s troubles such as terrorism and the historically troubled relationship with the Pakistani military. This engagement must continue to retain the present momentum, to stabilize the changes happening now.

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How Shall We Recover Our Lost Intellectual Freedom?

“How shall we recover our lost intellectual freedom and elasticity? By reversing, for a time at least, the process by which we lost it, by liberating our minds in all subjects from the thralldom to authority. That is not what reformers and the Anglicised require of us. They ask us, indeed, to abandon authority, to revolt against custom and superstition, to have free and enlightened minds. But they mean by these sounding recommendations that we should renounce the authority of Sayana for the authority of Max Muller, the Monism of Shankara for the Monism of Haeckel, the written Shastra for the unwritten law of European social opinion, the dogmatism of Brahmin Pandits for the dogmatism of European scientists, thinkers and scholars. Such a foolish exchange of servitude can receive the assent of no self-respecting mind. Let us break our chains, venerable as they are, but let it be in order to be free, – in the name of truth, not in the name of Europe. It would be a poor bargain to exchange our old Indian illuminations, however dark they may have grown to us, for a derivative European enlightenment or replace the superstitions of popular Hinduism by the superstitions of materialistic Science.”

– Sri Aurobindo

(Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo 12: 40)