

“[Brazil and India] have a stake and voice, by rights, not indulgence”

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### SAMIR SARAN

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Samir Saran is the President of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India’s premier think tank, headquartered in New Delhi with affiliates in North America and the Middle East. His research focuses on issues of global governance, climate and energy policy, technology policy, and India’s foreign policy.

He curates the Raisina Dialogue, India’s annual flagship platform on geopolitics and geo-economics, and is founder of CyFy, India’s annual conference on cyber-security and internet governance. He spearheads the foundation’s efforts to foster new international partnerships and incubate young leaders networks and youth-led conversations globally.

Samir is a member of the India-CEO Climate Action Group, Global Risks Advisory Board, and the Regional Action Group of the World Economic Forum (WEF). He has served as a Commissioner of The Global Commission on the Stability of Cyberspace. He is also a part of the Board of Governors of East-West Center.

Samir has authored four books, edited important journals and publications, and written several academic papers and book chapters. He is featured regularly in Indian and international print and broadcast media. His latest publications include *The New World Disorder and The Indian Imperative* with Shashi Tharoor, and *Pax Sinica: Implications for the Indian Dawn* with Akhil Deo.

The following is the interview given to CEBRI-Journal in November 2023.

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**Over the past decades, India has witnessed unprecedented growth not only in economic terms but also in terms of its international prominence. Has India effectively utilized its participation in the G20 to showcase global leadership potential emerging from developing nations?**

**SAMIR SARAN:** By all counts, the Indian Presidency of the G20 can be assessed as having been an outstanding success. The Indian leadership was able to ensure that the dynamic federal architecture was able to jointly deliver on the objectives that had been spelled out at the outset. Every state of India was involved, in some cases infrastructure was invested into certain parts of the country, and in all instances visible support of people and polity was in evidence. The G20 became a people's project and India hosted about 220 meetings in 60 cities.

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Global South became a participant, and it could contribute to the agenda for the grouping this year. India walked an extra mile to understand their concerns and expectations, and also ensured that some were also invited to the proceedings. It conducted two Voices of the Global South conferences under the chairship of the Indian Prime Minister indicating the seriousness with which it took this task. This has lent legitimacy to its international standing within this very large group.

Finally, at a time of polarized politics and breakdown of trust among countries, India fashioned an ambitious declaration in Delhi that responded to issues that are important to all. It achieved consensus amongst countries on matters that had been left unresolved in other multilateral forums. Its ability to deliver this outcome demonstrated its leadership and that of the emerging and developing countries to contribute significantly and effectively to matters pertaining to global governance. Indonesia, India, Brazil, and South Africa, in the consecutive years of Presidency have an opportunity to showcase the importance and prominence of emerging country leadership in world affairs.

**India and Brazil find themselves in a unique position, jointly leading a troika of developing countries. Drawing on India's experience, can it wield the potential to reshape G20 outcomes? Could**

**you provide concrete examples of results aligning with the Global South perspective?**

**SS:** Brazil has an even bigger opportunity than India did. India's troika with Indonesia and Brazil straddles two continents—Asia and Latin America. Brazil has the advantage of having a troika which includes South Africa and, therefore, the African continent. It is an opportunity which must be capitalized to articulate our common challenges as leaders in the developing world. Brazil has declared poverty reduction as a key theme of its G20 Presidency and this is very relevant. It is an indication of both our challenges and our aspirations. Equality and Equity, even as we grow and develop, are another Brazilian objective and resonate with developing societies.

India had strived hard with its partners to have a result-oriented G20. India had 87 outcome documents and 118 action items coming out of its Presidency. The African Union's addition to the G20 is of course a key achievement. The adoption of a framework on Digital Public Infrastructure is also a significant milestone. Both of these are at the core of the Global South expectations.

The Indian Presidency has also gone further on the social protection agenda. It has come out with G20 Policy Priorities on Adequate and Sustainable Social Protection and Decent Work for Gig and Platform Workers & G20 Policy Options for Sustainable Financing of Social Protection. This is an import-

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ant part of the Brazilian agenda as well and corresponds with what is needed in developing countries.

**Despite the undeniable significance of the G20, the group faces criticism for inherent characteristics like the absence of a permanent Secretariat, insufficient means for implementation monitoring, and perceived lack of representation due to its “elite” membership. Drawing from your first-hand experience, do these criticisms hold merit? What are the primary challenges and gains associated with a grouping like the G20?**

**SS:** We should look at each of these criticisms discretely. First, on the lack of a permanent Secretariat, one may ask if this is in fact a criticism. The G20 has functioned without overzealous bureaucracies. It may well be one of the secrets

to its continued functioning. What we may need is a central repository of G20 knowledge rather than a Secretariat.

The knowledge repository brings us to the second criticism of implementation and monitoring. Leveraging the knowledge repository may allow us to hold the G20 members accountable for their commitments.

The lack of representation is a weakness of any plurilateral grouping. The ideas which brought the group together are the criterion for its exclusivity. It so happens that the G20 members are economically elite because they currently contribute the most to global GDP. The membership should adapt and change with the times. We have started this process with the addition of the African Union to the group. And the efforts of India to partner with the Global South in many ways smashed the glass ceiling and made the G20 relevant and respond to the leadership of the Global South.

At the think tank / academic level, we at ORF (Secretariat of the Think 20) were able to solicit policy briefs from over a 1,000 authors from over 75 countries and ensured that the process is inclusive and open to all. Some of our important convenings outside of India were in Kigali, Rwanda, and Cape Town, South Africa. These established the inclusive design of the Indian Presidency.

**As a leader within one of the G20 engagement groups, the Think20,**

**you have had the opportunity to observe how the integration of civil society on official negotiation tracks functions. Does civil society play a substantial role in agenda-setting or decision-making within the official G20 agenda? If so, how can these opportunities be expanded?**

**SS:** We cannot speak on past Presidencies but can say with confidence this year that civil society has contributed to the official G20 agenda. The energy with which the G20 India team followed and engaged with conversations in all the engagement groups is a reflection of these. We have also seen some of our ideas find space in the Leader's Declaration.

The addition of the African Union, the commitment to expand climate finance, and the push for digital public infrastructure were all at various points recommended by Think20 India.

The concept of Task Force notes introduced by T20 Indonesia was elevated to Task Force statements by T20 India. It was something that ensured more engagement with the specific Sherpa tracks. For instance, the Trade and Investment Working Group may not want to wait for the full Think20 Communique which may have specific recommendations. It may have more interest in the full statement of the Task Force on Macroeconomics and Trade.

Innovations such as this help academia and think tanks make more valuable and timely contributions to the G20 process.

**India and Brazil have a history of coordinating positions in various multilateral forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, IBSA Dialogue Forum, and the World Trade Organization G20. Can the G20 be considered a noteworthy example of the potential for Indian-Brazilian cooperation?**

**SS:** Brazil-India have been reliable partners to each other. At the G20, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, the partnership takes on a unique global character. At BRICS, IBSA, and other smaller groups, the partnership is characterized by a conversation amongst similarly situated and aligned countries barring a few exceptions.

Brazil and India have a vital role in keeping the focus on development in these international plurilateral groups. We have a stake and voice, by rights, not indulgence. The two countries are both aware of this and leverage their voice accordingly. The role of the troika in the success of a G20 Presidency is an open secret. Our collaboration at the international level on behalf of the Global South is something we should

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maintain momentum on and continue to permanently center development as the most important mission of the G20. This would certainly be a triumph of the Indian-Brazilian partnership in world affairs.

In India, the Banker's G20 became the People's G20. Brazil, with its rich constituency of civil society and research organizations, will take this forward and shape the process indelibly. ■

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