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India burying its sectarian past
Anthony Keller says the country that spawned Air-India tragedy has
changed

How did India react to the news of the acquittal of two Sikh Canadians accused in the Air-India bombing of 20 years ago? Did it inflame open wounds on the subcontinent of a billion people and fuel the fires of ancient ethnic conflicts? Not exactly.

"This is not relevant to us anymore," Gurcharan Das told me from New Delhi. "We have moved on. We're another country, and Khalistan (the movement for Sikh independence) is history. Those guys abroad may be stoking it up still, but it's all a foreign phenomenon to us. It's not India anymore."

Das is a Harvard-educated businessman, a columnist for the Times of India, and the author of *India Unbound*. The book is a popular look at the problems of the Indian economy, a prediction about its prosperous future and a call for bringing it to pass through more liberalization and growth. Thanks to *India Unbound*, Das has also become a leading spokesman for the new India. He's one of the most outspoken advocates of poverty reduction through free-market policies, and removal of the "Licence Raj" of red tape that has long held India back.

India is listening to people like Das. Starting in the 1980s - as we in the West were focused on images of a timeless land of poverty and sectarian strife - India started to liberalize its economy. Slowly at first, but each year a bit more. And something not surprising happened: Economic growth took off. For the past 25 years, the Indian economy has been growing at an average rate of 6 per cent - not quite as fast as China, but faster than Canada or the United States. Living standards are

... birth rates are falling, poverty is declining, and some old conflicts have started to fade.

"The rhetoric of the last election was not about the temple or the caste, it was about economic growth," says Das. "The middle class is growing very rapidly and it is beginning to have an impact on the rhetoric of the country. It's becoming a middle-class country."

In 1984, Indian troops stormed the Golden Temple at Amritsar, to crush a violent Sikh independence movement. Thousands died then and in the months that followed - including 329 people (most of them Canadians) aboard the Air-India flight, and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, assassinated by Sikh bodyguards.

Twenty years later, those wounds are largely healed: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is Sikh. And one of his key policy goals is raising economic growth to between 7 per cent and 8 per cent, through further liberalization. For example, he recently announced a 10,000 km expansion of the country's highway system, most of it to be built and financed by the private sector.

Canadians may want to launch an investigation into how the RCMP and CSIS bungled their inquiry into the Air-India crash. But it is worth remembering that the context in which these crimes took place is ancient history: The country that gave birth to them has changed, dramatically.

In its first decades of independence, many foreign observers believed India was on the verge of coming apart. It never did, perhaps because its people lacked the energy. Under a government that took its inspiration from British socialists and Soviet communists, India stagnated. From 1950 to 1980, India's economic near-paralysis was wryly referred to as "the Hindu rate of growth."

If growth had continued at this feeble pace, then, according to Das' calculation, Indian incomes would not have reached current American income levels until 2250. But, after 1980, annual economic growth did rise, to 6 per cent. As a result, according to Das, India can now hope to reach current American living standards by 2066 - a time frame that is very much in sight. "It is finally possible to believe," Das wrote last year, "that we shall soon be able to conquer India's age-old worry over want and hunger."

India still has a long way to go. Much reform is still needed. But the country is slowly, finally unbinding itself. "I don't like to say 'I told you so' to all the naysayers who jumped on me when I wrote the book," says Das. "But it's coming true."

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