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Latin America, the Caribbean and India: Promise and Challenge

Deepak Bhojwani

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Deepak Bhojwani belongs to that small crop of recently retired Indian ambassadors specialized in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, through a blend of chance and choice. India has gained from their hard won domain knowledge, as also their continuing commitment to that region, geographically the furthest from India. We have known too little of this vast region in the past; we can no longer afford such lack of insight. To paraphrase the author, LAC's appearance of homogeneity has produced lulled us into ignoring its political diversity. Worse, this lags much behind the manifest economic and political opportunity.

The nine chapters of this book are divided into two clusters, the first four that narrate the history of LAC, and the next four devoted to connections with India. The final chapter, 'The Challenge of Promise' looks to the future, of what is possible, if only we can weave new connections across the distance. In this fashion the book pursues two parallel tasks, to familiarize an Indian reader with a of 33 states that region that figures little in our mind-maps, and through that, address what is perhaps the core message, how and why LAC should to India.

The first two chapters cover LAC's history and the contemporary scene, in encapsulated form. Chapter three deals with its frequent attempts at hemispheric and regional unity, producing a veritable alphabet soup in the acronym names of organizations that have mushroomed; this has resulted in more frequent summit and ministerial gatherings of low output, than in any world region. The fourth chapter covers with LAC's global engagement, with the EU and other regions,

and with individual countries that have produced close ties with LAC. China's burgeoning 'aggressive economic and political campaign', comprises sequenced visits by its leaders, plus investments and trade deals that swap minerals and resources for finished products. Beijing is set to become the region's second largest economic partner, surpassing the EU, and likely to move to first place in the next decade. Some, especially the major players, worry over a flood of cheap Chinese products; Brazil and Mexico are among those deploying defensive barriers, but Argentine is to host \$12 billion worth of rail projects, and Venezuela has signed oil contracts worth \$32 billion. Left out of this account is the new tide of Chinese migrants, estimated at around a million, shopkeepers and entrepreneurs, overlaying the half-million that had migrated in the 19th century.

India-LAC relations are covered in the book's second half. Early contacts were episodic, though populated by some luminaries of those days. Revolutionary leader MN Roy installed himself in Mexico from 1917 to 1920; Rabindranath Tagore made his celebrated visit to Argentine in 1924-25; Chilean poet Pablo Neruda came to India in 1927-28, though his subsequent trip in 1951 proved to be a disaster. Octavio Paz's *In Light of India*, written when he served as Mexico's ambassador in New Delhi in 1962-68, is a celebrated masterpiece. Today, India has only 14 diplomatic posts in LAC, while disproportionately, 20 of these countries are represented in India.

Reading between the lines one notes that Brazil, by virtue of its size and role in the two key groups BRICS and IBSA, and the Caribbean region through its Indian diaspora, have become India's priorities, though Mexico is not far behind in terms of its expanding economic engagement with India, which includes now investment in movie multiplexes in our country. The author suggests an India focus on economic exchanges, noting that trade has grown sharply in the past ten years, zooming from \$1 billion in 2005 to over \$46 billion in 2014. He laments that India's aid diplomacy has lacked punch, not producing 'development partnerships'. Technical training languishes; barely 400 come from this entire

region on professional ITEC-funded courses; (in my essays I have urged that India's global offering should be stepped up from a current 25,000 to 100,000). Lack of capacity at Indian missions seems to inhibit projects and credit funding. We need a close look at China's methodology, and how South Korea has developed its linkages.

While five of India's 30-odd cultural centers are in LAC, and Indian soft power is manifest through significant interest in classical dance and yoga, cooperation in education is underwhelming, with few scholarships on offer, and not a single center in India that exclusively works on LAC studies. Of the 106 university chairs that India has established across the world, only six are in LAC.

India's inadequacies in diplomatic capacity are evident; we need more, well-resourced embassies across LAC. Despite impressive trade growth and rising energy imports, India has few agreements on investment protection or double taxation avoidance, and none with the principal economic partner, Brazil. Unlike with Africa, where India has pursued continental engagement through a series of 'summit' meetings (and the next one due later this year), plus \$8.5 billion line of credit, a real, sustained effort to engage LAC is yet to emerge. We seem to overlook expanding trade, and a sizable capacity for investments in India. The author notes that prime ministerial visits have been 'woefully infrequent'; a major bilateral LAC tour by Prime Minister Modi is surely worthwhile.

The reviewer is a former diplomat, teacher and honorary fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi; kishanrana@gmail.com
