Beyond chicken masala and the Taj Mahal

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During the 15th and 16th centuries, part of what is today India maintained trade contacts with part of what is today Brazil. In those times of European imperialism, they were inserted into the international system from their peripheral situation as colonies to serve the political and economic priorities of their colonizers.

The world has changed. Brazil and India are now independent nations facing the socioeconomic problems generated by colonialism and by the complexity of their postcolonial societies. Even though bilateral relations were made official immediately after India's independence in 1947, for some time the dialogue was restricted to mutual exoticism. Brazilian public opinion, even in intellectual circles, still ignores most of Indian history, culture, and society, except perhaps for chicken masala or the Taj Mahal.

Yet now Brazil and India are making progress toward a new phase of relations. Both are members of multilateral organizations charged with worldwide economical and political restructuring. From April 12th through the 16th, two of those forums, BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) met in Brasilia to deal with an extensive agenda (through 16 permanent working groups) of discussion of such issues as trade, financial aid for other countries, academic debates, security, think tanks, and Iran's nuclear program.

What is it that is now bringing these countries together, to the point of creating an environment favorable to the consolidation of agendas of common interests and to cooperation?

Economy

Common speculation that India and Brazil, along with China and Russia, will be among the planet's driving motors stems basically from the analysis of, among other things, current economic indexes, continued growth expectations, GDPs, production and consumption indicators, monetary reserves, industrial capacity, and the availability of and dependence on energy resources. Also not to be forgotten are the common expectations of, and insistence on, greater representation in the

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organizations in the global political arena, like the Security Council. However, it may also be useful to look at other indicators to measure the stamina of both countries for sustainable development.

One of the elements against which sustainable development and the potential for cooperation may be assessed is intellectual capital. In 2008, India ranked 10th and Brazil 13th in scientific production internationally. An analysis of their performance in science and technology over the last few decades shows intense and constant growth that has brought them closer to the major international centers.

This growth has not come by chance, by any means. In 1980 Brazil had 65 universities, 20 of them private and in 2008 183, 86 of them private. Today Brazil has some 2,300 institutions of higher education. In 1947 India had 20 universities, in 1980 200, and in 2005 357. But the number of colleges, also considered higher education institutions, soared from 500 in 1947 to an incredible 17,625 in 2005 (the United Kingdom has 166 institutions of higher education; Japan has 643).

Of course, the demographics are quite different. Whereas in Brazil there are almost 200 million inhabitants, India, the second most populated country in the world after China, has some 1.2 billion. On the other hand, about 30% of Brazilians of university age actually go to university, compared to 13% in India.[1]

Photos: Stringer, Robert Nickelsberg, Stringer and Prakash Singh (Getty Images / AFP).

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Differences

However, a mechanical comparison of categories that may seem similar is perhaps not the best way to start a valid debate. In both countries, academia has been called on to take part in the debate and to offer alternatives to the intense hierarchization and social exclusion of both societies, which cross borders between different historical and cultural heritages: race, cast, gender, representation of indigenous peoples, and the rights of the political minorities. While it is true that forces that generate exclusion and social, political, and economic inequality are present in both countries, it is also true that those forces operate differently in Brazil and in India. Caste discrimination in India is not tantamount to race issues in Brazil, even though both circumstances may illuminate the debate on creative solutions in terms of macropolicies for social inclusion, technologies for income distribution, or mechanisms of representation of minorities. Thus, the dialogue between India and Brazil must take into account the symmetric inequalities and unequal similarities that affect the two countries.

One highly positive ramification of this type of dialogue is that developing countries may find in Brazil and India models that are different from the US and Europe. From several perspectives Brazil, like many other emerging and developing countries, has evolved its concept of nation, economic success, and the expectation of social development by comparing itself with the US and Europe. They are not only the model for our development, they have historically represented an expectation of success that we constantly strive to achieve, even as they remind us that we are far from being their idea of developed, prosperous, or modern.

Today, though, we have an intense debate on the restructuring of global geopolitics that is leaning toward multipolarity. This effort is already apparent in various initiatives taken by individual countries or in regional forums with regard to the restructuring of the architecture of the global financial system; the promotion of trade in local currencies between countries in, e.g., BRIC, IBAS, Mercosur, and ASEAN; the reform of the Bretton Woods system; and the creation of regional institutions as an alternative to the IMF and the World Bank for financing development.

Opening up a broader dialogue with India and other countries in the South and considering authentic revision of the grammar of international power require efforts that go beyond simply identifying an agenda of common problems. It is necessary to redefine our universes of comparison and restructure our imagination in terms of economics, security, public policy, development, social inclusion, and intellectual capacity. Brazil has yet to complete this.

[1] Sources: Institute for Scientific Information; Scopus database; University Grants Commission, India, Unesco, Capes-MEV; Inep.