

THE LAST REVOLUTIONARY?

"Our biggest mistake has been not having been able to learn much more in much less time."

—*Reflections by Fidel Castro: The Tariffed Truth, in Escambray, August 27, 2013*

Fidel Castro's actions appeared quixotic to the outside world, but often yielded surprising results. His Cuba, an island nation of 11 million, held the world in thrall for over half a century and kept the most powerful nation at bay. When Fidel handed over power to his younger brother Raúl in 2006, the revolution appeared to be losing steam. The need to plug Cuba's enormous energy and talent into the currents coursing through an interconnected world was apparent. Raúl's decision not to seek another term after 2018 paved the way for the post-revolution reformers.

A country which portrays its iconic leaders in gigantic murals and monuments did not have a single public bust or statue of Fidel, as far as this writer could see. The spirit of El Comandante, nevertheless, pervaded the island. His writings and speeches, cogent messages on nuclear disarmament, climate change, human health, etc. are taken as gospel. Cuba's achievements in education, health, sports, scientific applications, cinema, ballet, etc. enhanced his faith and his reputation.

Reality, meanwhile, had inured a generation over the years when leather was passed off as meat and privation was a fact of life. Ice cream was sold for a Cuban peso (4 US cents) a cone, but smuggled into the black market for a dollar a litre. The same applied to cigars, cosmetics, any product Cubans could use to 'resolve' their daily tribulations. Enterprise was either forbidden (all property, even fish caught at sea, belonged to the State) or discouraged. Salaries were pegged at levels unheard of even in India: \$20 to \$40 for hairdressers, scientists, doctors. That the system prevailed is a tribute to Fidel. Some call it his curse.

The foundations of Cuba's reputation as a beacon against cynical political domination and economic exploitation were laid in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In the hearts and minds of leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who, at 71, called on a 34-year-old Fidel in September 1960 at a Harlem hotel. No 'self-respecting' hotel in New York would offer the revolutionary a room. This gesture cemented a relationship that saw an ailing Fidel make the unprecedented gesture of receiving a vice-president—M.H.

Ansari—in October 2013 for 65 minutes. The most memorable moment was Fidel's bear-hug of Indira Gandhi at the 1983 NAM Summit in Delhi. Rajiv Gandhi, who had met Ronald Reagan and recalibrated India-US relations in June 1985, visited Cuba in August that year. Manmohan Singh had a long meeting with Fidel during his visit to Havana for the 2006 NAM Summit.

Fidel's affection for India did percolate to a hardened Cuban diplomatic and bureaucratic establishment, but sentiments do not make policy. India was opposed to the Cuban chair's attempt, at the 1979 NAM Summit in Havana, to label the 'socialist camp' (USSR) a 'natural ally' of the movement. In 2011, despite high-level demarches, Cuba did not support in writing the short resolution on the expansion of the UN Security Council. It had its own views on the veto and other issues.

The economic relationship was a non-starter. Trade over the past five years peaked at \$40 million. Indian investments on the island were non-existent after ONGC shut shop in 2014. The US embargo, uncertainty over the investment regime and cost-benefit analysis made the project unviable. The Taj group sought, but were not allocated a prime hotel property in Havana in 2012. Indian enterprise needs goodwill in a reforming Cuba.

Back in India, Blas Fernandez, the Cuban boxing coach and the first foreigner to receive the prestigious Dronacharya Award (2012), trained Indians since the 1970s to Olympic glory. Cuban biotechnologists worked at Biocon's laboratories in Bengaluru for over a decade. India provides dozens of technical scholarships annually and set up an IT centre in Havana in 2009. The government wrote off Cuba's debt of \$68 million in 2008 and has financed the refurbishment of some industrial establishments. India's engagement with Cuba, however, does not match that with even relatively obscure countries in the region.

The incongruity of Fidel's doctrine, in a world moving towards greater economic integration, was evident by the 1990s. As communism collapsed and China became a 'socialist market economy', Fidel refused to accept that the old tenets needed revision. His core beliefs were challenged, but seldom altered. His revolution may have come to an end but some of the challenges he warned us of remain.

Illustration by ANIRBAN GHOSH



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