

Friends to partners

While working in Paris in the office of Jacques Chirac, the President of the French Republic of that time, I travelled to India to gather talking points for an upcoming presidential visit. During a bilateral meeting for this, Ratan Tata told me, “Indians generally like the French. Amongst the French businessmen I deal with, many are my friends. We are easily able to understand and be appreciative about each other but we have not succeeded in transforming these friendships into business.”

Not much has changed. There have been rich cultural exchanges and expressions of mutual appreciation between India and France in the past decade while the per cent change (YOY) in total trade between India and France has plunged from +30.07 per cent in 2006 to a dismal +0.37 per cent in 2016.

In 2017, around 5,500 Indian students and scientists found it worth their while to study in France. Whereas almost 15,000 students went to the UK during the same period. Many of France’s top universities, including the one I studied and now teach at, offer courses in English but perhaps few Indians know this. An education in France is also several times cheaper than a degree in the UK or the US but ultimately Indian students go where they get more jobs for their buck.

Tata had said to me in 2005, “The French often lack the will to give the final push towards concretising deals. It is necessary to act because things move quickly. But with the French, things get diverted.” In 2007, Chirac’s lacklustre presidency ended, but France had little respite even after. The country suffered a decade of subsequent obscure political leadership, with a GDP growth rate that hardly budged above one per cent. Any attempted reform by the government only led to the French going on strike, hindering the roll out of any substantial changes.

For instance in 2018, after a year-and-a-half of to and fro with the French government authorities in Paris to pick up my “talent passport” visa — a French green card, so to speak, to enable me to incorporate a company in France — that the French embassy in New Delhi had generously offered me and even processed (it took six months), I am yet to set my eyes on it. The French authorities in Paris recently told their colleagues at the Embassy in New Delhi that their challenge for granting me the visa was that I was not residing in France. It is a baffling chicken and egg situation.

France was the first country in the West with which India established a strategic partnership and the first with which India initiated a strategic dialogue after our 1998 nuclear tests when France refrained from imposing sanctions on us. It has ceased arming Pakistan many moons ago. Leaders from no other country have been honoured as many times as chief guests at India’s [Republic Day](#) celebrations. Besides education and culture, France and India have also built a long-standing cooperation in nuclear, defence and space. More recently, the vision for the International Solar Alliance was established jointly by the two countries.

President Emmanuel Macron’s March 2018 visit to India was much awaited precisely because there is so much for him to do. Political understanding is good to nurture, but how can he transform that into greater opportunities for the people of India and France? I had met him a few years ago when he was still Minister of Economy of France, and he seemed to me to be the ideal candidate for this task.

For example, climate change has emerged — and rightfully so — as a new cornerstone of the relationship between Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and President Macron. Both countries now need to leverage this political alignment towards creating meaningful joint ventures, and develop technology and knowledge exchanges in this field for all to benefit.

France is ahead on the curve of developing technologies that minimise the environmental impact of manufacturing processes. These are technologies that the Indian manufacturing industry can learn and adopt as the latter gets subjected to strict emission limits and stringent compliances by the current Indian government. Moreover, the climate change industry is estimated to reach a value of \$1 trillion by 2020, presenting an opportunity for France and India.

The protectionist stance of Brexit and Donald Trump also presents an opportunity to France. French universities can attract the best of Indian talent. In the realm of literature too, why not make greater collaborations? This will boost the publishing industry and also foster a rich exchange of ideas across the two countries that are both known for great literary writing.

Most importantly, Macron also needs to make reforms on his home turf in order to transform friendships into greater economic opportunity for all. The heavy bureaucracy in France must be loosened so it doesn't stifle the life out of potential incoming investments. French labour laws need to be reformed such that corporations are more agile when doing business abroad. And diplomatic agencies can be more confident of India's friendship and appreciation for France, so that more efforts can instead be directed towards joint action.

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