Samvad: Narendra Modi's Vision of India's Civilisational Dialogue

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Dr. Anirban Ganguly
Director
Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation
9, Ashoka Road, New Delhi – 110001
Web: www.spmrf.org, E-mail: office@spmrf.org, Phone: 011–23005850
A defining feature of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s foreign policy is his sustained and ceaseless emphasis on India’s civilisational dimensions, her civilisational experience and its continuing relevance and potential in shaping contemporary global geo-strategic direction and evolution. In the last three odd years that he has been at the helm, Narendra Modi has repeatedly displayed an astute and intuitive understanding of the power and capacities of India’s civilisational outreach. His vision stems from his own deeper understanding and study of civilisational India and his positions on how to map a long-term geopolitical trajectory has evolved, based on that study and foundation.

In this understanding of his Narendra Modi continues to be far ahead of many of those individuals and systems who have been tasked or mandated to work out a soft power strategy for India. Institutions like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for example, need to thoroughly revamp and reinvent themselves to be able to articulate and reflect a civilisational vision for India and the objective of India’s soft power that Prime Minister Modi nurtures and is trying to work out. A radical alteration of mindset and perspectives, when it comes to projecting India’s soft power, is what is required among those on whom it has fallen to carry out this mandate in the present age in which civilisational shifts and regroupings have assumed significance and speed.

Cultural and civilisational coalitions are indeed the order of the day as far as present geo-political strategies are concerned and Prime Minister Modi is one of those few world leaders who, having realised the need for forging such
coalitions, has also initiated efforts towards it, efforts, which are creative, imaginative, bold and go beyond the mundane and the routine. Not many in the system have yet grasped the need for such initiatives, initiatives which speak of convergences and synergies based on shared civilisational knowledge, traditions and philosophies.

In this Modi is also joined by the Japanese, led by Prime Minister Abe. Ever since his first bilateral visit to Japan in August 2014, the spirit of a civilisational partnership and exploration between the two countries has gained momentum. The two leaders have taken the effort to personally initiate and continue to impart momentum and perspective to such an effort. The Modi-Abe partnership on the Samvad initiative launched in 2015 and piloted and implemented by Vivekananda International Foundation and the Japan Foundation on ‘conflict avoidance, environment consciousness’, is one such refreshing initiative, that looks beyond present stereotypes of soft power and works towards erecting new foundations for a civilisational exchange and for eventually putting together coalitions of cultures and of civilisations. In fact, the Modi-Abe partnership may someday have to be seen as being one that began to re-write a lot of the terms of engagement in our part of world, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

Modi realises and works to harness and channelize India’s civilisational energies and repositories – so that these too could effectively contribute to re-instating her in the comity of nations as a power who is not only self-reliant and conscious of her present strength and future potentials but also alive to and energised by her rich experience of the past which can still be deftly worked out to propel her energies in her ongoing quest for a great power status.

India the civilisational state, has always continued to exist, her potentials at times subdued, subsumed or ignored, often by her own policy makers, but that era has gradually started receding and in working out his vision of a ‘New India’, Modi seeks to re-invoke, re-shape, re-state and re-configure in our collective consciousness, the vision of Bharat as a civilisational state.

In his studies of civilisations, Arnold Toynbee, for example, spoke of ‘three responses on the part of receiving civilisations, ‘recoil’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘synthesis’. In the entire Southeast Asian region – politically termed ASEAN – Bharat’s civilisational approach has never generated the first response, it generated instead Toynbee’s second and third responses. Both India and the region’s many civilisations were enriched through an osmosis based synthesis. Many
recognise that and have articulated it academically, but Modi has begun to distinctly work out an approach based on ‘adaptation’ and ‘synthesis’ which have primarily defined our interactions with these regions in the past.

The Samvad initiative, has over the last two years, thus emerged as one of the driving platforms for such an effort. By basing itself on Indic and Eastern wisdom and philosophies, PM Modi termed them as, “humanities longest traditions of thought and multiple streams of spirituality”, Samvad aspires to weave together a complex fabric of dialogue and exploration of traditions and knowledge systems that can aid in developing a new framework of international engagement. In this quest, the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies have much in common and are increasingly being look up to across the world.

Samvad-II held in August 5th-6th this year in Yangon, Myanmar saw a large convergence of faith and religious leaders of all major religions from across the world. Philosophers, religious leaders, academics and intellectuals gathered to deliberate, discuss and debate on the way towards a more balanced and harmonious world order. That Myanmar, Yangon was chosen for this was indeed highly symbolic for various reasons, mainly civilisational. D.P.Singhal in his opus, ‘India and World Civilisation’ (1969), for example, observes that, ‘It was mainly through Buddhism that Indian thought and culture made an impression on Burmese life and civilisation.’ Singhal narrates a popular Myanmarese tradition which spoke of how Buddhism came to the country ‘through the good offices of two Mon merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, who were graced by Buddha with some hair from his head [eight strands] and who enshrined the hair on the top of the Singuttara Hill, at the place of where the famous Pagoda, Shwe Dagon, now stands.” The magnificent and inspiring architecture of the ancient temples at Bagan, for example, it is said, bear the imprint of Chalukyan architecture and “whereas the Puranic records” refer to Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, Myanmar’s Buddhist traditions reverse that approach by calling Vishnu a rishi, a sage, “who built a city called Sisit (Sriksetra) and thereafter departed to Brahma-loka.” “It was knowledge of India”, writes, Thant Myint-U, a leading public intellectual of Myanmar “that would quicken and transform Burmese civilisation.”

On 14th June 1950 at a function organised in Yangon by the Ramakrishna Mission Cultural Centre, then education minister and acting foreign minister of Myanmar, U Win, calling for greater cooperation between India and Myanmar, perceptively observed how “History has shown that India and Burma must march together in amity and concord if they were to achieve greatness in accordance with the direction of Nature.” India and Myanmar, U Win argued “know each other as few people do. Our understanding of each other’s needs and difficulties is very profound and deep rooted.” He saw both India and Burma “playing very important parts in the new Asia, and in this Burma owing to her deep understanding of India through long association was in an ideal position to become a bridge between India and Southeast Asian countries.”
Nearer our times, the memory of the role of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, as president of Mahabodhi Society, in facilitating the loan of a portion of the sacred relics of Buddha’s two chief disciples, Mahamogallana and Sariputta, in Yangon’s Kaba Aye Pagoda, in 1951 and a grateful Prime Minister U Nu’s exclamation of “Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu” for this selfless act, further cements the civilisational ties between the two countries and their people up to the present. Dr. Mookerjee was especially invited to ‘Rangoon’ by U Nu to be presented on the occasion of the enshrinement of the sacred relics in March 1951.

Despite political vicissitudes, despite the many layers of our relations over the decades, despite challenging phases as well as promising ones, the essentials of India and Myanmar relations continue to be based on these civilisational fundamentals – from the very ancient past to the present times. Sacred strands of Sakyamuni’s hair bind our two countries for eternity as it were. The significance of Prime Minister Modi visiting Myanmar at regular intervals in the last three years, his upcoming visit – the first bilateral – in the first week of September this year, further cements and imparts new and contemporary vigour to this ancient tie. Yangon, therefore, as a setting for the second Samvad, was, for those who immerse themselves in trying to discern civilisational parallels, highly symbolic and significant.

The leading and pre-eminent Sitagu International Buddhist Academy led by the Venerable Dr. Ashin Nyanissara was the local host and driving force, while Vivekananda International Foundation, the Government of Myanmar, the Myanmar Institute of Strategic International Studies and the Japan Foundation extended their support and expertise to make the event a meaningful exercise in dialogue – Samvad. Daw Aung Sang Su Kyi took special interest, closely following the proceedings and despatching her National Security Advisor for the two days.

Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe sent their special messages for the occasion, each articulating the deeper theme and imparting an inaugural direction to the exercise. Prime Minister Modi’s call was to “cut through deep rooted religious stereotypes and prejudices” through the medium of Samvad and to address the fundamental questions facing mankind today, questions such as “how to avoid conflict”, “how to address a global challenge like climate change” and “how to live in peace and harmony and secure our lives.” Modi pointed out how, “Asia’s oldest traditions of dialogue and debate” can guide a 21st century world that is increasingly “interconnected and inter-dependent” and is battling a “number of global challenges, from terrorism to climate change.” It was a “deep and prolonged dialogue” which can “produce synergies and resolve contradictions”, he observed.

Prime Minister Abe’s message synchronised with the words and vision of Prime Minister Modi. “Terrorism and violent extremism is expanding and trying to deny the existence of “others” and to paint our world in a single colour”, Abe observed, “Such attempts should not be tolerated. In Asia, we must let flowers of all different colours bloom in harmony. Finally, “freedom” which brings tolerance and diversity is the source of growth and creativity. Asia’s significant development that we enjoy today is based on freedoms of thought, speech and commerce that those before us have carefully nurtured. Free, open, diverse and tolerant Asia, Asia where nobody is excluded, Asia, where sustainable growth is realized, these are the values that Japan would like to realize.” Interestingly, Abe spoke of evolving a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific

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Strategy” which would nurture and protect the freedom of civilisational interaction and positive exchange in the region and beyond.

The Hindu Acharya Dharma Sabha was represented by the most sacred collective of Hindu Swamis led by Mahamandaleshwar Swami Avadheshananda Giri Maharaj, saw the presence of Swami Nirmalanathananda, head of the Adi Chunchunagiri Math, Swami Paramatmanandaji, Swami Govind Giri Maharaj, Swami Mitrananda, Lokesh Muni, Swami Chidananda Muni, the Jathedar of the iconic Patna Sahib Gurdwara and a host of others who participated in the deliberations and extensively engaged with leaders from other religions, in closed interactions discussing various dimensions, challenges and the way forward. Apart from a host of scholars presenting their thoughts on the principle theme of Samvad, these intense and focused engagements were crucial and formed the bedrock of the exercise.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, himself a foremost representative of the Nath Sampradaya, which is, has he observed an “excellent example of the composite Hindu and Buddhist faiths and their philosophical religious traditions”, delivered the valedictory address, pointing out how he had come from a state that was rich in Buddha’s and Ram’s legacy. Guru Gorakhnath is regarded as one of the 84 Siddhas of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and is known as Goraksh in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In a moving and powerful address, Yogi Adityanath drew a deep civilisational parallel, between the two religions, and expanded on how their wisdom and traditions can indeed lay a distinct path ahead in addressing the major challenges of the world. Yogi Adityanath pointed out how India and especially his state was the inheritor of the legacy of Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and Lord Buddha and was committed to work for the welfare of one and all through pursuing the path of “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas.”

For the assembled international audience and the large number of scholar monks, it was indeed
an interesting sight to see and to hear a monk from India—who embodied in himself the dimensions of a spiritual leader, a popular political leader, a parliamentarian and an administrator and whose actions through renunciation seem to be giving him greater impetus and dynamism. This was a new aspect of the Samvad effort. Uttar Pradesh Governor the venerable Ram Naik also participated in the deliberations, both he and Yogi Adityanath, representing that Indian state which has one of the strongest civilisational and historical association with Buddhism and Hinduism.

The ten point Yangon Samvad Declaration, jointly authored by the hosts and the participating organisations and country, among other things, declared to stand firmly against “all kinds of hate speech, false propaganda, conflict and war under the pretext of religion” and strongly condemned “those who provide support to any such activities.” The members and leaders of different faiths and all those gathered affirmed that they needed to “build mutual understanding, respect and trust” among themselves “in order to obtain a peaceful, secure and prosperous human society.” They also resolved to “exercise restraint and refrain from interfering in matters of other religions and to cooperate in building bridges for world peace.” It was also declared that collective projects and efforts will be initiated for enhancing environmental consciousness. It was particularly significant, especially in the global context, that the declaration, affirmed at the end that “all spiritual paths and religious traditions are equally valid”, implying that there was no single path or single way.

The response from the people and from the intelligentsia in Myanmar was extremely positive and forthcoming; there was a great interest among them to be part of this initiative. The dimensions of civilisation, of culture and the dimensions of traditions and knowledge were activated to generate a new grand narrative – a narrative that is Dharmic and aspires to create a contemporary framework of civilisational engagement. One recalled Prime Minister Modi’s words while inaugurating the first Samvad in Delhi in 2015, where he had said, “They say that this century is going to be an Asian Century. I am very clear that without embracing the path and ideals shown by Buddha, this century cannot be an Asian century!” One saw that in action in Yangon, where Buddha and Vivekananda mingled, where the principles of Dharma were reiterated and articulated to shape that Asian century, guided by India’s civilisational
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