

Is the Commonwealth of nations about to become a trading bloc?

Last week marked Commonwealth Day—not in India but in the UK, where it is celebrated with multi-faith services and royal engagements on the second Monday of March. The absence of celebrations in India is understandable—it began life as birthday celebrations for Queen Victoria, then became Empire Day in early 20th century before Prime Minister Harold anointed it Commonwealth Day in 1958.

Every year, the Day has a theme. This year, it's Towards a Common Future. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the Commonwealth's biggest nation, prepares to attend its biennial heads of government meeting in London in April, he might want to dwell on what this "common future" might look like, and who might shape it.

But for that, familiarity with the history of India's role in the Commonwealth—particularly the role played by the visionary prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru—is useful. And there's no greater guide than Sarvepalli Gopal's majestic three-volume biography of Nehru. Let's dive into volume 2 without wasting time:

According to Gopal, the main reason Nehru decided not to take independent India out of the Commonwealth, despite the group's colonial association, was the "pressure of circumstances" (Nehru's words) rather than any sentimental attachment to Britain. It was a practical decision: India could get technical help for a few years, walk out when it wanted, and leverage the Commonwealth from being over-dependent on the US for financial and technical aid. One important factor informing his decision was the childish position Soviet Russia took in characterizing Indian independence (in the early years) as continuation of British rule by other means.

In fact, Nehru wasn't even inclined toward the Commonwealth, a grouping of nations that had been ruled by the British who owed allegiance to the British Crown. Public opinion in India, too, was against it. Finally, the matter was broached by Prime Minister Clement Attlee in a private meeting with Nehru on 11 March 1948—exactly 70 years ago—with suggestions that Republicanism did not come naturally to Indians, that it was a foreign idea, and that independent India should continue with a Governor General.

But British officials' attitude toward Kashmir and Hyderabad had generated suspicion and "strengthened the dislike of any link with Britain". The other sticking point was the role of the Crown. Nehru suggested to Attlee and Mountbatten that India would neither recognize nor repudiate any role of the Crown in the Commonwealth. But the Brits wanted something more: Winston Churchill and the King George VI actually harboured grand ideas of the King becoming the first President of India. And Attlee wanted a role for the King in the Indian Constitution, then its final stages of approval.

Gopal writes a fascinating account of what comes out as Nehru's increasing exasperation, and Britain's increasingly desperate attempts to keep independent India as a member of the Commonwealth on Britain's terms, subservient to the British Crown. Nehru? He would rather wind up the whole thing than carry on in this "juvenile" fashion.

Finally, Nehru gave the Conference of Prime Ministers in London in April 1949 a take-it-or-leave-it option with three points: Commonwealth citizenship, India's continued membership of the Commonwealth, and India's acceptance of the King as the "symbol of the free association of Commonwealth countries". Nehru gave nothing away, while somehow managing to squeeze the Crown in to his masterful formula.

This was to change the Commonwealth. An independent republic was now member of the “association”, with its own President, equal in every respect to the former Empire that headed it. Nehru’s radical idea of Commonwealth citizenship was quietly dropped (with no official mention, save for a weird confidential note) and India finally accepted the following wording: “The King as the symbol of the free association of its independent members and as such the Head of the Commonwealth.” India didn’t like “the Head” but there were far more important matters to attend to now.

Thus, April 1949 saw the birth of the modern Commonwealth. The British Commonwealth was dead in the water. Today the Commonwealth is composed of 53 countries, who together account for 2.4 billion people. But this history of India’s role in the creation of the modern Commonwealth is central to some of the debates surrounding the coming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), where Modi—going by the British press—is the anticipated star.

The obvious reason is India’s status as the world’s fastest growing economy—more than useful to the Brexit-occupied hosts and the Commonwealth just before Britain leaves the EU. Understandably, there is a great deal of focus on how to increase trade and business ties within the Commonwealth. According to a Commonwealth study, trade between members, around \$592 billion in 2013, is projected to rise to \$1 trillion by 2020. Outside the bloc, too, the potential is immense: total Commonwealth exports to China between 2000 and 2013 increased more than 14-fold to \$268 billion; imports from China rose almost eightfold to \$359 billion. While on average 12% of Commonwealth imports of goods are sourced from China, there are 35 members that export less than 5% of their exports to China.

But there are voices within the Commonwealth warning against shaping the group as a trading bloc. “Brexit is the preoccupation of one member state—it shouldn’t be allowed to dominate the entire discussion on renewal,” Vijay Krishnaryan, director general of the Commonwealth Foundation, a platform for Commonwealth civil society, told me.

“It is important for India to seize this moment and shape what the Commonwealth will look like. It should seize the discussion on renewal.” Rather than just trade, he cited governance as the main thrust of the Commonwealth as it reshapes itself. This would naturally lend itself to an Indian leadership role, given its experience of democracy, particularly panchayat polls—a governance model that can have lessons across the Commonwealth by tying it to development that is responsive. In the 1980s, the Commonwealth distinguished itself by leading the charge for ending Apartheid in South Africa. Since then, it has emphasized good governance and values such as human rights. Now, with a new Cold War knocking at our doors with the threat of protectionism, trade tops all our agendas.

Gopal’s account shows how Nehru overcame challenges to build India’s foreign policy brick by brick. It’s time to harness some of that energy with respect to the Commonwealth.

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