

India's Youth Movement

Upcoming elections in the world's largest democracy present the opportunity to shed old baggage and pump new life into its economy

Diverted from the economic fast track for several years now, India is conducting national elections to determine its near and perhaps distant future. The current prime minister and members of Parliament have held office for the entire five-year term that is constitutionally allowed, succumbing of late to "policy paralysis," as critics have called it. Further slowing the Indian ship of state is a long-overdue anticorruption movement that has taken to the streets during this government's reign. Politicians currently in power will soon be emboldened by a fresh mandate or swept out in favor of new blood.

The elections take place in staggered balloting over a seven-week period due to conclude on May 12. With a high turnout rate expected, India's vast electorate of 815 million people will choose candidates to fill 543 seats in Parliament—272 of which must be amassed to form a new government. Of the multitudes voting, fully 100 million will be appearing at the polls for the first time. The entire process is billed as the largest act of participatory democracy in world history. Come July, just weeks after the new government is seated, an initial budget must be produced and the rough outlines of major policy for 2014 and beyond made public. Legally requiring the new budget so soon is India's way to force a fast start from the newly elected. A jolt of energy and new momentum are the tonic for what ails India, according to Ron Somers, President of the U.S.-India Business Council (USIBC).

"Strictly by the spectacle of such an enormous turnout of voters, India will draw the world's attention and quite likely its admiration," says Somers, who believes that India will enjoy a particularly stark contrast between its jubilant but orderly succession of power and the miseries occurring in the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. "These national elections are the chance for young, energized Indians to seek better governance and more transparency, and to move past the era of *baksheesh*," observes Somers, using the old term for bureaucratic activity built on patronage and bribery. He has seen India's rising technocratic class become impatient to move beyond caste, cronyism and other remnants of the transition to self-rule. Not only is India's democracy young, its current wave of voters is, as well: Nearly half of those 815 million are under age 35.

New jobs needed for the young

The need for job creation throughout the country is urgent, according to Somers, who feels certain the newly elected Parliament and prime minister will make it a priority. "What's needed is a return to 9 percent GDP growth rates, or higher," he explains. "The younger end of the electorate is entrepreneurial, they are eager and their political support depends on employment expansion at the rate of at least 1.5 million new jobs a month." Two-way trade between the U.S. and India was at \$25 billion seven years ago, and within a half-decade it had risen above \$100 billion, so there is precedent for rapid ramping up of foreign investment.

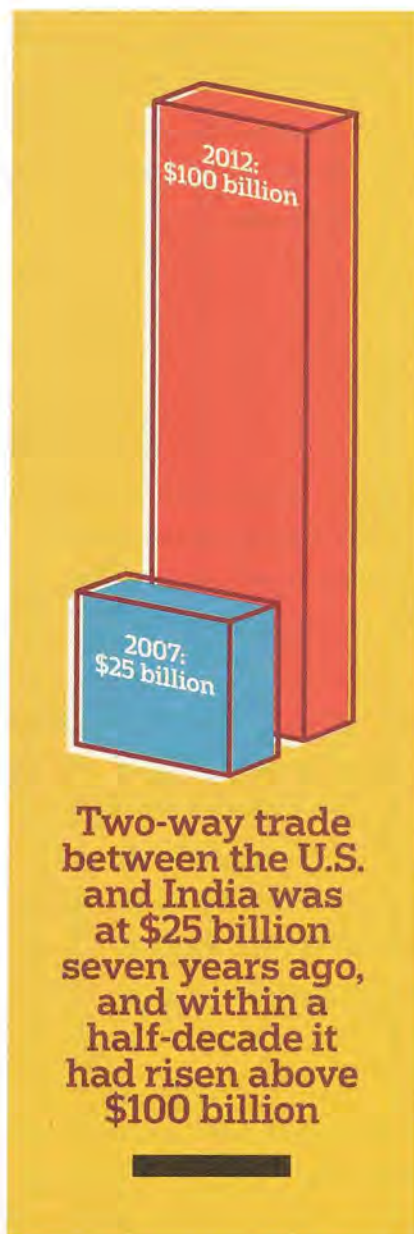
India does have an intensely articulated theoretical framework for the path it intends to follow. Stated eloquently in a 2007 essay by the late worldwide management expert C.K. Prahalad, the framework became the impetus for India@75. That organization, supported by the Confederation of Indian Industry, serves as a think tank, data clearinghouse, moral compass and rooting section for the nation India seeks to become by 2022, its 75th year of independence.

As described by Rajan Navani, one of its board members, India@75 exemplifies the country's twin strands of idealism and pragmatism. Dedicated to democratic rule and one-person-one-vote governance, India must move toward efficiency and urgency at every turn, he says. "Let's commit ourselves to skill 500 million unskilled Indian citizens in a compact time frame," Navani adds, referencing the original vows of India@75 Foundation. "Let's find millions more who are skilled and upskill them to a higher level of achievement and contribution."

Setting the future in motion now

The span of years until that 75th anniversary is short, and infrastructure projects that might follow in the wake of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project, a 920-mile road to the future through India's countryside, have to be set in motion if the second half of this decade is to fulfill expectations. "The country needs to put \$1 trillion into infrastructure over the next five years," says Somers.

Rajan Navani notes that some of India's progress comes faster than a Westerner could imagine, because entire stages of modernization can be—and basically must be—skipped over. For example, with its cumbersome physical infrastructure, much of India slept through the era of landline telephones. Today, 10 million cellphones a month are being



registered in India. Distribution of Web-based content is another stage with a leapfrog potential; Indian consumers never knew a period of no-charge dissemination. "One of our Jetline Group companies, Mereedhun Digital Media, is able to collect small sums on mobile and Internet content that is in extremely high demand, whether it is about Bollywood, cricket, celebrities, weather or astrology," Navani says. "Indian consumers don't have a negative association with paying one rupee a day, which is a tiny sum to them anyway, but it adds up very fast when the market is hundreds of millions of people."

Another economic engine that can—and by all rights should—drive post-election India is tourism. At present, no entity represents the allure of India as a place to visit, for pleasure or business, better than the Taj Group of Hotels. For a variety of reasons—including the importance of hospitality in the Indian mindset—the Taj Group seems to transcend the brand dilution so widely bemoaned by marketers in this era of social media and other digital din.

According to the BrandAsset Valuator for India report released in February by advertising giant Young & Rubicam, the Taj Group of Hotels emerged as the frontrunner in the so-called breakaway brand category. (This annual survey, India's largest study of consumer sentiment with respect to brands, polled over 10,000 consumers across 16 cities and covered 1,400-plus brands in myriad categories.) It's a testament to the way the Taj Group creates a sense of human connection within grand and unique physical spaces. Or, for that matter, in contemporary accommodations and meeting facilities in Taj-branded hotels like Vivanta by Taj and The Gateway Hotels.

The company shows a Janus-like capacity to highlight both the old and the ever-new in the India that surrounds it—meanwhile extending its brand power globally. In Sri Lanka, across the Palk Strait from India's southern tip, Taj Hotels now welcomes visitors to a new and resplendent asset, the Taj Samudra, in Colombo. Long on entertainment and shopping opportunities, the Taj Samudra is loaded with state-of-the-art infrastructure for dynamic business gatherings and important events of all types. Its purpose is to host the investment class and technology vendors who will play such a vital role in the next phase of national development; these sectors range all the way from finance to telecom and from IT to entertainment. Traditions of luxury at this hotel are evidenced by the mere fact that the 143-year-old Colombo Club, the most exclusive club in Sri Lanka, has relocated from their legacy headquarters known as the Crystal Building to a new space within Taj Samudra's sumptuous North Wing. In return, the club's Crystal Building is now repurposed as the hotel's banquet annex.

There are many ways in which India welcomes visitors, foreign businesspeople and investors intent on productive partnerships. The year 2014 is India's moment to celebrate its democratic and entrepreneurial nature, rise to new levels of capitalist efficiency and resume its ascent to prominence in Asia and worldwide. — David Gould



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