

## **The Economic Times**

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India: A rising great power in 2008?

India continues to be the flavour of the year and the phrase 'rising great power' is heady praise for a one billion collective that has yet to shed its colonial DNA. Hence any kind of accolade and affirmation from the west in particular is uncritically welcomed and adds to the notion that the Indian elephant has arrived in the 21st century — albeit with the Chinese dragon.

'India as a rising great power' (IRGP) was the theme of an international conference held in Delhi (April 18-20) under the aegis of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London and had an impressive mix of participants. But clearly the mismatch between the external view of India which is more rosy and perhaps exaggerated and the reality that is India with its robust GDP growth rate masking Bharat and its glaring socio-economic inequities cannot be wished away. India alas, has many potentialities but is far from becoming a great power. The perceived 'rise' is a case of flattering to deceive.

For India to 'rise', its one billion plus must be lifted out of different levels of impoverishment accompanied by a tangible increase in human security indices. Various estimates have been released over the last year by different agencies about poverty alleviation and while some remain contested, figures culled from the surveys of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) and the 2007 report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), also known as the Arjun Sengupta Report, offer a more sobering contrast. One extrapolation suggests that 77% of the India's working population lives on less than Rs 20 per day — which is a little over half a US dollar a day. India may have actually re-defined the global poverty index better known as the crushing DAD syndrome — or a dollar a day — to half a DAD!

Much of the IRGP hype has been derived from projections made on the basis of PPP — or purchasing power parity — and assessments made that catapult India to the top of the global economic ladder. But the reality check is different. Countries buy and sell at actual value and not PPP. As per the latest WDI figures for 2005, India is the 12th largest GDP in the world — and the asymmetry is glaring. The USA leads the list at \$13.2 trillion and the next nine nations are all over the \$1 trillion GDP mark and include Japan, Germany, China, UK, France, Italy, Canada, Spain and Brazil. Russia is 11th being just under one trillion and India is next with a GDP of \$ 906.3 billion.

Be that as it may, most of the gaps in the Indian edifice — be it infrastructure for socio-economic improvement or the availability of fiscal resources and their sub-optimal use (read rampant corruption and organised seepage of funds from state-funded programmes) remain grandiose concepts on paper and only a fraction of the targets are realised. In the interim, the size of the Indian bureaucracy keeps growing with new special interest political groups proliferating to make their own demands on the state exchequer.

Yet India is seen as a beacon of hope in the 21st century and no one has been a more ardent advocate of the elephant than Singapore diplomat-writer Kishore Mahbubani. His highly acclaimed book, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, offers a racy and provocative account of western hegemony and the colonial past and an elusive multi-polar future — where the dragon and the elephant ‘rise’ — such that Asia will reclaim its lost primacy.

But Mahbubani goes a step further in extolling the idea of India and in his latest thesis, posits a tantalising question: ‘Can India save the world?’ Luckily he provides the answer which is even more heady than the ‘rising great power’ sobriquet. In a magisterial conclusion that refers to the deep anxiety that the rise of China has aroused in the west, he avers: “By default, the weight of global leadership may fall on India’s shoulders. Fortunately, India is well-qualified to provide such leadership. Its credentials as the world’s largest democracy; its open, tolerant and inclusive culture; its unique geopolitical and cultural position as a bridge between east and west gives it a unique opportunity to provide the leadership for forging new forms of global governance that spaceship Earth desperately needs as it sails into the future.”

Paradoxically India has gone through a contradictory trajectory by way of its global relevance since the visionary Nehru years. Fifty years ago, when India was far less capable by way of economic and military strength, Delhi brought many distinctive and normative ideas to the global table — be it disarmament, non-alignment or de-colonisation. Today in the early 21st century, the elephant is far more enabled in terms of economic and military sinews and the Indian entrepreneur/professional is acknowledged globally be it a Tata or a Premji. But India appears devoid of big and innovative ideas and thought backed by assertive political conviction. The domestic political discourse has become arid and petty with zero-sum, dog-in-the-manger obduracy being the leit motif. Nowhere is this more evident than in the manner in which the July 2005 civilian nuclear agreement with the US has been pursued by Delhi.

India as a rising great power must be recognised for the red-herring it is and quietly buried. Yes, India is a notional and ambivalent power whose vast and neglected HR is ill-served by its ruling elite whose penchant for pursuing sectarian and ulterior short-term objectives continuously trumps the larger collective interest. This is hardly the abiding characteristic of a power that is either great or rising. A more appropriate objective for India may be to become an “equitable” power in the Chanakyan mould wherein ‘yogakshema’ — or the holistic well-being of its one billion plus populace is pursued with the integrity that behoves a ruling class. But one look at the unruly mess that passes for informed and reasoned parliamentary debate, as telecast at 11 am daily, compels us to admit that India can barely mange itself — let alone provide global leadership as a rising great power. May the IRGP acronym RIP. Amen.

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