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"The Missing Link": Exploring the Cultural Dimensions of Australia-India Relations

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Introduction

Australia is, for the most part, a multicultural success story. In fact, as many Western nations—such as Britain and Germany—have been questioning the value of multiculturalism, Australia has recently reaffirmed its commitment to diversity. Whether we choose to use the term multiculturalism or cultural diversity—as former Prime Minister John Howard preferred—we are unquestionably committed to our pluralistic and culturally complex society. Australia holds this in common with India. But when it comes to Australia and India recognising each other, we have, over the decades, run into trouble. As this paper suggests, this is because our mutual connections have been too narrowly

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1 I would like to acknowledge Professor David Walker's Australia-India research project, which I was involved with at Deakin University. That research informs this paper, some of which has been previously published in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* (December 2011) and *The Fearless Nadia Occasional Papers on India-Australia Relations* (Australia India Institute, Winter 2011).
defined, and the cultural diversity that each of us celebrate domestically has not been sufficiently understood when dealing with each other. When using the term "culture," this paper refers to the first anthropological definition set out by Edward Taylor in 1871. Taylor framed culture in its "ethnographic sense," thus applying culture to social interaction as the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." These attributes are, in turn, carried forward into our cross-cultural diplomatic engagement as members of international society.

Australia-India Relations

When thinking about what connects Australia and India, a set of shared attributes is repeatedly invoked: historical connections with the British Empire, the English language, parliamentary democracy, secular common law and cricket. For two culturally vibrant nations, this is a rather dreary set of characteristics and none, I would argue, would animate a sense of warmth and friendship when an Australian meets an Indian—except perhaps cricket. What does this mean for diplomatic engagement—either public or government—and why is it that successive Australian governments have struggled to find a sense of connection with India? At Track One level—that is, government-to-government—the Australia-India relationship is mostly framed within an economic and/or strategic prism. Here I search beyond these functional aspects of trade and security, to examine the nature of cultural engagement. When using the term "cultural engagement,"

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I refer to mutual understanding and sympathy towards those features of human interaction set out by Taylor. I look at this across two periods: the Hawke/Keating era 1983-1996 and the Howard era 1996-2007. But first I would like to briefly go back to the 1970s, when Asia moved into a more prominent foreign policy position for Australia.

As a non-aligned nation, India did not really enter Australian foreign policy thinking in any meaningful way until the Labor Party led by Gough Whitlam ended 23 years of Liberal governance. That era was dominated by staunch Anglophile Robert Menzies who strictly adhered to Cold War containment strategies such the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), which were particularly unpopular with India. The Whitlam Government sought to re-conceptualise Australia as a member of the Asia-Pacific region. Whitlam opened up dialogue with China with a view to breaking a foreign policy nexus, which had become constrained by Cold War bipolarity, and was the first Australian Prime Minister to visit India since 1959. He appointed Bruce Grant as High Commissioner to New Delhi with a directive “that Australia should seek more “substance” in its relations with India.”

At that time, Grant recalls, those relations were “characterised by a high degree of sentiment based on what the directive called, with almost imperceptible irony, our ‘shared experience’ as elements of the British Empire”—that is, “the English language, parliamentary democracy, the common law and social contacts through sport.” These elements of shared experience, and what they mean for India and Australia respectively, both connect and disconnect us. They are mostly, by nature, functional, rules based, and provide little insight into cultural determinants.

3 Bruce Grant, Gods and Politicians, Ringwood: Allen Lane, 1982, p. 15.
4 Bruce Grant, op.cit., p. 16.
For Australia, culture has played a role in "soft power" diplomacy since the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s the Australian government wanted Asia to know that it "was aware of its neighbours for reasons other than security." In the case of India, finding points of entry beyond the prosaic has been challenging. The political and institutional structures left behind by the British formed parallels between the two countries but to what extent do they shape our identities? One of the most frequently cited and celebrated inheritances from the British is democracy. But this similarity is somewhat overshadowed by difference: democracy in a population of one billion is vastly more complex than a democracy functioning in a population of just 23 million. But more important than the numbers is the context, within which lies the matter of identity. "In India" High Commissioner Grant observed in the 1970s, "the depth of civilisation gives meaning and order to life, with or without democracy. In Australia no such alternative exists." When Grant's posting to New Delhi drew to a close in 1976, the political crises that had tested the resilience of both democracies—the dismissal of Gough Whitlam and Indira Gandhi's Emergency—brought this into sharper focus: "even without democracy" Grant observed "India would remain a civilisation without democracy, Australia had no hope of becoming one."

So for this paper, set aside those frequently cited, symbolic points of connection and really think about how we have managed—and valued—the relationship in terms of real mutual, cultural understanding. I first look at the Labor years 1983 to 1996.

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5 Bruce Grant, op. cit., p. 43.
6 Bruce Grant, op. cit., p. ix.
7 Bruce Grant, op. cit., p. 179.
The Labor Years: 1983 to 1996

When Bill Hayden took the reins as Foreign Minister in the new Labor Government of Bob Hawke in 1983, he determined to invigorate the India-Australia relationship, which he believed had been neglected.8 Trade was inevitably the driving force, but for the first time since Prime Ministers Chifley and Nehru had found an affinity in the 1940s, the dynamic improved through a strong rapport between Bob Hawke and Rajiv Gandhi. In the 1980s this led to the founding of a series of institutions to support what looked to be a relationship on the improve. Nevertheless, in the 1980s a “lack of complementarity between the two economies”9 was noted. A resolution to this was sought in 1988 with the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on Australia-India Relations.

The report was released in 1990. It documented anomalies in Indian taxation and shipping, which were deemed to be obstructive to trade. It was recommended that a study on the importance of India in Australian affairs be undertaken.10 It made no mention of the presence, or absence, of cultural considerations in forging closer ties and stimulating a more productive economic relationship. Indeed, it appeared to do little to shift perceptions of India as exasperatingly reluctant to create the conditions that would give greater impetus to trade. Then-Foreign Minister Gareth Evans claimed that the time was ripe to “revitalise” the relationship. In 1989 Senator John Button, then Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce, visited India to explore the possibilities for partnerships. Still, however, despite the

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9 Meg Gurry, op. cit., p. 75.
10 Meg Gurry, op. cit., p. 76.
enthusiasm of Hawke and Evans to inject momentum into the relationship, Australia appeared no closer to developing more comprehensive insights into India. Button seemed to find little to recommend closer affiliation. During his meetings in India he observed that:

There were hardly any questions about Australia and few attempts at answering some of the questions which I had asked. There seemed an unbridgeable gulf of time, distance and culture.\textsuperscript{11}

It might not have occurred to Senator Button that the unbridgeable gulf was as much due to his poor grasp of Indian culture and history as to India's lack of curiosity about Australia. Indeed, Button's anachronistic view of India reflects what has been so difficult to dislodge from the Australian imagination. Recalling V. S. Naipaul's assessment of Indians as having no sense of race, Button thought that their "absence of a sense of race is compounded by the absence of a sense of continuity in the culture and in social and political institutions."\textsuperscript{12}

His observation represents the considerable way Australians still had to go, only a few decades ago, in grappling with their understanding of India. Impressions appeared to be locked within one primary frame of reference, the nation-state, which dated India less than half a century old at the time of Button's visit. The Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade report, published in July 1990 confirmed hat Australia's public "had been denied an accurate picture of India." It found that stereotypes lingered in the public imagination: "Australians hold hard, but ill-informed cultural stereotypes of India. Indians

\textsuperscript{12} John Button, op. cit., p. 139.
are supposedly lazy, religious, fatalistic, other-worldly, corrupt, poor, inefficient, unreliable and fertile.”

The Standing Committee also confirmed Button’s view that India was as ambivalent about Australia as it had become about India:

According to some submissions, attitudes to Australia in India are not highly developed. The Indian public’s knowledge is for the most part confined to awareness that we play cricket and that some of our television programs and films are worth watching. Beyond this, the Indian business community and Government have felt little need to consider Australia because they felt we had little to offer them. ... From India’s viewpoint, Australia was seen as little more than a satellite of the United Kingdom and the United States.

In 1989 Australia felt that it had a lot more to offer India’s growing middle class, which was expected to increase exponentially with its population and would demand consumer goods that would “open a number of windows of opportunity for Australia.” Beyond satisfying the consumer itch, however, Australia appeared to be lost when knowing what Indians responded to or how becoming more culturally literate—beyond speaking English and understanding cricket—might improve its relationship with India.


14 *Australia-India Relations*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

The Standing Committee’s summary under the heading “Cultural Relations” was a scant reference to India’s desire for Australia to promote Indian studies in Australian tertiary institutions, which the report admitted was only relevant in support of Australia’s “other national interests—presumably economic.”  

The remainder of the section on “Cultural Relations” was devoted to a discussion of sport, mostly cricket, as Australia’s point of cultural entry into India. Again, however, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s initiative in funding a sports exchange program was “intended to support trade linked opportunities” rather than promoting a more sophisticated or nuanced understanding of India.

Soon after, in 1991, the Melbourne South Asia Studies Group’s *Australia and India: The Next Ten Years*, was published in response to the Standing Committee report. The response revealed some of the reasons for Australians’ shallow perceptions of India. For example, a submission by a Radio Australia representative acknowledged that in the media, “as obviously in education, South Asia still doesn’t rate very highly.” He added that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s target priorities for the future ranked South Asia last in the Asia-Pacific region and that, in its perceptions of India, “ultimately news media have reflected the responses of the general community [which see Indians as] dismissive, patronising, discomfited, and lazy.”

It was not only the news media that remained disinterested in India. As recently as the 1990s popular Australian magazines

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16 *Australia-India Relations*, op. cit., p. 13.
19 *Australia and India*, op. cit., p. 60.
maintained a profile of India that fixated on stereotypes of strange gurus, cruelty and squalor—or promoted it as an exotic travel destination. In 1990, for example, while the government was analysing ways to improve Australia’s relationship with India, tabloid weekly magazines Australasian Post and People kept up a diet of Indian fare focussing on the bizarre, like the story about a guru who had not cut his hair in over four decades and lived entirely on milk.20

At the other end of the print media spectrum the Australian Quarterly, an established journal of the Australian Institute of Political Science, had considerably increased its interest in Asia during the 1990s. Its focus was, however, exclusively on East and Southeast Asia, with no articles about India appearing in that decade. It is clear when looking at the 1980s and 1990s that any comprehensive shift in perceptions of India still had many social and cultural layers to move through before it would pick up trade momentum, let alone a more comprehensive and sympathetic mutual understanding.

Obstacles to the trade relationship were eased after 1991 through new taxation arrangements, India’s liberalisation of foreign investment policy, and new tariff and licensing arrangements. By 1995 India was enthusiastically referred to as a “mega-business opportunity.”21 Even John Button, when revisiting India in 1994 was optimistic, but lamented that: “Too few Australians have caught the new mood of a country with which we share a common language, similar institutions and a common

20 David Flood, “42 Years without a Haircut,” Australasian Post (Melbourne), 10 November 1990, pp. 32-33.
21 Meg Gurry, op. cit., pp. 81-82.
business culture.” Trade Minister Bob McMullan the following year predicted “the beginning of a new phase in the development of a comprehensive partnership between Australia and India.”

The “Australia Looks West” initiative sought to renew links with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Predictably, this next “new phase” gave scant attention to the seemingly impenetrable cultural space. Instead this “revitalised” approach saw yet another rebirthing of the trade and security dialogue. In a Roundtable Discussion on Australia-India Relations in New Delhi in 1995, this point was vividly emphasised by Professor Ken McPherson during deliberations on the cultural elements of the relationship. In response to a point raised by an Indian correspondent for The Australian newspaper, which included a reference to the Indian Ocean and “threat perceptions,” McPherson replied:

If anybody raises the question of Australian threat about the Indian Ocean I swear I will go to that window and throw myself out. It is a red herring, it is dead. Believe me it is buried.

Further roundtable discussions organised on behalf of the Australia India Council in February 1996 included a separate session on culture for the first time. And for the first time, culture was approached as a dialogue, rather than a showcase of our cultural wares or an entry point into stimulating trade. The day’s

22 Meg Gurry quotes John Button in an article appearing in The Age (Melbourne), 31 October 1994, p. 15. Meg Gurry, op. cit., p. 82.


discussions were concluded with the observation that raising questions of culture between Australia and India had been more important than answering them.\textsuperscript{25} Unfortunately, those questions would hang in the air for some time to come as the nascent cultural dialogue was interrupted by a change of government in both Australia and India. In both countries a significant break with the past occurred when National Congress lost power for the first time since Independence and Labor's 13-year run ended. When the Howard Government took office in 1996, it seemed that the more things changed, the more they would stay the same. Howard observed that India remained a "blind spot" for Australia, and with a sense of déjà vu vowed to give "particular priority" to pursuing "a more sustained relationship"\textsuperscript{26} with India.

\textbf{The Liberal Years: 1996 to 2007}

Initially, the Howard Government's efforts towards South Asia, and India in particular, looked quite promising, but the "sensitive and emerging"\textsuperscript{27} relationship failed to maintain the momentum that an initial rush of enthusiasm had suggested. The Liberal-National Coalition's early intentions of nurturing a more sustained relationship with India were soon overshadowed in two ways: first, by a focus on relations with the US; and, later, by its response to India's Pokhran nuclear tests. It was also undermined early on

\textsuperscript{25} Ken McPherson, op. cit., p. 120.

\textsuperscript{26} Meg Gurry, op. cit., p. 94, quotes the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's \textit{Australia Through the Eyes of India}, AGPS, Canberra 1996 and Senator Brownhill speaking at an Australia-India Council Meeting on 19 April 1996, p. 87.

by what appears to typify Australia's efforts in India: a cultural clumsiness, no doubt brought about by the mutual ignorance already identified. A central part of the new push into India was the "Australia-India New Horizons" initiative to:

promote a broader image of Australia in India by showcasing the strength of our institutions, our multi-ethnic composition, our dynamic and eclectic cultural tradition and our expertise in technological and scientific innovation.28

This was a six million dollar initiative conceived by the previous Labor government, and was to be launched by the Australian Prime Minister in India in October 1996. At the last minute, however, John Howard reneged on the promised prime ministerial launch because, it was believed, he was busy planning for the upcoming APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) meeting.29 At the time Australia did not support India's desire to join APEC and this was a prickly issue. But this failure to fulfil a promise underscored the impression that India was a lesser priority for Australia.

The "New Horizons" program was largely promoted to facilitate still-underdeveloped trade opportunities, yet what it also promised was a focus on cultural understanding between the two countries, which remained chronically under-valued. Although the cultural program was considered a success, it was marred by a further faux pas on Australia's part. Unfortunately at the hugely popular performance of Circus Oz in Delhi, 800 invited guests had to be turned away for lack of space at the venue. Some

Indians complained that “by extending invitations to more people than could be accommodated in a venue, the Australian organisers had insulted their hosts.”

While a logistical error such as this might well have occurred for reasons other than Australia’s insensitivity towards India, coupled with the Prime Minister’s decision not to attend, and its steadfast position on APEC, existing irritants in a relationship searching for a foothold were compounded. It is important for Australian foreign policy makers to begin the process of understanding why this is the case by looking beyond the stock issues of trade and security and delving more deeply, and more critically, into Australian perceptions of India. Australian images of what it has in common with India have long stagnated as those rather colourless characteristics mentioned earlier. Cricket appears to be the sole animating feature of the relationship, which again, is a legacy of the British.

In one of the few comprehensive studies of Australia-India relations Meg Gurry concluded: “In the absence of this ‘imperial window,’ fear of India came to replace the nostalgia [for the British Empire] and to dominate Australian thinking.” Indians are articulate and enjoy dialogue. Indeed, some Indians found the “New Horizons” performing arts program to be lacking in the “spoken word.” After all, India is responsive to a cultural tradition of oral and performative storytelling through its epic texts, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana. It is the longevity, adaptability and interpretive nature of this performative storytelling tradition that many argue has metamorphosed into

30 Bernie Bishop and Deborah McNamara, op. cit., p. 176.
31 Meg Gurry, op. cit., p. 93.
32 Bernie Bishop and Deborah McNamara, op. cit., p. 176.
India's hugely successful film industry. Promoting one's own image is not enough. Australians need to understand how they might be received. Public diplomacy must therefore lead with cultural understanding—as a mutual and reciprocal exchange.

It was observed at the "Midnight to Millennium: Australia-India Connections" conference in Canberra in July 1999 that "Australia's relations with India and Pakistan have suffered because of major cultural and ideological differences [which] manifest from an inexplicable aloofness or even dislike towards South Asia."33 This attitude came to the fore when the Howard Government reprimanded India for its Pokhran nuclear test in 1998. Its tone was seen as supercilious and patronising, and relations entered a new, even more troubled phase.

In trying to repair the damage, a familiar initiative to "redefine" its relationship with India was undertaken in 2004. In January that year a report titled, *India-Australia: Redefining Relations for a Strong Friendship* was published by the High Commission of India in Canberra. Its contributors once again stressed the need for a more focussed commitment if Australia was to reap the full benefits of India's economic renaissance. On his visit to India in March 2004, Prime Minister John Howard remarked on the need for a "new vigour and dynamism" in bilateral ties.34 Howard echoed the same call that had reverberated since Gough Whitlam visited India in the early 1970s. In 2004, the nature of "redefining" bilateral ties revolved around the standard, functional ideals of seizing economic opportunities and reaching mutual defence agreements, specifically in relation to the

33 Marika Vicziany, op. cit., p. 76.
Indian Ocean. Remaining critically, and predictably, absent was any real attempt to not just redefine but to actually define, the nature of India-Australia relationship in cultural terms.

In his contribution to the Redefining Relations for a Strong friendship publication, Australian Professor Dennis Rumley prioritised three areas of importance in increasing “mutual consciousness” in a shifting global and regional order: geopolitical, cultural and economic. The geopolitical shift, Rumley argued, was driven by the changing economic status of India and China. This was reordering regional relations. Rumley recommended Australia’s resharpening of its focus on India in order to maximise the potentials of India-Australia trade. This was accompanied by new sense of urgency—clearly India’s economic boom would not wait for Australia. Rumley’s third priority was a renewed focus on the cultural dimension—a “respect for difference and to celebrate plurality.”

Where Rumley’s call for the strengthening of cultural ties was predictable was in his observation:

Australia needs to project an image of itself that is helpful to pursuing national security and commercial interests, and, in the case of India-Australia relations, this can be done by viewing cultural differences “as a challenge in cultural bridge-building,” rather than as a cause of fear or distaste.

The difficulties in Rumley’s views are threefold. First, his statement suggests that cultural literacy in international relations is a purely utilitarian aim in the service of trade and defence. Delimited as a function of economics and security, cultural literacy is therefore not only devalued as a mere diplomatic device, but

35 Dennis Rumley, op. cit., p. 19.
36 Dennis Rumley, op. cit., p. 19.
more importantly it undervalues the importance of culture as a precursor to the other necessary, but more functional, diplomatic concerns. This stultifies the dynamism desired, as expressed by Prime Minister Howard, but such a utilitarian view of culture also risks the relationship's descent into confusion and disillusionment as demonstrated during the 1996 "New Horizons" launch.

Second, Rumley's use of the words "fear and distaste" reflect the degree to which Australians appear unable to dislodge obsolete views of India that are mediated through a "fear of dirt, fear of illness ... fear of the unavoidable presence of misery" to quote Australian author David Malouf. Moreover, it would seem inconceivable for the words "fear and distaste" to be used in a discussion of Australia's relationships with other Asian nations such as Japan or Indonesia, especially as recently as 2004.

Finally, Rumley's words "Australia needs to project an image of itself" suggest that its image remains either undetermined or somewhat malleable depending upon who it has set its diplomatic designs upon. Hence, it might seem somewhat insincere. It also reflects why Australian identity might appear ambiguous, or difficult to determine, for Indians who possess a clear sense of identity without resorting to "image." These issues of identity are not helped by Australia's close association with the United States, which is often seen in the region as prioritised over its relationships with Asia. This only reaffirms ingrained perceptions of Australia as a disciple of Western interests and with a hesitant sense of self. This is of profound importance for Australia's interactions with India, and Asia more broadly, where a sense of self pre-dates the Commonwealth, parliamentary democracy, the nation-state, and the game of cricket.

Conclusion

In attempting to overcome the "blind spot" in its relations with India, Australia sought more "substance" in the 1970s, attempted to "reinvigorate" and "revitalise" relations in the 1980s, and recognised the dynamic as "sensitive and emerging" in the 1990s. But in each decade there have been setbacks in what has continued to be a "brittle" relationship into the 2000s. A 2012 study—Beyond the Lost Decade—undertaken by the Australia India Institute claimed that the ten years from 2001 to 2011 were marred by "nagging tensions and bad publicity."\footnote{John McCarthy et al., Beyond the Lost Decade: Report of the Australia India Institute Perceptions Taskforce, Melbourne: Australia India Institute, 2012, p. 9.} Like many reports that have gone before it, in 2012 it was once again claimed that the Australia-India relationship was "on the mend."\footnote{Beyond the Lost Decade, op. cit., p. 9.} Among a comprehensive list of 23 recommendations for the Australian government, and nine set out for the Indian government, is the suggestion that Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade double its public diplomacy budget for India. This would be a very positive move in generating Australia understanding in India, provided that areas for cultural contact are sensitively targeted. Coupled with recommendations that the Hindi language and Indian history, geography and culture be included in the Australian curriculum would, in the long term, deliver greater India awareness among Australians. In the short term, however, the latter seems unlikely.

The recent introduction of a national history curriculum in Australia, for example, has given little priority to India, except when framing it within the theme of decolonisation, thereby setting India within the context of Western imperialism and Western ideas of
the nation. Clearly, therefore, there is still a great deal of work to be done in educating Australians about India. In diplomatic terms, the role of culture is still under-defined and mostly conceptualised as so-called "soft diplomacy," thus avoiding the hard work of shifting deeply imbedded images of India as cultural "other." As the Beyond the Lost Decade report found, "entrenched resentments and negative perceptions" continue to undermine closer collaboration in areas such as security. These perceptions must be overcome at "grassroots levels" as noted two decades earlier, in The Asia-Australia Survey 1997-98. For forty years Australia has focused upon redefining, reinvigorating and revitalising its relationship with India, and I suspect it will continue to do so until it sufficiently recognises the centrality of cultural understanding. Culture is no mere diplomatic device that is secondary to trade and security. Australia must seek out the complex functions of culture on a range of levels that move beyond the model of culture as a showcase of artistic wares, to deeper appreciations of social sensitivities, historical connections, and national aspirations.

References


41 Beyond the Lost Decade, op. cit., p. 10.


