

The 'imperialist' tendency is not new to India

MUSCLE-FLEXING in the subcontinent whether in Sri Lanka, Maldives or in Nepal, Prithvi, Agni, and the Time magazine report. Glossy television features extolling the virtues of the land. India, it would appear, has discovered its sense of self-importance rather suddenly.

At least with reference to Indian attitudes towards the smaller nations of the subcontinent, a brief look at recent history belies such a judgement. Perhaps it is the rapid pace of events over the last few years which has prevented scholars and journalists alike from noticing the historical continuities in the Indian attitudes towards their smaller neighbours. Yet such a historically-informed view is imperative if we are to understand the kind of ill-will which India has managed to generate amongst the smaller South Asian powers.

One reason for the lack of such historical analysis has been the obsession with personalities which seems to pervade all aspects of the study of Indian politics. Despite many indicators to the contrary, a persistent myth about Indian foreign policy has continued to prevail. India has supposedly moved from Nehru's "idealism", even "Utopianism", through Indira's "pragmatism", to the recent brash phase under the leadership of Rajiv. It is only now that India has begun regarding itself as a regional superpower.

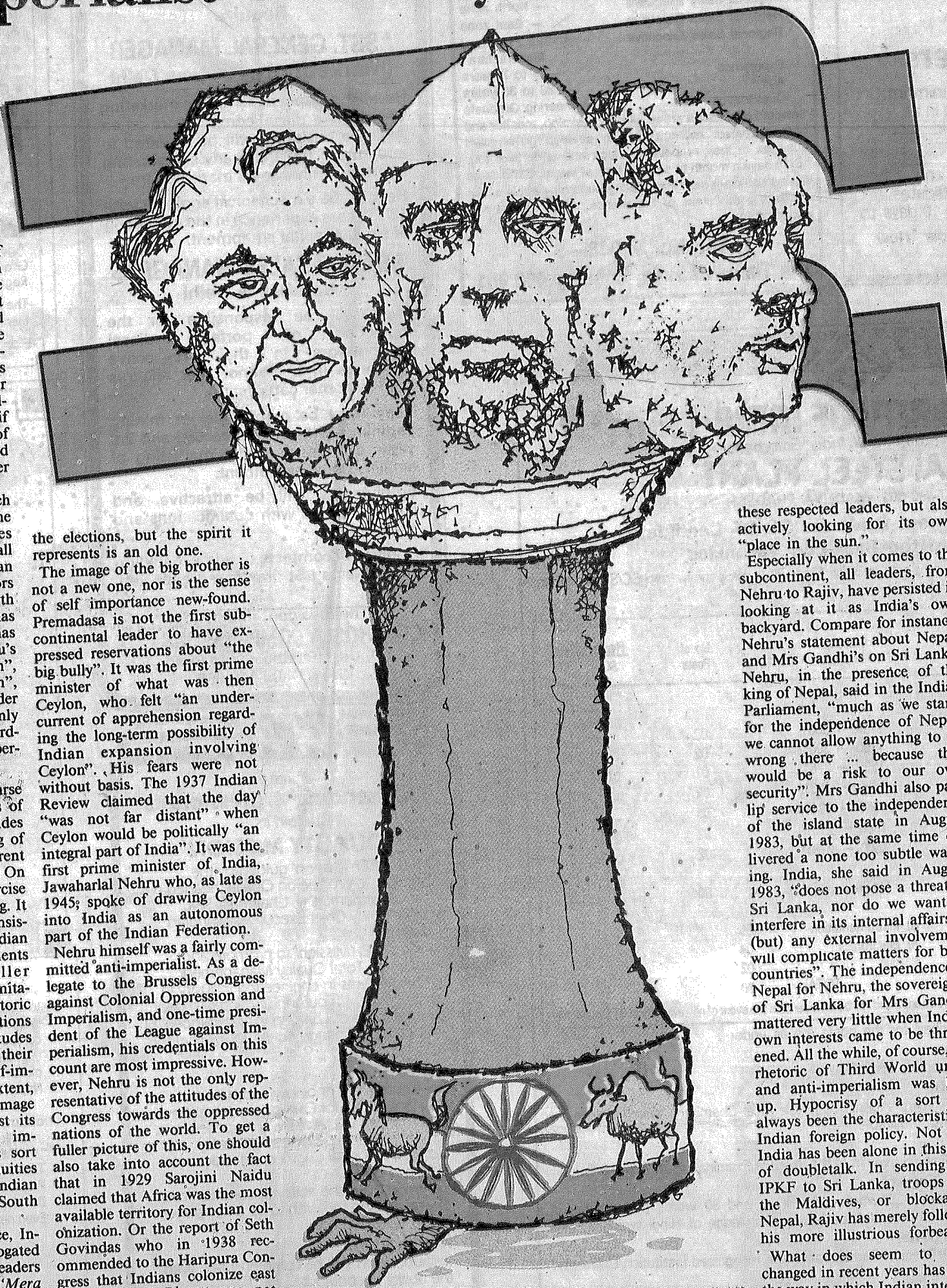
Which is not to say of course that a study of the attitudes of the Indian leadership provides no clue to the understanding of foreign policy, or the current situation in the subcontinent. On the contrary, such an exercise can be extremely illuminating. It shows, for instance, the consistent insensitivity of the Indian leadership in making statements regarding their smaller neighbours. It reveals the limitations of the ideological rhetoric mouthed by different generations of Indian leaders. The attitudes of the Indian leaders reflect their own sense of regional self-importance, and thus to an extent, account for the sort of image India has enjoyed amongst its smaller neighbours. Most importantly, a study of this sort reveals the essential continuities in the attitudes of the Indian leaders towards their South Asian neighbours.

Long before Independence, Indian nationalists had arrogated to themselves the role of leaders of the subcontinent. 'Mera Bharat Mahaan' might be a

the elections, but the spirit it represents is an old one.

The image of the big brother is not a new one, nor is the sense of self importance new-found. Premadasa is not the first subcontinental leader to have expressed reservations about "the big bully". It was the first prime minister of what was then Ceylon, who felt "an undercurrent of apprehension regarding the long-term possibility of Indian expansion involving Ceylon". His fears were not without basis. The 1937 Indian Review claimed that the day "was not far distant" when Ceylon would be politically "an integral part of India". It was the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru who, as late as 1945, spoke of drawing Ceylon into India as an autonomous part of the Indian Federation.

Nehru himself was a fairly committed anti-imperialist. As a delegate to the Brussels Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, and one-time president of the League against Imperialism, his credentials on this count are most impressive. However, Nehru is not the only representative of the attitudes of the Congress towards the oppressed nations of the world. To get a fuller picture of this, one should also take into account the fact that in 1929 Sarojini Naidu claimed that Africa was the most available territory for Indian colonization. Or the report of Seth Govindas who in 1938 recommended to the Haripura Congress that Indians colonize east Africa. 'Mera Bharat Mahaan' in the eyes of



these respected leaders, but also actively looking for its own "place in the sun."

Especially when it comes to the subcontinent, all leaders, from Nehru to Rajiv, have persisted in looking at it as India's own backyard. Compare for instance, Nehru's statement about Nepal, and Mrs Gandhi's on Sri Lanka. Nehru, in the presence of the king of Nepal, said in the Indian Parliament, "much as we stand for the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong there ... because that would be a risk to our own security". Mrs Gandhi also paid lip service to the independence of the island state in August 1983, but at the same time delivered a none too subtle warning. India, she said in August 1983, "does not pose a threat to Sri Lanka, nor do we want to interfere in its internal affairs ... (but) any external involvement will complicate matters for both countries". The independence of Nepal for Nehru, the sovereignty of Sri Lanka for Mrs Gandhi, mattered very little when India's own interests came to be threatened. All the while, of course, the rhetoric of Third World unity, and anti-imperialism was kept up. Hypocrisy of a sort has always been the characteristic of Indian foreign policy. Not that India has been alone in this sort of doubletalk. In sending the IPKF to Sri Lanka, troops into the Maldives, or blockading Nepal, Rajiv has merely followed his more illustrious forbearers.

What does seem to have changed in recent years has been the way in which Indian interests

are being forwarded. The use of armed force is not new to Indian policy. Sikkim was annexed almost without the rest of the world realizing it. Pakistan was divided by a war, even if the major concern of that war was not that. However, never before had Indian troops intervened directly in the politics of other South Asian states as they have recently in the Maldives or in Sri Lanka. However, to attribute this to the brashness of Rajiv Gandhi, or to argue that India has "suddenly" "discovered" its own capabilities, would be erroneous. What has changed has been the capacity of the Indian state to fulfil its objectives. This has partly been due to better military capacity, but also because of an altered international environment.

India has always coveted the role of a regional superpower. Indian leaders may not have used exactly these words, but from Nehru downward this is the role they have sought. What prevented the actualisation of this desire was ultimately not Pakistan, but its mentor, the United States of America. Possibly because of the security of the Rapid Deployment Force in Diego Garcia, the US has in recent years been content to allow India to play out this role.

The go-ahead for Operation Eagle (the airdropping of supplies into Sri Lanka) was obtained when American State Department spokesmen in early 1987, expressed gratification that "our policies and that of the government of India (on Sri Lanka) are very much running parallel". Indian violation of Lankan air-space was only "regretted" by the US, while the Maldives action was welcomed. India has thus the freedom to act as it chooses to within the confines of its backyard. This is the real reason behind the recent dramatic happenings in the subcontinent.

The drama however should not blind us to some of the realities behind the production. The big brother has not appeared on the scene all of a sudden. The ideological cloaks he wears may be different, but in this corner of the world stage at least, his role has remained fairly consistent. If he seems to be going about his task openly, hogging the limelight, throwing his weight about, and getting good "reviews" in the bargain, it shouldn't be forgotten that it is only the *maa-baaps* he has made speeches against, who allow him to do so.