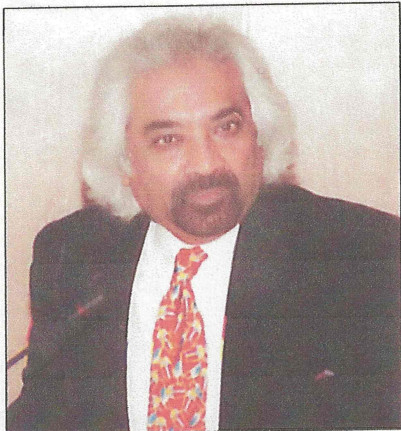


Mahatma's message



■ BY SAM PITRODA

There is a certain underlying assumption in the term "Overseas Indian" which means that no matter where they are, people from India essentially remain Indian. They may be overseas, but they are still Indian. It is as much a

tribute to the close to 25 million Indian Diaspora worldwide as it is a measure of how connected India feels to them.

Since Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, arguably the most consequential overseas Indian, returned to India in 1915 after spending 21 years in South Africa, many expatriate Indians have attempted to make a mark on the country of their origin with varying degrees of success. Mahatma Gandhi's was, of course, a unique example and nothing of that scale has ever been attempted and accomplished since.

However, during the last decade-and-a-half, particularly in the past five years, there has been a perceptible increase in the quality and frequency of interaction between overseas Indians and India.

In my view, that relationship is now poised for a fundamental shift predominantly because, like the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, India is now emerging as the new frontier of opportunity. Even beyond the emotional and cultural bond between the overseas Indian and India, what is now driving the relationship is the wish to explore a new frontier of great promise, an instinct which had prompted most diasporic Indians to leave their home in the first place.

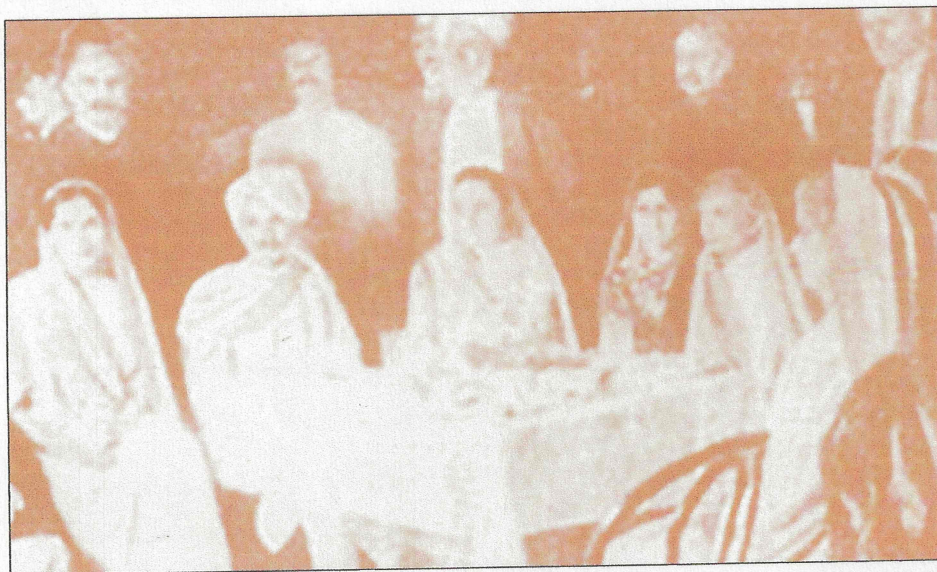
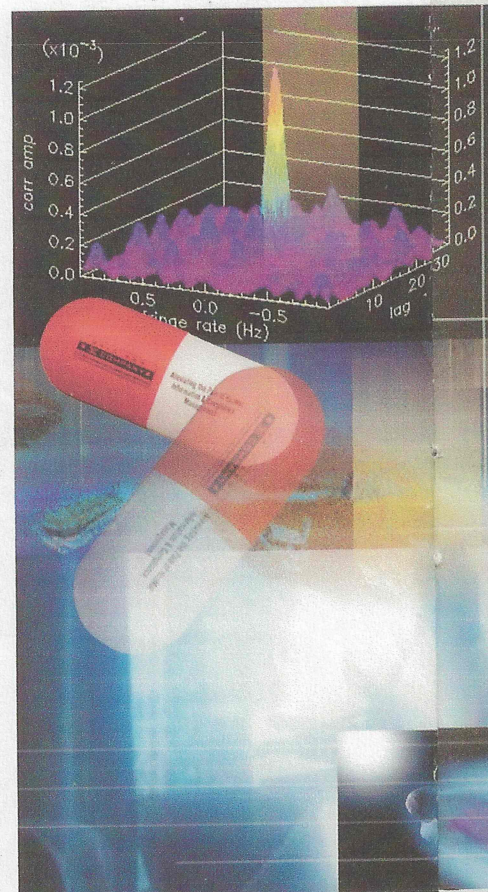
Those who left India between the 1950s and 1980s did so primarily in search of a better life and out of a sense of disillusionment about the country of their birth. Many of them thought, in some ways justifiably so, that their

talents and aspirations would be better served in the West. However, the tide began to turn sometime in the mid-1980s with the emergence of Rajiv Gandhi as India's Prime Minister. In him many people saw the promise of a new India, an India that would be modern and prosperous, a nation occupying its just place among the front-ranking nations. That promise has taken more than two decades to begin to come true.

Although by no means is India anywhere close to realising its full potential, it is quite heartening to see that successive political leaderships have kept things moving in the right direction.

At least now, perhaps for the first time in its independent history, many pieces are in place in order to create a modern and prosperous nation where people, irrespective of their background, have access to a good life.

I believe India now presents the most promising opportunity to not just overseas Indians but those who want to be part of the exciting task of building a great democracy and economy. Having spent over four decades



Mahatma Gandhi, seated second from left, soon after his return to India in 1915, after spending 21 years in South Africa.



in the United States and travelled extensively I can say confidently that there is not an area of nation building that some overseas Indian somewhere does not have expertise in. Be it science, engineering, medicine, management, education, cinema, television, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, space or any other discipline, overseas Indians have what it takes to make a significant contribution.

What is important is that India is now absolutely ready to address its many challenges. With a robust economy, burgeoning foreign exchange reserves, more than 500 million young people, political, cultural and religious stability and overall recognition that there is no alternative to all-round progress, India and the overseas Indian have a perfect fit.

It is tempting for many overseas Indians to look for opportunities where their involvement means some level of political influence. However, they would make a far greater contribution if they were to concentrate on areas of their expertise rather than worrying about political influence.

Very often overseas Indians tend to criticise the role of the government, bureaucracy and administration in India because they believe they have earned that right, having succeeded in some endeavor abroad. I think it is important to recognise that there is a great deal of talent in India in the government, industry, NGOs, academia, etc., that is trying very hard to expedite the process of modernisation

in spite of an age-old feudal and hierarchical mindset. It is advisable to work with these people and strengthen their hands by supporting good work at all levels to meet basic human needs related to water, sanitation, literacy, education, healthcare, etc.

For all of these areas, technology can play an important role in bringing about generational changes. If I were asked to suggest areas that overseas Indians can get involved in, I would recommend any area of their expertise that relates to bringing innovative ways to meet developmental challenges in the public and private sectors.

We should all bear in mind that working in India requires a sense of sacrifice and selflessness. In doing so we are not doing the country a favor but answering our own moral calling. To that extent, what was expected of Mahatma Gandhi then and what is expected of us now has not changed.

(The writer is a technocrat and Chairman of the Knowledge Commission set up by the Government of India.)

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