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SWEDEN DIARY - IV

Much In Common With India But Relations On Hold

It is time to put Bofors behind us

Subhash Agrawal

India and Sweden shared a special relationship and frequent contact during the Palme-Indira years, and right through the romance of non-alignment. Both nations have changed course significantly since then, in both domestic and foreign policies, but there is still much in common: a mixed economy, family-run businesses, a new and evolving tradition of pragmatism, and the paradox of virtual one-party rule even while being democracies. Also very crucially, the two share strong links across academia and civil society.

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Sweden perhaps has more 'India experts' per capita than any other country on the continent, so much so that they have formed the Swedish South Asian Studies Network among themselves. Sweden inherited and then added the 19th century German tradition of scholarship in Sanskrit and Indology. At the top universities of Uppsala, Gothenburg and Lund, one can find any number of scholars working on a host of sub-continental issues. Uppsala University even has a master's level program in Tamil Studies. There are 10 students at present, which I suspect is more than the number studying Tamil in Delhi University.

India has also been one of the main recipients of overseas Swedish developmental aid, usually among the top three. Even though it is now declining, over the years the total amounts to almost \$1 billion. Sweden may have used this aid as a subtle instrument of business and foreign policy - all donor nations do — but it has also done immeasurable good.

Swedish development aid has facilitated and spawned valuable social and infrastructure projects which otherwise might not have taken off, such as the Uri hydropower project in Kashmir. So what is the problem? Given such history, why are we not close? The answer is of course Bofors, a subject which figured in every conversation I had. There is a sense of grief that the image of both Palme and Sweden have been needlessly dragged in the mud and besmirched in what is essentially a domestic issue in India, especially after Sweden did so much for India. What is worse is that the probe has led to nowhere even after 15 years.

When I met Ingolf Kiesow, who served as their Deputy Ambassador to

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India in the mid-1990s and is perhaps the most well-informed India expert in their foreign ministry, he was dispirited about the end of the 'special relationship' between the two countries as result of the Bofors case.



On the Swedish side there is now a clear desire for some sort of renewal, but shorn of exaggerated sentiment and perhaps focussed more on trade, business and culture. China is still the flavour of the day, but the Indian middle-class provokes their interest and queries. India is beginning to blip louder on the radar.

The Swedish trade minister Leif Pagrotsky led a delegation in early April, and there is interest among Swedish companies, like Volvo and ABB, to invest in infrastructure projects.

Volvo in infrastructure? Yes, they also design and build systems for toll collection. When I met him, Pagrotsky was very much concerned about trade facilitation. Two-way trade is just about \$550 million, and on both sides the basket of goods is very narrow, which means increased potential right away.

Sweden is also trying to make a comeback in defence purchase, very quietly, by offering India its upgraded version of the Bofors gun, though the Persson regime may face some political and legal flak on that back home.

On a more general level, what is it that makes the Swedes tick? Try as I might, I could not get any of my local friends and contacts to pinpoint anything special about themselves. Perhaps, when you are so close to the question you often miss the answer.

Call it national aspiration or collective subconscious or a bee in the bonnet, but every society has that one thing which shapes its individual and collective psyche. In the US it is constant reinvention combined with the pursuit of the self, in Germany it is the exorcism of guilt and defeat from World War II, and in India it is the desire to be acknowledged as a once (and future) great power.

The Swedes do have that 'something' too. In Sweden, it is social responsibility. It is really that simple. They may have their flaws and their hangovers from the past but they are a deeply caring and honest society, and their manner, values and institutions reflect this. Crime is very low. The people are egalitarian, polite and friendly, not just to visiting journalists but in everyday interaction. And Sweden has gone from being a homogenous nation to a multicultural and immigrant one, all in two decades, with far less pain and far more generosity than almost any other.

If you look beyond its stereotypes, Sweden is perhaps one of the most progressive cultures in Europe. Something we may have overlooked all these years.

When India goes courting for friends it might find an old one still out there. Always pretty, but now wearing a new dress.

(The author, an FE columnist, travelled to Sweden as a guest of the Swedish government)

