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TAKING A GIANT LEAP FOR A NEW ETHICS IN OUTER SPACE

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‘India must lay the foundation for the moon’s future as a partner with the earth’ | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The itch to get there first and fast is human. Being competitive is part of the human’s survival instincts.

The urge to plant one’s flag there before the other flag-bearer does is human too. It is part of the human’s political instincts.

Some 11 decades ago, in 1910-12, both itch and urge were quivering in the northern hemisphere. Robert Scott, a 43-year-old British naval officer, was preparing a daring expedition to the South Pole. Around the same time, a Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, about four years younger, was planning a bold ice-drift to the North Pole. On learning of dubious but loud claims by two Americans Frederick Cook and Robert Peary, Amundsen lost interest in that destination; it had been reached. But the South Pole beckoned. While others had fringed that continent of ice, no human foot had stood on the southern-most point of the earth.

Scott and Amundsen knew of each other’s target and goal. But observing due courtesies alright, they raced to it. Scott and his men with dogs and horses, Amundsen with his dogs and sledges. Amundsen and his five companions, with 16 surviving dogs, got there on December 14, 1911, 34 days before Scott and his team of five did. Planting the Norwegian flag there, Amundsen felt fulfilled, as he should have. He named their South Pole camp Polheim, meaning Pole-home, in Norsk. And he renamed the Antarctic Plateau as King Haakon VII’s Plateau, after his monarch. Scott and his team were to perish on the pole, having been caught in foul weather.

On exploration’s success scrolls, Amundsen is placed on top; in legend and lore, Scott has for all time outpaced his Norwegian rival. Any race has its victories; some have ironies, besides.

In 1939, Norway laid claim to a vast area of Antarctica which it called Dronning Maud Land, or Queen Maud Land, after its reigning Queen, wife of King Haakon. This area covers about a sixth of the entire continent. There followed another Norwegian claim to Peter I Island, which is about 450km off the western side of the Antarctic peninsula.

Britain had been outdone by Norway on the south Pole. But she was not going to be out of the race for territorial claims over Antarctica. Nor others. And now, apart from Norway the first South Pole ‘arrivee’ and claimant, Britain the second South Pole ‘arrivee’ and claimant, there are five others who have sharply defined areas on Antarctica which they regard are ‘theirs’ — Australia, Argentina, Chile, France and New Zealand. So Antarctica has seven flags flying on their own ‘ Antarctic territories’. How are these seven tracts of Antarctic ice over which flags of different stripes fly, then, different from colonies of the imperial era? They are different. There are no subject people there, no ‘native’ residents, who are being denied freedom, no resources are being drained out from there to the ‘mother country’. But then why were the seven on that inhospitable continent at all?

With the International Geophysical Year (IGY) in 1958 seeing many players becoming active in Antarctica, and fears of Cold War rivalry taking unexpected turns, United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower convened in 1959 an Antarctic Conference of the 12 countries active in Antarctica during the IGY, to negotiate a treaty. When Argentina proposed that atomic explosions be banned in toto on Antarctica, the U.S. objected, saying only those tests that were carried out without prior notice and consultation should be banned. The USSR and Chile supported the Argentine proposal, leading the U.S. to agree and take the negotiations forward

In the present times when satellites can pick up any activity that is suspicious, none of them can do anything questionable there. They will be found out. But even before the world developed its sky-eyes, the early Antarcticans had to share their space with others if only to justify their own. Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States — 12 countries — had established over 55 Antarctic research stations for the IGY and they had to make the Treaty accord full acceptance to two basics: freedom of scientific research in Antarctica and the peaceful use of the continent. An indirect consensus emerged for demilitarisation as the treaty prohibited nuclear testing, military operations, economic exploitation, and further territorial claims in Antarctica. Today there are 54 parties to the Treaty, with 29 having consultative status, India with its own station on Queen Maud’s Land being one of those 29, that have ‘demonstrated their interest in Antarctica by carrying out substantial scientific activity there’. Close monitoring systems are in position to regulate the activities of the countries with a presence on Antarctica in order to maintain its ecological integrity. But the fact that there are around 66 scientific stations in Antarctica, 37 being occupied year round, the remainder closing down for winter and some 4,000 people through the summer months and about 1,000 over winter each year living on it, in my opinion, compromises its well-being. Is the work being done for humanity’s good from there sufficient ground for the present and future footprint of humanity on its climatically challenged surface?

But this article is not about the earth’s South Pole alone.

The earth’s seas and ice are different from the sky and its spheres but we know that there has long been an Antarctic-type race in outer space between the powers which have perfected, with great toil and at great expense, to penetrate it and go higher and higher, faster and faster, than their several peers. And the world has been all too aware of the need, dire and pressing, to prevent an arms race in outer space.

Even as the earth’s South Pole drew Amundsen and Scott to it, the moon pulled Russia’s Luna-25 lander and India’ s Chandrayaan-3 to it. The Indian vehicle reached its destination, but the Russian was not so fortunate. And just as the world’s engagement with Antarctica led to a treaty, so does the Moon Agreement adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 in resolution 34/68 (elaborating on many of the provisions of the Outer Space Treaty) provide that space-probing humanity’s dealings with the moon should be used exclusively for peaceful purposes; that its

environment should not be disrupted; that the United Nations should be informed of the location and purpose of any station established on it. The agreement states that the moon and its natural resources are the common heritage of mankind and that ‘an international regime should be established to govern the exploitation of such resources’ when such exploitation is about to become feasible. The Moon Agreement is far-sighted. Something of the world’s experience of Antarctica and the working of the Antarctic Treaty informs it. The Moon Agreement is a self-regulating covenant of restraint. It anticipates human appetites for turf, for control, for the urge to get there first , flag and all, and dig in.

Pride and exhilaration over the Chandrayaan-3 achievement, entirely natural, must now be followed by a mature policy on the future of India’s earth-borne plans on the moon. To put it differently, as an earth-pioneer on the moon, India must, by precept and practice, set the pace for the earth’s agenda on the moon and of the moon’s future as a partner with the earth. As a partner, not as property. As a collaborator in science, not a colony in subjugation. The Moon Agreement must be taken to its next logical stage. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s statement — “The success of Chandrayaan 3 is not just India’s alone but it belongs to all of humanity” — was wise and responsible. Following up on that, he can now do the world’s space missions great service. He can do so now by taking the initiative to craft a declaration of the fundamental rights of outer space. And thereby inaugurate a new ethics for human activity in outer space, including, very pointedly, the earth’s responsibilities towards outer space debris. This new ethic must make the non-militarisation of outer space a non-negotiable covenant. The Outer Space Treaty and Moon Agreement now need aligning not just with the latest advances in space missions but with a moral compass to the stars.

India cannot afford to be among those who may want to scramble for outer space hegemonies over what is not just the common heritage of humankind but that of a larger cosmos.

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