

Relevance of Commonwealth of Nations & Suggestions: An Indian Political Perspective



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Abstract

Commonwealth of Nations is an establishment of 53 nations that were decolonized by British. Institution came into existence in 1949 with London Declaration. British Queen or King acts as ceremonial head. Members take decisions on inter-governmental consensus. The Commonwealth gives "technical assistance" in support of economic growth. Drawing from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (which amounts to about 29 million pounds per year), the Commonwealth provides its needier member states with advisers on trade and land-use strategies, or consultants to help restructure public services, for example. The Commonwealth is basically a big club. After the British Empire crumbled, eight states (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom) adopted the 1949 London Declaration. This established, in brief, that all members were free, independent, and equal to one another, and that they recognized King George VI as the symbolic head of their association, known as the Commonwealth of Nations. Several dozen countries have joined since. Members are supposed to commit themselves to the group's ideals, but they don't have any contractual obligations per se.

Recently India participated, after a decade, with huge enthusiasm at home and abroad, attended the CHOGM summit wherein various issues were discussed. India has responded positively to the UK's attempt to revitalize it, post-Brexit scenario. However, Commonwealth of Nations, as an organization, has been an under-achiever with little relevance vis-à-vis other forums. And one of the most important issues undermining the efforts to improve the relevance of the organization is the issue of migration.

The paper is the secondary data content analysis based study made with a view to commenting on the relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations for India, as well as its future in the world. The findings of the study reveal that for India, the Commonwealth of Nations is very relevant, as with its support India can definitely be a world-recognized power.

Keywords: Relevance, Commonwealth, Perspective, Charter, Ceremonial, Members, Migration.

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Nations that houses the Ex-colonies of Britain is a potential global power unit in its own right. The Commonwealth is one of the largest international associations (other than the United Nations and the NAM) in the contemporary world. Its member-nations are spread over the entire length and breadth of the globe. Together, they account for more than one-fourth of mankind and represent a wide diversity of political systems and culture: monarchies, republics and dictatorships as well as unitary and federal politics. A major characteristic of the Commonwealth lies in the fact that unlike other institutions of British origin it has evolved over a period of nearly a hundred years. Starting as an instrument of British colonial policy and administration during the Victorian age, it has grown into a voluntary association (comprising 53 sovereign States) for international cooperation and consultation. It has no rigid charter or constitution, and it generally arrives at its decisions through consultation, debate and consensus.

The Commonwealth of Nations does not discuss bilateral disputes among its member-nations.

Indo-Pak Issue & Protests against the Commonwealth of Nations

However in utter disregard of this norm the late Pakistani Prime Minister Ms. Benazir Bhutto tried feverishly to raise the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir at the Cyprus Summit. Pakistan also supported a plan for a new humanitarian world order which would have armed the Commonwealth with "intrusive" power into the internal affairs of the member-States, especially in the field of human rights. But, as it happened, it ended up as a loner in each case. It was not for the first time that Pakistan made a bid to rake up Kashmir at the Commonwealth forum. The late Pakistan Prime Minister Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan had forced the issue in a dramatic fashion at the Commonwealth Summit in London as far back as 1951. But all that the Commonwealth conceded to him was a private dialogue between him and the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, under the good offices of the Australian Premier, Sir Robert Menzies. It tried the trick again at the Commonwealth Summit in 1964, which was strongly protested by the leaders of the Indian delegation, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Mr. T.T. Krishnamachari. The thrust of these Pakistani attempts was to embarrass India at an international forum, despite the fact that it is a gross violation of the Commonwealth norms and international diplomacy. It is also contrary to the provisions of the Simla Agreement which clearly stipulates that all outstanding disputes between India and Pakistan will be settled through bilateral negotiations. Following the 1951 and 1964 experiences, there were strong public protests against the abuse of the Commonwealth forum by Pakistan and a demand (voiced in Parliament) for India's withdrawal from the Commonwealth. But both Pt. Nehru and Mrs. Indira Gandhi resisted this demand on the plea that the Commonwealth was, all told, a useful association of cooperation and consultation.

The Commonwealth encompasses almost a third of the world's population, bringing together people of many faiths, races, languages and incomes. It is showcased through the Commonwealth Games every four years. Yet it is an institution which remains a mystery to many, polarising opinion as to its role and relevance. Journalist Peter Osborne believes that the Commonwealth represents a friendly network of nations, based on education, culture and history, which will continue to play a vital role. But for the Economist's James Astill, the Commonwealth is "a large and somewhat anomalous club, which devotes most of its energies to maintaining its strange existence". Commonwealth Day, an annual celebration of the Commonwealth of Nations, is held on the second Monday in March.

25th Summit Conference of The Commonwealth of Nations, 2018

The 25th meeting of the heads of government of the Commonwealth of Nations was held in the United Kingdom on 19th & 20th April, 2018 with the following agenda-

Prosperity

Boosting intra-Commonwealth trade and investment.

Security

Increasing cooperation across security challenges including global terrorism, organised crime and cyber attacks.

Fairness

Promoting democracy, fundamental freedoms and good governance across the Commonwealth

Sustainability

Building the resilience of small and vulnerable states to deal with the effects of climate change and other global crises.

The agenda of the Summit conference has brought new hopes to India. It is hoped that soon India is going to be a leading country in terms of prosperity through an extensive trade and commerce; security through a planned policy for the check on terrorism, crime and cyber attacks; democratic fairness through good governance; and sustainability through sustainable development.

Objectives of Study

1. To review the emergence of the Commonwealth of Nations
2. To trace out the names of the important members of Commonwealth of Nations
3. To review the status of India as a member of the Commonwealth of Nations
4. To be familiar with the views of the various critics to the Commonwealth of Nations
5. To have an idea of the Commonwealth of Nations given by Pt. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India
6. To review the Commonwealth of Nations in the days of the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh
7. To review the Commonwealth of Nations in the days of the Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi
8. To analyze the various aspects of the Commonwealth of Nations
9. To point out the positive and the negative aspects of the Commonwealth of Nations
10. To interpret the relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations
11. To produce the Indian political context of the Commonwealth of Nations
12. To give certain suggestions relating to the issue

Review of Literature

Beth Kreling (February, 2009) in the article entitled 'India and the Commonwealth: A Symbiotic Relationship?' comments that at the midnight hour of 14 August 1947, India became an independent Dominion within the British Commonwealth. For both India and the Commonwealth, India's accession to the organization marked a unique redefinition of structure and identity, culminating in the birth of the 'modern' Commonwealth in the London Declaration of April 1949 and of the sovereign Republic of India in the ratification of her constitution that November. Mansergh's lead indicates the scope to look more closely at their symbiotic birth and to examine modern India and the modern Commonwealth as products of the 'historical development' at their root.

Daniel Howden, Africa Correspondent (Nov 26, 2009) under the head The Big Question: What is the Commonwealth's role, and is it relevant to global politics? observes that it enables otherwise isolated

and impoverished nations to network with powerful allies and be, in the words of one booster, "a decent club... which confers a sense of identity... no more no less." While its membership is almost entirely made up of English-speaking former colonies that share a legal system and often a constitutional framework, Britain is no longer dominant in what is a voluntary association.

Louise Stanton (March 14, 2011) in the report entitled 'The Commonwealth's relevance today' surveys that the modern Commonwealth is an organisation which promotes democracy and freedom across the world, standing as a force for good within the global community. The traditional relationship between the United Kingdom and the various countries of the Commonwealth was one based on its undoubtedly significant historical ties and common values, yet the modern organisation has developed over time to embrace social and economic development across the globe. Another advantage of the Commonwealth is the chance for smaller nations to have their views and opinions heard on an international stage more effectively than within the wider structure of the United Nations (UN). The less formal setting of the Commonwealth is an easier place to discuss issues which are significant but may not be considered as essential discussion by the UN. However, with over two billion people living within Commonwealth nations, it faces a challenge in developing the future of the globe. But its core values and exceptional results leave it in a very strong position to better itself and further its aims.

Alexander C. Ugwukah (2014) in the paper entitled The Relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations In Today's World traces the evolution of the Commonwealth of Nations as one of the oldest voluntary international organizations of the world. He further assesses the relevance of the organization in the light of recent developments which have affected both the primus inter pare – Great Britain and the other constituting members of the organization. The findings are that, even though there exist some problems within the fold, the role played by members such as Britain, Canada and Nigeria in Africa justifies/balances the obvious reasons for its establishment.

Mohd Haffiez Mohmad Nazri, International Business Development Executive at iSentia (Jan 16 2017) comments the issue of the relevance of Commonwealth both positively and negatively. According to him, it is relevant because the Commonwealth provides a space where big and small nations can speak as equals; it is a voluntary association and if it wasn't performing properly there wouldn't be a queue to join; and it encourages developing members to raise their standard of democracy, rights and governance. At the same time, he does not find its relevance because it talks about ideals that it doesn't uphold and offers a fig-leaf of legitimacy to damaging regimes; it wastes the time of governments that would be better spent on regional trade blocs and pacts that matter, and once every four years it provides England with the false impression that it can win things in the sporting arena.

Nigel Boon, Vicar Retd at Church of England (March, 3, 2017), putting the origin of Commonwealth of Nations, comments that Commonwealth of Nations was formed as the British Empire began to fracture in 1926 and comprises 54 independent and sovereign states. The Commonwealth acknowledges the British monarch as their Head of State but not necessarily their Ruler. Thirty three are republics; five are monarchies, having their own ruler; 16 are Constitutional Monarchies under QEII. The headquarters are in London and meetings take place under the chairmanship of a Secretary General who is elected by the Heads of governments and may serve up to two consecutive terms of four years. The *raison d'être* of this voluntary coalition is stated as: International cooperation and the advancement of economics, social development and human rights in member countries. The organisation is also responsible for the Commonwealth Games.

Ben Lewis (March 12, 2018) quotes the interview of Baroness Patricia Scotland with SBS News and says that Speaking with SBS News to mark Commonwealth Day, Secretary General Baroness Patricia Scotland shares why the group of 53 nations is still important today. She believes the group of 53 nations remains relevant today. In her own words-"We have so much in common. We share the same language, the same parliamentary structure, the same common law and the same values."

CSR Murthy (April 11, 2018) in his article India and the Commonwealth: Redirecting the Relationship observes that as a rising power India recognizes Commonwealth as a valuable forum for it to redefine itself on the global stage. The Commonwealth has much to gain from India's engagement as well.

Harsh V. Pant (April 16, 2018) under the head India and the Commonwealth: A New Beginning? surveys that there is a renewed interest in the idea of India taking a leadership role in the Commonwealth to infuse a new lease of life into an organization which for many in Delhi has long outlived its usefulness. Though Jawaharlal Nehru decided to join the Commonwealth as he viewed it as a platform where India could develop connections with other erstwhile colonies as well as partly to balance Pakistan, his successors did not seem to be particularly interested in the grouping and viewed it largely as a colonial relic. Today as Britain searches for a new global identity post Brexit, there are those who believe that the Commonwealth, where a third of the world's population in English-speaking democracies resides spanning multiple ethnic and religious faultlines, could emerge as a significant international platform. And India, one of the most powerful and important of emerging global powers, should take the lead in reimagining the future of the Commonwealth.

Karan Pradhan (April 19, 2018) under the head India taking a leadership role in the Commonwealth can revitalise grouping, make the UK relevant again observes that Narendra Modi's appearance at the CHOGM is the first by an Indian prime minister in nearly a decade — with the last one

being Manmohan Singh at Port of Spain in 2009. The 2011 edition in Perth was boycotted by Manmohan on account of Australia's reversal of the decision to export uranium to India. New Delhi also gave the 2013 event in Colombo a miss after taking note of the charges of massive human rights violations against Tamils by Sri Lanka. In 2015, Modi sent External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Malta in his stead....Ultimately, the Commonwealth is undoubtedly a colonial hangover, but then so are neckties. And there's no reason to throw either out just yet.

John Elliott (April 22, 2018) in *Will the Commonwealth be Relevant in the Future?* discusses the Indian context of the Commonwealth of Nations that India plans to help small countries, especially island states, withstand climate change and other sustainable environmental and development problems. That will also benefit India because it will help it develop relationships at a time when China is also looking for naval bases and alliances. This is less involvement than India's earlier idea of hosting a trade and investment centre, or "business hub", in India, which Modi was thought to favour. Initially there was a general welcome for the idea, but the Indian commerce ministry lost enthusiasm, while the secretariat felt it would be losing a key role. A joint international exercise with private sector federations is now being explored. This was accepted by India, which seems to have learned that changes and interventions can only happen gradually. Freedom of expression and protection for journalists also failed to figure, despite recent killings of journalists, and even though the Commonwealth Journalists' Association (CJA) and other organisations produced a new set of principles on freedom of expression and the rule of law. Again India, where there have been recent killings, would have felt pressured. William Horsley, a former BBC journalist and prominent CJA member, says the failure "casts doubt on the capacity and conscience of the Commonwealth and its elected leaders to live up to the much-vaunted 'Commonwealth values'".

Hypothesis

1. *The Commonwealth is one of the world's oldest political association of states.*
2. *Membership of the Commonwealth of Nations is based on free and equal voluntary cooperation.*
3. The lofty Charter of the Commonwealth speaks of "shared inheritance in language, culture and the rule of law", "respect for all states and peoples", "consensus through consultation", "promotion of international understanding and world peace" and so on.
4. The Commonwealth of Nations is a boon to the isolated and impoverished nations as it allows them to win a particular identity
5. At first, Pt. Nehru was not enthusiastic to the notion of the commonwealth, but India became its member during his office in 1949
6. The issue of climate change forced Dr. Manmohan Singh to criticize it
7. Mr. Narendra Modi has an unshaken faith in the notion of commonwealth

8. The relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations has been an issue of controversy

Research Methodology

Prepared with a historic-analytical approach, the paper is a comprehensive interpretation of the relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations at present, and produces the Indian context of the relevance. The study is based on content analysis, and the author has used only the secondary data collected from the various sources. For the purpose, the author made a thorough study of the selected 11 studies and reports on the theme as specified under the head in the paper 'Review of Literature'. The studies and reports include both the Indian and the foreign ones. The method includes the selection of the theme and title, collection and study of the related literature, content analysis of the selected literature on the basis of the name and nationality of the authors, objectives of the study, hypothesis of the study, tools and techniques of the study and findings and conclusion, having a personal peep and insight into the contents of the studies, development of thought derived from the varied studies taken into consideration, systematically putting together the scattered study material and shaping it accordingly.

Findings & Conclusion

The Commonwealth is one of the world's oldest political association of states. Its roots go back to the British Empire when some countries were ruled directly or indirectly by Britain. Some of these countries became self-governing while retaining Britain's monarch as Head of State. They formed the British Commonwealth of Nations. In 1949 the association we know today – The Commonwealth – came into being. Since then, independent countries from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific have joined The Commonwealth.

In his 1946 book *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru was critical of the notion of the Commonwealth. However, soon after the book's release, India climbed on board and by signing the London Declaration of 1949, became a member of the Commonwealth. Since then, India has emerged as the largest member, accounting for 60 percent of the grouping's total population. As per the Ministry of External Affairs, "(India) is the fourth largest contributor to the Commonwealth budgets and programmes. It provides the largest number of technical experts engaged by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation extending assistance to developing Commonwealth countries after the UK." Over the years, India has been a part of several important committees within the Commonwealth, including the Steering Committee on Commonwealth Connects, the Standing Committee on Terrorism, Common Wealth Advisory Board on Sports, Grants Committee of the Commonwealth Foundation and the Executive and Accreditation Committees of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors.

It was in 2009, long before the landmark 2015 Climate Change Conference in Paris, that India demonstrated some of its clout acquired over 60 years of membership to issue a critical intervention on climate

change. "It is unfortunate that the global discourse on climate change has become enmeshed with arguments about maintaining economic competitiveness or level playing fields. Climate change is becoming the pretext for pursuing protectionist policies under a green label... India and other developing countries will strongly resist this," Manmohan had said at the time. India's growing stature on the global stage has not gone unnoticed within the country and outside, which is notable in the Queen's personal invitation to Modi to attend the CHOGM.

The Commonwealth of Nations is an association of countries that is neither undergirded by trade, economics, security or regional considerations. What that means is that members will not be able to hold the grouping hostage to their own respective agendas. This also means that in the absence of any expectation of concrete outcomes or resolutions, India can focus on using the platform to build consensus among over a quarter of the world's UN-recognised countries. The Commonwealth represents a rare opportunity for India to throw its not inconsiderable weight around as one of the biggest, if not *the biggest*, world power in the room.

Some people claim that the Commonwealth is toothless, but in the late '80s, Australia and Canada joined with smaller nations to effectively gang up on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's reluctance to place economic sanctions on Apartheid South Africa. That argument is valid even today or, perhaps, more valid now than ever before in view of the fact that currently the Commonwealth has a preponderance of Afro-Asian members. The question as to relevance is answered by the stated reasons for their existence as listed. There is no military obligation save that of brotherly affiliation and unlike the UN and Nato there are no troops. I can't imagine that a time will ever come when such a large and close knit alliance ceases to be of relevance. One might even be drawn to speculate that the relatively peaceful break up of the Empire was facilitated by this new spirit of cooperation. I'm not going to claim the Commonwealth of Nations to be perfect, but for most of the reasons it is good for India and the Indian politics, trade, commerce and economy.

Relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations in India

1. Countering silk road and maritime belt
2. Improving trade within members since Britain exiting from EU India fill the void and leverage the benefit through customised trade policy that benefit the common wealth nations.
3. Gathering more clout and power to negotiate in other forums like UNFCC for more responsible funding from developed nations,
4. Technology transfer to boost make India
5. For hassle free labour migration----currently many Indians and other common wealth citizens are suffering due to unfavourable laws that restricted their existence
6. Rather than skipping CWM for short term reasons India needs to play proactive leader role for both it's own and others benefits.

7. An Indian citizen who resides anywhere in the United Kingdom—that's England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales—has the right to vote in local and national elections and can also help select members of the European Parliament.

India can play while being one of the largest economies of the commonwealth. India's Role in CHOGM as an economic giant is extremely crucial given our ambitions and interests. Trade in Goods and Service with Commonwealth Nations (CN) can aid in mutual growth and development. CHOGM can enable India to reap the benefits of globalization with lesser conflicts. CHOGM can be a suitable platform to enhance social interactions and best-practices. Ideological symmetry will help us maintain balance of power in a multipolar world.

This platform can revive security cooperation's and gauge the strategic weight of our nation in the international forum. It can also help in achieving environmental conservation and SDG goals via concurrence in implementations. An Egalitarian and inclusive migration policy is indeed vital for the relevance of the Commonwealth platform

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