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## New Delhi Conference Report

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# Experts discuss high technology, infrastructure, Asian trade links

by Linda de Hoyos and Susan Maitra

India's economy must make a quantum leap in its growth if it is to meet the challenges of the 21st century, concluded a two-day conference titled, "India an Agro-Industrial Superpower by the 21st Century: A Strategy for Economic Break-out." The April 9-10 conference in New Delhi brought together distinguished individuals and experts from India and abroad, fielding four proposals that will be placed before the government.

Sponsored by *Fusion Asia*, the New Delhi-based quarterly of science and economics, the conference organizers, headed by C. Hingarh of Modipon, Ltd., included Dr. K. D. Sharma of the Delhi Economic Club, Dr. R. K. Hazari, former Reserve Bank of India deputy governor, and D. S. Rawat of the Punjab-Haryana-Delhi Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"Though extravagant—because we in India do not normally talk of 'superpower' status for us," Minister of State for Planning K.R. Narayanan stated in inaugurating the meeting, "the title of this conference is an encouraging theme, an optimistic theme, and maybe a realizable theme." He continued: "I hope in your deliberations you will throw up concrete ideas of realizing these dreams—which may not be dreams, whether it is in regard to the development of the Ganga, or the application of technology to daily life and production, or to linking Asia together more effectively."

Following the public opening session, 40 participants discussed three areas of economic policy required to move India's economy into a new geometry of more dynamic growth: Ganges Valley—Lifeline to India's Future; Impact of High Technology on Productivity; and, Looking East—Benefits of an Asia-Oriented Trade Policy.

The deliberations focused on transforming India from an agrarian-based economy absorbing 71% of the population to an industrial economy in which 50% or less is involved in food production. As Uwe Henke von Parpart of the Fusion Energy Foundation stressed, thinking must focus on *productivity* rather than *production*. "If we concentrate on productivity, production will come automatically. If we do not concentrate on productivity, production will stagnate."

This will require "tough decisions" by government, Ram-

tanu Maitra, editor-in-chief of *Fusion Asia*, noted. "But it was the willingness of independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to make the tough decisions that set the course for India's development so far. Even when many people were starving to death or near starvation, Prime Minister Nehru took the correct decision to focus the economy's resources on building the steel sector and building a scientific and technological workforce. Now we must build on these accomplishments by taking bold and decisive steps in the areas of infrastructure and high technology."

### Development of the Ganges River Basin

The Ganges River Basin, home of nearly half the population, is one of the poorest but potentially richest areas of the country. "It has long been known that the valley could feed much of the world's population. And the industrial potential of the area is no less," Maitra stated. "Yet, to this day, the valley remains a showcase of poverty and backwardness. We need a task force approach to the problem, taking the valley as a whole and formulating a comprehensive water-management program as the basis for systematic development of the basin area."

In a background paper and talk at the conference, Maitra outlined the basin's problems and enormous potential. Government should create a team of experts to carry out a time-bound survey of all aspects of the Ganges River system, he said. Interestingly, as Narayanan had pointed out earlier, such a survey had been an early concern of the Indian National Congress, and of Nehru in particular. In his inaugural address, Narayanan read the text of a 1937 party resolution to initiate such a study.

Prof. H. L. Uppal, a water engineer with Punjab Agricultural University, emphasized that both the surface- and ground-water systems must be harnessed and the basin treated as one ecological system. India's satellite technology can be used to complete the survey in a timely manner. Proposals for flood control, soil erosion control, power, and ground-water development can then be formulated and carried out to "train" the Ganges.

The resulting increase in irrigation and other benefits

would boost agricultural production in the region by about 150 million tons per annum, the equivalent of India's total current grain production. Water transportation, industrial expansion, the rejuvenation of old cities, and building of new cities along this historic river, will also be possible.

### High technology and productivity

India must utilize the most advanced technologies and the most advanced areas of science to make even marginal gains in solving the problem of poverty. This was discussed in the second panel session, and several concrete proposals emerged.

For further industrialization, India requires a fully modern machine-tool industry. Laser technologies provide the most efficient and productive pathway for building this industry. As Dr. Deb K. Ghosh, professor of physics at the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, demonstrated, use of lasers in precision-cutting, welding, annealing, machinery operation, and heat treatment can yield productivity increases on the order of several hundred to several thousand percent. The government, it was recommended, should encourage private-sector involvement in laser technologies' development and application.

Dr. N. Tata Rao, chairman of the Andhrapradesh State Electricity Board and of the Central Power Authority, pointed out that India produces only 40,000 megawatts of electrical power per annum, a very low 150 units per capita. "Energy production cannot be improved by reliance on coal-powered stations. There are better uses for India's coal reserves than mere heat generation." India could move much faster in production of nuclear power plants. With the current program to build 10 gigawatts of nuclear power by the year 2000, nuclear would still provide for only 10% of power requirements. Moving into the 21st century, Dr. Rao said, fusion energy should be used as quickly as possible.

A highlight of the conference was the discussion of a "Look East" orientation in India's trade policy. "We are now entering a new era when the old concept which Jawaharlal Nehru had entertained of Asian cooperation is again emerging as a practical possibility," Narayanan stated. "In this respect the idea of a Kra Canal is a very crucial one. . . . In order to link up India, China, Japan, and the Southeast Asian countries together, this canal can play a far-reaching role."

Pongpol Adireksarn, a member of the Thai parliament and guest speaker, urged India to look toward Japan and Southeast Asia for partners in economic cooperation. "In my opinion, the Kra Canal would offer India a strong boost to the industries and ports of the eastern coastal areas and to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands."

"I foresee that the canal and the subsequent growth of industries will coincide with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's long-term policy to strengthen infrastructure for scientific and technological developments in India," the lead-

er of the opposition Chat Thai party stated. "I believe that India will benefit as a supplier of modern technology, a supplier of steel and other construction materials, and also skilled labor force and technicians during the construction of the Kra Canal and the industries that will be developed in the canal zone afterwards."

He detailed the recently revived 200-year-old idea to build a canal across the Kra Isthmus of Thailand at the final panel session chaired by Dr. Hazari. Other speakers included K.L. Dalal, India's former ambassador to Thailand, and Prof. P.N. Agarwala, an Asian Development Bank consultant. Dr. Norio Yamamoto of Japan's Mitsubishi Research Institute sent his greetings.

"Although several generations of our forefathers have not been able to bring the idea of a Kra Canal into reality," Adireksarn concluded, "with increasing support from various interested and influential groups in Thailand and other countries such as the U.S.A., Japan, and India, I have a growing confidence that . . . the progressive new generation of your Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, of myself and many in this room, would exert joint efforts to make the Kra Canal project, the dream of the old generations, become a reality in our lifetime."

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