

IS the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) relevant today?

Devaki Jain

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IS the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) relevant today? We can perhaps expect an answer to this haunting question from the 15th Summit of the 192 nations that belong to this political club founded more than 50 years ago, that is taking place in Egypt this week .

The phrase ‘non-aligned’ suggests a political space of neutrality, – a definition by negation – between two powerful blocs, East and West; socialist and capitalist to put it starkly. But the club’s purpose, domain and actions were far greater than the literal interpretation. The key word was “movement”. The club became a movement for claiming sovereignty for the newly liberated nations from super powers, as also the independence to design their future from their own history, culture and economic landscapes. Sovereignty and liberation were the key words.

The key issues that make for its relevance today are that the multilateral spaces – even the UN as well as related agencies such as the WTO, and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) set up as level playing fields to negotiate “fair play” – have revealed their biases , their failures to prevent the recent recession , and are struggling to re arrange global economic governance .

In the meantime in the last 15 years, countries of the South such as India, China, South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil, the G 5, among others, have shown the vitality of their economies in their growth rates and capabilities despite recession. The recent meeting in L’ Aquila affirms not only their strength but their bargaining power , and the broadening of a power group such as the G 8 into G 14.

But for NAM in the 21st Century, while the nuts and bolts would be trade, and the goal economic strength, this is not a sufficient match to light the fire of solidarity in a club of such disparate members. Disparate not only in the level of their economic condition, but also in their political stances, and internal situations. Therefore at this juncture in our history, for us to forge that solidarity, broaden what already has begun and affirmed itself in the economic arena in L' aquila , last week, there is need to re invoke the political umbrella that NAM provides.

Otherwise, a mere agenda of one more set of commitments on trade and terror, which would seem not be the same to all the members and groups, will not bind it into what it can, and needs, to become. The end in sight – people's liberation from hunger, deprivation, the cruelty of local wars, the ground realities in which our countries less privileged live – needs to be talked about more..

The summit being held in Cairo is propitious, as Egypt's father figure , the late Nasser, one of the active founders of NAM along with Jawaharlal Nehru, still holds a place in the popular mind in Egypt .

Today our leaders and our countries have got factored into or trapped into one or a single-minded macro purpose, driven by global power. The only reality that is accepted as smart and realistic, is growth, and that too export-led. Locked into this quest, NAM has lost its identity – and let me clarify that the identity I talk about is not civilisational, nor cultural, but a movement-oriented identity, the anti-domination identity

India can reclaim her place if she puts her self out, imagines a Nehru and a Sukarno, a Nyerere , and even a Gandhi , and argues that political solidarity to affirm collective economic bargaining power, through regional and other trade arrangements, are for the masses to win their second freedom: - bread, water and salt as Nelson Mandela asked for, in his inaugural speech, in 1994, expressing the yearning of his people after

being liberated from the apartheid regime. Something emancipatory , rather than “inclusive”, a term which is losing its power due to the ground level realities ..

The Summit has also recognized the importance of drawing on women in leadership to articulate the concerns of women , by arranging a “summit “ of “first ladies “ on the economic crisis and women . Data appearing from all corners of the world reveal that women are the worst hit by the recession , as they have engaged with their economies in deep and difficult ways in order to provide sustenance to their households, - the poorer the more the engagement . Yet this is not fully articulated in the declarations nor in the bail outs and stimulus packages , except in providing social safety nets, where as those women want economic protection and support .

The first ladies summit by drawing attention to such a crisis in the lives of their less privileged sisters can make a difference – and perhaps if India would offer to host a NAM women’s conference , or set up as is a tradition in NAM a think tank or a women’s commission on global economy, addressed to the role and needs of women in NAM countries , this aspect of women’s roles in their political economies would receive the recognition and the healing touch that they deserve .

***The writer is a development economist and was a member of the erstwhile South Commission 15 words*