

TREAT INDIA AS AN EQUAL

GOLDY HYDER

Canadian business and political leaders are at last waking up to the importance of India. But they need to be aware that Indian attitudes toward Canada are changing too.

Les chefs d'entreprise et dirigeants politiques canadiens prennent enfin conscience de l'importance de l'Inde. Mais ils doivent savoir que l'attitude des Indiens à l'égard du Canada est aussi en pleine évolution.

The Harper government has committed itself to an important goal: to complete negotiations on a free trade agreement with India by the end of 2013. Given the scope and complexity of the proposed agreement, which could include provisions related to federal and subfederal procurements, it is an ambitious and aggressive undertaking — yet it is absolutely vital to Canada's continued economic prosperity.

By the government's own estimates, a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with India has the potential to triple bilateral trade from \$5 billion to \$15 billion as soon as 2015. If the full potential of the agreement is achieved, some observers contend, Canada's GDP could increase by \$6 billion, creating as many as 40,000 new jobs. At a minimum, a trade deal would provide Canadian businesses with a massive competitive advantage: preferential access to more than 1.2 billion consumers.

Curiously, despite ample evidence and intertwined national histories, Canadians have been among the last to fully acknowledge and join the West in a renewed interest in India. Western interest in India had lapsed after centuries of cultivating trading ties with the Indian subcontinent (after all, European settlement of North America was an unexpected outcome of Christopher Columbus' expedition to find a better route to Asia). Canada's bilateral relationship with India has languished due to a number of factors, including what some might describe as benign neglect.

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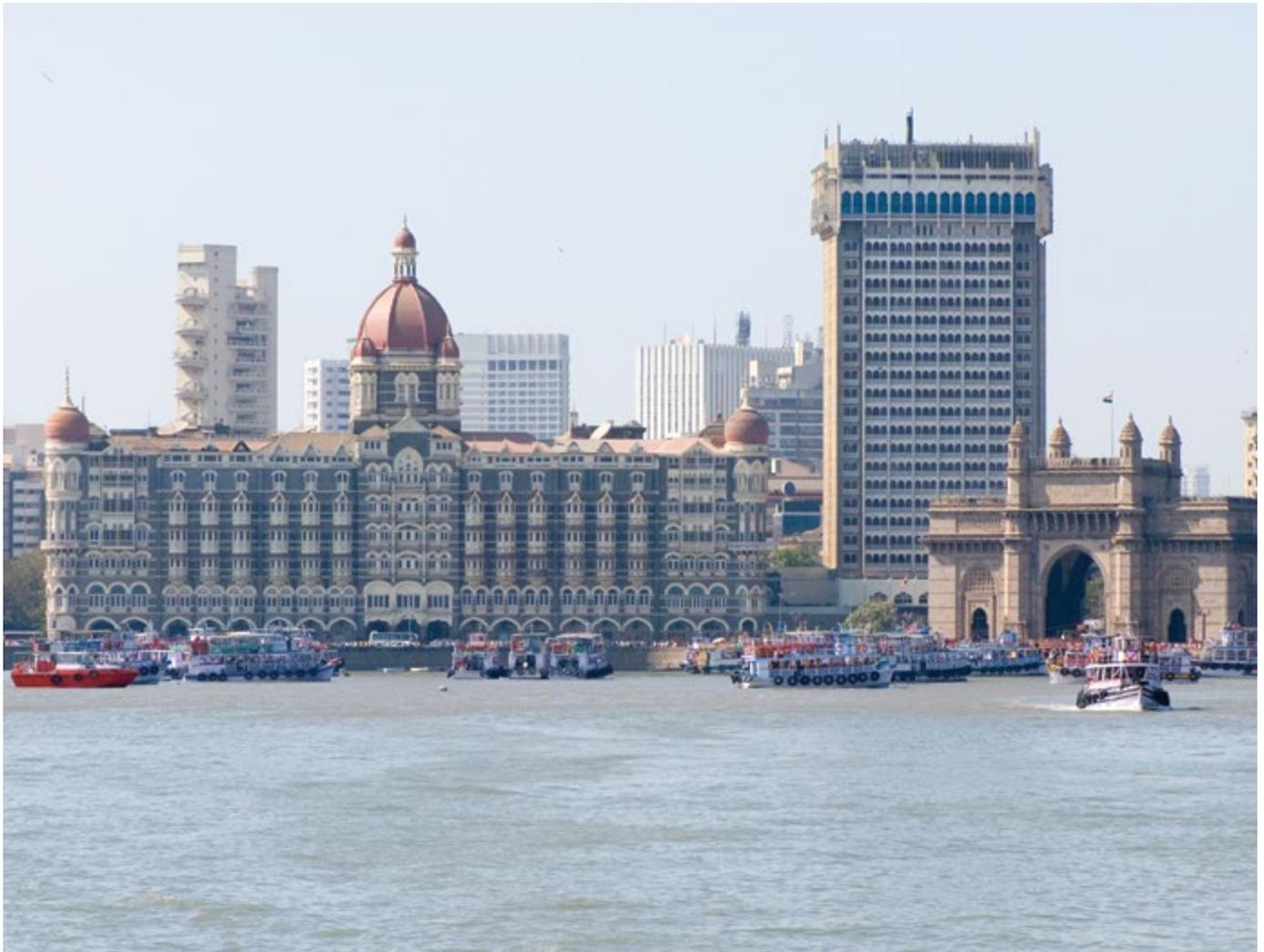
Prime Minister Stephen Harper does not appear to need convincing that this trend must be reversed. In his recent speech to the World Economic Forum in New Delhi, the Prime Minister correctly noted that India is “a place where globally important decisions are increasingly being made.” But Canadian awareness of the shifting economic opportunities must also be matched with an evolution in attitudes toward India.

Fairly or unfairly, many in India still perceive Canada's attitude as having colonial undertones, that there is an implied sense that “we are here to help.” Although India clearly has issues with income inequality and poverty, the perception of paternalism undermines our ability to foster stronger ties with Indian business.

Canada and India both have long legacies as nations of traders. But because so much of Canada's trade has been with Europe and the United States, we have not developed the adaptability in our business culture that will be necessary for us to excel in the new markets that are so crucial to future growth. Despite being a diverse and tolerant multicultural society at home, we are often rigid and inflexible when it comes to our business dealings abroad.

I have often heard international clients and business contacts praise individual Canadian business people for being far more respectful of cultural differences than their American and European counterparts. And yet there is an overall sense among Indian businesses that Canadian companies try too hard to impose their own way of doing business when abroad. It is absolutely crucial that we bridge this gap without, of course, compromising core Canadian values.

Equally damaging is the perception that all levels of Canadian government and many companies lack the



Mumbai's waterfront:
is Canada committed for
the long haul?

PHOTO: ISTOCK

essential commitment to the long haul when it comes to building business relationships in India. There is a troubling view that we are there for the weekend or, worse, that we only visit India when we are “in the neighbourhood” having real negotiations with the Chinese. (Just think how we feel when international visitors tack on a token visit to Canada after traveling to the United States.)

I cannot stress enough how much India's attitudes toward Canada and the West have changed in recent years. Indians are properly taking immense pride in the explosion of new opportunities in their country, and they are

understandably demanding that they be treated as the peers and equals they clearly are. A failure to recognize and respect these changes will jeopardize our ability to seize the opportunities.

I have had an inside perspective on the evolution of Canada's relationship with India. My family and I frequently travel back to India, and for many years we were often asked by friends and family about opportunities in Canada. During recent visits, however, those inquiries have been replaced by questions about when we will be moving back to India. The old adage “go West, young man” has been replaced with a steady chorus of “go East.”

There are encouraging signs that Canadian governments and business leaders are addressing our perceived shortcomings. Since 2006, there have been 24 visits by Canadian cabinet ministers to India, and the Prime Minister visited in 2009 and 2012. Moreover, we now have a High Commissioner to India, Stewart Beck, who comes from the international trade side of the Department of Foreign Affairs, suggesting there is more of a focus on the business side of the relationship.

Over 500 Canadian companies now have sustained operations and investments in India, and several hundred more are developing plans to do so. The Canada-India CEO Forum, led by Hari Bhartia and Tom Jenkins, has been established as a vehicle to promote and establish increased trade and investment ties between our two countries.

These steps reflect the type of dedicated, focused and sustained effort that Canada needs to undertake if it is serious about building stronger ties with India. But there is still more we can and must do if we are to succeed. We are only one of many suitors seeking to woo (and wow) Indians. And given the relative size of our population and economy, we are one of the smaller suitors seeking to rekindle a relationship.

The 2011 Indian census reveals there are 46 cities in India that have populations greater than 1 million people, not including urban agglomerations or “greater areas.” Canada has 3 cities of this size. More than 1 million Canadians of Indian origin live in Canada — effectively 3 percent of our population. By contrast, Canada’s total population is less than 3 percent of India’s.

Canada is therefore in fierce competition for India’s attention with much larger countries, including most of the major European economies as well as the United States. Overcoming that size disadvantage requires finding ways to emphasize other strengths. Australia, a country of a size comparable to Canada, has a strategic advantage due to its geographic proximity to

Asia. Canada has advantages too, but to date we have not been able to effectively leverage them. One group that could lead the way is Canadians of Indian origin, who have not linked back effectively to the community in India. It is a strategic advantage that Canada must leverage better.

It is often said that where you stand on a given issue will depend on where you sit — so it is perhaps not surprising that I, the president of a large public relations consultancy, see the problem in the context of brand management. As odd as it might sound, in India Canada’s “brand” is not one of the most recognized. Conceptually, therefore, we need to base our efforts in the Indian — and wider Asian — markets on a strategy to enhance and improve “Brand Canada.”

As with any branding exercise, the key to a successful campaign is identifying and isolating your core strengths and communicating them effective-

ly to your target audience. It is not so much an exercise in conveying how we see ourselves and want the world to see us, as it is one of highlighting those aspects of our country that are most attractive to those we want to attract. To that end, we need to better understand our target audience.

A 2012 Ipsos Reid report on the effectiveness of efforts to increase the number of international students attending Canadian colleges and universities found that Canada was not a “top-of-mind destination” for prospective students in India or China. The report stated, in part, that Canada’s work in this area was insufficiently detailed when it came to highlighting Canada’s advantages relative to those of the United States and the United Kingdom.

The report recommended that future marketing and advertising campaigns should more clearly articulate factors such as the quality of our educational institutions, our liberal immigration policies, our strong and distinct culture, as well as Canada’s record of innovation and research. More specifically, it recommended the development of a “clear national brand” — something that both the United States and the United Kingdom already have and exploit.

Given the undisputable links between higher education and economic growth, the broader lesson here is that promoting Canada’s cultural distinctiveness is crucial to strengthening our global brand. Foreign Minister John Baird has spoken passionately and persuasively about the need to promote Canadian values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as part of our efforts to promote Canada’s economic interests.

In contrast to some of the other

The “Canada” brand is not well known in India.

large and emerging economies in Asia, India shares Canada’s strong commitment to all four of these core values. We also share similar banking and legal regimes, as well as other legacies of the former British Empire. We have a vested economic interest in highlighting the elements we share with India as well as what differentiates us from the other Western countries vying for its attention.

Prime Minister Harper has compared the Canada-India trade relationship to the plot of a Bollywood movie, in which the hero competes for the beautiful heroine in a crowded field of suitors. It is clear who the love interest is in this relationship. The question is whether Canada can present itself as being attractive enough to win the girl, in a world full of suitors. ■