

Province's passage to India

THE LEADER-POST FEBRUARY 12, 2009 5:09 AM



Taj Mahal

Photograph by: Reuters Photo, The Leader-Post

The emerging economic powerhouse of India is the focus of a Saskatchewan-government led trade mission, a trip that further underscores Premier Brad Wall's point the province must look to countries other than the U.S. for export opportunities.

When Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall was in Chicago last week, his apparent frustration with the trade protectionism being bandied around by some -- though not all -- American politicians caused him to tell Saskatchewan reporters by phone: "The second-largest consumer of oil today is China and their 'recession' is 6.8-per-cent growth. There are people interested in buying what Western Canada and Saskatchewan has."

Wall was restating what has become dogma for Canadian politicians and businesses facing blind protectionism in the U.S.: If you're going to put restrictions on some of our exports, then maybe we'll

look elsewhere for customers.

And by coincidence, this week Wall's government announced the province is sending a long-planned trade mission to India, where the already-large economy has been growing at rate rivaling that of China -- the sheer size of which seems to have mesmerized Canadian exporters for decades.

But why should we overlook India?

Its economy is large, too, and has been growing explosively as well. If anything, doing business there should be easier than in China. Canada and India share many things: a multicultural society; language, political and legal systems descended from a common British root; and family ties forged since mass immigration from the subcontinent to Canada began in the 1960s. That number has increased dramatically following reforms to Canadian immigration policy in the 1960s and the province clearly would like to see more.

The news release announcing the trade mission said Saskatchewan's "current priorities" in India include education and immigration. But it added the Saskatchewan mission's members are to meet "with interests in key resource sectors like uranium, diamonds and oil and gas", raising the interesting possibility that Indian investment in these areas is being courted.

Saskatchewan's current exports to India revolve around agriculture: peas, chick peas and lentils, mustard seed, canary seed, malt and wheat flour plus -- significantly -- large amounts of potash for India's own farms.

Have no illusions: Saskatchewan's trade flows will not be instantly, or even quickly, directed away from the ailing and occasionally xenophobic American market into India -- or any other country.

"Growing" such things take time, as was the case with our exports to China, the roots of which go back to Canada's blockade-busting wheat sales to that country in the late 1950s.

But change must start somewhere -- and change offers this province something very tempting: the idea of diversifying our trade into as many foreign markets as possible.

© Copyright (c) The Regina Leader-Post