**Came Modi, and there was light?**

BY J A W E D N A Q V I 2023-05-09

NOBODY should take S. Jaishankar`s barbs to heart. The foreign minister has to say what he says because his job is to shore up Prime Minister Narendra Modi`s self-congratulatory foreign policy, likening it to the end of the dark times for India. In this view, Nehru, Indira, Rajiv, Rao, Vajpayee, Manmohan represented a national embarrassment, as it were, which was overcome with the 2014 advent of Mr Modi. This was more or less what Mr Jaishankar told the UN General Assembly recently. His comments didn`t sit well with old-school diplomats, but that`s besides the point.

Praising the `determination, innovation and enterprise of millions of ordinary Indians`, he said: `They are rejuvenating a society pillaged by centuries of foreign attacks and colonialism.

In one fell swoop, he erased India`s inspirational anticolonial battle that Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Bhagat Singh, Kalpana Joshi and other revered heroes waged, and which set off prairie fires of freedom across the globe. It`s still rocking diplomatic templates in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

To be fair, there was humour too in Mr Jaishankar`scommentsinNewYork.Unintended perhaps, but it was there. Indian officials say the country`s interest lies in being a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation for the access it gives to Central Asian markets and their enormous resources. By a coincidence, some of the Central Asian countries deify a hero Jaishankar`s party regards as a villain. India`s first Mughal emperor, Babar, is a legend; a romantic adventurer from the Ferghana valley, a scion of the house of Central Asia`s revered ruler Taimur. Hindu nationalists, however, can`t digest their meal if they don`t curse Babar in grace. The `centuries of foreign attacks` was perhaps Jaishankar`s way of indulging his bosses and their Quixotic battles with Mughal ghosts.

That the friendly Uzbeks and Tajiks overlook the odd behaviour reflects the essence of diplomatic refinement. Not to forget that the Tashkent Agreement Indian and Pakistani leaders signed in 1965, though shepherded by Alexei Kosygin, took place on the land where Babar, reviled inIndia with a doctored history, learned to relish the melons he would sorely miss in Hindustan.

It is a given that India and Pakistan ties have been traditionally mired in churlishness and mistrust. It`s not always easy to explain when or why the dark clouds disperse too momentarily, usually at the snap of the finger. And the media goes up like the Mexican wave in a football stadium: `two legs good, four legs bad.

Another day, the command changes: `four legs good, two legs bad.

The sheep from Animal Farm knew the script when Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari came as Mr Jaishankar`s guest at the SCO meeting in Goa.

They poked fun at his bad Urdu and put words in his mouth. Faiz Ahmed Faiz foresaw the one that got ripped into shreds on TV. `Wo baat saarefasaane mein jiska zikr na thal Wo baat unko bahot nagawaarguzri hail` (They sulk over words that were never said/ The things that are only in their head.) Did Bilawal threaten violence if a G20 meeting is held in Srinagar, as India plans to do? It seems what he said was messed up by his faltering Urdu.

There was this Hyderabadi friend who came running to our house to say that my mother had met with an accident and she was thrashed. Why was Amma thrashed? In his broken Hyderabadi Urdu, we heard: `Amma ka accident ho gaya.

Unko khoob maar piti.` It turned out that Amma was slightly injured when a three-wheeler overturned. Remember Gen Musharraf asking earnestly: `What does `atoot ang`mean?` The Indian speaker had just described Kashmir as an inseparable part of India in chaste Hindi. Language can be a barrier within a country and beyond.

It has miffed some that Bilawal spoke to thePakistani press in Goa, and that too about Kashmir. In fact, Bilawal gave two in-depth, noholds-barred interviews to senior Indian journalists in Goa, one to The Hindu newspaper, the other to India Today TV. Maybe they couldn`t grill him enough. Not all interviewers are Karan Thapar or Sophy Ridge to make their guests sweat. Why blame the quarry? There was another perplexing incident at the Agra summit. A platoon of senior Indian journalists cornered Gen Musharraf in a closed room in Agra. But the story later was less about how the senior scribes failed to put Musharraf on the mat. The spin, over which the Agra summit ostensibly collapsed, was how dare Musharraf get the better of India`s elite press corps.

Likewise with Manmohan Singh. He was at least brave enough to hold one news conference in his 10-year tenure. He was petrified at the thought and said so. `I am here to throw the pigeon to the wolves.` But the wolves were so smitten by the occasion that they didn`t muster a single newsworthy question.

Some Indian commentators thought Bilawal should be told to go home. He shouldn`t wince.

He was a Pakistani being asked to return to Pakistan. Pity the plight of Indians, Rahul Gandhi included, routinely ordered to go to Pakistan for raising a point of order with the rulers.

Some Indians feel they have arrived on the world stage with Mr Modi, particularly as G-20 chair for the year. A truer picture of the world is more powerful than any regional club ushers.

Fact is, the non-aligned movement, given up for dead and bereft of a platform, is reviving more robustly than ever before. If India can befriend Russia and the US simultaneously, asserting a fine balance without committing to either side, it should thank Nehru`s mantra of NAM. Indeed, the larger world is standing up to the hegemons as they had once set out to do. To claim that it was all darkness before Mr Modi would seem discourteous to the torch that Nehru lit.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

jawednaqvi @gmail.com