“So, where the bloody hell are we?”

The Search for Substance in Australia-India Relations

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The Australia India Institute expresses its deep gratitude to Wadia Movietone for this gesture and wishes to record the contribution of JBH Wadia who thought up the Hunterwali character, gave Mary Evans her screen name, and popularized the Fearless Nadia persona through his films.
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Abstract: It seems inevitable that Australia-India engagement will only deepen as China continues to rise and the US becomes comparatively weak in Asia. The time, therefore, has well and truly passed for Australia to be agonising over ‘reinvigorating’ or ‘revitalising’ its relationship with India. Australia and India are getting on with it. But what about people-to-people relationships? Deepening ties between Australia and India will depend upon the quality of, and commitment to, our mutual understanding – and the way to do this is through culture.

Introduction

At a recent conference on public diplomacy in Australian-Indian relations in New Delhi, an Indian scholar gave a presentation on ‘nation branding’ – how governments construct their national image in publicity campaigns. He discussed, as an example, Australia’s controversial tourism campaign of 2006: “Where the bloody hell you are?” The Australians present exchanged glances and smiled quiet smiles. It was, of course, a perfectly correct Hindi translation where the word order is different in an interrogative. While there was much vigorous discussion at the conference – on issues such as racial etiquette in India-Australia relations, journalism and the Colombo Plan in the 1950s and 1960s, and the media’s portrayal of the shameful spate of attacks on Indian students in Melbourne in 2009 – this moment, I thought, crystallised something about the nature of the relationship. It was a moment of insight into the way we observe and form opinions about each other and the stubbornness of mutual stereotypes. But more subtly, it revealed how the English language, which we celebrate as a gift from the British that binds us, obscures as much as reveals meaning in our cross-cultural exchange. The English language has been an insufficient interlocutor in establishing an enduring mutual comprehension.

This paper explores this idea by pondering how Australians and Indians perceive each other as expressed in films and popular media. Before the advent of travel, student exchanges, and globalised media, this is where people-to-people impressions have been formed over the course of Australia-India engagement. State to state relations are generally framed around ‘hard power’ economic and security issues, while culture – or ‘soft power’ – forms a lubricating sort of function. It ought to stimulate curiosity, dialogue and, in turn, a deeper understanding of each other. This, in turn, leads to greater trust, more trade, closer military cooperation and, ultimately, stronger ties. Conversely, cultural misunderstanding can send us in the direction of mystification, irritation or even distaste.

1 The conference was sponsored by the Australia India Institute at the University of Melbourne and the Public Diplomacy Division of India’s Ministry of External Affairs. It was the second international conference organised in partnership by the Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University and the Department of English, Radhani College at Delhi University.
For Australia and India there have been misunderstandings aplenty – cricket-related stoushes, Australia’s refusal to sell uranium to India and the violence against Indian students studying in Australia in 2009. These topics shall be noticeably absent from this paper. It is not that they are not important, but these issues have been discussed at great length in the Australian media in recent times. As an historian I am more curious about the subtle evolution of our mutual perceptions. I wish to explore the broad trajectory of state-to-state relations and the parallel formation of cultural perception through the cinematic and popular media lens to discover the disjuncture between policy initiatives and people-to-people perceptions. To begin, I sketch an historical overview of Australia-India relations since India became an independent nation in 1947. I then take an admittedly sweeping look at mutual Indian and Australian representations in an attempt to understand how Australians and Indians see each other.

State-to-state relations

The 1950s and 1960s

It is perhaps surprising to note that Australia opened diplomatic relations with India, and a defence alliance was considered, as early as 1944 – three years before Indian independence. Asia was still a region of colonies at the time and this demonstrated the importance of India to Australia, and the degree to which familiarity flowed from our joint British connections. At the time of Indian independence Australia was governed by the Labor Party, which was sympathetic towards India’s break from colonial rule. Prime Minister Ben Chifley and External Affairs Minister Herbert Evatt enjoyed a warm relationship with India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nevertheless, Chifley was not entirely comfortable with the fact that the new Republic of India and Australia were both members of the new Commonwealth of Nations. He was an Anglophile who saw Commonwealth membership as a ‘triangular relationship’ between Britain, Australia and New Zealand, primarily because loyalty to the British Crown was absolutely central to their mutual identities. Furthermore, as a Republic, India’s loyalty to the Commonwealth was doubted in some quarters. Though friendly towards India, Chifley did not welcome the sudden proliferation of Asian heads of state that came with decolonisation: ‘It used to be a great distinction to be a Prime Minister but now they are two a penny’ he lamented (Bongiorno 2005: 24).

The Australia-India relationship changed fundamentally after 1949 when the Liberal Party led by Robert Menzies came to power. Meg Gurry has written that Menzies did not grasp the ‘cultural distance’ between India and Australia: ‘there was no room in his imagination for Asia at all.’ In his memoirs Menzies dismissed India ‘as a place too difficult for any “Occidental” to understand’ (Gurry 1992: 513). Menzies’s dismissal of India was compounded by Cold War ‘pactomania’ – as US Ambassador to India (1951-53) Chester Bowles called it – which drew Australia into the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954. India had adopted a policy of non-alignment and Nehru saw such containment alliances as nothing more than ‘a modern version of a protectorate’. Menzies, on the other hand, thought non-alignment was ‘foolish’. Australians retained some fixed – and one would have to say patronising – ideas about Indians in the 1940s and 1950s. These were not just political opinions, but assessments of personal characteristics, which made their way into cultural and racial stereotyping that has proved difficult to dislodge.
Sir Walter Crocker, who led Australia's Diplomatic Mission to India from 1952 to 1955 and again from 1959 to 1962, reaffirmed some fairly typical views in his book *Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate* (1966). Crocker saw Indians as loyal, intelligent (especially South Indians), tolerant, enduring, spiritual, affectionate and sensitive (Crocker 1966: 44-45). These complimentary views were tempered by rather more worrying tendencies around truth and morality. Indians, he thought, regarded the truth as 'sheer bad manners' and moral obligations to those outside one's own group (caste and family) were 'much less pressing or might be seen as non-existent.' One can therefore, 'with a clear conscience, exploit the misfortunes of people outside your group, such as those starving in times of famine' (34-35).

Crocker’s Indian counterpart in Australia General K.M. Cariappa, who was India’s High Commissioner to Canberra from 1953 to 1956, would no doubt have been exasperated with such racialised nonsense. Cariappa caused quite a stir in Australia by publicly commenting on the White Australia policy. He pointed out that Australians and Indians were fellow members of the Commonwealth, had fought side by side in World War Two, and were members of the same geographical region. There was therefore little reason to bar Indian immigrants from Australia. It was not until the 1960s that the White Australia Policy underwent some serious revision under Prime Minister Harold Holt who replaced Menzies when he retired in 1966. Gurry claims that Menzies’s handling of the relationship with India caused damage that would last over the course of the next two decades. Australia and India ‘remained culturally, psychologically and diplomatically poles apart [and it] would now need a new generation of leadership to transform it’ (Gurry: 526). That fresh start presented itself when Gough Whitlam came to power in 1972. The following year the White Australia Policy – which had deeply offended many of Australia’s Asian neighbours, not only Indians – was laid to rest and the policy of multiculturalism was embraced.

**The 1970s and 1980s**

Prime Minister Whitlam hoped to forge stronger relations with Asia and, while still opposition leader in 1971, made a bold visit to China (a year before US President Richard Nixon’s visit). Whitlam appointed Bruce Grant as Australia’s new High Commissioner to New Delhi with the directive ‘that Australia should seek more “substance” in its relations with India’ (Grant 1982: 15). At the time the relationship was still characterised by our joint inheritances from the British Empire: the English language, parliamentary democracy, the common law and cricket. Forty years later, this remains the list that is routinely rolled out when we are prompted to think about our Australia-India links. The most prized is not, I would dare to suggest, cricket, but democracy. As a matter of national identity, however, the relatively new advent of democracy is a vastly different prospect in an ancient civilisation such as India, compared to Australia, which has been inhabited by Anglo-Celts for a mere two centuries. ‘In India,’ High Commissioner Grant observed perceptively in the 1970s, ‘the depth of civilisation gives meaning and order to life, with or without democracy: in Australia no such alternative exists … even without democracy India would remain a civilisation … without democracy, Australia had no hope of becoming one’ (179).

The democracies of both India and Australia suffered shocks in the mid-1970s when the Governor General dismissed Gough Whitlam from office in 1975 and Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency in 1975, which lasted until 1977. The new Prime Ministers Malcolm Fraser and Morarji Desai developed a good working relationship – ‘fellow souls’ Hamish McDonald suggests (McDonald 2009: 2). Prime Minister Desai visited Australia for a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sydney in February 1978. It turned out to be one of the most dramatic in the
history of CHOGM summitry – and Morarji Desai was at its centre. On the morning of 13 February, as state leaders were arriving at the Sydney Hilton, two bombs exploded. Although no one claimed responsibility, and the culprits have never been identified, Desai was believed to be the target. It was not proven, but it was believed to be an attack orchestrated by the Ananda Marga sect whose leader Prabhat Sarkar was in prison. Sarkar’s Australian followers were agitating for his release; however, they repeatedly denied any involvement in the bombing. Three people were killed and eleven injured in the bomb blast, leaving India with the dubious honour of being implicated in the worst terrorist attack on Australian soil. The incident did not seem to damage Australia-India relations, but rather seems to have formed a bond between Desai and Fraser. When Prime Minister Fraser visited India in 1979 he was honoured as the Chief Guest at the annual Republic Day parade on the 26th of January, which is also Australia Day, the only Australian leader to have received this honour.

Prime Minister Bob Hawke replaced Fraser in 1983 and Rajiv Gandhi replaced his mother Indira when she was assassinated in 1984. Hawke determined to ‘invigorate’ the India-Australia relationship, which he believed had been neglected by the Fraser Government. Hawke and Gandhi formed a noticeably warm relationship – Gandhi visited Australia in 1986, the last Indian prime minister to do so, and Hawke reciprocated twice. Sadly, the second time was to attend his friend Rajiv’s funeral after he was assassinated in 1989. In the Hawke-Keating Labor years (1983 to 1996) the first bilateral institutions were established to kick-start the trade relationship – the Australia-India Business Council in 1986 and the Australia India Council in 1992. Like Hawke, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans thought that the time was ripe to ‘revitalise’ the relationship and in 1989 Senator John Button, Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce, visited India to explore the possibilities for partnerships. Australia and India had long-standing trade connections: from 1801 Australia shipped coking coal to India; a supply of horses from Western Australia went to the British Raj from the 1830s; and India supplied textiles, tea and various condiments to the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century (Walker 1999:15). By the 1980s trading patterns had stagnated, settling into a range of goods such as coal, wool, non-ferrous metals, and specialized manufacturing plant and industrialised machinery. Indian exports to Australia comprised textiles, clothing and accessories, jute and hessian, tea and coffee, nuts, vegetables and fruits, leather goods, semi-precious stones, handicrafts and carpets. A ‘lack of complementarity between the two economies’ (Gurry 1996: 75) was noted and addressed by a Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on Australia-India Relations in 1988. The report, released in 1990, documented anomalies in Indian taxation and shipping which were deemed to be obstructive to trade, however, the obstacles were soon removed under Finance Minister (and now Prime Minister) Manmohan Singh’s suite of reforms in 1991.

Button’s visit in 1989 revealed that it was not only the trade relationship that lacked complementarity. In meetings Button found little to recommend closer affiliation, observing 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)

Button’s view of India reflected the entrenched distance that had formed between Australia and India, but it also revealed that the sense of distance was mutual. His observations represented the considerable distance Australians still had to go, just over twenty years ago, in understanding India. ‘The Standing Committee found that Australia’s public ‘had been denied an accurate picture of India’, and 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.’ (Australia-India Relations: Trade and Security 1990: 8) The Report also confirmed 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 programmes 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. (11)

The 1990s and 2000s

In 1996 Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating lost office and when the Liberal Party was returned under John Howard, a familiar theme was invoked – that Australia needed to ‘re-imagine’ its relationship with India. A ‘blind spot’ had developed it was thought, and it was time to pursue ‘a more sustained relationship’ (Australia Through the Eyes of India 1996: 94). A central part of the new push into India was the ‘Australia-India New Horizons’ policy, a six million dollar initiative conceived by the previous Labor government. The New Horizons programme aimed to stimulate trade opportunities, but it also promised to focus on cultural understanding between the two countries. It was to be launched by the Australian Prime Minister in India in October 1996, but John Howard did not attend. His attention was diverted by the forthcoming APEC meeting, which added insult to injury, as Australia at the time did not support India's entry into the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation APEC. The relationship was further undermined two years later when India tested a nuclear bomb at Pokhran. Indians were disgusted with the patronising tone of Foreign Minister Alexander Downer’s remonstrations, which they believed treated India as if it were a colony, rather than an ancient civilisation and sovereign republic (Cotton and Ravenhill 2001: 67). Relations thereafter entered a seriously grim phase. Building a sustained relationship could not have got off to a worse start.

The Howard Government’s initial enthusiasm for India seemed to fade due to a chronic undervaluing of the importance of culture, and the value of people-to-people contact, in deepening mutual understanding. It was observed at the Midnight to Millennium: Australia-India Connections conference in Canberra in July 1999 that Australia’s relations with India suffered from major cultural and ideological differences. These manifested from ‘an inexplicable aloofness or even dislike towards South Asia’ (Vicziany 1999: 73). Yet another report, India-Australia: Redefining relations for a strong friendship was published by the High Commission of India in Canberra in 2004. In his contribution to this report Australian Professor Dennis Rumley identified three areas for consideration in increasing ‘mutual consciousnesses’ in Australia-India dynamics: geopolitics, economics and culture. Rumley’s call for the strengthening of cultural ties suggested that differences should be seen ‘as a challenge in cultural bridge-building, rather than as a cause of fear or distaste’ (Rumley 2004: 19). Rumley’s use of the words ‘fear and distaste’ seemed rather shocking when I read them. Surely in 2004, when Australians lived, worked and studied alongside Indians, when many had travelled to India, read Indian literature and (some) watched Indian films, and most Australians know what makhani, vindaloo and rogan josh are, there can hardly be fear – and certainly no distaste! This calls for a more comprehensive search of exactly what cultural connections have been made and what impressions have been formed since Australia and India exchanged High Commissioners in the post-independence years.
People-to-people perceptions

An ‘unbridgeable gulf of time, distance and culture’?

Australia’s cultural understanding of India since independence has been filtered, to a large extent, through films, the popular media and, to an increasing degree since the 1960s, through travel. Having said this, opportunities for Australians to see India and Indians in films has been comparatively limited until the last decade or so when the popularity of Bollywood has spread this far south. The iconic Indian film of the immediate post-independence era was Mehboob Khan’s Mother India (1957), which received India’s first Oscar nomination. As an affirmation of the national self Mother India was promoted as a film ‘from India, the ancient cradle of humanity’ in which ‘two mothers rise, earth and woman!’ (Mishra 2007: 77). What I find fascinating about this film is the reverence towards the land, a feminised reflection of the mother. In Inhaling the Mahatma, Australian journalist Christopher Kremmer notes:

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 contrast, Australia was built on ownership and dominance over the land. Despite deeply embedded connections to the land in the consciousness of indigenous Australians, every government since the arrival of the British has overlooked this affinity in favour of commerce. Hamish McDonald affirms this point, that in Australia there is an ‘overwhelming materialism [and] slowness with which any mythology of the land is emerging among non-indigenous people’ (McDonald 2007: 2). Bruce Grant also invoked the land when thinking about Australia and India. Rather than identifying difference, he observed the shared ‘tyranny of [an] unforgiving, aggressive land’ that formed a particular type of stoicism in the Australian and Indian national character (Grant 1982: 5). I agree with Grant. But I think the points of similarity are as informative as the points of difference. If we trace attitudes towards the land back to our respective cosmological roots – Hinduism and Christianity – we find very different interpretations of the human relationship with the earth. In the First Book of Moses (Genesis 1:26) 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.’ By contrast, in the Aitareya Upanishad, the earth is created by ‘the self’ (ātman), 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, the macrocosm, and, as such, man and the earth are cosically ‘one’. The Christian tradition grants man dominance over the earth, as a separate entity from himself.

Are our respective religious and philosophical traditions the source of the ‘unbridgeable gulf of time, distance and culture’ that John Button felt during his meeting in India in 1989? Do Australians – members of a quintessentially ‘young nation’ – have difficulty reconciling India as both a young nation and an ancient civilisation? What Australians learned from films in the 1950s and 1960s was mostly filtered through an American or British lens that hardly ever featured India or Indians. When they did appear, they were mostly stereotyped images that had a jarring relationship with modernity. We imagined India through a prism of opulent rajah’s palaces, British military establishments and temples. Indians were often portrayed as members of a mysterious cult, generally wearing a white turban, or were measured against their relationship with the British, as either loyal or subversive: the doggedly loyal Bengal soldier, ‘brave, fearless and willing to die for his British officers’ (Jones 1955: 65) or working in cahoots with a rich, treacherous rajah. There were also good, benevolent rajahs – portrayed in silent films by Rudolph Valentino – but there were never ‘modern’ Indians.

Sally Percival Wood
Nostalgia for the British Raj

For a surprisingly long time films about India that a generation of Australians would remember were of the Rudyard Kipling genre: *Gunga Din* (1939), *Kim* (1950 and 1984), *The Man Who Would be King* (1975) and, for children *The Jungle Book* (1942, 1965, 1994, 1997). For me, the 1965 Disney adaptation of *The Jungle Book* completely captured my childish imagination. Names like Sheer Khan (the tiger) and Bagheera (the panther), along with Gunga Din (which I knew because my father would recite Kipling’s poem), were the most exotic I had ever heard. It seemed that in the 1970s while our High Commissioner was seeking substance in the relationship from New Delhi, the majority of Australians were wallowing hopelessly in a time warp when imagining India. Romanticized imperial narratives continued into the 1980s with Richard Attenborough’s 1982 blockbuster *Gandhi*, and in 1984 the filming of E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and the hugely popular television miniseries *The Jewel in the Crown* based on Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet*.

In the 1980s the West seemed to be experiencing a rush of sentimentalism for the British imperial past – a past from which Australia, as a settler society that had retained the Queen of England as its head of state, had never really disengaged. This fare of 1980s imperial nostalgia maintained a somewhat dreary stereotype of India as an intriguing artefact of the colonial era. Even Attenborough’s *Gandhi*, which did not resile from portraying the British as brutal and uncompromising, was inflected with a Western historical bias. Some Indians took exception to its selective focus, which was almost entirely on independence leaders well known in the West: Gandhi, Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, overlooking significant figures such as Patel and Ambedkar. Not only has the British imperial filter circumscribed our cultural and historical perceptions but when this is removed, the remaining view has been rather dim. When undertaking research for Professor David Walker on representations of Asia and Asians in Australia (1970s to 1990s) some years ago, I was struck by: a) the scarcity of content about India in Australia’s popular print media, and b) the tenacity of Indian stereotypes that Australians continued to fixate on. This was picked up by a report published in 1991 by the Melbourne South Asia Studies Group *Australia and India: The Next Ten Years*. Some of the submissions to the study revealed why Australians had such a poorly formed view of India. A Radio Australia representative acknowledged that in the media, ‘as obviously in education, South Asia still doesn’t rate very highly’ (*Australia and India: The Next Ten Years* 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’ (60).

It was not only the digital media that remained disinterested in India. Popular Australian news magazines maintained a profile of India that regurgitated on this set of stereotypes. In the 1970s and 1980s images moved almost without exception between the startling and the bizarre. Australians could expect to see Indians testing their resolve in all manner of alarming ways – a farmer who allowed bees to swarm all over his head to prove they were harmless; a middle aged man who had preferred to remain naked and shackled for 50 years earning guru status; or an enduring favourite, the man with excessively long curling fingernails that would earn him a place in The *Guinness Book of Record*. Such feats in the Hindu tradition might be classed as tapas (austerities and penances), which open the way to enlightenment. For readers of popular news magazines such as *Australasian Post* these images were visual substantiation of the incomprehensibility of India. These images were compounded by stories of dangerous, cultish India. Young Australians, a new generation of ‘drop-outs’, were warned of the dangers they might encounter along the ‘hippy trail’
through Afghanistan, India and Nepal. Young travellers were warned about Indian thieves, easy
access to drugs and the perils of rogue gurus such as the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh: in 1972 it was
reported that ‘inhibitions vanish as followers of this new religious sect groove to the guru.’ India
became a Western counterculture phenomenon, a combination of the ‘mystic India’ trope that had
evolved since the nineteenth century, and the books of the 1960s ‘beat generation, particularly Jack
Kerouac’s Dharma Bums and Allen Ginsberg’s Indian Journals’ (Sobocinska 2011: 4). Gita Mehta’s
Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East (1979) brilliantly sent up this Western hippy fad and, in
turn, India’s infatuation with the West. In the 1980s travel articles became increasingly popular, and
the counterpoint to the ‘dharma bums’ was the luxury travel experience – houseboats in Kashmir,
maharajas palaces and, of course, visits to the Taj Mahal, which pandered to Australians’ dreamy
nostalgia for the British Raj.

Australians through the Indian cinematic lens

Menzies’s neglect, and the mutual ambivalence observed in 1980s, created a conceptual void that
was filled with often ludicrous stereotypes. I suspect it would be difficult to find many Australians
in Indian films since Fearless Nadia – aka Mary Evans from Perth – thrilled Indian audiences in
Hunterwali (1935) wearing thigh high boots and wielding a whip. So, in my search for Australians
in Indian films, I must fast-forward to the 2000s when Hindi (Bollywood) films are increasingly
being shot in Australia. Australians tend to appear only on the periphery in these films and when
they do they are featured in a rather poor light. There have been several – Dil Chahta Hai (2001),
Chak De! India (2007) and Singh is King (2008) to name a few – but I focus on just two, one shot
in Australia, the other in India. Salaam Namaste (2005), was the first Hindi film made entirely in
Melbourne. It dealt with the de facto relationship of a young Indian couple, cut adrift from
the moral security of their families and their culture. When Ambar, played by Preity Zinta, becomes
pregnant to her boyfriend Nikhil, played by Saif Ali Khan, he does not want anything to do with her.

I note that the names they are given – Ambar (Amby) and Nikhil (Nick) – are closer to the modern
names of Australians than the traditional names of Indians. Ambar and Nick are subtly distanced
from India – their sexual relationship outside of wedlock would simply not be tolerated in a film
shot on Indian terra firma. Running alongside this narrative, which finds Amby and Nick trying to
negotiate a world seemingly without moral boundaries, is a feast of sexually easy blonde Australian
women, one of whom tries to pick up an innocent Indian boy at a bus stop. The only Australian
male representation in the film is a monosyllabic parody of Crocodile Dundee. He appears, rather
hilariously, at odd intervals throughout the film with his gum-chewing girlfriend whose only
utterance is ‘sorry?’ – a gag that wears a little thin by the end of the film.

Ram Gopal Varma’s Nishabd (2007) also pushes some moral boundaries and it does so using the
device of Australian moral laxity. In the vein of Lolita, Nishabd explores the love between Vijay,
a 60-year-old man played by Bollywood veteran Amitabh Bachchan, and Jia (Jiah Khan), his
dughter’s 18-year-old girl friend. Jia is visiting from Australia where she lives with her mother
who is divorced. She is desperately unhappy in Australia where her mother has taken up with
an Australian man who Jia deprecates. This point is never laboured but it subtly lodges itself in
the sub-text, that immorality, a disease contracted in the West, has entered Vijay’s Keralan idyll and
destabilised what was a sound marriage. A Congress spokesman for Uttar Pradesh called for
Nishabd to be banned for ‘going against Indian culture’ and in Andhra Pradesh the BJP called it
‘cultural pollution’. The behaviour of Ambar and Jia in both films is clearly influenced by the moral
depredations of Australian culture. They send a message that the absence of family, marriage, and
cultural values will open the way to Western individualism and decadence. I did warn that my
survey would be sweeping, but I also believe it is representative. From independence to the 2000s
Australia and India could claim at least one point of continuity – that the blind spot into which
cultural misconceptions have crept has remained equally dim.

Sally Percival Wood
Conclusion

So – where the bloody hell we are?

In 2011 Australia and India find themselves in a vastly different region to the one they inhabited in 1947. The 'Asian Century' – a term coined by Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping and Rajiv Gandhi when they met in 1988 – is, many believe, upon us (although there are many Asian sceptics). Certainly since Deng’s famous ‘four modernisations’ were pronounced in 1978, and Manmohan Singh’s abolition of the obstructionist Licence Raj system in 1991, the region has been economically transformed. India is now Australia fourth largest export destination. From 2000 to 2009 our two-way trade growth averaged an astonishing 24.6 percent per annum – from $3.3 billion to $20.9 billion. Australia’s exports of goods to India has grown from $1.8 billion in 2000 to $14.5 billion in 2009 (Trade at a Glance 2010 2010: 20). India’s consumption of Australian coal and crude petroleum are testament to its economic appetite for growth – it is predicted that India’s economy will replace the United States as the world’s second largest (behind China) by 2050. It is not unreasonable to suggest that demand for Australian resources will only grow and the bilateral commitment to the trade relationship was demonstrated with the opening of negotiations on a free trade agreement just last month.

Australia and India also move closer together as joint members of Asia’s strategic architecture – both are members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994 and the East Asia Summit (EAS) formed in 2005. Of increasing importance for the future will be Australian and Indian cooperation within the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). The IOR-ARC was established in 1995 and, to date, activity within the association has been somewhat spasmodic. However, China’s increasing dependence upon the Indian Ocean for oil and trade, its growing naval capacity, and its investment in a series of ports known as the ‘string of pearls’ – stretching from Hainan Island in the South China Sea, through the Straits of Malacca, taking in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, and extending across the Indian Ocean from Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan’s Gwadar Port – is sending strong signals that the IOR-ARC needs to be strengthened. Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd recently affirmed this as a priority for the India-Australia relationship.

It appears inevitable that Australia’s and India’s engagement within regional economic and strategic architecture will only deepen as China continues to rise and the US becomes comparatively weak in Asia. The time, therefore, has well and truly passed for Australia to be agonising over ‘reinvigorating’ or ‘revitalising’ its relationship with India. Australia and India are getting on with it. But what about the people-to-people relationships? Deepening ties between Australia India will depend upon the quality of and commitment to our mutual understanding – and the entry point to mutual comprehension is culture. As Hamish McDonald has noted, the sense of closeness between our two nations has waxed and waned with the affinity between Indian and Australian leaders of the day (McDonald 2009: 2). There is surely no clearer evidence that the search for substance in Australia-India relations begins with the value we give to our people-to-people relations. Both the Australian and the Indian media have become rather too fond of sensationalising mutual misunderstandings and, in the process, exhuming unhelpful, negative stereotypes. As someone who has travelled and worked in India for over a decade, my best advice is to forget about those stale old characteristics we inherited from the British Empire. Those ill-informed cultural judgments are anachronisms belonging to a less informed generation. Let’s strengthen the people-to-people relationships by allowing our mutual curiosity to flourish.
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