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ILLUMINATING THE VOID: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN AUSTRALIAN-INDIAN ENGAGEMENT 1983-2006¹

Sally Percival Wood

This paper examines Australia's search for meaning in its relationship with India which, since the end of World War Two, has 'drifted'. Moving beyond the well worn themes of the Commonwealth, the English language, democracy and cricket, it seeks to understand the role of culture and asks whether a lack of cultural literacy has steered the relationship into a diplomatic void. For Australia, culture has played a role in "soft power" diplomacy since the 1970s when it wanted Asia to know that it was aware of its region on more than grounds of trade and security. However, finding points of entry between a society that has evolved over thousands of years, and the other a mere two centuries, has proved challenging. In the absence of an immediate sense of cultural compatibility, the ties that bind Australia and India are inevitably defined through the colonial past and the post-colonial present, both of which are defined by the West and mediated through modernity. But even here lies a point of contention as to whether Australia does share "postcoloniality" with India, having never experienced a moment of severance from its colonial past. The paper takes a bipartisan approach, directing its focus on various attempts made to culturally engage with India by both Labor and Liberal governments in Australia over the last 25 years.

Keywords: Australian-Indian relations, cultural literacy, diplomacy, colonialism

Introduction

If diplomatic dynamics between nations are any indication of their mutual sensitivities towards culture, India and Australia have been languishing within an anachronistic paradigm for much of the post World War Two era. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Australian politics was dominated by the Liberal Party and its leader, arch Anglophile Sir Robert Menzies, whose foreign policy orientation was firmly fixed upon Australia's 'great and powerful friends' in the West. This was only briefly interrupted by a more Asia-friendly Labor Government under Gough Whitlam (1972-1975). Whitlam sought to re-conceptualise Australia as a member of the Asia-Pacific region: he opened up diplomatic dialogue with China, and he was the first Australian Prime Minister to visit India since 1959. Whitlam appointed Bruce Grant as High Commissioner to New Delhi with a directive that "arose from a single idea - that Australia should seek more 'substance' in its relations with India" (Grant 1982: 15). 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, with its heritage of 'the English language, parliamentary democracy, the common law and social contacts through sport'" (Grant 1982:16). Noticeably absent

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from this rather prosaic collection of attributes that bind Australia and India through their colonial ties to Britain – which are still routinely invoked as fundamental points of connection – is any cultural component, unless sport can be coopted into that category. The driving force of our sporting association is, of course, cricket. But while India stakes its claims to cultural identity into a deep historical terrain that would find cricket merely sprouting on the surface, for Australia, sport and cricket have put down their roots as defining elements of cultural identity. This need not diminish our shared passion for cricket, but it would be simplistic to imagine India as a cricket-loving nation in quite the same way as we see ourselves.

Since the colonial era trade connections have also been made and are almost as old as Australia itself. Shipments of Australian coking coal to India date back to 1801 (Australian Parliament 1989: 00877), horses from Western Australia were supplied to the British Raj from the 1830s and India sent textiles, tea and various condiments to Australia's colonies in the nineteenth century (Walker 1999: 15). However, one of the most frequently cited, and lauded, inheritances from the British is democracy. Democracy is invoked as a central unifying feature of India and Australia but again, the similarities tend to be overshadowed by the dissimilarities on closer scrutiny, as democracy in a population of one billion is obviously vastly more complex than a democracy functioning in a population of 20 million. More important than the numbers however is the context, within which lies the matter of culture and 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" (Grant 1982: ix). When his posting to New Delhi drew to a close in 1976, the political crises that had tested the resilience of both democracies – the dismissal of Whitlam and Indira Gandhi's Emergency – brought this into sharper focus: "even without democracy" he observed "India would remain a civilisation...without democracy, Australia had no hope of becoming one" (Grant 1982: 179).

This paper argues that the sense of diplomatic 'drift' that has come to characterise the Australia-India relationship is more problematic than simply the different orientations that shift between Liberal and Labor governments. Indeed, governments of both complexion inevitably invoke a recurring theme to 'rediscover', 'reinvigorate' or 'redefine' the relationship to the point that redefining the relationship has come to define it. To explore this curiously lacklustre relationship, the paper focuses on Australian-Indian engagement from 1983 to 2006 which is evenly shared by Labor and Liberal governments: Labor under Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996 and Liberal under Howard from 1996 to 2006.

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 (Gurry 1996: 73). 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 institutions such as the Australia-India Business Council to support what looked to be a relationship on the improve. Exports to India were already well established, particularly in raw materials, but expanded to include items such as specialized manufacturing plant and equipment, automotive components and specialized industrialised machinery (Australian Parliament 1989: 00877). Indian exports to Australia comprised textiles and fabric, clothing and accessories, jute and hessian, tea, coffee, leather goods, handicrafts and carpets (Australian Parliament 1989). This range of goods typified the Australian and Indian economies – what in the 1980s would have been called first and third world economies – and it also, to some extent, frames the identities of the two countries. Australian exports derived from mining, raw industrial materials and commercial farming arising from an energetic free market approach to the economic potential of the land. Conversely, India's export repertoire consisted of mostly culturally infused items and the smaller scale farming of cash crops in an economy that since independence had focused on domestic sustenance within a socialist model rather than global trade.

What can these economic and trade differences tell us about culture? One example is their respective approaches to the land, which can yield important insights into cultural identity. Connections have been made between the two countries toiling under the constraints of the "tyranny of unforgiving, aggressive land," that forms a particular type of stoicism in the national character and unique relationships with the land (Grant 1982: 5). True, India and Australia share strong cultural relationships with often harsh environments that are hot, dusty and given to drought, which adds a resilient dimension to national identity. But typically, the drawing of such a correlation will stimulate a conversation about difference. Australia's relationship with the land is historically and culturally masculine by nature. This is reflected, for example, in Australian landscape painting from the nineteenth to as recently as the mid-twentieth century. Landscape painting was the primary expression of the national self, outside of literature, through which Anglo-European settlers forged an identity, a sense of place and ownership within their new country. Paintings, mostly by male artists, often depicted settler's efforts to domesticate what was essentially an untamed continent.

After independence India culturally reinforced its new national identity absent of the British through its passionate embrace of film. The iconic film of this era is Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957). As an affirmation of the national self *Mother India*, on its release, was promoted as a film "from India, the ancient cradle of humanity" in which "two mothers rise, earth and woman!"² (Mishra 2002: 77). *Mother India*, as Grant suggests, similarly tells the story of environmental struggle

but it does so through a feminine lens. Radha (played by Nargis), and the earth are, as the title suggests, mothers: nurturers of life. Rather than subduing the land Radha works within its often awesome power over life in a relationship of interdependence and reverence.

It is possible to invoke many examples of gendered nationalism in Australia and India; they are widely documented. Pushing further into the national psyche, however, are our Hindu and Christian relationships to the land.³

"By their devotions, Hindus lay claim to the land, not always to own or govern it, but certainly to worship it, and no government in Indian history has successfully prevented them from doing so. The land is too big, the faith too deeply imbedded in the people's consciousness." (Kremmer 2006: 22)

By sharp contrast, Australia was built on possession and dominance over the land. Despite deeply imbedded connections to the land in the consciousness of indigenous Australians, every government since the arrival of the British has disregarded this affinity in favour of commerce. Understanding these layers of cultural difference will not, of course, change the dynamic of bilateral trade, but it might help stimulate curiosity and shift the consciousness to subtler levels of understanding.

In the 1980s a "lack of complementarity between the two economies" was noted (Gurry 1996: 75) and in 1988 a Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on Australia-India Relations sought to examine this. The report, released in 1990, documented anomalies in Indian taxation and shipping which were deemed to be obstructive to trade and recommended a study on the importance of India in Asian affairs (Gurry 1996: 76). 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. The report attracted little interest either in Australia or India, however, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans claimed that the time was ripe to "revitalise" the relationship. In 1989 Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce, Senator John Button, visited India to explore the possibilities for partnerships. Still, however, despite the enthusiasm of Hawke and Evans to inject momentum into the relationship, Australia appeared no closer to developing more comprehensive insights into India and Button seemed to find little to recommend closer affiliation. In meetings 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." (Button 1994: 143).

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. 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" (Button 1994: 139). His observation represents the considerable way Australians still had to go, just twenty years 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 at the time of Button's visit. Like V.S. Naipaul, Australians appeared unable to dislodge the bleak views of India reminiscent of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), which Gandhi referred to as a "drain inspector's report". Indeed, the 1990 Senate Standing Committee report confirmed this to be the case. Not only did the Committee find that 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 are supposedly lazy, religious, fatalistic, other-worldly, corrupt, poor, inefficient, unreliable and fertile." (Australian Parliament 1990: 8) .

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." (Australian Parliament 1990: 10-11).

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" (Australian Parliament 1989: 00878). Beyond satisfying the consumer itch, however, Australia appeared to be lost when knowing what Indians responded to or how becoming more culturally literate might improve its relationship with India. The Standing Committee's summary under the heading Cultural Relations made 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" (Australian Parliament 1990: 13). It did not delve more deeply into the nature of culture or cultural relations as more than an economic stimulant. 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, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's initiative in funding a sports exchange program was "intended to support trade linked opportunities" (Australian Parliament 1990: 14) 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's study which was hailed as "the most comprehensive survey of Australia-India relations ever undertaken" (Melbourne South Asian Studies Group [MSASG]1991:ii). Submissions to the MSASG revealed some of the reasons for Australians' shallow perceptions of India. For example, one submission by a Radio Australia representative acknowledged that in the media, "as obviously in education, South Asia still doesn't rate very highly" (MSASG 1991: 60). He added that the Australian Broadcasting Commission'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" (MSASG 1991: 60). It was not only the news media that remained disinterested in India. Popular Australian magazines maintained a profile of India that fixated on this set of stereotypes that moved between images of strange gurus, cruelty and squalor, to promoting India as a travel destination focussing on its past glories, such as maharajahs' palaces. For instance, while the government was analysing ways to improve Australia's relationship with India, mainstream 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 (Flood 1990: 32-33). At the other end of the intellectual spectrum the *Australian Quarterly*, an established journal of the Australian Institute of Political Science, had considerably increased its interest in Asia during the 1990s. However its focus was exclusively on East and South-East Asia: no articles about India appeared.

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" (Gurry 1996: 81-82). Even Senator Button, when re-visiting 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 business culture." (Gurry 1996: 82) 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"⁴ (Gurry 1996:84) while 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 that seemingly impenetrable space: the cultural dimension. Instead a "revitalised" approach to trade and security was advocated. In a Roundtable Discussion on Australia-India Relations in New Delhi in 1995, during deliberations on the cultural elements of the relationship, Professor Ken McPherson picked up this point with some exasperation. 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.”
(Roundtable Discussion on Australia India Relations [RDAIR] 1995: 110).

The roundtable discussion, the second organised on behalf of the Australia India Council, included a separate session for culture for the first time that year. The day’s discussions were concluded with the observation that raising questions of culture between Australia and India had been more important than answering them (RDAIR 1995: 120). Unfortunately, the questions would hang in the air some time to come as the nascent cultural dialogue was interrupted by changes of government in both Australia and India: India’s National Congress lost power for and Labor’s 13 year run ended. While the political landscape in both countries took on a rather different hue, the opaque tones of the bilateral relationship were rather more stubborn. When the Howard Government took office in 1996, it deduced that India remained a “blind spot” and with a sense of *déjà vu* vowed to give “particular priority” to pursuing “a more sustained relationship” with India.⁵ (Gurry 1996: 94, 87).

The Liberal Years – 1996 to 2006

Initially, the Howard Government’s efforts towards South Asia, and India in particular, looked quite promising, but the “sensitive and emerging” (Vicziány 1999: 73) 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 its re-energised relationship with the US over its regional partners; and, later, by its response to the Pokhran nuclear tests. It was also undermined early on 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” (Cotton and Ravenhill 2001: 65-66). 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 2006. At the last minute, on October 6, John Howard reneged on the promised prime ministerial launch because, it was believed, he was busy planning for the upcoming APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Community) meeting (Bishop and McNamara 1997: 166). Australia’s refusal to welcome India into the APEC fold was already 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* when 800 invited guests had to be turned away from the hugely popular performance of Circus Oz in Delhi 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" (Bishop and McNamara 1997:176).

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 derivative of the British Empire, that is, the Commonwealth, political democracy, comparable legal institutions, and the English language. 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." (Gurry 1996: 93) For the first time, the previous Labor Government, particularly with its Roundtable Discussion in February 1996, approached the issue of culture as a dialogue, rather than a showcase of our cultural wares or an entry point into stimulating trade. Indians are articulate and enjoy dialogue. Indeed, some Indians found of the 'New Horizons' performing arts program to be lacking in the "spoken word" (Bishop and McNamara 1997: 176). After all, India is responsive to a cultural tradition of oral and performative storytelling through its epic texts, such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. *Rāmlilā*, theatrical adaptations of the deeds of Rama taken from the *Ramayana*, have been central to local cultural life for centuries and in 2005 were recognised by UNESCO as a masterpiece of the world's Oral and Intangible Heritage (Kremmer 2006: 384). It is the longevity, adaptability and interpretive nature of this performative storytelling tradition that many argue has metamorphosed into a hugely successful film industry. Like the more subtle understanding of how Indian and Australian relationships with the land offers insights into cultural identity, understanding India's textual and performative traditions can only enhance cultural sensitivity.

The Roundtable had sparked some feisty debate as some entrenched impressions – of Australia as homogenous, overtly masculine and obedient to the

West, and India, as poor, economically inert and diplomatically stubborn – were challenged. The discourse returned to the customary “showcase” modes of cultural exchange which, though certainly not disadvantageous, have not been proven to shift more deeply imbedded cultural perceptions. The outlook expressed for Australia-India relations in *The Asia-Australia Survey 1997-98* put it this way:

“...perceptions will change over a period of time, especially as trade, aid and educational and cultural links improve between India and Australia. The real success, however, will be achieved only when the images of the “other” change at grassroots levels.”⁶ (Bishop and McNamara 1997:181)

It would appear, however, that by 1998 the old “veil of ignorance” (Gurry 1996:90) had descended once again when India’s nuclear tests caused a serious diplomatic rupture which exposed not only the depth of Australia’s ignorance about modern India and its aspirations but also the purpose of what India called “peaceful nuclear tests”. Australia’s exaggerated rebuke of India over the nuclear tests at Pokhran was not backed by support for India’s defence objectives, which were largely driven by often tense relationships with its nuclear-armed neighbours Pakistan and China.

“What Indians and Pakistanis resented was not so much the content of Australian criticism, but rather its tone, which was seen as patronising and supercilious. According to one senior Indian diplomat, [Foreign Minister Alexander] Downer in his remonstrations treated India as if it were a colony rather than an ancient civilisation and sovereign republic.” (Cotton and Ravenhill 2001: 67).

The rift that this caused, despite Australia’s overtures to India in 2000 in order to mend the relationship – mainly out of fear of damage to the growing trade opportunities India presented – settled in the Indian psyche in much the same way as the racism of the White Australia Policy had lingered well after its dismantling. It confirmed in Indian thinking that Australian foreign policy was little more than an imitation of US policy, albeit asserted rather less adroitly. This was apparent in the author’s discussions with strategic affairs editors of major Indian daily newspapers in New Delhi in 2007.⁷ One saw Australia’s response to the nuclear tests as a reflection of its pro-NATO, pro-US stance, and what was thought to be a friendly relationship was exposed as one that could quickly shift to hostility. Another commented candidly that India sees Australia “as an adjunct of the United States – by itself it doesn’t matter.” While the rapidly changing nature of Australian-Indian relations was acknowledged by one editor, who was positive about its future, he acknowledged that “because of what happened in ‘98 there has been a lot of dissatisfaction with Australia...so politically we’re not doing much with them now.” These comments, made nine years after the Pokhran nuclear tests, affirm India’s disenchantment, possibly even a sense of betrayal, in its relationship with Australia. It also suggests a lack of trust. What is perhaps more disturbing for Australia, after a series of missed opportunities in its stop-start relationship with India, is the potential for Indian indifference towards Australia to become entrenched. 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" (Vicziány 1999:76). Rather than repairing the "blind spots" in the relationship that it had recognised when coming to office in 1996, it appeared that the Liberal Government was steering the relationship into a void.

In averting this prospect, a new (though familiar) initiative to "redefine" Australia's relationship with India was undertaken in 2004. In January that year, *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 Howard remarked on the need for a "new vigour and dynamism" in bilateral ties (Rumley 2004:18). It echoed the same call that had reverberated since 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 Indian Ocean. Remaining critically, and predictably, absent was any real attempt to not just redefine, but actually define, the nature of India-Australia relations 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. A shift in the geopolitical dimension, he determined, was driven by the changing economic status and global positioning of India and China, calling for a redefinition of Australia's relationships in the region more broadly. On the economic front, Australia needed to sharpen its focus in order to maximise the potentials of the India-Australia trade relationship. But for a new sense of urgency, now that India's economic boom was clearly not waiting for Australia, these two sets of priorities demonstrated that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Rumley's third priority, a renewed focus on the cultural dimension, called for a "respect for difference and to celebrate plurality" (Rumley 2004:19). Where Rumley's call for the strengthening of cultural ties becomes predictable is in his observation that:

"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." (Rumley 2004: 19).

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 this way culture is not only devalued as a mere diplomatic

device, but more importantly it is undervalued as a mere precursor to more pressing diplomatic concerns. This stultifies the dynamism desired, as expressed by 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, at many levels of the social spectrum, 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 (Gurry 1996: 93). 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, 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 adherence to US foreign policy during the Liberal years, which reaffirmed ingrained perceptions of Australia as a disciple of Western interests with a hesitant sense of self. This is of profound importance for Australia's interactions with India, where a sense of self pre-dates the Commonwealth, parliamentary democracy, the nation-state, and the game of cricket.

Conclusion

Australia is no longer the culturally uniform nation that it strived to be during the years of restricted immigration which lasted until the early 1970s. Since that time, there has been perpetual redefinition, not only of its relationship with India, but a pressure to redefine its relationship with itself as its population evolves into one of increasing cultural diversity. The rapidity of change in Australia's cultural landscape has created a degree of internal social pressures and this has been exacerbated by external pressures around 'otherness' since September 2001. Rather than expanding cultural awareness, this has seen an increasing tendency towards defining each other through the narrow lens of ideology. We see this in an increased reliance on concepts such as political democracy, concepts of 'nation', and citizenship as ways of understanding the world. For Australia and India ideas such as common law and the parliamentary system offer some sense of historical bond, but they are impersonal and cannot be expected to provide meaning when an Australian meets an Indian. After all, people represent nations and forge relationships. Rearticulating the historical links of nationhood therefore seems to be redundant in defining the foundations for friendship.

Given the longevity of the "blind spot", the "sense of drift", in the Australia-India relationship we can safely conclude that the past, and the perpetual redefining

of the future, has failed. It is time to reorient the paradigms of time and space. This might seem somewhat abstract, but it simply means a loosening of the restrictions simultaneously imposed by history and by Australia's "tendency to view [its] regional relations in terms of future potential rather than existing reality" (Cotton and Ravenhill 2001: 68). Globalisation has shifted the immediacy with which the world is now linked and the future, as they say in advertising, is now. Globalisation similarly shifts the spatial paradigm, and pondering the questions of whether Australia considers India a part of its Asia-Pacific neighbourhood, or indeed whether Australia perceives itself as an Asian nation, become less relevant. For over a decade, it has been acknowledged that negotiating cultural difference remains a central problem in the bilateral relationship and the differences that have been referred to in this discussion – from our respective relationships to the land, to the expression of textual and oral traditions – are an example of this. An authentic desire to build a strong relationship will be motivated by this sort of cultural curiosity, rather than geopolitical pedantry. The gritty diplomatic matters of trade and security will be better supported if the exploratory dialogue continues to engage culture as more than an artefact or an entertainment, but as a way of knowing each other.

This paper therefore resists drawing conclusions that might suggest that the job of identifying the issues easily brings about their resolution. The Australia-India dynamic is far too intricate, and far too stimulating a discussion, for such a neat outcome. What we share are similarities, which veer off into dissimilarities, and convergences that wind their way into divergence, much of which stems from the cultural complexities of our internal pluralities. In 1995 when summing up the session on Culture at the Roundtable Discussion on Australia India Relations, chair Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee alluded to the value of this approach when she observed:

"I feel that there is a growing realisation that a national identity, whether it is Australian or Indian, is not an essentially unified category. It is this awareness of heterogeneity and multiplicity that could unite our two large countries in a search for the methodology of the study of culture..." (RDAIR] 1995: 86).

Jaya jaya bheda!

Notes

1. Quoted from the Indian film magazine *Filmfare*, 2 February 1959.
2. The disjuncture of attitudes towards (wo)man's relationship to the land can be traced back to the cosmologies of Hinduism and Christianity which provide very different interpretations of the human relationship with the earth they inherit. In the Bible man was given 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' (See *The First Book of Moses: Genesis 1:26, Holy Bible*.) Hinduism's *Aitareya Upanishad* presents a very different creation story in which the earth is created by 'the self' (*âtman*), manifesting the physical elements of the mind, the breath and the skin and hair of the body (*purusha*) in corresponding

parts with nature. This presents man as the microcosm of the earth, as macrocosm, and, as such, man and the earth are cosmically 'one', while in the Christian tradition man is granted dominance over the earth, a separate entity from himself.

3. Meg Gurry quotes Senator Bob McMullan's address to the Australia-India Council Roundtable, 'Australia and India: Building on Change', on February 14, 1996, in New Delhi.
4. Meg Gurry quotes the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Australia Through the Eyes of India*, AGPS, Canberra 1996 on p.94 and Senator Brownhill speaking at an Australia-India Council Meeting on April 19, 1996 on p. 87.
5. Quoting Samina Yasmeen, Department of Political Science, University of Western Australia.
6. Interviews with the strategic affairs editors and correspondents, who remain unnamed at their request, from *Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, and *India Today* were conducted in New Delhi in January 2007.

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