



Oral History

Record of Ambassador Prem K. Budhwar

Interview Conducted

by

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Early Life of the Ambassador

INTERVIEWER: Thank you Ambassador Budhwar for agreeing to participate in the Oral History project. Your professional background and rich experience should be of considerable interest to many, notably those who closely follow India's foreign policy and its principal tool, the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).

AMBASSADOR: Well, I am happy to be included in this unique project and to be interviewed by an experienced diplomat like yourself who I have had the pleasure of knowing for nearly three decades, both as a colleague and as a friend.

INTERVIEWER: As a student of political science it is logical that you opted for the Foreign Service. Was the glamour of foreign travel also a motivation?

AMBASSADOR: It is hard to attribute any single factor that motivated me to join the Foreign Service. The attraction of foreign travel and living abroad was no doubt there. But overall a diplomatic career held several other attractions for me. I think my interest in a Foreign Service career goes back to the 1950's when I was still in early college. Foreign affairs began to attract me even as a student, as also the world beyond India. After finishing my Matriculation from St. Edwards High School in Simla (there was no Higher Secondary those days) I joined college also in Simla, BM College. One of my class mates was from Ethiopia studying in India under a Government of India scholarship scheme. I still remember his name, Tessema Ibibdo. Tessema and I became good friends and I would keep asking him about his country, Ethiopia. In the process I gathered enough material to write an article entitled 'Ethiopia Today' for the college magazine and it was published. My first ever published material. Little did I know then that about thirty years later I would be in Ethiopia as my country's Ambassador. I managed to locate Tessema Ibibdo who had recently retired as his country's Deputy Finance Minister. You can imagine how we both reacted on meeting each other after such a long gap of years. After staring at each other for a few moments, it was a warm hug and a long chat recalling our days together as students.

This is just one of the charms of a diplomatic career. The world is your stage. You can have friends and contacts all over the globe, stay in touch with them and who knows one day you may even meet them again.

I will be honest, yes the charm of travelling and living abroad was a strong plus point in favour of a Foreign Service career. You have to look at things in the right context. India of the period when I joined the Foreign Service was a foreign exchange strapped country. Reserves of around six to seven billion dollars were considered just about adequate and we seldom managed to cross that figure. Unlike now, foreign travel for an average Indian was a dream. Even if you went out, you were hardly allowed any foreign exchange. Remember those famous eight US dollars you got at the airport against your Rupees, later gradually rising to the princely figure of twenty. Stay and shopping abroad depended on who was hosting your visit. A Foreign Service career delivered you from all this. You lived and worked abroad. You were paid abroad and in the precious foreign exchange. You had access to all the foreign and much sought after goodies like a car, a music system, clothes, to mention just a few, and on top of it, as a diplomat, you were a privileged person with certain immunities and a special status. All this made you the envy of many back in India. While on a visit to your country people were curious to know about life abroad. At times you were, quite honestly, made to feel almost as though you belonged to a different world altogether. This massaged your ego very well, however modest you remained. Even when you came on a home posting your place was equipped with foreign gadgets that you had brought along as your permissible heavy baggage, even your clothes were different, you were, in fact, in many ways made to feel like a different person. Imported cars those days were a luxury within the reach of very few only and certainly not if you were in government service. But outside the South Block (home to the MEA) it was a different sight. The car park had mostly foreign cars. As a Deputy Secretary in the early 1970s I had a Mercedes. I do not think our colleagues in the Ministries of Finance or Home across the road in the North Block were particularly thrilled or happy with this sight outside the Ministry of External Affairs. This was the image of the IFS those days

Of course, there were other motivating factors as well, if anything, of greater substance and importance. Please do not forget that India was still in its fifteenth year of independence when I joined the Foreign Service in 1962. It was Nehru's India. He was his own Foreign Minister and our foreign policy bore the stamp of his influence in every way. Non-alignment was our battle cry. We were a major inspiration for many countries still struggling to throw off the yoke of colonialism. India was an accepted and recognized moral force on the world scene otherwise in the throes of the Cold War. We were a bridge between the Western world led by the USA and the Communist world headed by the Soviet Union. India was a sought after entity by both sides. To be a part of this exciting and significant role was a major attraction, hence the realisation that a Foreign Service career was

where the action was, a career that promised not just glamour but also a meaningful role in life, more satisfying than perhaps ensured by any other career. All this seemed to merge perfectly with what I wanted in life. Even as a student doing my MA in Political Science from Delhi University, the constant refrain of our teachers in the Arts Faculty was that a Foreign Service career should be the logical choice of those doing well in their studies. When I topped in the University being the only one clearing the final examination in first division, our then Head of the Political Science and International Affairs Department and Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, the almost revered Dr. CJ Chacko had this to tell me: “My dear boy, if you continue to work hard I have no doubt that you will walk into the IFS.” In short, it looked like, as indeed to many others my generation, a dream career and I was determined to have a go at it. Fortunately, I made it in my very first attempt.

INTERVIEWER: What were the service preferences of your parents/family? Relatives and friends normally advise a civil service aspirant to join the IAS or the IPS for obvious reasons.

AMBASSADOR: Let me first answer the first part of your question. Things should be viewed in the context of the trend prevalent when I sat for the UPSC examination. Those days the IAS and the IFS were the clear choice of those sitting for the higher civil services all India competitive examination conducted annually by the UPSC. It was common for the toppers in the examination opting for one of these two services, with the IFS invariably attracting the very top layer. Since you could not be sure of the outcome, it was considered safe to opt for other services as well since career opportunities were limited those days with a government job holding a major attraction. Hence it was fairly common for civil service aspirants to opt for virtually all Class I services on offer. From what I recall, the list ran into almost a dozen services ending, I think, with the Indian Ordnance Factories Service. I myself opted for all, naturally in my order of preference, since one never knew what the final outcome was going to be. After all, if you got only something that did not appeal much as a career choice, you could always refuse. Or, as many did then, and I think even now, you took whatever was offered and tried your luck again the following year. Those days you were allowed only two attempts and provided you were still within a certain age bracket, 21 to 24 in my days. Things have eased considerably now with a major relaxation on both these counts, particularly for those from the reserved category.

As you have yourself observed, even the order of preferences very often is a different story now. Even the IAS sometimes gets relegated to a lower

position with the top preferences being the Police Service, the Revenue Service (Income Tax) and Customs and Excise. I would not like to delve into the reasons for this but you are welcome to imagine the same. Also, let me add that the catchment area, so to say, for recruitment to the higher civil services has also undergone some major changes over the years. With so many other career opportunities now available to bright youngsters, a civil service career is not even considered by some. Reflective, in a positive sense, of the socio-economic changes in the Indian society, the elitist character of the civil services too has corroded somewhat. The top universities and colleges of the country no longer have a monopoly hold over the UPSC examination. I was myself a witness to this visible change when, post retirement, I served for a few years on the UPSC's personality test board for recruitment to the higher civil services. During my days, the top preference almost without exception was the IAS or the IFS, with the latter often scoring over the former. It was rightly said then that all those in the IFS could have easily joined the IAS by simply saying so, but that could not be said of the IAS when it came to being in the IFS. The IFS would invariably get filled up from amongst the top twenty or at the most thirty of the combined list of around a hundred of the successful candidates for these two services.

Now coming to the first part of your question, it takes me to a somewhat interesting story. Ours is a very small family and both my mother (I lost my father when I was just four) and my elder brother were very keen, almost insistent, that I joined the IAS. When it came to filling out the application form for the UPSC examination, my brother sat next to me to ensure that I put down IAS as my first preference. Being a difficult and a competitive examination there was no guarantee that I would make it and even if I did which Service I would be offered. It all depended on one's ranking in the final merit list of successful candidates. Recognizing this, both my mother and brother agreed to my opting for all Services on offer, including the IFS as my second preference. This done I submitted my application at the UPSC. But since my mind all along was firmly made up in favour of the IFS I found it very hard to accept this compromise on the choice of my career. In fact, gradually it even started affecting my preparation for this tough examination. Increasingly I felt that I had not been fair to myself or my future. Now while filling up the UPSC form I had noticed it mentioned in small print that if one wanted to make any changes they could be made before a certain last date. Quietly, without telling anyone at home, I went across to the UPSC and altered my order of preference to make the IFS the first choice and IAS the second. Having done this, my preparation for the examination picked up the earlier momentum. A few months down the line when I was called for the UPSC's viva voce or personality test this alteration

that I had made in my application was noticed by Sh. KPS Menon (Sr) who was on the Board. He pointedly asked me as to why this. Did it indicate that I could not make up my mind as regards career choice? I thought the best would be to honestly tell the Board how I could not possibly subordinate my main ambition in life to family sentiments and emotions. Sh. Menon's reaction was: "So, you are trying to get into the diplomatic service diplomatically."

To cut the long story short, I finally made it to the IFS. By then, through my persuasive conversations at home I had largely succeeded in making both my mother and brother realise that a Foreign Service career was the best thing for me. This little trick that I had played on them was ultimately divulged by me to them some twenty years later. I still feel happy that I resorted to this. In fact, if I could start life all over again, as regards career choice, unhesitatingly I would opt for the Foreign Service again.

INTERVIEWER: How large was your batch? Did the top ranks opt for the Foreign Service?

AMBASSADOR: My batch, 1962, was of fifteen. Ten from the general list and the last five from the SC (3) and ST (2) reserved category. In other words, one third of our batch consisted of reserved category candidates. For some reason, the two batches previous to ours did not have any from the reserved category. Consequently, from what one heard, there was a Court directive to the UPSC to clear this backlog with our batch, hence the disproportionately high figure of 33% out of a total of fifteen.

The IFS was still a very much sought after service. In our batch, the topper in the combined list of IAS/IFS opted for the IFS. The remaining nine for the general category vacancies were from the first twenty five of the combined merit list. The last five from the reserved category were from lower down in the overall list of about a hundred. Obviously, the IFS was still a hot favourite and a very much sought after career.

INTERVIEWER: Any lasting memories of the Probation period, both pleasant and unpleasant?

AMBASSADOR: I reached the National Academy of Administration (later named after the late Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri) in Mussorie on May 20, 1962. My government service career started from the following day, May 21, 1962, when I signed the charge report. It was an exciting moment in one's life and the start of a long journey that was to end in 1997 upon superannuation from the service. In 1962 retirement looked like centuries

away. Instead, the focus was on what lay ahead. There was hope, expectation and the thrill of a career in the diplomatic service. Being in the salubrious climate of Mussorie, away from the gruelling heat of Delhi in May, by itself looked like a well deserved reward for all the hard work one had put in for making it to the Foreign Service.

Life in the Academy, six months, going through the foundation course, was easy and enjoyable. With my social sciences background studies at the Academy posed no problem. It was fun getting to know one's IFS batch mates and making friends with Probationers of other services. In the evenings, flaunting the Academy blazer, one would go for a walk to the Mall. Mussorie those days was a relatively quiet and lovely hill station attracting a fair number of tourists and holiday makers escaping the heat and dust of the plains. I have never liked getting up very early in the mornings but the Academy training schedule left one with no choice. Reaching the Happy Valley ground for PT looked like an unnecessary effort. Our Deputy Director in charge of discipline, retired Brigadier Shereef was a nice but no nonsense man and one took him seriously. But an even more jarring aspect of the training was the early morning horse riding compulsory lessons. Given the changed circumstances, horse riding looked like an unnecessary infliction with no use in ones subsequent career. Instead, some basics of motor mechanism and driving would have been a lot more useful as preparation for the future. I understand that this aspect of the training at Mussorie has since undergone a change and made more relevant.

The total number of those undergoing the foundation course at Mussorie those days was a little over three hundred including probationers of all services. But even by the end of May, the total number had barely touched forty---about ten from the IFS and the rest from the IAS. In the case of others their formalities like medical examination and police verification were still getting completed. The Director of the Academy, Late A.N Jha, rightly felt that a training programme meant to cover about three hundred probationers could not possibly be started with just about forty of us who had made it on schedule to the Academy. How this was allowed to happen I cannot explain but in subsequent years, I understand, the commencement of the training at Mussorie was better coordinated. The question now was what to do with those few of us who had already made it on time and formally joined government service. For the handful of us at the Academy it was already becoming something of a paid holiday.

Finally, after coordinating with the then Home Secretary in Delhi, it was decided to send the forty or so of us on what was conveniently labelled as a cultural tour of Punjab and Kashmir. Our entire group was divided into four

sub-groups of about ten each and I was made the leader of Group "A". A teacher from the Academy, Dr. Puri, our History professor, was over all in charge of the group. Our first halt was Chandigarh, some sightseeing there, and then a trip to Bhakra and Nangal. Being peak summer we were happy to put this part of the tour behind us with our next halt being Srinagar. For the next week or so it was great fun being shown the different tourist spots of the Kashmir valley---Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Sonamarg, Gandarbal, Mattan--to name some besides the various sites in and around Srinagar and, of course, several "shikara" rides on the Dal Lake. It was great fun indeed. Since the Academy at Mussorie was still not ready to start the course, all of us, in much smaller groups, were then attached to various army units in Kashmir in what was called Army Attachment. I personally found this to be both exciting and educative, particularly the weeklong stay in bunkers at 13,000 ft. in one of the army units right next to the Cease Fire Line, later to be called the Line of Control after the 1971 war.

Finally, we were back in Mussorie by early July when the Academy was in full strength and the formal course started, to conclude by early December. The brief training at the Ministry of External Affairs was useful, particularly in Ciphers. Bharat Darshan was most welcome since most of us had a very limited idea of the rest of the country. District training for three months, for which I was assigned to Sambalpur in Orissa, was easily one of the most useful parts of the training. I was lucky to have a Deputy Commissioner, an elderly IAS officer, Sh. S.N Mishra, who not only took great personal interest in my district attachment but was almost in awe of the Foreign Service. He put me up in the Circuit House for the entire duration of my stay, almost two and a half months, in Sambalpur, placed a four wheel drive vehicle (a Land rover) at my disposal and a chauffeur. He made sure that I visited all the five sub-divisions of the district and as many villages as possible. On weekends he insisted that I joined him for breakfast and also share with him my experiences and impressions of this extensive touring. Upon learning that I did not know driving he instructed that while thus travelling around in the district I should also be taught driving. In fact, my first driving licence was subsequently issued in Sambalpur. To wind up, I was sent to the State Capital Bhubaneswar for about ten days to call on and interact with senior officials in the Secretariat. Finally, there was a trip to the famous Sun temple at Konark and the temple at Jagannath Puri as part of my exposure to the cultural richness of Orissa. Frankly, I could not have asked for more from my district training of three months, a memorable and highly useful experience indeed. But this was not the impression of some of my IFS batch mates who had been assigned to other districts across the country. It really depended on how much interest your Deputy Commissioner or Collector took in your training. Answering specifically the concluding part of your

question, I really cannot think of or recall any unpleasant memories of my Probation period in India. It was essentially a happy time, exciting in some ways, a learning experience in many respects. By and large, a very pleasant time even though one was under training.

INTERVIEWER: The profile of the young entrants to the IFS now is radically different from the profile of Foreign Service recruits in your time and even from my time. In your thoughtful recent book: “Making of a Diplomat: Hone your Skills” you have made several suggestions regarding recruitment to the IFS as well as the training modules. Would you like to elaborate on some points which would be relevant to the government and human resource managers at this time?

AMBASSADOR: A very good question indeed. I do feel rather strongly about the way our various civil services are shaping up of late, but I am particularly worried over the way things are going with the IFS. If it has dropped in the listing of service preferences, this is not necessarily a calamity, though it should be a matter of some concern. After all, to start with, this all India competitive examination conducted every year by the UPSC attracts, I hear, almost a lac and a half candidates initially. The final list of successful candidates is just a few hundred. That is very drastic pruning and, one would like to believe that those finally making it, even the much enlarged reserved category, have something in them to have made it to the final few hundred out of several thousand. While ranking in the combined merit list does matter and is even an indicator of your talent, it need not be taken as the final word on how actually you are going to perform in practice. I know of quite a few cases of toppers in the beginning somewhat lagging behind in actual performance in later years. Academic excellence is one thing, how you shape up in the practical sense can be a different ball game. The wide choice of subjects and disciplines available at the recruitment stage does not even ensure a perfect level playing field for all. In mathematics, for example, scoring hundred percent marks is not something uncommon. But it is unthinkable in the case of subjects like History, Political Science, and Economics etc. The overall aggregate is close to two thousand marks, including the interview. While a difference of even one mark in your aggregate score will determine your ranking in the combined merit list, it need not necessarily mean that you are inferior material.

But your social and academic background does matter and will show even in later years. Focussing on the IFS, I have no hesitation in maintaining that this is the only service that requires you to conform to certain widely

accepted international norms, standards and practices. That is the arena in which you will be operating, whether serving abroad or at headquarters. Possessing a high level of language and communication skills, both written and oral, along with certain social graces will be a constant necessity that you cannot possibly escape. While certain things can be taught through well focussed and rigorous training, good communication skills cannot be developed overnight. And, let us face it, they are a very essential tool that a successful diplomat must possess. By all means pay attention to the national language, Hindi. I have nothing against the regional languages and their importance. But while operating on the international scene what you require is a good sound grounding in at least one widely used and accepted international language. When India became independent in 1947, our educated elite had an excellent grasp of the English language, something that enabled us to take to world diplomacy like a duck taking to water. Even today the use of English is widespread in our official work, it serves as the country's link language, in fact, it has the status of our official language. The Ministry of External Affairs and all our diplomatic missions abroad just cannot do without the use of English. We should show the confidence and maturity of acknowledging and accepting this aspect of our day today functioning. Why do we have to keep harping on English being a part of our colonial legacy. Even if factually that is the case, why not look at the positive side. Today, we have this most widely used and understood international language as part of our historical past. But, regrettably, instead of building up on this immensely useful legacy, in the name of narrow minded regionalism and a myopic view of national interests, we are slowly frittering away this one enormous advantage we started with in 1947. A high level of proficiency in any language takes years to acquire. Short cuts like crash courses at language institutes can at best give you only a rudimentary working knowledge of any language, English included. The IFS can ill afford to lose this one inherited advantage and yet, shockingly, this is already happening now. Just imagine, of late, some of the new entrants to the IFS have had to be sent for English language coaching classes.

I am glad you found time to go through my latest book: "Making of a Diplomat". There I have, at considerable length, expressed serious concern over some such new trends in our Foreign Service. Recently (2013) when the UPSC announced some significant changes in its examination system, shifting the emphasis back to social sciences and the English language, I felt very heartened, even vindicated, in view of the serious concerns expressed by me in my latest book. I was given to understand that these changes introduced by the UPSC had been approved at the highest level in the government. But sadly, under the pressure of regional forces and narrow minded elements, the UPSC's new policy had to be put on hold, rather rolled

back. God alone knows what the future holds for us. I feel very strongly about this. Regionalism and vote bank politics are the twin poisons being slowly injected into the body politic of India. I hope things do not spin out of control one day. As regards the IFS either we somehow, may be through a separate recruitment process for this service, insulate it against such trends or be prepared to pay a heavy price in the not too distant a future.

THIRD/ SECOND SECRETARY, USSR 1963-67.

INTERVIEWER: This was a traumatic period after the humiliating defeat by China. The USSR had stood by India at that time. You must have been excited about going to Moscow. Was Russian your language of choice.

AMBASSADOR: After completing my training in India, I reached Moscow on November 02, 1963. The traumatic period you are talking of was already a year old by then and it had hit us when I was still in India. In fact, I was at the Academy in Mussorie in October, 1962 when this major set-back was suffered by India. In retrospect, it is painful to recall how as a nation we were almost paralysed. It exposed how ill prepared we were. It brought out how wrong we had been in our understanding of the Chinese mind and intentions. The top political leadership of the country, Nehru in particular, had let us down. The bubble of his prestige, both domestically and internationally, had been pricked. His bluster had been shown to be hollow. As a matter of fact, I think Nehru never completely recovered from this hard knock to his image and reputation. Within a year and a half of these developments he died in May, 1964. Not much is served by our accusing the Chinese of betraying us. We betrayed ourselves, in particular, our political leadership and poor generalship in our army at the time. Our Air Force and Navy were never brought into the picture. Though there is a section of opinion that had we thrown our Air Force into action in the Eastern Sector, the utter rout suffered by us there might have been avoided.

It is also sad to recall that Nehru did not pay any serious heed to those who cautioned him about the Chinese designs and intentions. Unless you have already read it, I would strongly recommend your going through the long letter that Sardar Patel as Home Minister had written to Nehru in November 1950. In this very relevant and important communication, since long a published public document, Sardar Patel had very clearly given expression to his strong misgivings about the Chinese intentions. He had also bluntly spoken of the role being played by our then Ambassador to China, Dr. K.M.Pannikar, and how he was totally misreading the situation. Sardar Patel had then gone on to suggest certain concrete actions on the ground that India should initiate. Sadly, Sardar Patel died in about a month's time after

this letter was addressed by him to Nehru. I do not think Nehru ever replied to it, perhaps there was no occasion for him to do so following Sardar Patel's demise in December 1950. But whether this letter was ever discussed by Nehru with his senior political colleagues and even if so with what outcome, I have my doubts. At least, I have not come across any evidence to confirm this.

There is another very illuminating side light to this famous letter of which I personally became aware only very recently. The person who actually worked on the draft of this letter was the then Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs, Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai. Apparently, he at some stage, shared his serious concerns over China with Sardar Patel after drawing a blank with Nehru. Sardar Patel asked Bajpai to give him a draft that he offered to send as a formal communication to Nehru under his (Patel's) signatures. Sardar Patel approved the draft given him by Bajpai, making only a few changes or additions and sent it on to Nehru. All this was confirmed to me, in response to my specific query, by none other than K.S.Bajpai, the son of Sir Girja Shankar and who too served in the IFS with distinction. Since he was Secretary (East) in the MEA when I was serving as JS (EA) I had enough equation with him to pose this question directly to him. His reply was short and crisp: "Of course, it was my father's draft with only a few changes and additions made by Sardar Patel."

Incidentally, this brings out another interesting fact. Obviously, some of the senior officials in the Ministry of External Affairs did not cut much ice with Nehru, his own Foreign Minister. Frustrated by this a person like Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai was left with no choice but to share his strong feelings and views with Sardar Patel and try and convince Nehru by using this channel. Cruel fate took away Patel too early and, as subsequent sad events leading up to 1962 were to reveal, no serious heed was ever paid to these advance warnings and advice emanating from some senior official and even political sources in India at that time.

Coming now to the Soviet stand on the India-China border war of October, 1962, Moscow must have found itself in a somewhat tight spot. Though early signs of a rift between the Soviet Union and China were already there, outwardly at least the Communist Block was still a monolithic structure led by Moscow. Things should be seen in the context of the world scene then. The Cold War was at its peak. The Cuban missile crisis nearly brought the world to the verge of a hot war, possibly even nuclear. Moscow could ill afford to chide China over its attitude towards India. India-Soviet relations had been warming up since the exchange of high level visits in 1955, Nehru to the USSR in June and Khrushchev and Bulganin to India in

November. Indo-Soviet economic cooperation was progressing well. Trade was picking up. Taking all this into account while Moscow's sympathy lay with India, it could ill afford to antagonise China. That would explain the initial Soviet reaction to the India-China border clash as something regretful between an ally (China) and a friend (India). I do not think the Chinese were particularly thrilled or impressed by this somewhat ambivalent stand of Moscow. There is even a view sometimes expressed that China timed its border clash with India to coincide with Moscow's heavy preoccupation with the Cuban crisis.

As regards my reaction to my Moscow posting I was quite thrilled and excited. The Russian language was my first choice and I was happy when I was allotted it as my compulsory foreign language. Even otherwise the USSR held a certain strong attraction for me, its political system, its socialist society, its history and culture. And, the fact that it was emerging as a great friend of India with widespread cooperation in so many fields, only added to this attraction. Its closed system, its restrictions on foreigners, including diplomats, the difficulty of travelling around this vast and varied country, the permissions and permits needed, the curbs on foreigners interacting with the local people. All this and more made a Moscow posting something of a challenge, a mystery to be unravelled as much as possible. Those who served in Moscow, no matter in what capacity, themselves became objects of curiosity. People thought you were someone special. After all, Moscow was the Capital of the only other super power those days. A statement coming out of the Kremlin was carefully studied across the world. To be close to all this and get a chance to study things from close quarters was professionally both challenging and exciting. Moscow was something of an enigma those days. Added to this were the known difficult living conditions including its severe, long and harsh winter, the winter that had overwhelmed Napoleon in the 19th century and Hitler in the 20th. I was going straight into all this. When I flew from Delhi to Moscow by Air India on the night of November 01, 1963, Delhi was still +30 degrees centigrade. Six and a half hours later when I landed at Moscow's Sheremetevo International airport it was - 6 degrees centigrade and snowing. What a change. Cumulatively, as a young diplomat on the threshold of a long career ahead, nothing could have been more thrilling and exciting.

INTERVIEWER: The Cold War was at its peak at that time immediately after the Cuban missile crisis. Did you notice any over militarisation of the Soviet Union like marches, and demonstrations etc?

AMBASSADOR: As mentioned in reply to your previous question, the Cuban missile crisis was over by the time I reached Moscow in November, 1963.

But tensions and suspicions between Moscow and Washington were still very visible. The Soviets never missed an opportunity to flex and show off their military might and muscle and of which they had plenty. Within a week of my reaching Moscow I had a good glimpse of this. The Soviet National Day, November 07, was almost upon us. The streets were full of banners and hoardings extolling the virtues of socialism and running down capitalism and imperialism. The Revolution Day Party slogans published in the Communist Party's official organ, the Pravda, a couple of days before the big day, November 07, were, when carefully analysed, almost a statement of Soviet domestic and foreign policies. Diplomats and foreign journalists based in Moscow were kept busy studying and analysing these slogans. Diplomatic despatches and media commentaries emanated copiously from this exercise. Comparing the slogans to those of the previous years was also done. Differences or changes, if any and however subtle were spotted and commented upon. This was the kind of stuff that earned you the label of being a "Kremlinologist". Diplomatic parties were humming with comments and discussions. Professionally it was all great fun, almost one's bread and butter. The arms race between the West and the Communist Block was going ahead full steam. The military parade and the display of latest weapons on the Red Square on November 07 was not only most impressive but also provided sufficient material to military experts and analysts, notably of the West, to analyse and comment upon. For me personally and professionally the timing could not have been better. It was like going into battle straight away.

INTERVIEWER: Any memories of Nikita Khrushchev?

AMBASSADOR: Being as yet a very junior diplomat there was no question or expectation of meeting Khrushchev personally. But even this happened in my case when Khrushchev, accompanied by virtually the entire Politburo, came to the Indian Embassy to sign in the Condolence Book following Nehru's demise. I was on duty to receive Khrushchev as he alighted from his car and escort him up to the Ambassador standing next to the Book. When he shook my hand I could notice that his eyes were wet as a sign of genuine grief over Nehru's death.

But other than this brief personal encounter, one saw and heard Khrushchev a lot those days, particularly in the Soviet media. He came through as a very popular leader. How much of it was orchestrated would be hard to tell. But Khrushchev was in every one's focus. He was a bit of a showman too with his overall image capturing considerable attention. His rolly poly figure, his ill fitting clothes and baggy trousers projected something of a pleasant image. His wife, Nina Khrushcheva, too had a grandmotherly image and presence.

On the international scene he stood his ground against the handsome and smartly attired John F. Kennedy, the US President, and his glamorous wife Jacqueline. He created something of history when, while addressing the UN, he took off one of his shoes and banged it on the podium. But somehow he came through as very humane. Within the USSR his biggest contribution was to start the undoing of the Stalinist legacy with his famous de-Stalinization speech in 1956 at the 20th Congress of the CPSU. In a way, he was the originator of the reform process in the Soviet Union. He was bold enough to even introduce the concept of material incentives for better performance at work. Years later, with his twin policies of GLASNOST (openness) and PERESTROIKA (re-structuring), Gorbachev was to pick up these threads a lot more vigorously. As for Indo-Soviet relations they owe a lot to Khrushchev. He laid the foundations of a process that was to grow over the next three decades and more into a unique multifaceted relationship. During his landmark visit to India, accompanied by Bulganin as the Premier, he truly endeared himself to the Indian people including with his antics like chewing a “paan” in public and on one occasion even appearing in public in a “kurta-pyjama” dress, the typical north Indian attire. He knew what clicked with people. Perhaps all this that formed a part of his style did not go down too well with some of the top Party brass in the Soviet Union. His abrupt downfall in October, 1964 was the result of a combination of factors. But his legacy lived on in many ways. The very fact that following his fall from power and grace he was not banished to Siberia but allowed to continue to live in Moscow with dignity was perhaps the best tribute to the fundamental changes he had injected into the Soviet system. I personally have fond memories of Nikita Khrushchev.

INTERVIEWER: Indian films were very popular in all the Republics of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Did Raj Kapoor visit Moscow or Tashkent in your time?

AMBASSADOR: Yes, you are right, Indian films were indeed very popular all over the Soviet Union, even more so in the Central Asian Republics. Those days the exposure to outside cultures, particularly Western, allowed to the common people in the USSR was strictly monitored and controlled. Indian classical dance forms, music, including film songs and movies were considered relatively safe for viewing and enjoying by the Soviet masses. Some scrutiny was there but Raj Kapoor and his movies found broad acceptance. His invariably choosing the common people and their lives for his films endeared him to Soviet viewers as also his looks and quality of acting. The Raj Kapoor-Nargis team was very popular in the USSR.

My first personal encounter with Raj Kapoor was in 1966 in Moscow where he was in the summer of that year as part of a group of Indian film stars to participate in the Moscow Film Festival. Raj Kapoor had requested for a courtesy call on Ambassador Kewal Singh. He was given twelve noon as the time and also informed that the Ambassador must leave by 12.45 pm for a formal luncheon engagement. For whatever reason, Raj Kapoor was very late and walked in just as the Ambassador was stepping out. Since I was having a meeting with the Ambassador I was with him. Raj Kapoor apologised for being late. The Ambassador expressed his regrets for having to go. But while doing so, turning to me, Mr. Kewal Singh suggested that I look after Mr. Raj Kapoor. Since it was lunch time I asked Raj Kapoor if he would care to join me for lunch at a nearby cafeteria. He readily agreed, got into my Volkswagen Beetle and we were at the cafeteria in a few minutes. As we walked in the place was nearly full but we were lucky to find a table for two in a corner. I found Raj Kapoor very relaxed and easy to talk to. He had none of the airs often mentioned about big and famous film stars. Service in Soviet cafes and restaurants was poor those days and for nearly fifteen minutes there was no sign of anyone even remotely taking our order. As the host, and with a celebrity as my guest, I started feeling a little uneasy. Finally, I went to the Director of the café and complained, also mentioning who was my guest. The lady Director obviously thought I was pulling a fast one on her and insisted on accompanying me to my table. One look and she almost screamed in Russian: “Boj moi, nastyashi Raj Kapoor.” (My God, it is the real Raj Kapoor). You can well imagine what followed. There was a virtual stampede. Many in the café wanted to shake hands with Raj Kapoor. Those with cameras wanted to get photographed with him. The Director insisted on herself serving us lunch and it was only after some persuasion that she accepted payment from me. One felt great and Raj Kapoor visibly enjoyed all this attention as proof, if any was needed, of his immense popularity amongst the Soviet people.

Years later, in the winter of 1979 when I was doing my second posting to Moscow I was on an official visit to Ashkabad and some other parts of Central Asia. I was then Minister (Economic) in the Embassy. While in Ashkabad my programme included a visit to a carpet weaving factory. There a lady weaver proudly showed me a small carpet lovingly made by her with Raj Kapoor's portrait on it. She then requested if I could ensure that it reached Raj Kapoor. I thanked the lady, photographed her holding her handiwork, took custody of it and assured her that I would do the needful. On returning to Moscow I despatched the carpet to Raj Kapoor. On receiving it he sent a warm letter of thanks to me for the lady weaver which I promptly forwarded to her in Ashkabad along with a photograph of Raj Kapoor holding the carpet and autographed by him. The lady was thrilled to no end

and I am sure, if she is still around, treasures that letter and the photo. Raj Kapoor was indeed a living legend for the Russian people those days.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you study the language? I wonder if you had a smart young Russian beauty as the teacher.

AMBASSADOR: While at the Indian Council of World Affairs in Delhi as part of my training I started my first formal lessons in the Russian language. One Mr. Roy was a good teacher. Those days the Ministry paid for 120 hours only for learning Russian. Since classes at the ICWA were counted against this limited quota of hours that made things difficult. The then First Secretary and Head of Chancery in the Embassy in Moscow, Mr. N.P.Jain, happened to be on a short visit to Delhi and I called on him. He advised me against utilising my limited language study hours quota in India as I could make much better use of it once I reached Moscow. Accordingly I discontinued the language classes at the ICWA.

Those days the restrictive Soviet system did not permit foreign diplomats to study Russian at any Institute etc. Instead, your Embassy hired a teacher for you through the Service Bureau of the Foreign Ministry (UPDK), and that was it. The teacher thus sent for you gave you, say, one hour lessons twice a week at your Embassy plus lot of home work. This was the best possible arrangement. If you were lucky to get a good teacher you did well, if not then you struggled on your own as best as possible.

Of course, living in Moscow and with constant exposure to the language helped a lot. You gradually developed an ear for the language, picked up the correct accent and pronunciation. Your local maid at home and most of the local staff in the office hardly spoke any English and you had no choice but to learn their language fast. Even the office interpreters encouraged you to speak to them in Russian even though they knew English very well. One thing I would like to mention about the Russians in this respect. They were most encouraging when a foreigner used their language. In fact, highly appreciative of the effort made by you and they never made fun of you if and when you committed mistakes. If at all, only very politely they would correct you. This was naturally very helpful and once you broke the barrier of initial hesitation over using a language you did not know well enough the rest began to fall in place quite smoothly. That way living and working in Moscow helped a lot. But, I should clarify, language study was not your full time occupation. From day one I was assigned different tasks in the Embassy. I was rotated every few months and attached to different officers so that I could learn or at least get an idea of their work and responsibility. This certainly helped and one took to this learning process quite enthusiastically.

But language study perhaps did not get as much attention as it should have. It was only years later that our young language trainees could join the Moscow University for an intensive language study course with the Embassy making no demand on their time. But my times were different and you had to make do with what was available by way of language study. But I am not complaining. That pattern had its own fun. From day one you felt a part of the Embassy and learnt a lot in the process. At that stage of your career, even affixing your signatures on passports and visas gave you a certain thrill. You were someone in the Embassy, a well integrated part of the team. While doing language study in Moscow I had three teachers, one after the other. You had no voice in their selection and UPDK could withdraw them arbitrarily, without assigning any reason, and simply send a replacement. This of course was not an ideal situation as it took you a while to get used to a teacher. All the three I had were lady teachers and one of them was indeed “a smart young Russian beauty” as you have chosen to put it. But she made a good teacher, was strict when it came to doing the home work, but overall it was a pleasant experience learning the language from her.

INTERVIEWER: How was the social life for young probationers? Were you married at that time? Did you find the atmosphere stifling?

AMBASSADOR: When I first started in Moscow in November, 1963 I was still a bachelor. In fact, I got married only a few years later in January, 1970. To begin with I found life in Moscow somewhat tough. One did not know the language. It took the Embassy nearly two months to allot me my regular accommodation. Till then it was either a hotel room, for about a week only, and then being moved into different apartments belonging to the Embassy as and when they fell vacant on account of transfers. On top of it, it was the peak winter. Very often, I could not even leave for work with a proper breakfast. And, I was totally dependent on public transport. My first car I only acquired several months later in June, 1964. So, initially life was pretty rough. But by the end of December, 1963 I had a nice two roomed apartment, well furnished and in a very good residential area of Moscow, 45, Leninsky Prospekt. Soon thereafter I got a full time Russian maid (8 am to 4 pm, Sundays off). Even though I saw her only in the mornings while getting ready for office, at least I would start the day with a hearty breakfast. Gradually things started looking up and life in Moscow became both comfortable and interesting.

Those days the Moscow Embassy was not that large as it became in subsequent years. There were four of us as probationers, two from the 1961 batch – S.N.Puri and J.N. Doddamani—and two of us from the 1962 batch, N.R.Verma and myself. S.N. Puri was particularly helpful and in many ways

a friend and a guide. But even otherwise we had a wonderful atmosphere within the Embassy, headed by Ambassador T.N. Kaul. His No.2, Rikhy Jaipal, Minister (Political) and his wife Sheela entertained frequently and as a young probationer I was often invited to their parties. All the other officers, including those from the Military and Air Wings (the Naval Wing started only from 1965) were extremely friendly, helpful and generous. One really felt as part of a large family.

With the passage of time things changed further and for the better. Outside the Embassy circle one developed interesting contacts with Moscow's large diplomatic corps and foreign correspondents. The Indian community was very small but friendly, including the four Moscow based Indian correspondents. Since we all suffered from restrictions on local contacts, we tended to gravitate a lot towards each other, since social interaction between the aforementioned categories was the only thing freely possible. With foreigners of all categories confined to pre-designated buildings in certain residential areas, quite often you were within the same building or virtually next door for an evening out. In inclement weather and sub-zero temperatures this certainly facilitated social interaction. With the passage of time and as one acquired some knowledge of the Russian language, limited contacts with the locals became possible. But this remained quite restrictive and mostly confined to Russians who had obviously been cleared to mix with you, some officials from the Ministries you dealt with, a few academics, those from the Friendship Society so on and so forth. There was something artificial about such contacts but there was no choice. If, on a rare occasion, a Russian invited you to his or her home it was something to talk about on the diplomatic circuit. As an Indian diplomat and from a "friendly" country one had a slight advantage over the Western diplomats who were under constant watch and observation. For us Indians it was living in a friendly but very restrictive and closed society. For the Westerners it invariably meant a hostile system too besides being restrictive. Do not forget, those were the Cold War days.

Availability of things was a problem too. Basic needs could be fulfilled through local purchases if one was ready for the long queues. But anything beyond that had to be imported from Stockman's in Helsinki or Ostermans and Peter Justesen in Copenhagen, they being, the virtual life lines for a diplomat based in Moscow. The famous hard currency stores, the "Bereoskas" opened only from 1965 and it was very slowly that their range and number expanded. But gradually one got used to all this, even learnt to cope with it so that overall Moscow became an interesting and exciting posting. It was a hardship post no doubt, but somehow one did not grumble, certainly not beyond a point.

INTERVIEWER: Who was the Ambassador at that time? Are there any anecdotes of that period that you might wish to share?

AMBASSADOR: Mr. T.N.Kaul was the Ambassador when I joined at Moscow. Though he is no more, I still have very pleasant memories of my association with him. In fact, my contact with him remained active throughout my career and even well after retirement. He had a certain presence and a personality that made an impact. He was highly impressive in many ways and nothing escaped his sharp eye. As a young probationer what impressed me most was the keen interest he took in you, how you were shaping up and he made sure that you worked hard. At his weekly officer's meeting he would always start with the probationers and with questions like: how was your language study progressing, how were you finding life in Moscow, how well were you learning the working of different sections in the Embassy, if you had any suggestions to make, whether you had observed anything of interest while going around the city or interacting with the locals, so on and so forth. All this ensured that you were not a mere listener at these weekly meetings but an active participant.

I still recall his asking me at one of these meetings as to how I had found the IFS training in India, whether there was scope for improvements and if I had any suggestions to make. When I expressed my considered views and quite frankly, he promptly asked me to give him a note with concrete ideas and suggestions. This I did pretty fast because he invariably would prescribe a dead line. After going through my note he discussed the subject briefly, agreeing with some points and expressing reservations about others. He then forwarded my note, with his comments, to the Ministry. Those days the N.R.Pillai Committee was looking into the reform of the IFS. My note went before it. A few months later when the Pillai Committee Report was submitted I learnt to my great surprise that three of my suggestions had been accepted and incorporated in the Report with my name figuring in the list of acknowledgements. For a probationer this was most encouraging but the credit also goes to Ambassador Kaul for putting me on to this task and all the encouragement.

As I learnt from other colleagues in the Embassy he was a hard task master who always kept you on your toes. But if you worked hard and delivered he was quick to notice and appreciate. He wanted you to think for yourself. In case you were faced with a problem you could always go to him. But he would also insist that you suggested three possible ways of tackling the problem. Either he would accept one of your suggested solutions, failing which you then were justified in his showing a way out. This was his way of making you think of solutions and not just be posing problems. In case he

found you slow or sloppy he would pull you up and if you did not show any change or improvement he would gradually lose interest in you. A sure indication that he was not impressed with your capacity or potential. The more he liked your work the more of it he gave you and rewarded you for your good performance. He made an excellent teacher at that stage in ones career, and a friend and a guide in later life. I was very fond of him and I think it was a mutual feeling. As already mentioned, I was in touch with him till his very last days. I attended his cremation in Delhi and looking at his face for the last time I had tears in my eyes. It looked like the end of an era to me. May his soul rest in peace.

COMMERCIAL SECRETARY: (HONG KONG) 1967—1969.

INTERVIEWER: Hong Kong was perhaps a sleepy outpost at that time. Was India- PRC trade mostly through Hong Kong?

AMBASSADOR: After serving for nearly four years in Moscow, my first posting abroad, I was naturally excited about going to Hong Kong. I thought I could do with a different world altogether, no matter how fulfilling the four years in Moscow had been. But Hong Kong was certainly not a sleepy little outpost, nor did I expect it to be. It was a known base for China watching considering that Mao's China was a forbidden land for many. Even for those based there the restrictions and controls on foreigners, diplomats included, were formidable to the point of being suffocating at times. For China watchers, therefore, Hong Kong was the best bet. It was a place pulsating with activity, not just commercial but political as well. It was an acknowledged listening post, so to say.

In addition to all this, my arrival in Hong Kong, October, 1967, coincided with the so called Cultural Revolution in Mao's China. This Revolution had spilled over into Hong Kong, including in the form of violence. Bomb explosions were a common feature. Business was suffering. There was even some flight of capital. The real estate market was in a bad shape with rents falling. I still recall reading a book by an Australian writer on Hong Kong of those days with an ominous title: "Hong Kong—Borrowed Place Borrowed Time". The British who still had thirty years of the Hong Kong lease to go were naturally most upset but they also realised that they were in no position to defend Hong Kong militarily against China. They were just being realistic. But they also realised how important Hong Kong was for China. With Mao's China ostracised by most of the Western world, notably the USA, most of China's hard currency earnings those days came through Hong Kong. As the phrase went, it was not so much trade with Hong Kong as through Hong Kong. It was the goose laying golden eggs for China and the

Chinese knew this very well just as they were too realistic and pragmatic to realise that they could ill afford to kill this goose. This, the British realised, was their main trump card. And, the story goes that ultimately they told the Chinese quite frankly and bluntly that if they wanted them to end British rule in Hong Kong prematurely they had simply to tell them so and they would pack up and go. But could China afford that? Not at all, it seemed then and even thirty years later when in 1997 the lease ended but China agreed to the principle of one country two systems. They did the same towards Macao when the Portuguese rule ended there in 1999. It is a measure of China's pragmatism that despite their political and propaganda blustering against imperialism and colonialism they happily tolerated the last two remnants of European colonialism on their soil well into the end of the twentieth century.

As regards India-China trade you have to see in the context of the times we are talking about. The low in India-China relations following the events of 1962 was still something very recent and fresh in memory on both sides. My reaching Hong Kong in October, 1967 was just five years after this major setback to our bilateral relations. There was still considerable hostile feeling and suspicion on both sides. There was nothing much to talk about political relations. Even diplomatic relations, though not totally broken off, were downgraded to the Charge d' Affaires level. Beyond routine official contacts there were no high level exchanges. Under these circumstances there was hardly any worthwhile India-PRC trade. With Hong Kong yes we had active trade and business dealings with frequent comings and goings of delegations and visitors. Whatever trade there was with China was essentially through Hong Kong which served as an important conduit for this purpose. In fact, this aspect was a very important factor about Hong Kong those days not just for India but even more so for the lucrative Western markets. China itself was a major beneficiary of this role played by Hong Kong. The large Indian business community in Hong Kong of those days was in many ways an active participant in these commercial dealings for which Hong Kong was famous. From what I recall, the first formal bilateral trade agreement between India and China was signed only in 1984 when an Indian delegation visited China for this purpose. As JS (EA) those days in the Ministry of External Affairs and, therefore, handling China, I was a member of this delegation led by Abid Hussein, the then Commerce Secretary.

INTERVIEWER: How visible was the presence and authority of British colonial rulers?

AMBASSADOR: Very visible and the British were not discreet or modest about it nor did they keep a low profile. The appellation British Crown

Colony was proudly used. The Governor was very visible at all major functions and events. The Colonial Secretariat was manned, Colonial Secretary downwards, by mostly young expatriates from Britain as were the senior executives in the big British companies based in or operating from Hong Kong. The Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club was a regular and sought after social gathering point. An old company like Jardine Matheson and Company was an influential player on the Hong Kong scene. The business community constantly endeavoured to be on the right side of the British. One of the jokes current those days in Hong Kong was that real authority lay with the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, Jardine Matheson and Company, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and the Governor---in that order. The British loved and enjoyed all this. After all, with most of their erstwhile colonies gone by now, Hong Kong was their only worthwhile possession left. The last jewel left in the British crown. The only significant place left where they could still throw their weight around as colonial masters.

CONSUL, ACTING CONSUL GENERAL, Charge d' Affaires HANOI (1969-1972)

INTERVIEWER: This period saw the ups and downs of the Vietnam War. The morale, motivation, and sacrifices of the people of Vietnam were exemplary. How was it achieved? Was it due to compulsions of an authoritarian regime?

AMBASSADOR: My nearly three years in what was then the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRVN or North Vietnam with Hanoi as the Capital, was an important and even dramatic period in the Vietnam War. During my stay, initially the American bombings were mostly confined to the territory between the 17th parallel (the demarcation between North and South Vietnam) and the 20th parallel. But a little later these bombings were extended virtually all over North Vietnam including the major port of Haiphong and the Capital Hanoi. Consequently, I had my full share of bombings in broad daylight, the dash one made for the improvised bomb shelters, wearing one's helmet and carrying a small medical kit. I even started keeping some cotton wool in my pocket to plug my ears and save my ear drums against blast. One was young and took it all as something of an adventure, fully appreciating the risk to one's life and limb only in retrospect. In fact, I continued to feel the pinch of the Vietnam War even after reaching Delhi on home posting in June, 1972. Since March, 1972 the Americans had resorted to the mining blockade of all the North Vietnamese ports, Haiphong included. Consequently, my entire heavy baggage and personal car got stuck at Haiphong on board a Polish ship that was one of

the twenty eight to get trapped in the Haiphong harbour due to this mining blockade. These ships were often even strafed by US planes. For almost a year after joining at headquarters I was almost like a refugee in my own country with most of my clothes, all the household goods and gadgets and the car stuck in Haiphong. I finally received my worldly possessions in Bombay only in May, 1973, after the lifting of the mining blockade. And, in what condition, there was a bullet hole in the side of the refrigerator and the roof of the car had caved in. The less said the better about the breakage of crockery and glassware. Well, that is life.

As regards the people of North Vietnam one admired their quiet courage and determination. They had resigned to a very simple and frugal life and the sacrifices that a war entailed. Even their leadership and officials tried to set an example. They seldom attended any diplomatic parties except for occasions like National Days or the visit of a high level delegation. But even then they just registered their presence and politely declined any drinks or snacks. They wore simple clothes, mostly used the bicycle as a mode of transport except for the very top leadership. One had no or little idea about their family life. In short, they made a conscious effort to be a part of the extremely austere life their people had to lead.

On the part of the people, how much of all this was accepted as a national duty and necessity or a discipline enforced by the system is hard to answer categorically. I would venture to say that at least some of them were resentful, but they had no choice and were fearful of the system. Such a reaction would only be human and to be expected. But one never saw it being publicly expressed. Contact between the foreigners and the man in the street was virtually zero. Those Vietnamese, who worked for you or officially dealt with you, were extremely cautious even if you tried to probe their true feelings. There was no denying that it was a very tight, strict and disciplined system. The contrast with South Vietnam was indeed stark. But in the end what happened is known to us all. When the final reckoning came, the system in the South just collapsed, the Americans fled shamefully and there was nothing to stop the juggernaut of the North and the National Liberation Front, derisively labelled by the West as the Vietcong.

INTERVIEWER: The world has not treated Ho Chi Minh with the respect due to a true freedom fighter, revolutionary and a leader devoted to the people. Did you get to meet him?

AMBASSADOR: Taking up first the last part of your question, unfortunately I never could meet Ho Chi Minh or even see him. He died at the beginning of September, 1969 and I joined at Hanoi only by mid-October

of that year. But it was a nation and a people still mourning the demise of this great leader of theirs.

In my view Ho Chi Minh was a great leader not only for his own country but for several others in the Third World who were fighting imperialism. He was held in very high regard in India which he even visited once in the 1950s to be accorded all the honours due to a Head of State from a friendly country. We still keep his memory fresh by having named one of the important avenues in the national Capital after him. In Vietnam his place in the annals of that country is always assured. There are any number of statues and busts across the country to honour him. After the liberation of South Vietnam in 1975 and the re-unification of the country what better tribute could the Vietnamese pay him than to rename Saigon in South Vietnam as Ho Chi Minh City.

As for the rest of the world, particularly the Western world, it would have been surprising if they had honoured him or remembered him. Their experience at the hands of Vietnam and its people led and inspired by Ho Chi Minh was anything but pleasant. The famous battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 had put a humiliating end to the French Empire in Indo-China. And, Ho Chi Minh's legacy carried forward by his successors drove the Americans out of that country in just six years after his demise. Being honoured and respected worldwide is unfortunately not an objective process. Lot of subjective considerations invariably creep in, including political. The role played by politics in the annual announcement of the Nobel Prize for Peace, and to some extent even Literature, is so obvious and well known that one hardly needs to elaborate on it. Was an acknowledged apostle of Peace like Mahatma Gandhi ever even considered for this Prize? And yet, just recall the almost indecent haste with which it was conferred on President Barack Obama of the US within the very first year of his first term in office. I think, even he was somewhat embarrassed, so much for the Nobel Peace Prize. If Ho Chi Minh, as you feel, has not received the treatment and respect he deserved at the hands of the world then it should be viewed in the light of what I have just explained. His greatness and place in world history does not depend on the number of testimonials he received from around the world.

INTERVIEWER: What was your assessment of the relationship between the Vietnamese Communist Party and the people at large? As we had both witnessed in Moscow in the late 1980s, the CPSU had become totally out of tune with the aspirations and outlook of the people of that country.

AMBASSADOR: I am sure you are familiar with the old saying: Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Now, answering the first part of your question, during my time in Hanoi the Vietnam Communist Party was in absolute control of virtually everything. But since the nation was involved in a struggle for survival, the rigidity of Party control and discipline were easy to understand. Even the people seemed to go along with all this. One can surmise that there were some dissidents, that there was some quiet resentment expressed over these rigid controls. But there was no public display of it. The Party cadre were held in awe, even respect because they themselves accepted the extremely frugal life. Nobody talked of any corruption in high places, the top leadership was held in high regard, there were no signs of anyone leading a life of luxury or not doing his or her duty. At least, understanding was expressed for the Party's rigid control and discipline. Tough times required tough measures and there was broad understanding of the shortages and the extremely frugal life style. People could see their top leadership and the Party cadre willingly going along with all this. The national priority focus was on the liberation of the country, throwing out the Americans and their Vietnamese lackeys in the South and to re-unite the country so as to start the process of rebuilding it.

Following liberation and re-unification, the country did make impressive progress, prosperity began to return, happy days were slowly back but that is when human frailties and weaknesses also gradually started raising their head. Vietnam is still a single Party system but the Communist Party is perhaps no longer what it was during the difficult days of struggle. It is no longer uncommon to hear of corruption and indiscipline. Even some popular resentment would be there now. But Vietnam is as yet showing no signs of tolerating or accepting political opposition, much less a switch to multi-party system. Let me hasten to add that this reading of mine is based on what one generally reads or hears about that country and not on any first-hand information or experience. It is a little over forty years now since I left Hanoi.

You have correctly observed how we both witnessed in Moscow in the 1980s the decline of the prestige of the CPSU and how the Party cadre were drifting away from the popular mood and aspirations. This process was, in fact, in evidence even earlier than the 1980s. I could see it, to an extent at least, in the 1960s and even more so in the 1970s when again I was in Moscow on my second posting. But the CPSU instead of trying to reform itself from within let things go on, the Party cadre often indulging themselves when the common people suffered. Gorbachev with his twin policies of "Glasnost" and "Perestroika" tried to change things but I personally feel that he went too far

and too fast. In the end, one not only saw the demise of the USSR but a considerably weakened Russia.

The Chinese perhaps have proved to be smarter in this respect. They brought in first the economic reforms, gave their people a taste of prosperity, but left their political system by and large untouched. China despite its impressive economic progress still remains a rigid one Party system. But dissidence, corruption in high places in the Party, social unrest, popular opposition and resentment are fairly common place now. The top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party itself admits all this. But whether the Party is ready to boldly allow opposition and change its ways is a matter of conjecture. How the future will take shape in China only time will tell, but the winds of change are already there.

INTERVIEWER: Life in Hanoi must have been hard in a war ravaged country. Did you experience any aerial bombardment? What were your outlets regarding shopping, recreation and social life? Was there any other notable experience that you might like to recall?

AMBASSADOR: Living in Hanoi those days was indeed tough. One had no choice but to lead a very simple and Spartan life. There were no restaurants, no movie halls, no TV and nothing much to buy in the local shops. Even our Ministry's note on living conditions in Hanoi recommended long walks as the best recreation and past time. Otherwise, Hanoi was a well planned city with French style villas with independent gardens. But most of these structures looked very run down and badly in need of repair. The two lakes in the city, the small one in centre of the town and the big one a little distance away, added to the natural charm of the city. The roads were wide, tree lined and with sidewalks for pedestrians. Bicycles and cycle rickshaws were to be seen in large numbers but hardly any cars except for a few official vehicles. I was literally the only diplomat with a personal car that I had got shipped from Hong Kong since I was required to move directly from there to Hanoi. Other diplomats either used the Embassy vehicles or sometimes bicycles. Hanoi had no public bus service and taxis were simply out of the question. While our local Vietnamese cook shopped for the kitchen, my wife and I often went to the only hard currency shop strictly for diplomats. But the range of goods there was extremely limited, mostly from the Soviet Union. Canned sardines were available in plenty and given my fondness for sea food it became almost my staple diet. Importing from Hong Kong or Bangkok was possible but very time consuming and prohibitively expensive. The only civil airline to connect Hanoi with the outside world was the Chinese that operated a twice a week flight from Hanoi to Nanning (a closed city for foreigners) from where you could proceed either to Peking, now Beijing, or Canton, now

Guangzhou. The only alternative was the once a week courier air service, an ancient Boeing 307, operated by the International Control Commission (ICC) between Saigon and Hanoi with a halt in Vientiane (Laos). Since this weekly flight, every Tuesday, had to fly over the Pathet Lao held territory in Laos it was allowed a safe passage strictly along a prescribed air corridor and equally strictly between certain hours of the day. Any deviation could spell trouble and indeed in 1965 one of these planes was shot down with the wreckage never to be found and with all on board, including a few Indians, presumed dead.

As regards social life it was quite limited. With the Vietnamese there was hardly any social interaction except when you met them at big functions. Because of what they were going through this was understandable. Those days the diplomatic corps in Hanoi was very small, just about twenty resident missions and mostly from the Socialist Block. Their diplomats did not socially interact much. For them Hanoi was a non-family station and they led more of a hostel life with common messing. Outside this category there were a few small missions and they provided a welcome social outlet. These included those from France, Britain, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria and a couple of Canadians serving on the International Control Commission. The Swedes came much later. Within this small group of diplomats there was regular social interaction, including informal lunches and dinners and we had good fun. Since we all suffered from similar restrictions we tended to be a closely knit group. The Canadians regularly received English films from their bigger base in Saigon and that provided welcome relief.

But all said and done, it was socially a lonely life and ultimately you had to be on your own. Here I should mention that I got married while posted in Hanoi and for my wife it was the start of life in the Foreign Service. I would keep telling her that this was for her possibly the lowest point in life as regards living conditions and hereafter, no matter where we got posted, things could only improve. I must say to her credit that she accepted life as it was in Hanoi and never complained. Ours being an arranged marriage, being thrown together like this, we really came to know and appreciate each other. We enjoyed our long walks together and looked mostly at the positive side of things. We even started our family in Hanoi and our first child, a son, was born there. Even our friends in the diplomatic corps were surprised that we had decided to have the baby delivered in Hanoi. I even told my wife that if she felt one bit uneasy about Hanoi's medical facilities I would send her to India for the delivery. She flatly refused, adding that if the Vietnamese could fight off the Japanese, defeat the French and now give a tough time to the Americans, they could surely deliver a baby. This brave attitude of hers was a big relief and our son was indeed born in Hanoi. I think even the

Vietnamese were impressed with our attitude and they truly laid it out for us at the St. Paul's hospital, the biggest in the city, and on our panel. As a special gesture our son's birth certificate was signed by the Mayor of Hanoi. Your query on whether I experienced any actual aerial bombardments I have already answered earlier so that I need not repeat.

Ultimately what kept one going in Hanoi those days was the professional satisfaction of being in the centre of things of what was, those days, easily the most newsworthy part of the world. The War in Vietnam was invariably the front page news in the newspapers around the world, including in India. One's regular reports to the Ministry were carefully read and appreciated. With just about nine years of Service professionally I found all this very satisfying. When the Consul General, Dr. K.S.Shelvankar, left Hanoi in early 1971 on transfer, I became the Acting Consul General. Those days there were very few takers for an extremely tough (even dangerous) posting like Hanoi and I continued to be in-charge of the mission for several months. And then the big thing happened, something in which I had some role to play as the man on the spot. India decided to upgrade its relations with Hanoi to the full Embassy level without a similar gesture towards Saigon. This was effective from January 07, 1972. Our mission was now called the Embassy of India and my designation changed from Acting Consul General to Charge d'Affaires, the first one of India in Hanoi. While my colleague in Saigon was literally facing brickbats, I was overnight the darling of the North Vietnamese. They were highly appreciative of this very bold diplomatic decision on India's part.

In April that year Prime Minister Indira Gandhi convened in Delhi a meeting of India's Heads of Mission in Asia. As the C'dA in Hanoi I was asked to attend this Conference. Before leaving for Delhi I wanted the latest briefing from the Vietnamese, starting with the Head of the Asia Department in the Foreign Ministry. Without my asking these briefings escalated to the level of the Deputy Foreign Minister, the Foreign Minister the next day and, what came as a total surprise, a breakfast meeting with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and a briefing by him lasting well over an hour. All these meetings resulted in my daily cipher telegrams to headquarters and were highly appreciated. When the HOMs Conference opened in Delhi I was without doubt the "baby" of the gathering with senior colleagues around from Tokyo, Dhaka, Colombo, Islamabad, to mention a few. To every one's surprise Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asked me to make the first presentation. As she put it: "these days when I look at the morning newspapers, invariably Vietnam is the front page news. Let me, therefore, first hear what our man on the spot has to say." This was totally unexpected by me but also a very

satisfying and proud moment in life, professionally speaking. I remained C'dA in Hanoi till my departure in June, 1972 for headquarters on transfer.

INTERVIEWER: Coming from India it may not have been very difficult to cope with power cuts and water shortages in Hanoi those days.

AMBASSADOR: Both yes and no. Shortages in Hanoi those days were easy to understand, after all the country was in the throes of an active war. In India, to the extent these shortages occur due to mismanagement it is difficult to condone or understand.

INTERVIEWER: Any observations on the sense of discipline, dedication, and sacrifice of the Vietnamese people, some traits which we in India sorely lack.

AMBASSADOR: With the War on one saw in plenty these qualities of the people of North Vietnam. How much of this was enforced by the system then prevalent and how much was spontaneous and voluntary is hard to tell. Nobody is super human and I am inclined to say that even those days, at least some Vietnamese were sore about shortages, restrictions and hardship. But they suffered in silence as they had little or no choice. Even in India, whenever the nation is threatened by an external force you do find people dropping some of their negative traits and behaving differently. I think people the world over react differently to the circumstances surrounding them.

INTERVIEWER: How did the Vietnamese leadership assess India? The recently declassified US records reveal that the Chinese leadership looked at India and its leadership with some disdain. Were the Vietnamese closer to the Soviet perception of India?

AMBASSADOR: Both the Vietnamese leadership and the people viewed India with respect and as a friendly country. Our special relationship with and proximity to the Soviet Union those days also helped in this respect. The fact that our relations with China were far from friendly or normal was not allowed to have any negative bearing on how the Vietnamese viewed us. Historically, the Vietnamese themselves have been wary of China. During the period that we are talking of, on the surface Vietnam looked to be very close to China, as close as the lips and the teeth was an expression used often. But this was out of practical necessity. For their war effort the Vietnamese were heavily dependent on the Soviet Union and China. Most of their heavy weaponry including missiles and aircraft were from the Soviet Union. But China was the main overland supply route. Chinese cooperation

was, therefore, very vital for Hanoi. China was also a source of direct supply for some food items and manufactured goods. The stand-off between the US and China served the Vietnamese interests well. Even with India this factor played an important role. Things have to be seen in the context of the situation then prevailing. During this period India-US relations had touched a new low. President Nixon of the US had no soft spot for India or for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. How the Americans behaved towards India during the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) crisis is well known including their despatching their Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal to intimidate India. All this, I am sure, determined our own policy towards Vietnam. India regularly maintained contact with the National Liberation Front (Vietcong) of South Vietnam much to the irritation and annoyance of the Americans. Mme. Binh, the NLF Foreign Minister, was even warmly received in India with our Foreign Minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, hosting her visit. The ultimate affront by us towards the US was when in January, 1972 India decided to upgrade its relations with Hanoi to the Embassy level without a similar gesture towards the American puppet regime in Saigon. The Americans were furious with us while Hanoi was all praise and so was Moscow. But China, I am sure, was not pleased over this development. It would have only increased their unease over the growing proximity between New Delhi and Hanoi. Till then, Pakistan, China's all weather friend, had no diplomatic presence in Hanoi. I am willing to surmise that at Beijing's behest Pakistan sent its then Foreign Minister, Abdul Hafiz Pirzada, to Hanoi on an official visit to at least try and off-set India's growing standing in Hanoi. This visit, in early April, 1972, was not a secret one but kept very low key by Hanoi. Very likely the Pakistanis wanted it that way too in view of their being very close to the US and highly conscious of American sensitivities. They were possibly up to a double game of keeping China happy without upsetting the US. The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry kept us in the know of this visit. Now, it just so happened, that Pirzada's departure from Hanoi coincided with mine on the way to Delhi for the HOMs Conference already mentioned. On the sector Hanoi-Nanning in fact we were on the same flight. Since the intensity of war, including the American bombings, were on the increase our Ministry agreed to my family being evacuated to India. So here we were, my wife, our son of a year and a half and I on the same flight as the Pakistani Foreign Minister. In fact, we were seated just one row behind Pirzada. From time to time our son would go and touch Pirzada who was gentle and playful with him. The Chinese air hostess obviously thinking that we too were Pakistanis travelling with the Minister very lovingly gave an apple to our son. A little later, when in response to her specific query my wife clarified that we were Indians, the change of attitude on the part of the Chinese air hostess was dramatic, almost amusing. The smile on her face vanished, she almost grabbed the apple she had earlier given to our son of a year and a

half and walked away. We received no further service from her for the rest of the flight. I think even Pirzada looked somewhat surprised over this sudden and dramatic change in the attitude of the Chinese hostess. I cannot think of a better example to show how, at least then, disdainful the Chinese attitude was not only towards our leadership but Indians in general. Whether this has undergone any change for the better over the years is hard to tell. Formal warm handshakes and smiles do not necessarily always speak the truth.

But coming back to Vietnam and China, 1971 was something of a turning point. The surprise visit to China of the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, in that year was not just a blow to Hanoi but it almost felt stabbed in the back by the Chinese. Hanoi needed China so that the Vietnamese refrained from any public comment on this visit marking a new phase in US-China relations, but in private and confidential conversations they expressed their disillusionment with China. Their historical doubts and reservations about China had only been re-confirmed. The 1979 border clash between China and Vietnam was not such a surprise to the close observers of the Vietnam-China relations. And, the fact remains that till today China continues to threaten Vietnamese vital interests in the South China Sea including by way of maritime territorial disputes. In the logic of things, therefore, the Vietnamese were closer to the Soviet perception of India and that view still persists and, I think, will continue to persist even in the aftermath of the demise of the USSR with Russia taking its place. New Delhi-Moscow and Hanoi share a lot more in common than Hanoi and Beijing or New Delhi and Beijing. I have often maintained that in Asia there are only three countries with a capacity to contain China given its territorial and big power ambitions. These three are India, Vietnam and Japan or the Delhi-Hanoi-Tokyo Axis. I am not suggesting any military ganging up but only a capacity or a potential to hold back an over ambitious and assertive China. I hope the Chinese themselves realise the limitations of their power and instead the good that a cooperative and accommodating approach will do not just to them but to the rest of Asia, indeed the entire world.

INTERVIEWER: Did the Vietnamese come out openly and early in the support of Bangladesh liberation in the 1971 tribulations?

AMBASSADOR: Pakistan's closeness to the USA and the hostilities between the USA and Vietnam made Hanoi's task easy in this respect. Pakistan's total rout in this war and the impotent rage of the USA over the way things were going certainly were welcome developments from Hanoi's point, more so given its friendly feelings towards India. But the China factor could not be totally ignored by it. China's support for its "all weather friend" Pakistan, its

strained relations with India, its new found equation with the USA following the Kissinger visit, all these factors had to be kept in mind by Hanoi. But its sympathy and support was obvious as it was for Bangladesh. Its manner of expressing this support was influenced by the China factor but not to an extent that it lost its value or significance.

DEPUTY SECRETARY: DS(IC&EA)—Indo-China and East Asia.

INTERVIEWER: This was in the aftermath of Ping Pong diplomacy, Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and the Nixon-Mao talks. How did the Ministry look at these historic changes?

AMBASSADOR: You are right, the years 1971-72 indeed witnessed some historic changes. The dramatic developments in US-China relations did indeed have global implications. The USSR, already weary of China, viewed all this with concern. India had convincingly won its brief war with Pakistan that not only stood dismembered but had 95,000 of its troops as India's POWs, the largest number ever in history. China was upset, the USA was fuming, the USSR stood by India, Pakistan was a demoralized country, India was enjoying its hour of glory and Bangladesh had emerged as the latest independent entity on the world scene.

I joined the Ministry, my first home posting, in early June, 1972 as DS(IC), a post newly created because of the importance attached to the rapidly changing scene in Indo-China. The Vietnam War was increasing in ferocity. The three International Control Commissions for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, set up in 1954, were being wound up. All concerned saw no useful purpose being served by these three Commissions of which India was the Chairman and Canada and Poland the two members. My job was, besides handling the Indo-China developments, most importantly Vietnam, to also see to the winding up of the three ICCs. The euphoria over the birth of Bangladesh was visible. Preparations were afoot at a feverish pace for the upcoming Simla Summit between India and Pakistan. The new Bangladesh Division had just been formed in the Ministry. The Branch Secretariat of the Ministry in Calcutta had just started. In a major re-shuffle of charges at the Deputy Secretary level, the DS(EA), A.K.Das, was shifted to the Branch Secretariat in Calcutta. Starting as DS(IC), within a few days I was given the additional charge of East Asia, thus being re-designated as DS(IC&EA). I was assured that this was purely temporary and that soon there will be a separate DS(EA). In reality that never happened and for the next nearly three years I continued to hold this double charge till my transfer abroad in 1975.

Though all this meant a very heavy work load for me, I had nevertheless great job satisfaction. My Joint Secretary (EA) was V.V.Paranjpe, considered to be a China expert. There was no Director's post then between the DS and JS levels. Very soon I had a clear understanding with my JS. He frankly told me that except for China, with regard to all other countries forming part of my double charge—the whole of Indo-China, Japan, the two Koreas, Hong Kong and Mongolia—I was free to deal directly with the Secretary over all in-charge, V.C.Trivedi. I was only to regularly keep him apprised of what was happening. I was thus possibly the only Deputy Secretary to deal directly with the Secretary level, by-passing the Joint Secretary. Working with Secretary (East), V.C.Trivedi, was a pleasure. We soon developed a perfect equation. I saw him several times during the day to discuss various official matters. It was an extremely heavy work load but most satisfying.

As regards North Vietnam, having just up-graded our relations to the full Embassy level, there was considerable activity on both sides to further strengthen bi-lateral relations and cooperation. The North Vietnamese, to begin with, wanted our involvement in their economic development being otherwise constantly badgered by US bombings. They asked us for high quality seeds for their agriculture and also assistance in animal husbandry. The Americans already furious over our upgrading our relations with Hanoi, kept a hawk eye on our growing bi-lateral ties with North Vietnam. Since we could not afford to totally ignore our relations with the USA, most acts of this bi-lateral assistance to and cooperation with Hanoi were carried out by us as discreetly as possible. Can you imagine, the decision on our supplying Hanoi with high quality seeds merited, in the initial stages, a Top Secret category classification.

INTERVIEWER: In December, 1973, we had raised our relations to Ambassador level simultaneously with both North and South Korea. DPRK was not happy about it and the Ministry had to press Pyongyang to accept this decision. I believe you were in the thick of this drama. Any comments?

AMBASSADOR: Yes, You can say that. I was indeed very much involved with this important development. When we first informed the two Koreas about this decision of ours, while Seoul took it gracefully and happily, Pyongyang reacted differently. For a while I was visited several times by senior diplomats of North Korea. They first suggested that India should do this only towards them and not the South. I flatly turned this down. After more consultations, they came back with the suggestion that we should first announce this decision in respect of Pyongyang only and then, only after some gap, towards Seoul. By now I was getting quite impatient and turned down this suggestion too. I then added that for this simultaneous

announcement a date had already been fixed by us. Seoul had expressed no difficulty with this decision of ours. If I did not get Pyongyang's agreement on time then we will be left with no choice but to go ahead and make our decision known about South Korea and do so later in respect of North Korea after receiving their acceptance of this arrangement. I think, within a matter of hours the North Koreans came to see me to convey their acceptance of our decision about a simultaneous announcement. That is what we ultimately did. But I found the North Korean handling of this quite amusing. Their desire for one-upmanship had been frustrated when really things need not have come to such a pass.

CONSUL GENERAL(Hamburg) 1975-76 and COUNSELLOR(Bonn) 1976-78.

INTERVIEWER: After postings in the dour Moscow and Hanoi, you would have welcomed a posting in the developed world.

AMBASSADOR Yes indeed, but much more so for my wife. In my case, sandwiched between the Moscow and Hanoi postings was a two year stint in Hong Kong which even those days was an oasis of luxury, comfort and easy availability of virtually everything under the sun. But in the case of my wife, her life in the Foreign Service had started with Hanoi, possibly the toughest posting for an Indian diplomat those days. Hamburg was a very welcome change indeed, a beautiful city with glittering shopping centres. Given our fondness for travelling we found Germany an ideal country from this point of view as well with its excellent infrastructure and the superb autobahns. As Consul General my jurisdiction covered the four northern States or Landers of what was then West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany). These were, besides Hamburg, Bremen, Schleswig Holstein and Lower Saxony (Hannover). Officially I had to travel a lot and on week- ends my wife and I would just get into our car and drive in different directions exploring the country side and small towns and villages. With Hanoi as the immediate backdrop and a home posting after that, life in Hamburg was indeed like a breath of fresh air.

INTERVIEWER: We used to visit West Berlin from Sofia and Warsaw to see the "lights" in the good old days. What was your experience of an industrialized country?

AMBASSADOR: It was great fun indeed. What particularly impressed me about West Germany was how things worked in an orderly fashion and the emphasis on cleanliness. People were friendly and helpful. Right from school days one had grown up with the impression that English countryside was beautiful, which indeed it is. But the German landscape, forests and pretty

little villages I found very attractive. I am by nature very particular about discipline, cleanliness and organization. I saw all this in plenty in Germany and, therefore, felt very happy. I felt very comfortable with the general environment surrounding us. I can well imagine how you must have enjoyed your forays into West Berlin from Sofia and Warsaw.

INTERVIEWER: Your stay in Hamburg was rather short and then you were moved to Bonn. Was there any particular reason for this?

AMBASSADOR: You are right. My Hamburg posting was indeed a short one. In fact, I received my transfer orders just five months after joining there when I had just about finished my first protocol visits to the four northern States covered by me. The reason was a happy one but somewhat upsetting nevertheless since we were just about beginning to feel settled in Hamburg. When I was posted to Hamburg I was still in the Senior Scale of the IFS. A few months later I was promoted to Grade IV or the Counsellor's grade. Since the Hamburg post could not be upgraded (I believe it is now for several years a Joint Secretary or Grade III level post, things have changed indeed) I was required to move to the Embassy in Bonn where a Grade IV post was shortly falling vacant and thus get my promotion. But some of my German friends found it hard to believe that my move on transfer was indeed on promotion. For them Herr General Consul was something higher and superior despite my painfully explaining to them that as No. 2 in the Embassy in Bonn I would rank higher than all our Consuls General in West Germany and be supervising and coordinating their work, in addition to my other responsibilities as Counsellor in Bonn. Well such is life.

However, the two years that I spent in Bonn was a thoroughly enjoyable and satisfying experience. I had in M.A. Rehman an excellent Ambassador to work with. He more or less left the running of the mission to me and yet was always available for consultation and guidance. We had a wonderful team of officers in the Embassy and things worked smoothly and efficiently. Bonn was a nice place to live in. Our residence was not far from the Rhine and surrounded by fruit orchards. For fresh milk and eggs one had just to drive to a nearby farm and which I did twice a week on my way back from office. Most of the officers from the Embassy lived not too far in neighbouring villages which were now fast emerging as comfortable residential suburbs of Bonn. We would often have informal get-togethers and a regular once a month pot luck dinner by rotation at different residences. Bonn was the only major Capital in Europe (nearly hundred and twenty resident diplomatic missions and mostly large to very large) those days that gave you all the comforts of city life along with the charm of country life.

But I was destined to be in Bonn for two years only as against the normal three. The post of Minister (Economic) in Moscow had fallen vacant. Being a Ministry of Commerce post the outgoing incumbent was a senior IAS officer, Gopi Arora. The Ministry of External Affairs was trying very hard to get this post for the IFS cadre, just as the IAS was keen on keeping it for its own cadre. I was told that using my track record in the Service the MEA had been successful in getting this post for the IFS and that I should join at Moscow, as early as possible, so as not to let the Service down. It is amusing how your parent Ministry can suddenly discover all your qualities when they need you somewhere. Anyhow, I did not resist, though my Ambassador in Bonn was not particularly pleased over my premature move to Moscow. Thus came, in July, 1978, Moscow for me a second time and after a gap of eleven years but for my wife and our two sons for the first time.

MINISTER (Economic), MOSCOW: 1978-80.

INTERVIEWER: The Rupee-Rouble trade was in full bloom at that time. It was of great help to our balance of payments difficulties. Were there any new trends or policy changes during your time?

AMBASSADOR: I agree. Our bilateral trade with the Soviet Union was indeed doing well those days. Annual trade plans were invariably fulfilled, as were the long term targets. With the Janta Dal government in office at that time and Morarji Desai as the Prime Minister, the Soviets felt a little uneasy to begin with. Desai had an anti-Communist reputation. His talking of "genuine" non-alignment left the Soviets somewhat guessing. But reality soon prevailed and, I think, even Morarji Desai soon realised the full value and importance of Indo-Soviet multifaceted ties. His official visit to the USSR went off well and Moscow felt more relaxed. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was then the Foreign Minister and accompanying Morarji Desai on this visit was, I felt, a good restraining and balancing factor. However, things could have been better if Morarji Desai had been less wooden, less rigid and more warm and forthcoming. I still recall one particular instance to prove this point. As member of the official delegation on our side, I was present at the high level formal talks at the Kremlin between the two sides, with Brezhnev leading the Soviet delegation and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko by his side. Brezhnev was already in frail health and his speech was somewhat slurred. His hearing too was somewhat impaired. Gromyko had to constantly keep guiding him on what to say every time Morarji had a query. As the talks were coming to a close, with great flair Brezhnev pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and read from the written text. As a friendly gesture and to further strengthen bi-lateral cooperation he offered to train an Indian cosmonaut and then send him into outer space on board a Soviet

spacecraft. Brezhnev apparently had expectations that the Indian Prime Minister would readily and enthusiastically accept this offer which would then be announced as one of the major outcomes of Desai's visit. But Morarji Desai's reaction was quite lukewarm and failed to go beyond the assurance that the Indian side would consider this offer and let the Soviet side know in due course. This was like pouring cold water on Brezhnev's expectations and he visibly looked upset and a bit shaken. Well that was Morarji Desai and his style. As we came out after the formal talks most of us in the Indian delegation felt that we should have happily accepted this Soviet offer. As it happened, within a year or so when Indira Gandhi was back as Prime Minister she readily agreed to this Soviet proposal and not long thereafter we had our first cosmonaut, Sqn. Ldr. Rakesh Sharma, successfully flying in outer space.

Speaking generally of my experience as Minister (Economic), while there were no basic changes in policy on either side, functioning in that position gave me a good inside picture of the working of our Soviet aided public sector projects. HEC Ranchi was a particularly disturbing example. It was over staffed because of political interference and nepotism, its work force seemed to lack motivation, its products sometimes shoddy in quality and its overall performance invariably fell far too short of the installed capacity of the Plant. As Minister (Economic) I had to often face the frustration of the Soviet side with such problems prevailing on our side. It was not pleasant and yet one felt quite helpless.

INTERVIEWER: The Soviet purchasing agencies, which had a monopoly over all procurement from India, were powerful entities and their executives were ardently courted by the Indian suppliers. There were anecdotal evidences of diamond necklaces, VCRs, Scotch and cash being offered to Soviet buyers to get any contract. Would you care to offer any comments on that?

AMBASSADOR: I generally agree with your observation. Those days the Soviet market for certain Indian products was almost a captive market. Bilateral trade was almost a spin-off of political relations. On the Soviet side decision making was centralised in the hands of a few officials in Moscow and their Trade Commissioner in Delhi. If they were happy God was happy. This naturally resulted in this small coterie of Soviet officials being actively wooed by the Indian business community. They were often showered with gifts and special attention. In return the Indian business community bagged lucrative contracts. Sometimes even quality control on the Soviet side would be relaxed somewhat in consideration of the favours bestowed on Soviet officials by their Indian suppliers. If in the process the Soviet consumer

suffered it did not matter much. The consumer being King was a concept alien to the Soviet mind set. Shortages were a known feature of the Soviet consumer goods market and people accepted whatever was made available to them. In a way, I think, we are paying for all this now as is evidenced by the sluggish growth in our bi-lateral trade. With the coming of the market economy following the collapse of the old system and of the USSR, the Russian consumer became quality conscious. With competing products in the market the old pattern of trade no longer worked as before. The Russian market was no longer a captive one for Indian suppliers. The fall in trade was inevitable. Indian products now had to compete with products from elsewhere. Indian suppliers had to face this new challenge. But such things take time as we can see now.

INTERVIEWER: Rumours abound that contracts for the purchase of rice, tea and tobacco were given to a few favoured suppliers from India and there was diversion of funds by these companies both to the Congress Party and the CPI. Did you come across any evidence of such machinations?

AMBASSADOR: Such rumours did indeed reach one from time to time. Sometimes they even found echo in our media. Even if there was some truth in them there was little that the Embassy could do in the matter, nor was it ever asked to do. If the Soviet buyers were willing parties to such deals, for whatever reasons, then why blame only the suppliers. You will appreciate that even if there was some truth in these rumours it would have been hard, virtually impossible, to prove them. Such deals, not totally unknown to the business community the world over, are not in the form of formal contracts nor are they open to public scrutiny. I would rather therefore neither confirm nor deny such rumours.

AMBASSADOR TO ETHIOPIA (1980-83)

INTERVIEWER: I believe this was your first Ambassadorship. How did you react to it? This was also your first posting to Africa. What was your experience of serving in that part of the world?

AMBASSADOR: You are right, Ethiopia was my first Ambassadorship and I not only welcomed this development in my career but felt quite excited about it. This was so for a variety of reasons. Going as Head of Mission, and that too for the first time, should be a unique experience for any Foreign Service officer. I was barely forty one years of age with just eighteen years of service to my credit, roughly half way mark, so I was naturally looking forward to it with considerable enthusiasm and excitement. I had never served in Africa before and to be going to a country like Ethiopia only added

to the charm. Ethiopia, as you know, is an ancient country with a rich history and culture, the land of the source of the Blue Nile (Lake Tana at Bahr Dar), a country connected with the story of Solomon and Sheba, a country of handsome people, beautiful climate in the highlands including the Capital Addis Ababa and a country with old and friendly links with India. In fact, our diplomatic mission in Ethiopia is the oldest in Africa dating back to 1948 that is to within a year of India becoming independent. When India attained independence in 1947 virtually the whole of Africa was still under European colonialism. Ethiopia was an exception since it was never colonised. Only its northern parts, now the separate State of Eritrea came under Italian occupation for a brief period around World War II. It was, therefore, logical and natural that post-independence India's first diplomatic presence in Africa was in Ethiopia. The country's Capital, Addis Ababa, is often called the Capital of Africa. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), now renamed the African Union, is headquartered in Addis Ababa as also several of the UN agencies in Africa including the UNDP, the ILO and the UN Economic Commission for East Africa. Talking of my days, Addis Ababa was the largest diplomatic Capital in Africa with nearly seventy five resident missions, including most of the major African countries. The Secretary General of the OAU was also based in Addis Ababa. Most of the African Heads of Mission to Ethiopia were very senior people, including a few ex-Foreign Ministers. Addis Ababa, therefore, was not just the Capital of Ethiopia but clearly had a pan-African dimension and was often called the Capital of Africa. Even our government accepted and acknowledged this reality. This was confirmed when in 1981, for the 18th OAU Summit in Nairobi (Kenya), I was formally asked to go as India's Observer, rather than our High Commissioner to Nairobi, a senior colleague, being assigned that role. Since almost all my African contacts and colleagues in Addis Ababa were in Nairobi for this Summit it made my task of covering this important event considerably more smooth and easy. The OAU Secretariat issued me an identity badge, "No.001 Special Guest", which enabled me to have access to all events and functions related to this OAU Summit. Upon return to Addis Ababa I naturally sent a detailed report to our Ministry of External Affairs.

On the bilateral side, my nearly three years in Ethiopia were a period of considerable satisfaction. We had several firsts to our credit since the Marxist Revolution, as it was commonly referred to and take over by the military regime. We signed the first Trade Agreement during the visit of our then Minister of Commerce, Shivraj Patil. Coinciding with this visit, the visiting Minister convened a Conference of India's Heads of Mission in Africa in the Ethiopian Capital. I got excellent cooperation from the Ethiopian government for a smooth handling of the organizational aspects of an

important event like this. Besides the Commerce Secretary, the Minister's delegation included nearly twenty five CEOs of small and medium industrial houses in India. Altogether, including our HOMs, the number was almost fifty. As a relatively small mission we naturally had our hands more than full. During the visit of our then Minister of Culture, Sheela Kaul, we signed our first Cultural Agreement. Coinciding with this visit the famous Anand Shankar troupe from India came and gave three performances in Addis Ababa's National Theatre to packed houses. The opening night was attended by three Cabinet rank Ministers of Ethiopia including their Minister of Culture. Over the years Ethiopia has been an active user of our ITEC scholarships. During my time we succeeded in getting their quota increased fourfold. For the NAM Summit hosted by India the Ethiopian Head of State and their Foreign Minister were in India with post the Summit the visit partly becoming a bilateral one. In March, 1983, two of our naval ships, a frigate and a tanker, paid a goodwill visit to the Ethiopian military port of Massawa with their Naval Chief staying there throughout the three day stay of our ships as a special gesture. I could go on with several more such examples but suffice to say that all this was most satisfying both personally and professionally.

As much as these positive happenings, what I equally enjoyed in Ethiopia was the ambience in which one functioned. Unlike my postings to the then USSR and what was then West Germany where one's hands were invariably outstretched for favours and economic assistance, in Ethiopia the role was reversed. Here as India's Ambassador I was at the giving end, be it in terms of scholarships or collaboration in setting up small or medium scale industrial units. With our own foreign exchange position extremely tight those days, India could ill afford to give outright economic aid by way of soft loans or grants. But, as I would often tell my Ethiopian friends, one Ethiopian engineer trained by us was on his return home going to serve his country for several decades. This was how we could help friendly countries those days and the Ethiopians were indeed very appreciative of it. Added to this was the highly useful role being played by Indian doctors and teachers in Ethiopia. True, they were recruited directly by the Ethiopian government and paid also by them. We did not come into the picture. But their services were highly appreciated by the Ethiopians who found our doctors and teachers not only of high quality but dedicated and hard working. In the process they earned us lot of goodwill. One often came across the comment by Ethiopians that India was the founder of their modern system of education. Our teachers were assigned to even insurgency hit areas like Eritrea and Tigray since they had a reputation for just doing their work without dabbling in local politics. The Ethiopians trusted and respected them which could not be said of all foreigners. Besides Addis Ababa which

had a sizeable Indian community, even two Indian schools, Indians were to be found in virtually all parts of the country. Even on the military side, Ethiopia's only military training academy in Harar was set up and run by India in the 1950s with Gen. Rawley as its first Commandant.

Altogether I thoroughly enjoyed my Ethiopian assignment. It was highly satisfying in many ways. Indeed, I have often maintained that for a member of the Indian Foreign Service not to serve in Africa even once is indeed a loss. It is a fascinating region of the world, with a good Indian presence in most countries and a scope for doing a lot by way of promoting our interests and earning goodwill.

INTERVIEWER: How genuinely Marxist was the Ethiopian Revolution? How sincerely were the Ethiopians committed to the Marxist-Leninist ideology?

AMBASSADOR: One quite clearly got the impression that the ideological commitment of the Ethiopian leadership those days was more of a lip service than a sincere inclination. I doubt if any of the top leaders, Chairman Col. Mengistu included, had even studied Marx or Lenin. Circumstances of those days had pushed them into the arms of the Soviet Union following the military revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy. Till then Ethiopia was quite close to the US. The Cold War was on, so was the long war in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia and Somalia over the disputed Ogaden region. Somalia's naval base at Berbera was a much sought after naval facility. Once Somalia obliged the US in this respect, Washington conveniently threw its weight behind Somalia in the ongoing Ogaden conflict. The Americans reportedly choked off the supply of arms and ammunition to Ethiopia, even for items they had already been paid for. Ethiopia was left in a lurch with Somali troops almost advancing up to the highlands. That is when the Ethiopians turned to Moscow. The Russians were only too willing to oblige with arms etc, including in the initial stages a sizeable contingent of Cuban troops. The tide of war changed in Ethiopia's favour but Moscow had succeeded in carving out a place for itself in this strategically located country. When the Russians came in full force they naturally brought the communist ideology in their baggage.

But as I said earlier, the Ethiopian ideological commitment was more out of sheer necessity than anything else. In their day to day functioning they were more nationalists and pragmatists. Despite Moscow's urgings, at times even some pressure, the Ethiopian military regime never got down to things like demolishing or desecrating their churches, or putting up busts or statues of Marx or Lenin all over. They continued to accept, even respect, the religious feelings of their population—mostly the Coptic Church in the highlands and

Islam in the lowlands. Even at their national day parade (September 12) alongside the portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin one could see a fair sprinkling of religious symbols like crosses. They never nationalised retail trade in the country. Being the home of coffee and coffee exports accounting for 75% of their meagre foreign exchange earnings they never nationalised their coffee trade. An Indian by the name of Mr. Kothari was commonly called the Coffee King of Ethiopia. He never suffered. On the contrary he was told by the military rulers to carry on business as usual as long as the country was earning well from coffee exports. They were pragmatic enough to realise that they knew little or nothing of the world coffee market. So it was best to leave this vital export item to the experience and expertise of a person like Mr. Kothari, so much for how deep their roots were embedded in Communist ideology. National interest was clearly more relevant and important than ideology.

INTERVIEWER: The then ruler of Ethiopia, Col. Mengistu, was very well disposed towards India. If I recall right, he had undergone a course at our National Defence College.

AMBASSADOR: You are right in the sense that Chairman Mengistu had a positive attitude towards India and Indians. This came out in my very first conversation with him that followed my presenting my credentials to him within about a week of my reaching Addis Ababa at the end of November, 1980 directly from Moscow as desired by the Ministry since the post was already lying vacant for about two months. In his welcoming remarks Mengistu expressed warm feelings towards India, happily recalled his Indian teachers from his school days and the Indian instructors when he was at their Military Academy in Harar. But a slight correction, he had never till then been to India or to our National Defence College. But he had happy memories of his Indian teachers and instructors. He even recalled one of his Indian school teachers, who was still in Ethiopia and who, as he put it, occasionally played chess with him whenever his busy schedule allowed him some leisure time.

INTERVIEWER: I recall that I had accompanied the then Additional Secretary, Dr. J.S.Teja, to Addis Ababa for consultations with the Ethiopian government in the run up to the 7th Non-Aligned Summit. You had taken us to an audience with Chairman Mengistu. It was heart warming to listen to his positive memories of his links with India.

AMBASSADOR: Yes I do indeed recall that visit of yours with Dr.Teja with whom my association went back to my first posting days in Moscow where he was then one of the First Secretaries in the Embassy. It was indeed a

warm meeting with Chairman Mengistu who was particularly appreciative of how India had, at very short notice, agreed to host the 7th NAM Summit. As you will recall, it was really the turn of Iraq to host this Summit in Baghdad. But due to the ongoing Iran-Iraq War, both members of NAM, there was a growing feeling among the NAM members that, under the circumstances, Baghdad would not be an appropriate venue. Some member countries had even expressed their reluctance to attend if the venue remained Baghdad. That is when India was persuaded by several member countries to instead host the 7th NAM Summit. Ethiopia was one of them and they were happy and relieved when India agreed. The notice was indeed short but we did it and that too smoothly and efficiently much to the admiration of many. Indira Gandhi was then our Prime Minister.

It was for this Summit in New Delhi that Chairman Mengistu, accompanied by his Foreign Minister, visited India for the first time. Despite our understandable reluctance to take on any bilateral engagements or programmes, some exception was made for Ethiopia and apart from a separate meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi a separate schedule was also arranged for the Ethiopians in Bombay (now Mumbai) since it was on their route back home. I had to work extra hard to ensure all this and was happy when our people concerned in Delhi agreed to go along with my suggestions. Both Mengistu and his Foreign Minister came back very happy from their visit to India and the special attention they had received. When I called on the Foreign Minister to get their impressions he was most thankful for all that we had done. When asked about his and Chairman Mengistu's impression of India after their first visit there, I still recall how the Ethiopian Foreign Minister summed up their impression. As he put it, having now had a first hand experience of India, however brief, and having seen some of your achievements, how can India still call itself only a developing country? What you have already achieved and the level of growth that we saw with our own eyes, if Ethiopia could attain that level in even hundred years, it would be for us a dream come true. I was naturally very happy to hear this and thanked the Foreign Minister for his observation.

JOINT SECRETARY (EAST ASIA): 1983-85.

INTERVIEWER: This was the period of somewhat frozen relations with China. How were your initial meetings with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi? Did he come to the chair with any definite perception about his government's approach to repairing relations with China?

AMBASSADOR: I was JS (EA) from July, 1983 till December, 1984. I was very happy with this charge. The East Asia division in the Ministry with

responsibility for handling relations with China, Japan, the two Koreas, Mongolia, Hong Kong and informally Taiwan was considered to be one of the important political desks in the Ministry and, therefore, sought after. How I got this important charge bears some recalling. I was Ambassador in Ethiopia since November 1980 so that when we stepped into 1983 I was technically entering the transfer zone, going by our normal three year posting pattern. Sometime in February 1983 I received a formal communication from the Ministry stating that since I would be due for transfer during 1983 if I had any preferences or pressing personal factors I should let the Ministry know so that, at best, they could at least be taken into consideration before a final decision was arrived at. I was quite impressed with this thoughtful approach on the part of the Ministry, a pattern I believe introduced by the then Foreign Secretary, M.K.Rasgotra. By then I had already been abroad for eight years since 1975, Hamburg, Bonn, Moscow and now Ethiopia, and was mentally all set to do a spell at Headquarters and that too at the Joint Secretary level, fully appreciating the importance of serving in the Ministry at that level from one's career point of view. So my prompt reply to this communication was that I would very much like a Headquarters posting. A few weeks later my formal transfer orders came asking me to join the Ministry by early July, 1983 and that I would be taking over as JS(EA). The last bit was somewhat surprising to me and even to my colleagues in the Embassy since the Ministry was not normally known for such advance planning. For the time being at least I was happy that I was going to get an important political charge like East Asia. To cut the long story short, I was back in Delhi in early July 1983 on transfer from Addis Ababa and, within hours of landing at Delhi (no leave or even joining time) took over as Joint Secretary (East Asia). My predecessor, Ranjit Sethi, was to proceed immediately to Malaysia as High Commissioner.

Here, I would like to mention that I was very likely the first JS (EA) who knew not a word of Mandarin nor had he ever done a posting to China. The closest had been my two years in Hong Kong (1967-69) and the double charge I had held from 1972 to 75 as Deputy Secretary (IC&EA). May be the Ministry wanted someone as Joint Secretary to have a fresh look at our relations with China without any baggage of the past. Whatever the rationale of the Ministry, I took to this challenging and interesting assignment with considerable enthusiasm.

But I soon discovered that there was an old style school of thought in the Ministry as regards our dealing with China. The then Historical Division of the Ministry and its Director, G.N.Rao, was no doubt very well informed on our boundary dispute with China and knew the detailed maps inside out. But his approach was basically technical for which perhaps one could not

blame him. But since I was increasingly inclined towards a practical approach, at times I would be a little impatient with him. Presiding over our China policy those days was G. Parthasarthy. He was a senior foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had the designation of Chairman Policy Planning and had been given the rank of Minister of State with an impressive office in the South Block. Whenever, there was any discussion on China, everyone ultimately turned to G. Parthasarthy or GP, for the oracle to speak. I do not think even the then Minister of External Affairs, P.V.Narasimha Rao, could ignore GP because of his known proximity to the Prime Minister and indeed to the Nehru family going back to the days of Jawaharlal Nehru.

I do not think my initial encounter with GP was particularly happy. Those days we had started official level talks with the Chinese. These periodic rounds rotated between New Delhi and Beijing. After a few weeks of my taking over as JS (EA) we were due to go to Beijing for the next round. As JS (EA) I was to head the boundary group at these talks. There were other groups like culture, trade and so on, each headed by a Joint Secretary level officer. But the heart of these talks was naturally the boundary group which I was to head. As relatively new to my job as JS (EA) I was working overtime preparing myself for this role. But, either the all powerful GP did not have enough faith in me, or he was playing games. More likely the latter, as later developments almost confirmed. Now, my immediate predecessor, Ranjit Sethi, was by all accounts GP's blue eyed boy. His mentor, GP, wanted to involve Ranjit Sethi in the upcoming round of official level talks with the Chinese even after Sethi having taken over as High Commissioner to Malaysia. All this was very much happening behind my back as nobody discussed it with me. In fact, the first time I learnt about it was when our then Ambassador to China, A.P. Venkateswaran, (an old and a dear friend of our Moscow days together) rang me to say how shocked he was on seeing the composition of our official delegation for the Beijing talks since it also included the name of Ranjit Sethi who was to join us from Malaysia. Obviously because of the time difference the Ambassador had seen his copy of the Ministry's telegram conveying the composition of our delegation earlier than I could see my copy after reaching the office. I was both shocked and distressed. After thanking our Ambassador for his concern, I immediately walked into GP's office and virtually confronted him. He tried to assuage my feelings and to convince me that as I was still relatively new to my job as JS (EA) it was felt that Ranjit Sethi's inclusion in the delegation would ensure a certain element of continuity in our dialogue with the Chinese. GP then made his concluding observation that this was the Prime Minister's decision that could not be easily changed.

I was naturally in a combative mood and begged to differ with GP on all the points made by him. I then pointed out that this would make a laughing stock of me as JS (EA) and that I would take it as a serious reflection on my capability. I also added that even the Chinese would find it most odd and treat me as a light weight in their future dealings with me as JS (EA). Further, that I would not let myself be thus demeaned in the eyes of the Chinese even if my own colleagues knew the truth. I then concluded by very categorically stating that if Ranjit Sethi was going then I would opt out of the delegation, if necessary by pretending to be sick and going on sick leave. In short, this was totally unacceptable to me, both professionally and personally. I think the penny finally dropped with GP realising that I was no push over. He relented and on the same day a chaser telegram went to our Ambassador in Beijing informing him that our delegation for the upcoming Beijing talks would be minus Ranjit Sethi. While our Ambassador complimented me, I do not think GP was one bit happy as I could sense from his coolness towards me, at least for a short while. Hopefully, in the long run he respected me for the principled and firm stand that I had taken on this issue.

But I had to continue to face this fossilised approach, so to say, in our handling of China. As regards GP, whenever I would press him for a brief on the boundary talks, his standard reply would be: "Just bat along". In practical terms it meant just keep talking reiterating our well known position and do not bother if there was no movement forward. Right or wrong, this attitude was alien to my result oriented approach and, therefore, quite frustrating. GP, at times, would even get emotional with the remark: "But they (the Chinese) killed her (Indira Gandhi's) father (Nehru)". The obvious reference was to the sad events of 1962 that had administered a shock to Nehru, a shock from which I think he never quite recovered till his demise in May 1964. Such a stance would often leave me wondering as to what was our China policy. Was it guided more by personal and emotional factors or by practical considerations and larger national interests?

Under pressures like these I decided to tap the Minister of External Affairs, P.V. Narasimha Rao. He, in my view, was a lot more down to earth and pragmatic. I recorded a note and sent it to him for his consideration, raising some fundamental questions about our China policy. The note came back to me a couple of days later, signed by the Minister but with no comments. Since this was not good enough for me I pressed for a meeting with the Minister to discuss the matter. The Minister agreed to see me but at his residence on a Sunday so that we could discuss without any disturbance. He treated me to excellent South Indian filtered coffee and we discussed my note at some length. The upshot was that he broadly agreed with my various

points but added that as yet unfortunately the political atmosphere was not ripe enough for us to proceed with some of my contentions. As he put it, the issues raised by me were very relevant but political constraints did not allow for an appreciable movement forward. I had no choice but to gracefully accept this position and thanked the Minister for his time and attention, just as he appreciated my concerns, indeed frustration. He even added: "Prem, basically you are right but perhaps a bit ahead of the times. Carry on with your good work. We need such fresh and forward looking thinking."

This takes me to the second part of your question about Rajiv Gandhi and his approach to China. Here I should clarify that soon after Rajiv Gandhi took over as Prime Minister I was made the Chief of Protocol so that I hardly saw him in action as JS (EA), more on this later. But the massive political mandate with which he came to the office of the Prime Minister did give rise to hopes of fresh initiatives, even some breakthrough, in our relations with China. The Congress Party with over four hundred seats in the Lok Sabha was politically very well equipped for breaking fresh ground and taking bold measures. Initially, I think, Rajiv Gandhi even showed signs of this, including during his visit to China. But this opportunity never did fructify and we had to be content with only some small steps forward in our relations with China. To be fair to ourselves, I think the blame has to be apportioned to China as well. Till today, despite considerable movement forward in various other fields, trade in particular, and lot of bonhomie whenever the top leaders of the two countries meet, I dare say the Chinese do not appear to be in any hurry to solve the boundary question with us. They have got what they wanted the most (Aksai Chin), we seem to show no inclination to get those areas vacated, even if (a big if) we have the military capacity to do so and the present continuing stalemate seems to suit the Chinese more. A sizeable part of our army is today pinned down along our northern boundary, financially it is a big drain, the Chinese substantial military presence in Tibet has to be there for keeping things under control and, finally, the Chinese are happily helping and encouraging Pakistan to keep up the pressure on us all along our western border. Altogether the pressure caused by this nefarious combination seems to be much more on us than on China. At least that is how I perceive it and this very likely explains why the border issue with China still remains unresolved. "TALI EK HATH SE NAHIN BAJTI". You cannot clap with just one hand.

However, even while JS (EA) I did witness some positive developments in our relations with China. During 1984 I was in China twice on official visits. The first time it was as a member of a trade delegation led by the then Commerce Secretary, Abid Hussein. The outcome was a formal Trade Agreement between India and China. It was possibly the first inter-

governmental agreement to be signed between the two countries since the 1954 accord on Tibet. Needless to say, much water had flown under the bridge since then. If today China has emerged as a very major trade partner of India one could trace back the foundation of this back to 1984 and the signing of this agreement. My second visit to Beijing in 1984 was for the periodic official level talks, including on the border. Natwar Singh, then Secretary (East) in the MEA, was the leader while as JS (EA), I headed the boundary group. As expected, there was no outcome of substance on the border, but some movement forward in areas like commerce and cultural exchanges.

But here I should add and clarify that as JS (EA) I handled relations with a few other important countries as well. With Japan our relations were doing fine. There was even the visit to India by the Japanese Prime Minister during this period. With the two Koreas, notably the South, our relations were developing satisfactorily. Even with Mongolia where we had already set up a resident mission, the highlight was the visit by our then Minister of State for External Affairs, Rahim, as one of the distinguished foreign guests on the Mongolian National Day in July. I accompanied the Minister. The visit was much appreciated by the Mongolians because very few Indian dignitaries visited that far off but friendly country. For me it was my third visit to Mongolia, the previous one being in 1966 from Moscow. Even my first visit, in July, 1965, was connected with the visit of our then Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Indira Gandhi. Possibly no Indian political dignitary had gone to Mongolia since then till Mr. Rahim's visit in 1984. So other than China, I had a considerable feeling of achievement in our relations with other countries that I covered as JS (EA).

CHIEF OF PROTOCOL (1985-86)

INTERVIEWER: You watched and worked with the freshly minted Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at close quarters. The office of Prime Minister fell in his lap in rather tragic circumstances. What are your memories of direct interaction with him?

AMBASSADOR: Here a little background would not be out of place. I was still JS (EA) and had just reached my office in the South Block that my Private Secretary mentioned to me that he had just heard the rumour that there had been an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was October 31, 1984. I immediately checked with some colleagues and, as the day progressed, the fog lifted till the formal announcement that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had succumbed to bullet injuries she had received earlier in the day at the hands of her assassins, her own body guards.

Everybody was stunned. The President, Giani Zail Singh, was out of the country on a State visit. From what I recall, only three senior Cabinet Ministers were in town, P.V. Narasimha Rao, External Affairs, Pranab Mukerji, Finance and Buta Singh, Home Affairs. Even Rajiv Gandhi, who held no office in government then, was, I think, in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and had to rush back. Suddenly, a wave of uncertainty hit us all as to what next. M.K.Rasgotra, the then Foreign Secretary, convened a meeting of all Joint Secretaries later in the afternoon. We were told to temporarily suspend our normal work and be available instead for emergency deployment. I was told to proceed to the Palam airport and take charge there of all arrangements connected with the expected arrival of a flood of foreign dignitaries for the State funeral of Indira Gandhi. Security was a major concern and, to make matters worse, anti-Sikh riots had broken out in Delhi. For the first time ever I went to the roof top of the South Block. There was a pall of smoke along the horizon from the different fires started by the rioters. Sitting in the office one could hear gun fire from the direction of Gurudwara Raqab Ganj. On cutting short his foreign tour when the President, Giani Zail Singh, soon after returning to Delhi rushed to AIIMS where Indira Gandhi's body still was, his motorcade was stoned by angry mobs. Buta Singh, the Home Minister, met with similar fate on his way to the airport and when I received him there he looked badly shaken. The VIP lounge had a bed room upstairs. I deposited him there so that he could calm down and rest. I worked out a coded signal with him and advised him to bolt the door from inside and to open it only if he recognized the coded signal that I had worked out with him. He readily agreed to comply.

As things progressed and the foreign VIPs started arriving for the State funeral, for most of the time we had no political dignitary on our side to receive them. The few senior Ministers at hand were closeted in emergency meetings. It was quite unusual, perhaps even somewhat funny, that for receiving most foreign Heads of State or Government invariably I was the senior most representative of the Government at the airport. Someone even sent me a newspaper cutting from one of the leading American newspapers carrying a photograph showing the US Secretary of State, George Schultz, being received on arrival by P.K Budhwar, Joint Secretary to the Government of India. It was only after the State funeral and once all the foreign dignitaries were gone, thankfully without any incident that life started limping back to normal. I was complimented by quite a few, including the Minister of External Affairs, for a job well done at the airport end during this period of crisis.

Here, to fast forward a little, when Rajiv Gandhi took over as Prime Minister he naturally came with his own style of functioning. The post of the Chief of

Protocol was falling vacant with the then incumbent Hamid Ansari (now our Vice-President) on the point of departure for Australia as High Commissioner. Romesh Bhandari had just taken over as Foreign Secretary. Rajiv Gandhi was settling down in his new office and a new team was being formed around him. In this scenario, one day Romesh Bhandari just walked into my office and said: “Prem, we have all observed how well you handled the airport arrangements recently. You are doing very well as JS (EA) but now please take over as Chief of Protocol. We have a young and a new Prime Minister and the Chief of Protocol is one officer in the Ministry who is required to interact a lot with the Prime Minister, besides of course the President. Please do not say no.”

This was totally unexpected for me and yet it did not take me long to realise that there was no getting out of it, even if I wanted to. I was enjoying my work as JS (EA). I was by now feeling well settled in that job. But C.O.P. it had to be now and I went along. To be frank, the perks that went with the job also influenced my decision. A bungalow in Lutyens Delhi next to Teen Murti and the Rashtrapati Bhawan, with a garden of over two and a half acres maintained by the CPWD, a committed staff car 24 hours a day with a chauffeur who lived on your compound that had three garages and eight outhouses. As I told my wife, in terms of government accommodation and perks on a home posting this was possibly the highest and the best that one could expect. She agreed and we moved from our second floor DI flat on Satya Marg to our Bungalow No. 11 on Wellington Crescent (now Mother Teresa Marg).

Rajiv Gandhi took over as Prime Minister amidst considerable excitement, high hopes and expectations. Riding on the crest of a sympathy wave in the aftermath of his mother, Indira Gandhi’s assassination, he had won the general election with a massive mandate. The Congress Party had won over 400 seats in the Lok Sabha. Even his grandfather, Nehru, never touched that high a figure despite his popularity and a very feeble opposition those days. Rajiv Gandhi was young, possibly the youngest head of government in the world at that point of time. He had a charisma and a presence that impressed. He spoke well and was full of ideas and drive. He wanted changes, fast and for the better, as perceived by him. On a higher political plane, his address at the Bombay AICC Conference had given a clear indication of this. He had come with a new style of functioning. Soon he was surrounded by a new set of close aides and advisers, a much younger lot, roughly his own age group, who constantly suggested changes and new things to him. Being close to him their influence was correspondingly high. These people, as they gradually attracted the attention of our media were what came to be called “the Baba Log”. His Personal Secretary, V. George,

was soon to become a power centre in his own right, what R.K. Dhawan was during Indira Gandhi's time.

I took over as Chief of Protocol in this atmosphere and under these circumstances. Protocol work otherwise by then was like a well-oiled machinery with well-set patterns and practices that had been there since the times of Nehru and Indira Gandhi and they worked fine, but Rajiv Gandhi and some of his young advisers wanted changes and fast and I had to bear the brunt of all this. My office (Room No.149) in South Block was just a few meters away from the Prime Minister's office and I would be sent for by him several times during the day. Rajiv Gandhi wanted his say in many Protocol details—the guest lists at State banquets, the type of menu, the seating plan, the format and size of the programme booklet that was prepared for visiting dignitaries, the nature of gifts for foreign dignitaries on his official visits abroad, the décor of the rooms or venues earmarked for important meetings, to name a few aspects of protocol work and arrangements. Earlier, as I learnt from old hands in the Protocol Division, the Prime Minister hardly ever bothered about such details and things were mostly left to the Chief of Protocol who generally kept the Prime Minister and his office in the picture. It was the same in the case of the President who generally took it easy in all such matters, leaving it to his Secretary and, even more, his Military Secretary to coordinate with the Chief of Protocol. With Giani Zail Singh in the Rashtrapati Bhawan this is what I continued to face and things moved smoothly. I had an excellent equation with his Military Secretary, AVM Naidu. But in the case of the Prime Minister I had no such opposite number. I could and often did consult PM's Principal Secretary, Sarla Grewal, and his Private Secretary, V. George, but seldom got a final decision out of them. Consequently things like guest lists at State banquets and even menus would often be stuck for finalisation till the last minute awaiting PM's nod of approval and then the Chief of Protocol would be expected to perform miracles at the last minute. All this, quite needlessly, added to the COP's pressure of work and yet no appreciation when miracles were performed but prompt criticism even if there was a minor lapse. That I soon realised was the tragedy of Protocol work. If things worked fine nobody even noticed, much less appreciate. But one small lapse, invariably for reasons beyond your control, and there would be any number of people out to criticise or run you down. I would sometimes wonder if the PM should even be bothering about such minor details, instead of focussing on larger and much more important issues facing the country. It was a question of priorities, if I may say so.

I will give just one example to illustrate my point. Over the years the detailed programme booklet prepared by Protocol for visiting dignitaries had been of

a certain size, small enough for it to go into the side outer pocket of a jacket. One day Rajiv Gandhi sent for me and had this to say: "Budhwarji (that is how he used to call me) I feel the size of this booklet needs to be very much reduced. It is too big and should be small enough to go into the outer top pocket of a jacket". I said, fine Sir, I will get the needful done and report back to you. I then immediately asked our printer to come over and do the needful. Within a day or so I went back to Rajiv Gandhi with the miniaturised booklet. He tried slipping it into his top outer pocket. It went in but with a slight effort, turning to me he said, why not make it a little smaller? This was my reply: "Sir, I will get it done but I would like to submit something. In the process of making the booklet so small, already the size of the print has become so small that we will perhaps have to supply a magnifying glass along with it so as to make it readable. As it is, I added, most visiting dignitaries are in an age group where they need reading glasses. Further reducing the size of the booklet would only make things more difficult for them. Besides, I went on, visiting dignitaries at that level hardly ever need to consult or read these booklets. They have their personal staff to do so. Finally, I added, Sir you are easily the youngest head of government in the world today. Most of your counterparts are much older. So, kindly keep that in mind too". I thought I was giving sincere, honest and practical advice. But I did not get the impression that my frankness went down well with Rajiv Gandhi. He concluded our brief meeting with the curt remark: "Alright, do as you like." Possibly, he was already developing a mind-set where a "No" to a suggestion coming from him was just not the done thing, certainly not coming from a mere Joint Secretary. And, blind "Ji Hazoori" is alien to my nature.

I could give several more examples of such small happenings in my dealings with Rajiv Gandhi which, I think, were gradually developing into irritants. One of his official foreign tours took him to Egypt, France and the USA. In France and the USA the Protocol programme booklets, in size the same as we had earlier and not miniatures, were leather bound with gold lettering on the cover. This obviously impressed him and he brought back with him a copy each. Again the summons to his office and this time I was told to reproduce this pattern for our booklets, leather bound with gold lettering on the cover. Assuring that I would do my best I immediately sent for our printer and also the one recommended by Rajiv Gandhi himself since he had been handling his personal stationery for a few years. Both the printers gave almost a similar reply. Leather binding could be done provided the finalised schedule and all relevant details were given to them a week in advance and with no subsequent changes. This I realised was a near impossibility given the way we functioned with things getting finalised only at the last minute. On one occasion, I recall, three names from the media party accompanying

our PM on a trip abroad, were changed as I was on my way to the airport for the send-off to the PM. Further, both these printers told me that our gold printing on the cover would not be sharp like the French or the US samples, but a little smudged as we still did not have the necessary wherewithal in India. I promptly reported my findings to Rajiv Gandhi. The idea was dropped but he did not look like a happy man.

Slowly I started wondering if such small little details really merited the time and attention of a Prime Minister when he should really be focussed on much larger and more important issues facing the country. Professionally I was increasingly feeling put off. All this was hardly giving me the job satisfaction that I was seeking. I had not joined the Foreign Service to be running a service department, so to say, with constant near harassment from different quarters and with little or no appreciation, even when things were done to near perfection.

It was against such an emerging background that about a year later, I think it was January 1986, that the same Romesh Bhandari, still the Foreign Secretary, once again walked into my office but this time to tell me that the PM wanted the Chief of Protocol to be changed immediately. He then tried to soften the blow by letting me know that “fortunately”, as he put it, the PM had agreed to my being posted out as our Ambassador to the GDR (German Democratic Republic or East Germany). Since the necessary formalities would take some time, I could go on leave, I was further told.

Even though my sixth sense had been telling me that such a thing was coming, it was a shock nevertheless. To be removed from a post at the behest of the Prime Minister is not something one takes lightly. I had lot of sympathy from many colleagues but none stood up for me nor did I expect that. My career chart had been progressing very smoothly so far which made accepting this set back all the more difficult. Frankly, I felt quite bitter and saddened but there was no way out but to accept the inevitable. I felt I had been victim to the style of functioning of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister. By then even the media had, from time to time, started adversely commenting on it. Even on my being abruptly removed as Chief of Protocol one of our leading English language dailies offered a negative observation on my removal in one of its centre page commentaries. But all this was of little or no comfort to me. As far as I was concerned the damage had been done. Within twenty four hours I handed over charge to Salman Haider (later Foreign Secretary but who too barely lasted a year as COP), went on leave, later had my consultations, went on the entitled Bharat Darshan and reached Berlin by the end of March, 1986 to take up my assignment as Ambassador to the GDR. All this helped, to an extent at least, to put the sad

chapter of serving as COP behind me. Prior to leaving for Berlin when I paid my courtesy call on President Giani Zail Singh, significantly he remarked that he was sorry to see me go since he was happy with my performance as COP. He then added that he was not even consulted over this change which was wrong since a Chief of Protocol served the President too, in fact more than the Prime Minister. The worsening relationship between Giani Zail Singh and Rajiv Gandhi was by then an open secret. Gianiji was obviously giving vent to his feelings when he thus spoke to me.

INTERVIEWER: Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had come to Geneva in 1985 to address the WHO. He had come across as a man with a mission and exuded sincerity of purpose. Sonia Gandhi had come across as a rather aloof and reserved person. What was your assessment of their personalities?

AMBASSADOR: I think, to begin with, even Rajiv Gandhi was a reluctant politician. From what one generally heard he was quite a private person, happy with his own circle of friends, enjoying being an airline pilot, very much a family man. His younger brother, Sanjay Gandhi, was apparently more cut out for politics. In fact, he was already delving quite actively in them till his life was tragically cut short in an air accident. I personally think if Sanjay had lived longer, the political mantle would have fallen on him. But his premature death changed it all and Indira Gandhi's focus shifted on Rajiv as regards active involvement in the hurly burly of politics. Even then perhaps he was reluctant or at least not so enthusiastic. But his mother's tragic end on October 31, 1984 suddenly changed the scene. Rajiv was left with no choice but to actively take over the political role and leadership of the Congress Party if the Nehru- Gandhi political tradition was to continue. One hears that even Sonia Gandhi was not happy over his active entry into politics but events and the way things unfolded in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination left him with no choice but to be in the centre of things.

You are right and I agree that in the early stages at least Rajiv did give the impression of being a man with a mission and sincerely desiring change and for the better. Both the country and the Congress Party were beset with problems. Here was a young dynamic leader with a massive popular mandate and who wanted to bring about changes, even drastic. But, I think, that is when things slowly started going wrong. Politics is a complex game. There are several pockets of influence, even power. There are deeply entrenched vested interests. However well meaning and sincere you may be, long established things are not easy to sweep away and change overnight. It is not without reason that it is said that politics is the art of compromise. Sooner or later you have to accept certain realities, however unpalatable

they might seem. Rajiv was a young man in a hurry to bring about changes and that is when complications started raising their head. Even his choice of advisers and those who surrounded him perhaps was not so happy, at least in the early stages. He just wanted things to go his way, even when it was unrealistic. In a sense, and of course in a very small way, I think even I fell a victim to his initial style of functioning. His close advisers only egged him on. The voice of experience, reason, maturity and restraint was at a discount and sycophancy at a premium. I think his close aides and advisers did him a disservice in the long run. If his life had not ended prematurely and the way it did, he possibly would have changed in style and functioning and done a lot of good. I would be inclined to give him the benefit of doubt.

As regards Sonia Gandhi, I hardly came into direct contact with her. I think your observation of her being aloof and reserved is relevant to those days and, therefore, correct. Though she was by Rajiv's side most of the time he was the one who stole the limelight. She essentially came through as a smart and well attired companion. But she fitted well in that role and together they made a handsome and attractive couple. The only time she opened up somewhat, not to me but to my wife, was a few years later and under unusual circumstances. This is how it happened.

I was doing my third posting in Moscow, this time as Deputy Chief of Mission. T.N.Kaul was the Ambassador and Gorbachev still in full control. Rajiv had already been to Moscow a few times as Prime Minister. The general impression was that he had clicked with Gorbachev and the two had developed a special equation. But the encounter I am going to recall relates to the time when Rajiv Gandhi had already lost the general election and was no longer the Prime Minister, but only leader of his Party. In the aftermath of the first Iraq war Rajiv had set out on a global diplomatic mission of his own in order to project himself as a world statesman. This is what brought him to Moscow with Sonia Gandhi accompanying him. For old time's sake Gorbachev had agreed to meet him. The venue of the meeting was one of the villas on the Lenin Hills of Moscow and present at this meeting were Gorbachev, his interpreter, Rajiv Gandhi, Ambassador Kaul and myself. The meeting lasted over an hour. My wife had accompanied me and she kept company to Sonia Gandhi in an adjoining room. Over tea and light snacks the two had all the time in the world to chat. There was no choice. Later I asked my wife as to what she thought of Sonia Gandhi and this is how she summed up her impression. As my wife put it, Sonia Gandhi came through as a quiet and modest person, well informed and intelligent, but essentially a private person who very much valued her family life above all else, very fond of her husband, devoted to her two children, but also concerned about their safety and wellbeing. She had not quite got over how her mother-in-

law, Indira Gandhi, had met with her tragic end. How correct her premonition was regretfully proved right not much later when her husband, Rajiv, himself fell victim to the designs of extremists while electioneering in South India on May 21, 1991.

INTERVIEWER: There were rumours of a tiff between you and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Foreign Secretary had apparently backed you fully. Would you like to share that episode with us?

AMBASSADOR: The rumour I can straight away confirm as correct. As already mentioned in quite some detail, in reply to an earlier question, Rajiv Gandhi was not happy with my style of functioning as Chief of Protocol. I would not exactly call it a tiff. As a mere Joint Secretary I could not afford a tiff with the Prime Minister of the country. It was a one sided match. It was his privilege to express his unhappiness or even annoyance and my misfortune to listen quietly or, at best, try and explain things as frankly but politely as possible. It is a different matter that whenever I tried to explain things or reason out something, it only irritated Rajiv Gandhi more. Till, as already mentioned, I was abruptly changed as Chief of Protocol. It was Romesh Bhandari as Foreign Secretary who had pushed me into this post and it was Romesh Bhandari again who broke the ugly news to me that PM wanted me to be replaced immediately. Whether Romesh Bhandari tried to reason it out with Rajiv Gandhi I have no idea and, frankly speaking, I very much doubt it. I was then reminded of the good old saying: When you laugh the whole world laughs with you. But when you cry, you cry alone. I did not perhaps even expect anyone to stand up for me. The only exception that I would like to mention in this context would be my senior colleague and dear friend A.P.Venkateswaran, an old friend and a person much admired by me over the years. Only he had the courage to stand up for me on one occasion at the Delhi airport when Rajiv Gandhi flared up due to some confusion caused entirely by the security people but for which I was sought to be unfairly blamed. A.P. Venkateswaran was then one of the Secretaries in the Ministry. I do not think Rajiv Gandhi was particularly appreciative of his style, frankness and openness. He did become Foreign Secretary later on but only for a short while. We all know how Rajiv Gandhi most unceremoniously did this and how Venkat took it by quitting as Foreign Secretary. This was the first time ever that a Foreign Secretary had been so ill treated by the Prime Minister. It was a very sad moment in the history of the IFS but I do not think Rajiv Gandhi won any laurels for behaving as he did on this occasion. If anything, there was widespread praise and admiration for A.P. Venkateswaran and the courage he had shown in resigning as Foreign Secretary. This was even reflected in a unanimous resolution passed at an emergency meeting of the IFS Association. I do not

think Rajiv Gandhi felt happy over this resolution. But what could he do. You cannot punish an entire Service for a principled stand taken by it. I, as a member of the IFS felt proud, even somewhat vindicated because of my own experience at the hands of Rajiv Gandhi.

AMBASSADOR TO EAST GERMANY (GDR): 1986-87.

INTERVIEWER: What is your assessment of Honecker?

AMBASSADOR: When I reached East Germany (GDR) in March, 1986 Honecker was King. He was God. His official designation, Chairman, inspired awe. He appeared to be in full control as did the Communists indeed. In fact, the GDR was held up as a success story in the Communist Block. Both in terms of GDP growth and per capita income they were the front runners. I travelled extensively within East Germany and one saw prosperity, at least as compared to the other Communist countries, including the USSR. The GDR had a competent military machine, considerably bolstered by the Soviet presence in the country. In the Warsaw Pact, East Germany was a front line State, bordering as it was on West Germany. This was so for an obvious reason. In case of outbreak of hostilities between the West and the East, the first blow would have been taken by East Germany or administered by it. Geographically the East Germans represented the heartland of Prussia and its historic reputation for hard work and discipline. The East Germans were encouraged to believe in their traditional Prussian values and look almost disdainfully on the West Germans, notably the West Berliners, as the decadent merchant class. This impression was sought to be strengthened by the fact that most of what a united Berlin once stood for—the Von Humboldt University, the Museums, the Reichstag, the famous avenue Unter den Linden were in East Berlin. Even the landmark Brandenburg Gate with beautifully sculptured horses on top was best seen from the East Berlin side since the horses faced this way. For diplomats based in East Berlin it was a unique situation. They benefitted from the discipline, the sense of security and stable (even subsidised) price structure ensured by the Communist system and yet had, literally next door, the luxuries and attractions of a Capitalist system in West Berlin. From our residence in East Berlin, the nearest crossing point was in the French sector, barely a kilometre away. For us diplomats in the GDR, going to West Berlin was like briefly stopping at a traffic red light. You just showed your diplomatic identity card and the guards would waive you through. It was a common saying those days that a posting to East Berlin was for a diplomat like having the best of both the worlds.

But it was also quite clear that the stability and strength of the Communist regime in East Germany was very crucially dependent on Soviet support and backing. Soviet presence in East Germany was crucial. The Soviet Ambassador in East Berlin was a very important and influential person. In the diplomatic corps he was often called the Soviet Viceroy to East Germany. He had easy and direct access to the top East German political leadership, Chairman Honecker very much included. The Soviet Union maintained a huge Embassy in East Berlin.

But as subsequent events were to show, the strength and stability of the East German leadership was heavily dependent upon Moscow's support. Gorbachev's "perestroika" and "glasnost" undermined all this, including the Communist system and its institutions in the USSR. Once this happened everything crumbled, first the Berlin wall and then the entire system behind it. I was by then already gone from East Berlin. But it was a sad sight to see the same Honecker and his close colleagues running for their lives and ultimately just withering away. The pace at which things moved surprised many, including I think the West Germans. When I was posted in West Germany in the 1970s (Hamburg and then Bonn), the concept of a reunited Germany was viewed more as a constitutional fiction than a one day reality. Bonn was termed the provisional Capital of West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany) more for reasons of political correctness than reality. A united Berlin once again emerging as the Capital of a reunited Germany hardly figured in any realistic calculation. Yet, history was to take a different course and the reality of present day Germany, one and united, was to emerge.

INTERVIEWER: When I was in Poland in the period 1979-82 I found the Poles to be reluctant Communists. The people as well as the United Workers Party were covertly waiting for the day to peacefully chuck "Socialism" and quit the Warsaw Pact. But the East Germans appeared to be staunch Communists—perhaps more Pope like than the Pope. What were the undercurrents of dissidence in the GDR at that time?

AMBASSADOR: You have made a relevant and interesting observation. But in reply to it I think I should delve into the background a bit and the scene as it emerged in the aftermath of World War II. Europe, both the East and the West, had suffered massive destruction and a colossal loss of human lives. Reconstruction and rehabilitation were top priorities. But the onset of Cold War between the West led by the USA and the Communist Block led by the USSR necessitated the diversion of precious and limited resources towards defence and the development of offensive military capacity. The frantic arms race that we are so familiar with was the result.

Now, in my view, Western Europe was better placed for economic recovery and reconstruction for a variety of reasons. Even before the War it had better economic capacity compared to the East. Major West European countries like Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Spain had an advanced industrial base. Additionally, helping their recovery was the US Marshall Plan which played an important role in post-war recovery. As opposed to all this, Eastern Europe under Communism was not so fortunately placed. Its principal, rather the only, source of relief and help was the Soviet Union which itself, unlike the USA, had suffered massive destruction. Its victory in World War II had come at a very heavy price. Several of its major cities that lay in the path of the initial Nazi thrust were virtually flattened, suffering up to 85% destruction. In terms of human losses, some estimates put the number of casualties at twenty million. There was almost an imbalance in the sex ratio of the population with women outnumbering men. A substantial part of an entire generation, the younger lot, had been wiped out. Rebuilding on this basis was not easy but the Soviets did it, besides taking on the burdens imposed by the Cold War. The process of reconstruction was perhaps slow compared to that in the West but it was there nevertheless. The clash of the two ideologies, Capitalism versus Communism, that constantly fuelled the Cold War, was at its peak display in Europe. The divided Germany and even more the divided city of Berlin were the frontline entities in this Cold War scenario. In fact, the West very consciously and deliberately worked on making West Berlin (the American, British and French sectors) as a show piece of Capitalism as against East Berlin (the Soviet sector). West Berlin was sought to be made into an island of Capitalism in the midst of the Communist sea of East Germany. This was despite things like the Berlin blockade and the defiant Western air lift which I am sure you are familiar with. The West did succeed in all this and to a considerable extent. I first visited Berlin in 1964. West Berlin already looked rebuilt and impressed you with its bright lights, well stocked shops, hotels, restaurants, night clubs and what not. But East Berlin, despite some visible rebuilding, still was a sharp contrast to West Berlin. Some parts of East Berlin almost looked as though the war had just ended. This was perhaps the early beginning of Capitalism scoring over Communism, at least in the context of West Germany versus East Germany and West Berlin versus East Berlin. Despite the efforts being made by the Communist regime, with whatever assistance the Soviet Union could afford, to many in East Berlin and East Germany the grass was already beginning to look much greener on the other side of the fence. Those were the days when many from the East fled to the West despite the risks involved till the notorious Berlin wall was constructed which stemmed these defections considerably, though not managing to stop them completely.

By the time I reached East Berlin to take up my assignment in 1986, the scene had changed considerably and for the better. East Germany had been rebuilt and in some respects at least it could hold candle to the West. But the relative lack of freedom was still pinching the man in the street, who was constantly exposed to Western propaganda, despite many restrictive measures adopted by the Communist regime in East Germany. But the biggest factor going in favour of this regime was the Soviet support and backup. Once this factor was withdrawn the Communist regime like the Berlin wall just collapsed and the rest is history. Hardly anyone expected this, certainly not the speed with which things moved. I will be honest, when I left East Germany in May, 1987 for Moscow to take up my assignment there, I never thought that was the last of East Germany or of Erich Honecker and his team that I was seeing. Possibly even the West Germans were somewhat surprised over the rapidity with which the scene changed with the emergence of a re-united Germany with a re-united Berlin as its Capital.

But all this came at a price. The financial burden of this re-union of the two Germanys did strain the West German economy, however strong, so as to cause resentment amongst many West Germans. Historical prejudices re-emerged. The affluent West almost looked down upon its poor cousins from the East. The Wessies versus the Ossies feeling raised its head. Some in East Germany perhaps even felt whether they had done the right thing by re-uniting with the West. It is amazing how even in a relatively small (compared to India) country like Germany local prejudices and divides raise their heads, if not predominate. Having served in different parts of what is now a united Germany I have personally been a witness to this phenomenon. The people of Hamburg thought they were much more cosmopolitan in outlook. When I moved from there to Bonn on transfer, some of my Hamburg friends almost sympathised with me for having now to live amongst “the rustic peasants of the Rhineland”. On my first visit to Munich, a beautiful and impressive city, my German friends in Bonn cautioned me to be careful while dealing with “the Bavarian crooks”. In Berlin the Germans were convinced that the best German was spoken in that city. And, the East Germans revelled in their pride as the true Prussians, disdainful of “the merchant class of the West”. Added to all this was the divide between the Protestants and Roman Catholics. No wonder, many foreigners view India as an incredible miracle with its unity amidst huge diversity, not withstanding its intra-national differences and prejudices.

Now coming to the Polish part of your question, I would be inclined to agree with your observation. The Poles were, I think, always reluctant

Communists and discarded this ideology given the first opportunity. You have lived and served in that country and would know and understand its people much better. I have only visited Poland a few times, spending a while in cities like Warsaw and Krakow. I think, historically the people of Poland have been suspicious of Russians, though they have not had too happy an experience with their neighbour to the West either, I mean Germany. Sandwiched between the two they have nevertheless preferred the West, notably the West that lies beyond Germany. Being not landlocked, unlike some of the East European countries, they have perhaps always felt encouraged to look beyond their borders and exercise the other options available to them.

In the scene following World War II, they were in the grip of Stalinist USSR, though not happily. I could perceive this as far back as 1964 on my first visit to Poland. Even with the language, when I tried my Russian with them, many almost chided me for not speaking to them in English, being from India.

Their feelings towards the Russians were not helped in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The startling revelation that the Red army during World War II, while advancing towards Nazi Germany, had massacred Polish POWs on the outskirts of Minsk understandably incensed the Poles. Till then this incident had been projected as the work of the retreating Nazi forces. My wife and I had even visited this war memorial in the winter of 1989 while on an official visit to Minsk and laid a wreath there. The truth was to come out years later, so much about how the people of Poland feel about the Russians.

I am sorry if I have burdened you with too many details in response to your question. But then I thought I should share my views and feelings openly and frankly with you.

DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION:(with the rank of Ambassador) USSR:1987-91.

INTERVIEWER: I have very warm memories of working with you during the period 1987-89. You worked with two Ambassadors, T.N.Kaul and Alfred Gonsalves---both were excellent diplomats, but very different in their personality, world view and approach to their colleagues in the Embassy. Would you like to offer any comments?

AMBASSADOR: A very loaded question indeed on which I have lot of comments to offer. But first of all let me say that I still have very happy memories of having you as one of my colleagues in Moscow for two years. I

think the close equation we developed during that period happily continues to last till today.

As regards my premature move from Berlin to Moscow, I think the circumstances and the background call for some explaining. After the sad manner in which I had been shifted from Delhi to Berlin, it took me a while to mentally reconcile to all this. After a few months in East Berlin, I was feeling quite well settled there. Ours was a small mission in East Germany (GDR) with normal work load. I was quite enjoying it with the attraction of West Berlin literally next door as an added bonus. As mentioned earlier, it felt like having the best of both the worlds.

In the midst of all this, one day I got a phone call from Ambassador T.N.Kaul from Moscow where he had joined as Ambassador for the second time after a gap of twenty years and while well into his retirement after a very successful career. After we had exchanged the usual pleasantries (I had very high regard for Ambassador Kaul and I think the feelings were mutual) he asked when was I planning to come to Moscow. I replied that I was quite happy in Berlin but would love to visit Moscow while he was there. He then added that he had more than that in mind and would be very happy to have me as a colleague there once again. I remained non-committal but also got a feeling that something was afoot.

The post of DCM in Moscow was shortly falling vacant. The then incumbent, C.V.Ranganathan, one of our very fine officers and a dear friend, was going to China as our Ambassador. It is interesting how, over the years, we had been sharing several commonalities. In 1976 I had succeeded him as Counsellor in Bonn. In 1983 he had succeeded me as Ambassador in Ethiopia. We had both served in Hong Kong though at different times and in different capacities. We had both, at different periods, served as JS (EA) at headquarters. With Ranganathan's imminent departure from Moscow on transfer, Ambassador Kaul was obviously scouting around for a suitable DCM.

By 1987 our overall relations with the Soviet Union were indeed on an upswing. Gorbachev in Moscow and Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi were firmly in the saddle and it was widely believed that the two leaders had developed a special chemistry. Relations with the Soviet Union were a corner stone of our foreign policy. There was almost hectic activity in all fields of this multifarious and fast growing relationship. From June, 1987 the year long Festival of India in the USSR was starting to be followed a year later by the Festival of the USSR in India. Both the opening and closing ceremonies of these two mega events were to be on a grand scale and at the highest levels

on both sides. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was to be in Moscow in early June 1987 for the opening of our Festival in the company of Gorbachev.

In the run up to these major events, Ambassador Kaul was a frequent visitor to Delhi for high level consultations. Almost every time, while on these visits, he would meet Rajiv Gandhi who used to address him as “Tikki Uncle”. During one of these meetings Ambassador Kaul brought up the question of who was to be the next Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow. Given his advanced age (already in his seventies) Ambassador Kaul told Rajiv Gandhi that in view of the upcoming pressure of work and responsibility in Moscow he must have as his No.2 (DCM) someone not only highly competent but in who he had complete faith and confidence. When asked by Rajiv Gandhi if he had anyone specifically in mind fitting the bill, Ambassador Kaul mentioned my name. I should clarify here that all this is based on what Ambassador Kaul himself told me and I have no reason to believe that he was pulling a fast one. Having worked closely with him over the years I think I can claim that confidently. Further, according to Ambassador Kaul, when he brought up my name Rajiv Gandhi did admit that he later felt that he had been somewhat unfair and hasty in judging me when I was the Chief of Protocol. Anyhow, to cut the long story short, with Ambassador Kaul wanting me in Moscow and Rajiv Gandhi readily agreeing, I think my fate had been decided.

In the midst of all these happenings, to which I was to be privy only later on, one day while sitting in my office in Berlin, I got a phone call from the Foreign Secretary, Sh. K.P.S.Menon (Jr). He had just taken over charge and being an epitome of politeness and courtesy he conveyed to me, rather defensively, that I was required to move from Berlin to Moscow. He then quickly added that I should not think that he had taken over as FS to take this decision only. As he put it, the matter had instead of moving from his level upwards the relevant note had just landed on his desk signed by the PM, endorsed by the EAM, requiring him to ensure that Sh. P.K.Budhwar was moved early from Berlin to Moscow. The Foreign Secretary then added from his side that in view of the circumstances under which I was thus being shifted to Moscow, professionally I would find the experience a lot more rewarding and satisfying than as Head of Mission in many other countries. Adding a personal note he then said: “Prem this should more than rehabilitate your reputation in the Service that suffered a setback due to the manner in which you had to hand over as COP.” The Foreign Secretary was considerate enough to follow up this conversation on the phone with a formal letter more or less along these lines. It was thus that I moved to Moscow from Berlin reaching there by train on May 07, 1987 to a very warm welcome from a very large number of officers from the Embassy

who had, along with their wives, come to Moscow's Minsk railway station to receive me and my wife. The Ranganathans were naturally there too and one felt very warmly welcomed to Moscow.

While in Moscow as DCM I had quite a few encounters with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The first one was within a few weeks of my joining at Moscow when he was there in early June, 1987 for the formal opening of the year long Festival of India in the USSR. I was naturally at the airport, along with Ambassador Kaul and others, to welcome him. When he shook hands with me the grip was firm and warm and a smile on his face along with the remark: "good to see you again". I suppose this was his way of expressing regrets over what I had experienced at his hands about a year and a half ago. I was realistic enough not even to expect a formal expression of regret from him. About a year and a half later, Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi, after a visit to France, were passing through Moscow with an overnight halt and a meeting with Gorbachev. Sonia Gandhi was presented with a big and a beautiful rubber plant as she left Paris. Immediately on reaching Moscow Sonia instructed that this plant should be sent to my wife with her greetings and best wishes. This was of course done straight away and this plant continued to adore the entrance hall of our residence in Moscow till our departure from there on transfer. It never failed to attract attention of our guests and its origin provided a good point for social conversation.

Working with Ambassador Kaul as DCM was a very pleasant, happy and a smooth experience that covered a better part of my Moscow assignment---the third since 1963. He truly left the running of the huge mission to me and made sure that I was fully involved in all major internal discussions be it political, economic, commercial, military, science and technology, consular, culture and information. I interacted closely with all senior visiting delegations from India and often led their major discussions with the Soviet side. Within the Embassy this naturally ensured a special status for me. Everyone realised that if quick decisions were required the person to go to was the DCM. They knew that even if they went directly to the Ambassador before a final view was taken he would invariably be consulting the DCM. Socially too things were the same. I was the President of the Embassy club, with Mr. Kaul as the Patron. Since Ambassador Kaul was without his spouse, my wife was the first lady of the Embassy. Even Moscow's huge diplomatic corps would often remark that India had two Ambassadors in Moscow. Since Ambassador Kaul hardly ever attended any diplomatic dinners, my wife and I represented India at most such occasions. My wife was the unanimous choice as President of Moscow's prestigious and very active International Women's Association which had on its membership the wives of all Ambassadors, the wives of senior foreign journalists in Moscow

and a few Soviet ladies from the world of art and culture. As the first lady of the Embassy she had launched five of our Naval ships thus being designated, in the naval tradition, as their “Mother”. We had a lovely residence with a nice garden and located in the heart of Moscow (No. 9, Vospolny Pereulok) and hardly a ten minute walk from the Kremlin. Adjoining our boundary wall was the residence of the Algerian Ambassador that was at one time the residence of Beria, the Head of the Soviet Secret Police during the Stalinist days. I enjoyed all the perks and privileges of a Head of Mission including a separate chauffeur driven car and all the gadgets etc within the entitlement of the residence of a Head of Mission. Even the Soviets were very correct when it came to accepting my status. Since the term Deputy Chief of Mission does not figure in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Immunities and Privileges, they designated me formally as “Minister Plenipotentiary with the rank of Ambassador”. In all formal communications and invitations to me they always used the title “His Excellency” before my name. Even when I left Moscow on transfer after four years the Soviet Foreign Ministry gave me exactly the same send off as was due to a departing Ambassador, a farewell lunch at the Foreign Ministry’s guest house at No. 17, Alexei Tolstoy Street hosted by the Deputy Foreign Minister in-charge of your region and a senior Protocol Officer to see you off at the VIP lounge of the International Airport. Finally, as a measure of Ambassador Kaul’s faith and trust in me was that in one particular year I was Charge de’ affaires a.i for nearly six months since he was away from Moscow off and on either on leave or consultations. During my four years as DCM in Moscow two Heads of Mission conferences were convened in Europe---one covering the whole of Europe (in Paris) and one only Eastern Europe (in Belgrade). Natwar Singh, the then Minister of State for External Affairs chaired both the conferences. As per instructions from our Ministry, I represented the Soviet Union at both these conferences. In short, I was made to feel, all but in name, as the Ambassador, within our own Embassy, the diplomatic corps, by the Soviets and our own Ministry of External Affairs. My special equation with Ambassador Kaul ensured that this pattern and arrangement worked most smoothly. I, in turn, made sure that he was always kept in the picture in respect of all major decisions and happenings. I had the benefit of consulting him and seeking his advice and guidance in all major matters. I never let him have the impression that I was ignoring him or his status and position just as he never curbed my style of functioning or made any attempt at belittling or downgrading me. Ours was a happy team of two and this was known to and noticed by all those who mattered around us.

But with Alfred Gonsalves as Ambassador, the scene changed, in fact, considerably. He no doubt had his qualities as a professional diplomat, but he was very different from Ambassador Kaul. He had his own attitude and

style of functioning. As the Ambassador he very much wanted to control and supervise everything happening in the mission. The ground was thus clearly laid for unpleasantness, if not a clash between us. I tried to let him have his due as Ambassador but there were limits to this. He very obviously did not appreciate the role I had been playing as DCM and started the process of clipping my wings, so to say. He would deliberately leave me out of some important discussions and decisions. Even socially I would often be left out of large receptions etc hosted by him for important visiting delegations. Others in the Embassy were naturally quick to notice the changing scenario and, frankly speaking, it would hurt my feelings. It was as though he was jealous of me and viewed me more as a rival than as a colleague. In fact, gradually things started getting almost unpleasant and word even reached the Ministry about the continuing tension between the Ambassador and the DCM in Moscow.

To illustrate this I may recall just two incidents. Because of the process started by me and fully endorsed by Ambassador Kaul, Dr. Madhu, a long time resident of Moscow, President of the Hindustani Samaj, a prolific writer, poet and translator (Russian to Hindi) had been awarded the Padma Shri. Since the ground work for all this preceded the arrival on the scene of Ambassador Gonsalves he expressed his unhappiness over this development. Just because Dr. Madhu was very close to me was enough to generate negative vibes towards him on the part of Ambassador Gonsalves. On his return from Delhi after being honoured with this award Dr. Madhu immediately visited me and I congratulated him profusely on this richly deserved honour. But Ambassador Gonsalves found it difficult to spare a few minutes to receive and congratulate Dr. Madhu. He understandably felt bad and so did I. It was, after all, the first time ever that a prominent long time Indian resident of Moscow was being thus recognised and honoured by the Government of India. A few days later I hosted a big reception at my residence in honour of Dr. Madhu. Just as he had been leaving me out, I also decided not to invite him to my reception. This was of course widely noticed and word also reached him about this function. The two of us were sadly on a collision course.

The second incident was of a different nature. Ambassador Gonsalves was away to India around our Republic Day in 1991. As Charge d' Affaires I was approached by a long standing Russian friend and contact in their leading and highly prestigious daily newspaper "Izvestia" for an interview on Indo-Soviet relations that was to be published on the eve of our National Day. It was a rare offer and a wonderful opportunity to reach out to millions of Soviet readers and I promptly agreed. The only condition I laid down was that my views should be published in full without any editing. The Soviet

side agreed and the interview appeared in full on the appointed day. I was the envy of many including in the diplomatic corps of Moscow for it was possibly the first time ever that "Izvestia" had extended this honour and opportunity to any diplomat. But, on his return from India Ambassador Gonsalves took it differently. Instead of complimenting me he nearly accused me of exceeding my role and brief. He sent the full interview, with its English translation, to the Foreign Secretary without telling me. The Foreign Secretary wrote to me for my comments which I promptly conveyed in writing and the matter ended there. But I got a glowing letter of compliments and praise from the then JS (XP), Aftab Seth, urging me to keep up the excellent work. All this was fine and very satisfying from my point of view, but as I could clearly perceive, it was not doing any good to my relations with Ambassador Gonsalves.

A month before my departure from Moscow on transfer in May, 1991 as Ambassador to Brazil, the Soviets conferred on me a rare honour: "The Order of Friendship of the USSR." To date only two Indian diplomats had thus been honoured by the Soviets, Ambassador K.P.S.Menon Sr and Ambassador T.N.Kaul. I had naturally sought the Ministry's permission which was promptly forthcoming. The Foreign Secretary kept Ambassador Gonsalves informed of these developments just as I had fully kept him in the picture. Thankfully, Ambassador Gonsalves showed the courtesy and grace of attending the public function at the House of Friendship where this honour was conferred on me. Possibly with my move from Moscow on transfer as Ambassador to Brazil already known and almost imminent, Ambassador Gonsalves was beginning to feel somewhat relaxed. Without finding fault either with him or myself, I think it was a mistake to keep the two of us together in one mission. We were two different persons in almost every respect with totally different styles of functioning. As the old saying goes, you cannot keep two swords in one sheath. I think even the Ministry realised this and the then Foreign Secretary, Muchkund Dubey, assured me that as soon as a suitable post was located for me I would be moved out of Moscow where, in any case, I had already gone far beyond the normal three year term. Since 1989 I had been promoted to Grade II (Additional Secretary) and my next posting had to be in keeping with my seniority. Ultimately it was Brazil that came to everyone's rescue.

Finally, on the day of my departure, as courtesy demanded, I called on Ambassador Gonsalves to take leave. The meeting took an unexpected turn. He expressed his unhappiness over the way things had been between us. I took the opportunity to explain my position and feelings. He then got up, warmly shook hands with me, put his arm around my shoulder and said: "Let us put all this behind us and part as friends." It was nice of him to say

this and I fully reciprocated. He then ordered drinks for the two of us, we clinked glasses, and enjoyed our drink in a relaxed atmosphere. I left Moscow the same evening, and, as fate ordained, I was never to see Ambassador Gonsalves again for sadly he did not live long after that. Of course, from Brazil I occasionally exchanged greetings with him. With his wife, Prabha, a very different, gentle and a helpful person, my wife and I still maintain contact.

INTERVIEWER: Those were the heady days of “Glasnost” and “Perestroika”. It was exciting to watch history unfold. How do you look back at that period?

AMBASSADOR: Professionally my period in Moscow as DCM was most exciting. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union was indeed being transformed beyond recognition. Old attitudes and styles were tumbling and it was as though a new country and society were being born. Gorbachev was the undisputed leader and proclaimed the world over, notably in the West, for his boldness and statesmanship. But, in hindsight, all this possibly proved to be his ultimate undoing. He, I think, overestimated the popularity of his reforms. They were much too swift and sweeping till long established and well entrenched vested interests in the country started getting resentful. Gradually, his popularity in the West exceeded that at home. He perhaps overestimated himself and paid dearly for it in the long run.

INTERVIEWER: The year-long Festival of India in the USSR in 1987-88 was a great organizational feat. In retrospect, was all that effort and expense justified?

AMBASSADOR: I could not agree more with the first part of your question. This year long cultural extravaganza was indeed an organizational feat. Almost every artist of repute in India headed for the USSR. This covered not just classical forms of music and dance but popular forms as well. The same was true of our film stars. Nearly twenty exhibitions were mounted by us. The spread of these events was colossal. Besides Moscow, I think nearly thirty towns and cities were covered, from the Baltic to Vladivostok and the northern regions to Central Asia. The organizational aspect apart, one often had to deal with some of our artists who were full of their sense of importance, displayed too much sensitivity and made too many demands. Ambassador Kaul had designated me as the overall in-charge but I was fortunate to have in Veena Sikri, Counsellor (Culture), an excellent officer who showed tremendous stamina and skill in handling things. The Soviet organizers also did their best, despite the occasional tantrums of some of our participants. My day in office would start with a

coordination meeting with various officers concerned. We would thus often work out our fire fighting drills, so to say. Of course, there was the plus side too. Personally, the exposure I myself got to the vast range and variety of Indian culture in different aspects I could not have got, even through a concerted effort, over a decade in India. And, what one had the privilege of enjoying was the very best from India.

But, ultimately I think we all started experiencing what may be called cultural fatigue, the feeling that a year was perhaps too long a period. In terms of human effort and even financial burden both sides were beginning to show signs of exhaustion. In view of the publicity and importance attached to our year long festival in the USSR (1987-88) and vice versa the year long festival of the USSR in India (1988-89) both sides felt committed and ultimately saw them through and successfully too. But there was a definite realisation and feeling all round that this was overdoing it. This is borne out by the fact that in later years we opted for such festivals lasting mostly a month only, at the most a quarter or three months. I think that has now become the widely favoured and accepted norm.

INTERVIEWER: During those days Moscow used to receive one Cabinet minister every week. As Deputy Chief of Mission all the responsibility of their arrangements, Protocol etc fell on your shoulders. Do you have any notable recollections?

AMBASSADOR: Well, one every week might be a bit of an exaggeration, but Moscow those days certainly got very heavy VIP traffic from India. It was considerably true in reverse too with a very large number of Soviet dignitaries and senior delegations going to India. Being at the centre of all this, my job and role were indeed very tough. The airport runs alone, took up lot of one's time. Ambassador Kaul had been sent to Moscow with the rank of a Cabinet Minister. He could thus conveniently keep the airport trips to the minimum. In fact, he did so only in the case of Head of State, Head of Government and the Foreign Minister coming from India or going there, with my still being there in any case even on such occasions. The rest, the main bulk, fell in my lap as the DCM. It would be a rare week end indeed when I would be free to spend some quality time with my family. Week days I am not even talking about. Whether it was the working hours or one's meal timings the pattern often was quite erratic. Only in the peak winter months, with Moscow's well known sub zero temperatures, did the traffic from India slow down somewhat. But then that was the period when most Soviet delegations would head for India, given our lovely weather in winter months, even in the Southern parts of the country.

Given the nature of the job and responsibility as DCM one had a surfeit of interaction and close encounters with our VIPs. In fact, post retirement when I took to writing quite seriously, my second book, "A Diplomat Reveals" essentially dealt with my close encounters with VIPs from India who one dealt with while serving abroad. Moscow was not only an important destination for them but also a difficult one. Many amongst them found it difficult to adjust to the Russian cuisine. Not knowing the language was another major problem, in fact, why only as DCM, throughout my three postings to Moscow, from Third Secretary to DCM, one got close to our visiting VIPs because of the prevailing conditions alone. Talking of notable incidents and a close up of their personalities, I am afraid they are too numerous to relate here. As just mentioned, they merited a separate book and that is what I ultimately ended up doing. If you have the time you might like to read this book of mine, namely; "A Diplomat Reveals". Interestingly, of the five books that I have written in the last ten years, this one alone has even been translated into another language, Tamil, and reportedly it is doing rather well in that version too. Do not ask me why.

INTERVIEWER: No analyst or observer could foresee the swift demise of the Soviet Union. Why did the seemingly impregnable citadel of Communism collapse without a real fight? Is it because the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) lost legitimacy to rule in its own eyes as well as in the eyes of the people? What was Gorbachev's own contribution in forcing the events? Was he a victim of Western adulation?

AMBASSADOR: I agree with your contention that the manner and the speed with which the Soviet Union, an acknowledged Super Power, disintegrated was totally unexpected. Anyone claiming that is either possessed of a prophetic vision or is telling a lie. But what could be seen as coming was changing attitudes on the part of Moscow in its dealings with other countries. More practical, more business like and the approaching end of special economic offers and possibly even the so called friendship prices and loans on defence deals. In one of my despatches to headquarters I had myself cautioned about it.

Gorbachev's rise to his position as the supreme leader by the mid-1980s was preceded by his long career in the Communist Party. He was very much a product of the CPSU. This gave him an insider's view of the problems facing the Party, almost the internal rot, one might say, the corruption, the favouritism, the nepotism, the craze for special privileges. The Party had considerably lost the respect of the common man. It was more feared than adored, more ridiculed than admired. On top of all this, there was near vacuum at the level of the top leadership. By the late 1970s Brezhnev was

already a sad sight. I was myself a witness to this during Prime Minister Morarji Desai's visit in June, 1979 when I was doing my second posting in Moscow as Minister (Economic). Brezhnev's speech was slurred, his hearing impaired, his face looked puffed, in short, he was very much the picture of a sick man. In the aftermath of his demise in 1982, the Soviet Union witnessed fairly rapid changes at the top when one old and sick dodder succeeded one after the other. They spent more time on hospital beds than in the Kremlin.

Gorbachev's rise to power was against this immediate background. I would give him credit for recognizing the growing rot in the system. There was widespread corruption. The economy was in a bad shape. Inefficiency and incompetence were rampant. The Party and the armed forces were in poor health. The country was being slowly bled in Afghanistan, a misadventure dating back to the Brezhnev era. Spurred on by the Cold War rivalry with the West the Soviet Union had spread out its economic and military commitments in different parts of the world to an extent that the burden was now hurting and proving to be too much. The continuing arms race only added to their woes. The handling of the nation's economy left much to be desired. The proud claims of zero inflation, full employment, free this and free that were beginning to hurt and proving to be unrealistic aspirations and goals. An economy based on heavy subsidies was fast looking to be a wrong approach.

In the midst of all this, Gorbachev's twin battle-cry of "Glasnost" (openness) and "Perestroika" (restructuring) came like a breath of fresh air to the common man. His popularity soared. Wherever he went, he was greeted with the affectionate cry of "Gorby" "Gorby". With his charming wife, Raisa, by his side they made an impressive couple. They were the new face of the Soviet Union, modern, suave, refined and actively willing and determined to change things. The West also built him up and lavished praise on him for his "statesmanship". Even Britain's "iron lady" Margaret Thatcher said about Gorbachev that "he was a man she could do business with". All this was symphony to Gorbachev's ears. But I would not subscribe to the view of some that he was perhaps the CIA's best mole planted in the Soviet Union. At best, it was a bad political joke. But the sad fact was that when ultimately the Soviet Union disintegrated it was a colossal victory for the West without their having to fight a single shot.

I think, Gorbachev's intentions were good. He was bold enough to realise and admit that things could not go on the way it been over the years. There was need for change and this is what he vigorously initiated. His intentions were noble, even laudable. But where he went wrong, in my view, was in

implementation. He should have first focussed and concentrated on economic reform than on sweeping and wholesale re-structuring. Instead, like a one man destruction squad he undid and destroyed the basic system. He destroyed the Party, virtually dismantled the armed forces and the secret police (the KGB), virtually the whole system. As is well known, it is much easier and quicker to destroy than to rebuild. Gorbachev's vision of a re-structured USSR required new institutions, new concepts, virtually a new man. Here was a country with a primitive banking system, even cheque books were unheard of, there was no stock exchange, the institution of chartered accountants was virtually non-existent. And yet, over night everybody wanted a switch to market economy as though like a magic wand it would instantly cure their economic ills. With the old structure destroyed and the new one far from being there to replace it, not surprisingly, there was confusion and chaos, a virtual mayhem. The Soviet Union not only disintegrated but the 1990s were to be a dark decade. There was almost a loot of several national assets. Unheard of terms like "oligarchs" and the "mafia" overnight became terms of daily use. There was even the flight of capital with billions of dollars reportedly leaving the country for private bank accounts abroad. The once formidable institutions like the Party, the armed forces and the KGB, already steam rolled and weakened by Gorbachev's drive for reform either just caved in or participated in this wholesale loot of the country's assets. It was a sad, almost a pathetic sight. The once all powerful Gorbachev was a sad figure. He was shunned and ignored. His popularity plummeted. After a few interviews and speaking engagements even the West lost interest in him. He now leads a relatively lonely life in Moscow with, sadly, even his wife Raisa having expired some years ago.

In this context, one is tempted to compare things with China. They too, under Deng Xiao Ping, vigorously embarked upon the economic reform process, in fact before the Soviet Union did so. But they did not dismantle the old political system. The results are there to see today with China emerging as the world's second largest economy. But with prosperity comes the urge for change and liberalism. China is now facing this internal challenge, in the midst of reports of corruption in high places, the decaying Party discipline and even the PLA falling victim to the lure of profit and personal gain. But given the strong economic base that China has managed to build up perhaps it will be easier for it bring about institutional reform and change or its own version of "Glasnost" (openness). Signs of change are perhaps already there but China still has a long way to go in this respect and this journey could be fraught with risks. Gorbachev should have perhaps gone for economic reforms first without bothering too much about openness. Had he done things in a reversed manner the history of that country might have taken a different turn.

AMBASSADOR TO BRAZIL: (1991-92)

INTERVIEWER: Did Brazil show any signs at that time of its current socio-economic transformation?

AMBASSADOR: I was quite excited when informed that Brazil was my next assignment. This was so for a variety of reasons. I had never been to Latin America, or for that matter any part of the Americas, North or South. This was to be the first time that I would be crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Going to Brazil had other attractions too. It is almost half of Latin America in size of territory and the largest in terms of population. It is the world's largest Roman Catholic country. It is the world's number one in the production of coffee, soya beans, sugar, leather products, oranges and a few other products. It is the only Portuguese speaking part of Latin America, the rest being all Spanish. It is the country of the famous Amazon and many other attractions as I was to discover during my stay there. The Foz de Iguasu, the world's largest water falls, Itaipu, one of the world's largest hydro electric dams, the UNESCO protected Pantanal, a unique and huge part of the country famous for its wild life and birds, Rio de Janeiro, what I consider to be one of the prettiest cities in the world and its several kilometres long Copacabana beach. Of all our resident diplomatic missions in Latin America, the one in Brazil is the oldest. The Capital, Brasilia, located in the highlands, is a city built from scratch and an example of modern architecture. So, whichever way I looked at it, Brazil was a big attraction.

As for the rest, I managed to cover a lot considering that my posting to Brazil lasted only a year and a half. I travelled fairly extensively, met and interacted with a lot of people, was impressed by many things Brazilian and was convinced that here was a country with as yet considerable unrealised potential. Perhaps in many ways the same story as India. In several respects, Brazil was already a First World country. Here I am not only talking of its infrastructure, its hotels and shopping malls but its industrial growth and development, its advances in the nuclear field, its impressive aircraft industry, its huge automobile production, its efficient tapping of its energy resources and, in this context, its extensive use of gasohol. And yet, in many ways it was still a Third World country, particularly when you looked at its shanty towns and the bewildering gap between the rich and the poor.

Despite many robust aspects of its economy, what I found most amazing was its almost crazy inflation rate, at times nearly ten percent a day. I had

never encountered such a phenomenon before anywhere in my postings to various countries around the world. It took me a while to adjust to this feature of the Brazilian economy. Fortunately, we in the Embassy were paid in US dollars, which you kept converting, in small amounts only, into the local currency to meet with your daily expenses. If you walked into a shop, none of the items on display would carry the price tag, instead only a code number with the help of which the then price would be quoted. The chances were that the price in local currency would be higher if you enquired about it the same evening. This was, quite frankly, something of a crazy situation that took a while to get used to.

The glaring economic disparities apart, corruption in public life was quite rampant, including the high and mighty of the country. There were regular reports of scams involving the politically powerful and the business tycoons. All this was bleeding the country's economy. Social and economic disparities had a negative fall out on the law and order situation which was truly bad, even in the Capital Brasilia. Burglaries, break-ins and muggings were common. Cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo were particularly notorious. In Brasilia even the diplomats were not safe. There had been several cases, including that of a young Indian diplomat who succumbed to his injuries when he fought off burglars who had broken into his apartment. The Brazilians had to form a special police unit for the protection of the diplomatic corps. Both our residence and the embassy were provided with an armed police guard round the clock by the local police. And, we were not the only ones in this category. Quite a few other diplomatic missions and individual diplomats had met with such unpleasantness thereby obliging the Brazilian authorities to increasingly extend such protection to the diplomatic corps. This was one jarring note of living and working in an otherwise beautiful country with friendly people.

While I cannot comment on how the situation now is, from what I hear things have considerably changed for the better. Lot of credit is given to President Lula who introduced several social and economic reforms so that the scene has improved now, at least so I am told by those who have been to Brazil in recent times.

But one thing I was convinced of even when I was there, over two decades ago, was that there was enormous potential for India-Brazil relations to expand and grow to a much higher level and in many fields, a great potential that was waiting to be fully tapped. Also, I felt, there was a huge information gap between the two countries and their people.

For an average Brazilian, India was just a far off land full of mysticism and the country of Mahatma Gandhi. And, speaking honestly, how much about Brazil does an average Indian know, beyond perhaps Rio and the Amazon. This huge gap in mutual knowledge and information, I very strongly felt, needed to be bridged and fast. How many in India know, for instance, that for years Rio de Janeiro has had a Mahatma Gandhi statue in one of its prominent squares, that in the Brazilian province of Salvador, north of Rio and on the Atlantic coast, the Capital city of Bahia has a bust of Mahatma Gandhi in a square in the old part of the city, that the province has a sect called “Filos de Gandhi”(sons of Gandhi) which has a large following (including the Governor of the province when I was there) and participates every year in the famous Brazilian carnival season with a float depicting scenes from Mahatma Gandhi’s life and philosophy. They even had a Gandhi look alike who was introduced to me and my wife when we visited the head office of this sect. The similarity in looks was indeed uncanny.

To carry on with these little known links between India and Brazil, how many know that the mango plant went from India to Brazil and the cashew nut came to India from Brazil. With both Brazil and Goa being Portuguese colonies at one time in history considerable interaction took place on the colonial network. It was thus that a Portuguese Governor General of Goa, on being transferred to Brazil, insisted that what could grow in India could also grow in Brazil and vice versa and thus successfully introduced his favourite mango in Brazil. During my courtesy calls after joining at Brazil, when I called on their Minister of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry his welcoming remark was highly interesting. “Mr. Ambassador”, he said, “do you know that at least 90% of the Brazilian cattle have Indian blood in them.” This is how he then explained this aspect. Since the beginning of the twentieth century some enterprising Brazilians had been smuggling into Brazil the semen of high quality Indian bulls that was then used for inseminating the Brazilian cattle and with very successful results. Post Indian independence this practice got regularised through a formal agreement. This was what had prompted the Brazilian Minister to say what he did while welcoming me.

All such encounters and experiences only kept strengthening my conviction that India-Brazil relations had an enormous but as yet not fully tapped potential and the sooner this was realised the better for both sides and their peoples. One is happy to see that things are moving in that direction though the pace could and should be much faster. With both countries now forming a crucial part of BRICS and IBSA alliances this process should get a shot in the arm. Be it in the realm of trade or economic cooperation or political proximity of views and stances, the two countries can and should be major partners. Latin America deserves a lot more attention on our part and Brazil

even more so, constituting as it does nearly half of that region and as the biggest economy in Latin America with several features of particular interest to both sides. Communications, shipping services, air links between the two countries need a lot of strengthening. Distance should not be given as an excuse. With a direct air link Sao Paulo and Rio should be the same distance, if not a shade closer, from Mumbai and New Delhi as New York or Toronto. It is all in the mind and the mind-set needs a drastic change. Tourism should be encouraged much more. The Brazilians should find several attractions in India fascinating just as Brazil should make a charming holiday destination for Indians. This two way flow of people should go a long way in bridging the information gap that currently separates the people of these two friendly, culturally rich and scenically beautiful countries.

Before winding up the portion on my stay in Brazil, I would like to mention that the highlight for me of this posting was the Earth Summit in Rio in June, 1992. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao attended and he came with a delegation of nearly 170 including two Ministers, several senior officials, a large media contingent and of course a security team. With the Embassy located 1200 kilometres away in Brasilia and no Indian office in Rio we faced tremendous logistical problems. But we did it and to everyone's great satisfaction. It was described as the biggest gathering to date of Heads of State and Government in history, a total of 84, not to speak of Foreign Ministers or other Ministers. On the opening day, as they all walked into the Conference Hall, the joke was that if a stone were to be thrown into the air it was bound to land on the head of a Head of State or Government, or at least a Foreign Minister. Through our contacts and some active behind the scene work, we managed a bit of a coup. After the opening statement of the host President of Brazil, Ferdinand de Collor, the first speaker was the Indian Prime Minister. Even Prime Minister Narasimha Rao wondered how we had managed this and within a day of returning to India he was gracious and thoughtful enough to send me a personal letter of thanks and appreciation for a job well done. I shared the letter with all my colleagues in the Embassy to stress the point that it was really our team work for which everyone deserved credit.

Even before this visit I had known Prime Minister Rao when he was the Minister of External Affairs. But this visit gave me an excellent opportunity to interact at length with him, notably during our long drives from the hotel to the conference venue, a good twenty kilometres away. Mr. Rao was a patient listener and I had ample opportunity to share with him how India-Brazil relations should take shape if their full potential were to be realised. He was obviously impressed and showed enough interest to ask me to send

a comprehensive note, not to the Ministry of External Affairs or any other Ministry but to him directly. This I naturally did and even two decades down the line it gives me a certain satisfaction to see how our relations with Brazil are developing. I personally had high regard for Mr. Narasimha Rao. One could talk to him and he would listen with an open mind and was receptive to practical suggestions. In my considered view, he was one of the best Prime Ministers that India has had since independence. Within two months of Prime Minister Rao's return to India from the Rio summit, I received my transfer orders as India's next High Commissioner to Canada. Perhaps it was Mr. Rao's way of rewarding my work in Brazil and the realization on his part that I could be better utilised in an important and sensitive post like Canada, more so in the context of what our relations with Canada were passing through then.

HIGH COMMISSIONER TO CANADA: (1992-97)

INTERVIEWER: At that time Punjab was in turmoil and Canada was a hot bed of "Khalistan" sympathisers. How did you deal with the elements openly hostile to India?

AMBASSADOR: You are right, Canada was indeed a major base for the nefarious designs and operations of the protagonists and supporters of the so called "Khalistan". Both for the funding of this movement, training, even procurement of weapons for terrorist acts, Canada, along with the USA, the UK and Germany, was a major base. This was in fact, at times at least, even straining our bilateral relations with these countries. The plea of these countries that their liberal laws often prevented them from checking such activities on their soils was not convincing enough. Confining myself to Canada, I would say that I was not impressed by their government's pretended attitude of helplessness. I would have any number of meetings and discussions at various levels, at times even heated, but the outcome was not always satisfactory. I regret to say that there was an element of duplicity and double speak that one often detected in the Canadian presentations. Their politicians were obviously indulging in vote bank politics. We once did a survey within the High Commission to discover that in nearly 10% of the parliamentary constituencies across Canada that elected MPs to the country's lower house of Parliament or the House of Commons, Sikh vote constituted a substantial number. This would also explain why till today Canadian politicians on a visit to India invariably make a bee line for the Golden Temple in Amritsar. It is not so much out of religious feelings and sentiments as for a photo opportunity for suitable use on return home. But one had to accept these realities and carry on with one's efforts. Persistence did pay at times as for instance with a weekly TV

programme called “Ankhila” Punjab coming out of Toronto. It was full of anti-Indian venom, slanderous, giving a twist to realities on the ground in Punjab and indeed the rest of India and calculated in every sense to mislead and incite the viewers. I carried on a long battle against this programme till it was finally stopped by the TV and Radio Regulatory Authority of Canada.

My approach to this general problem was broadly two fold. Confrontation where it was open hostility and interaction wherever there was scope. I was convinced that it was only the fringe elements and a vocal and aggressive small minority of the Sikh community that was behind all this. The vast majority were peaceful, proud of their Indian origin and background and more keen on carrying on with their normal day today life than in the so called “Khalistan”. But they constituted the silent majority as against the vocal and aggressive minority that had acquired a vested interest, including easy access to easy and generous funds, in prolonging and building up this movement. Very often they even misused these funds, led lives of luxury, while the vast majority contributed towards these funds, however modestly, under pressure, even the threat of retribution.

As you would have guessed by now, under the circumstances then prevailing in Canada, the High Commission in Ottawa, our Consulates General in Vancouver and Toronto and indeed other Indian establishments like the Air India, even the State Bank of India did earn the wrath of these “Khalistan” activists so as to even pose a serious security threat. As High Commissioner I was a prime target and the Canadian government realising this, going by its own security threat perception, provided me with round the clock security cover. This job was handled most efficiently by their elite Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and my daily interaction with this police force convinced me as to why they enjoyed such a good reputation. Of course, I was not used to such a security cover and initially I even found it somewhat irksome. But gradually I got used to it and accepted it as a fact of life. With things having considerably improved in Punjab now and the “Khalistan” movement having more or less run out of steam, I understand that now for a few years Indian diplomats in Canada are no longer provided with such a security cover, a happy sign indeed.

As mentioned earlier, I never viewed all the Sikhs in Canada as sympathisers or supporters of the “Khalistan” movement. With this section of the Indian community, as indeed with the rest, I had very good relations, interacted with them regularly, attended their functions in different parts of Canada and my being a Punjabi myself was possibly an advantage and they were thrilled and happy when I spoke to them in chaste Punjabi. They started treating me as one of them. I visited the homes of many of them and

enjoyed their hospitality. Since they were insistent, I made it an annual feature to visit their “Baisakhi” *mela* or fair in Toronto every year. The Gerard Street there was the main venue of these celebrations. I got the distinct feeling that all this endeared me to this community.

But I did not shun the extremist or radical elements, the vocal minority. I kept my door open whenever they wanted a dialogue with me. I recall my first official visit in May, 1993 to Vancouver, a hot bed of “Khalistan” sympathisers and supporters. Apart from other official engagements, I expressed my keenness to visit the famous Punjabi Market. I was told that for a long time no Indian High Commissioner had been there. This area was considered to be a strong concentration of “Khalistani” elements. Even the RCMP initially felt a little uneasy over my stated wish to this area. However, noticing my determination they finally agreed to my going there though I am sure, as discreetly as possible, they made special security arrangements. My wife and I deliberately took a walk down the main street since I wanted to convey the message that I was not scared of visiting what some called “like walking into the lion’s den”. At the end of this walk about, I addressed a gathering of about two hundred in one of the restaurants on the main street, Himalayan Restaurant I think, as far as I can recall. I addressed them, answered their questions, some not so friendly and gave a patient hearing to their problems and views. My constant refrain on all such occasions, no matter where in Canada, was that Punjab was an integral part of India, that historically it had been the sword arm and bread basket of the country, that nobody there felt persecuted, that Sikhs enjoyed, if anything, a privileged position in India be it in private business, in various government services and notably in the armed forces. For anyone to suggest otherwise was totally wrong, mischievous, misleading, anti-national and, therefore, deserved to be exposed and rejected. I would invariably conclude by challenging anyone to prove me wrong with facts and suggested to them to go to India, whenever possible, to see things for themselves. I have reasons to believe that my approach and efforts did make some impact at least. My humane and open approach I think made a difference. I was always accessible to them and helpful in sorting out their legitimate problems, to the extent it was feasible.

Talking of threats to Indian interests and official representatives in Canada, I should mention two other sources, the supporters of Tamil Tigers who had a sizeable base in Canada and the Islamic fundamentalists and extremists. With the latter, it was like baptism by fire for me. I presented my credentials to the Governor General of Canada on December 04, 1992. Two days later came the Babri Masjid incident in India. Within a fortnight of this happening, I received close to a dozen letters of protest, very strongly and harshly worded, almost bordering on threats, from Islamic organizations across North America. It was a good indicator of threat from this quarter. We

compiled all the addresses and sent the list to all concerned in India and also shared it with the Canadian security agencies with whom we enjoyed good cooperation. This done, I then personally prepared a reply to all these organizations, part explaining things and also strongly rebutting their bogus and propagandist allegations against India. I also sent a copy of my letter to the Ministry of External Affairs for their information. The Ministry not only commended my handling of the situation but also circulated a copy of my letter to all our missions and posts abroad advising them that if faced with such an outburst of anger and protest they should reply along the lines of my letter.

INTERVIEWER: NRIs in the United States perhaps play a prominent role in lobbying for policies helpful to us with the US elected representatives. NRIs in Canada seem to be more self-centred focussing on their own advancement. Are their roots and links with India weakening? Or, are they not in full sync with the idea of India?

AMBASSADOR: Having yourself worked in the USA you would have a better understanding of the mindset of the NRIs there. Possibly, they are better organized in the US. Also, I think, lobbying is a much more perfected and accepted activity in the USA than in Canada. There are, I understand, people there who have mastered and refined the art of lobbying as a profession. They are even formally on the payroll of certain organizations to promote their cause and they do deliver. Such a concept of lobbying has perhaps yet to reach Canada. The Canadians, in any case, are quite different from their neighbour to the South, the USA, and they are not just keen to assert this difference but are proud of it. Their popular slogan is that they are North Americans without being Americans.

The Indian diaspora in Canada is indeed very sizeable, easily a million by now in a country with a total population of 35 million going by the latest statistics (2013). In fact, in proportionate terms to the total population of the country they possibly outnumber the Indian diaspora in the USA. The people of Indian origin in Canada can be broadly categorised as follows: the professionals who are in a sizeable number. These would include academics, engineers and IT experts, those in the finance sector like chartered accountants, various branches of banking, services and last but not least the medical profession. There would scarcely be a hospital in Canada that would not have a few doctors of Indian origin. This broad category is generally a satisfied lot, happy pursuing their profession, moving up in the hierarchy gradually, leading a comfortable life style, socialising within the spare time available to them and earning respect all round.

Another large category would be those engaged in commerce and business, including small time traders, retailers and shopkeepers. They follow their

own pattern of life, are generally a satisfied lot but with no or little inclination to indulge in public activity, much less active politics.

Talking of public life and politics, this category might be numerically small but they have made quite a mark on the Canadian political scene. The 1993 general election saw the first turbaned Sikh from a Toronto constituency, Gurbax Singh Malhi, occupying a seat in the Canadian House of Commons. This was the first time in Canadian history that not one but three Members of Parliament were of Indian origin. This representation of the people of Indian origin on the Canadian political landscape has only been increasing over the years. A few have even risen to be Ministers in the federal Cabinet, Herb Dhaliwal from Vancouver for instance. One of them, Ujjwal Singh Dosanj, was even Premier of the important province of British Columbia for a while.

So, this category has not done badly at all for itself. But how much lobbying for India they are willing to do or act as a bridge of understanding and cooperation between India and Canada remains a moot point. While they do India proud to an extent, their main focus often is on self promotion in the context of their Canadian constituencies and local politics. Indian interests do not necessarily always figure in their calculations. In fact, if at times being critical of India serves their immediate local interests, vote bank politics, they would feel quite at liberty to do so. Consequently, while I knew most of them and dealt with them, I could never totally count on their support or cooperation in promoting Indian interests in Canada. One had to accept this political reality, however difficult or even disappointing. Herb Dhaliwal was, in particular, such a case. He hailed from Vancouver and was known to have close links with the “Khalistan” elements and often even tried to act as their voice. The then Home Minister of India, S.B.Chavan, was on an official visit to Canada. He was addressing a select group of journalists and people of Indian origin. Herb Dhaliwal was present and at one stage posed a rather rude and offensive question to Sh. Chavan. I instantly interjected, put down Dhaliwal and bluntly told him that he had no business to be thus rude to our Home Minister who was, after all, an honoured guest in Canada. Dhaliwal got the message and went quiet after this snub and that too in public, media included. Sh. Chavan later told me: “Aap Ne Acha Kiya” (you did well).

INTERVIEWER: What was the highlight of your five year stay in Canada as High Commissioner?

AMBASSADOR: India established diplomatic relations with Canada soon after independence and in the early years the two countries enjoyed very

close and cooperative relations. Nehru had an excellent equation with the top Canadian leadership and had visited Canada to an exceptionally warm welcome. Canada was involved in several development projects in India and was the first country to extend active cooperation in the nuclear field. But India's first nuclear test in 1974 (Peaceful Nuclear Explosion as we chose to call it) changed all that. Canada was most upset and their then Prime Minister, Trudeau, even went to the extent of accusing India's then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, of "an act of betrayal". India-Canada relations nose-dived and remained virtually frozen for almost two decades. The Kanishka tragedy of 1985 and the tardy Canadian handling of it only added to India's misgivings about Canada. During the 1980s and early 90s the failure or rather the unwillingness of the Canadian authorities to firmly handle the "Khalistani" elements in their country only added to India's disappointment with Canada.

Fortunately, things started changing for the better in the early 1990s. India's major economic reforms from 1991, under the Prime Ministership of Narasimha Rao, started changing the Indian economic scene. The country began to attract the attention of foreign investors. The huge potential of the big Indian market came to be noticed and Canada, like many other countries in the West, realised that it should be on board. In the 1993 general election Brian Mulroney's Conservative Party got defeated and the Liberals under Jean Chretien came to power. In 1994 the Canadian Foreign Ministry commissioned a special and comprehensive report on India titled "Focus India". The report strongly recommended Canada getting close to India and not miss out on the enormous opportunity that the India of economic reforms offered. It was my good luck to be in the thick of all these changes of mind set and I naturally made full use of the emerging new possibilities in our bilateral relations. Against this background came the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien's "Team Canada" visit to India in January 1996. The Canadians really came in full force. Accompanying Prime Minister Chretien were most of the Provincial premiers (Quebec I think was the only exception, for reasons of its own and not due to lack of interest in India) and nearly three hundred top and middle level business executives, besides a large media contingent. Altogether, two big plane loads descended upon India. By all accounts, Jean Chretien's visit to India, the first by a Canadian Prime Minister in almost a quarter century, went off extremely well. As he declared several times while on Indian soil, "Canada is back in India and is here to stay". All this coincided with my stay in Canada and I was closely involved with work preparatory to the visit, during the visit and the essential follow up after the visit. It was my privilege to be at the right place at the right time. This sense of achievement was easily the highlight of my five year stay in Canada, 1992-97.

INTERVIEWER: There were rumours that you were going to Russia as Ambassador from Canada. Perhaps the “agreem’nt” had also been obtained. If true, would you like to share your feelings and thoughts?.

AMBASSADOR: Yes, it is true and I can, therefore, confirm the rumour. It all started quite suddenly and unexpectedly in May, 1996 when I got a phone call from our Prime Minister’s office (PMO). Ramu Damodran, who was then Special Assistant to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, was on the line. He conveyed to me that the Prime Minister wanted me to proceed to Moscow as our next Ambassador to Russia. Having already done more than three years in Canada, I had no valid reason to really try and resist, even if I wanted to. It was unlike in January, 1994, when I had barely completed a year in Canada that, again on the telephone, I was told that I was wanted back in the Ministry as one of the Secretaries. I had been in Grade I (Secretary’s grade) of the IFS since April, 1993. For a variety of reasons, both personal and professional, on that occasion I had flatly said “No” and it had worked.

When I asked Damodaran as to how soon was my move from Ottawa to Moscow desired by the Prime Minister, the reply was: “As soon as possible, the earlier the better, in any case before June end”. I replied that while I would try and do my best to accommodate this very tight schedule, certain essential formalities must be completed before I could make this move, the “agreem’nt” of the Russian government, the formal announcement and the formal transfer orders. This was fully understood and appreciated but thereafter things moved really fast. As against the normal six to eight weeks, the Russians gave the “agreem’nt” in three days, as I was later told by the then Joint Secretary (EE). Besides being a known commodity to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, having already done three postings there, the fact that the then Russian Ambassador to India, Albert Chernishev, an old friend going back to our serving together in Hanoi in the early 1970s, presumably strongly supported my appointment and asked his government for a very speedy decision. Soon thereafter, came the formal announcement of my appointment as our next Ambassador to Russia, with the Ministry faxing my transfer orders to me with the cyclostyled copy following by diplomatic bag. So, in a sense, I was really almost caught up in a whirlwind.

How my wife and I took it is another question. We were happily settled in Ottawa. It was a lovely posting with interesting and important things to do, an aspect that had received a tremendous boost after the Canadian Prime Minister’s recently concluded and highly successful visit to India. But, while there was a definite feeling of regret over having to leave Canada, the attractions of a posting to Moscow as Ambassador were also there. Going

back to a place as Ambassador where I had started as Third Secretary (Probationer) was like completing the circle. The abiding importance of a Moscow posting, despite all the changes that had occurred, including from the USSR to Russia, was also there for consideration. So it was, honestly speaking, a win-win situation. Continuing in Ottawa was certainly a big attraction. But so was going to Moscow. And, added to all this was the fact that the manner in which this posting had come about, there was no getting out of it, even if I had tried or wanted to.

So we started with the pre-move on transfer scenario, packing and farewell parties. But in the midst of all this the political scene in India underwent a dramatic change. Prime Minister Rao lost the general election and was out of office. The new Prime Minister, Deve Gauda, ordered a freeze on all foreign postings at the Ambassador level. Ronen Sen in Moscow was asked to continue there when he was all set to leave for Beijing. I was told to stay on in Ottawa which I was happy to do till my retirement at the end of September, 1997. Instead of Ronen Sen, Vijay Nambiar, an old China hand, was sent as Ambassador to China and C. Dasgupta was moved from Beijing to Brussels as Ambassador to the EU. This is the full story with nothing relevant held back. But strange are the ways of our Ministry of External Affairs. Except for an informal phone call by a senior colleague at headquarters advising me to go slow with my preparations for the move to Moscow, I never got any formal word or communication from the Ministry. My transfer orders to Moscow were never withdrawn and even if they were I was never formally told so. If anything, the six monthly booklet issued by the Ministry containing the deployment of Indian diplomats in all our missions and posts abroad, continued to show me till the end of 1996 as High Commissioner to Canada and as Ambassador designate to the Russian Federation.

CONCLUSION:

INTERVIEWER: In our long careers we have bitter-sweet memories, periods of achievement, happy and unhappy experiences. As you look back, what are your thoughts?

AMBASSADOR: Having recently completed sixteen years into retirement, at times I still feel nostalgic about the over thirty five years that I served in the Foreign Service. Fortunately, mostly they are happy memories. I never had any Godfather in the Service nor was I ever anyone's blue eyed boy. I had a mix of comfortable, interesting and important postings just as I had my share of the tough ones, what in our official jargon are described as hardship postings. But I never said 'No' to any posting and like a disciplined

soldier went wherever I was ordered to go. I never viewed any posting as unimportant, always tried to make the most of wherever I was, travelled extensively and made that extra effort to imbibe as much as possible of the history, culture, customs and traditions of the country of my posting. This attitude, I think, served me well because no matter which part of the world you are in, there is always something to learn and absorb and this approach only makes you richer in experience and knowledge. Blissfully, my wife, Kusum, fully shared this mind set of mine and together we went through our Foreign Service life with considerable satisfaction, even a sense of achievement. Professionally, I was fortunate to be at the right place at the right time, in the context of important developments on the bilateral front or the world scene in general. Consequently, it was never a dull moment. My career graph kept moving up smoothly, without any glitch. I got my various selection grades in the Service in good time – Grade IV with 14 years of Service, Grade III in 17 years, Grade II in 27 years and Grade I in 31 years. So, whichever way I look at it, it was very satisfying. By and large, I had very good colleagues no matter where I was posted. My wife and I always tried to generate a large family spirit at all our stations of posting and this helped considerably in creating and keeping the right atmosphere. We did not favour anyone and treated all our colleagues, no matter how senior or junior, with respect and consideration. I often say that the true test of your standing in the Service comes after retirement. The respect and affection we continue to receive from all serving or retired colleagues, particularly those who served with you in the past, only confirm this belief. We still very much feel a part of the large and growing IFS family. This has been and continues to be our best reward.

But, throwing in a jarring note, yes, I do have some bitter memories and unhappy experiences to recall. The first one takes me back to Hanoi days. Dr. K.S. Shelvankar, a journalist by profession and a political appointee, was the Consul General there when I joined as Consul in October, 1969. Both he and his wife, Mary Shelvankar, an elderly couple, initially came through as very affectionate and caring. Two months after joining at Hanoi, I was given some home leave and during this period got married on January 13, 1970, to be back in Hanoi, as a newly married person, in early February, 1970. The Shelvankars warmly welcomed me and my wife. By himself, Dr. Shelvankar was a quiet person, a scholarly type, who hardly ever interfered in my work or personal life for that matter. But his wife, Mary, soon proved to be a different cup of tea. We, before long, started feeling that she tended to be somewhat overbearing, a little too interfering, sometimes even in the day-to-day running of the mission and expected my wife to dance attendance on her and be holding her finger most of the time. This was clearly not acceptable, neither to me nor to my wife, and a certain degree of

unpleasantness started emerging. But the true colours of the Shelvankars came out when, due to their political connections, both being very close personally to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her powerful and influential Principal Secretary, P.N.Haksar, Dr. Shelvankar got posted as our Ambassador to Moscow. This, I think, went to their heads, a posting to the Soviet Union those days easily being one of our most important diplomatic assignments. I was almost shocked when, one day, Dr. Shelvankar expressed his unhappiness over my not addressing him as His Excellency. I had to politely explain to him that he would be His Excellency only after taking charge in Moscow as Ambassador and not while still Consul General in Hanoi. Also, I pointed out that in our system we did not address a senior as Excellency, only as Sir and that this is what I had been taught as part of my training under stalwarts like T.N.Kaul and Kewal Singh, both becoming Foreign Secretaries later on. I do not think Dr. Shelvankar was happy over this stand of mine, certainly not Mary Shelvankar.

But the worst came when they were on the point of departure from Hanoi for Moscow. In what I thought was my duty and responsibility as Head of Chancery, I advised Dr. Shelvankar that prior to their departure they should get the stock checking done at their residence of all government property. I added that whatever items had outlived their prescribed life span could be written off and the rest properly accounted for, notably some object de'Art. My repeated pleas for this action fell on deaf ears and the Shelvankars left for Moscow.

Immediately after their departure I got the needful done under my personal supervision, only to discover that a few items were missing, in particular a Nandi Bull replica that Mary Shelvankar used to like and admire a lot. Whatever could be, under the rules, written off I did but not some of the valuable decoration items. I then wrote a polite letter to Dr. Shelvankar in Moscow requesting for his comments and guidance. As I later learnt from some colleagues who were then posted in Moscow, on receiving my letter while Dr. Shelvankar was upset, his wife, Mary, hit the ceiling describing me as a shit of an officer who did not know who he was dealing with. She then insisted on dictating a reply to my letter, but signed by Dr. Shelvankar, and a copy of which was endorsed to the then Additional Secretary in-charge of the Administration in the Ministry. Their intention obviously was to impress and scare me with their senior position and contacts. The letter to me was nothing short of a stinker accusing me of being disrespectful. In my reply, I politely but firmly pointed out that I was simply following the rules and now that they had, in their superior wisdom, needlessly brought in the Ministry, I was left with no choice but to endorse a copy of my letter also to the Ministry in order to give them the full picture. A few months later, while in

Delhi for a conference, I ran into the then Additional Secretary Administration, Thomas Abraham. He patted me on the back for thus standing up for the rules and not giving in to pressure from higher ups. But, I think, the Shelvankars never forgave me for this and, whatever equation my wife and I had with them, was over. To finish the story, the Ministry ultimately made a suitable recovery from the Shelvankars for items that could neither be written off nor accounted for.

My next unpleasant experience with a senior colleague was, fortunately, to come much later, in November, 1980, in Moscow. Ambassador I.K.Gujral had left for India in the first week of November. His successor, Vishnu Ahuja, arrived about a fortnight later in the third week of the month. By then I was all set to leave for Ethiopia to take up my next assignment. Till then I knew Vishnu Ahuja by name only as a very senior IFS officer belonging to the first batch recruited in 1948. In a way, I was looking forward to meeting him and spending a few days with him prior to taking off for Ethiopia. My wife and I were at the airport, along with the rest from the Embassy, to welcome Mr. and Mrs. Ahuja upon their arrival from Delhi.

The following day, while in the office, he sent for me. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he threw at me the bomb shell, so to say, with the remark: "What is this I hear that you are leaving very shortly on transfer. This I cannot accept. As Minister (Economic) you are handling a very vital and important aspect of our bilateral relations. I cannot let such an important member of my team leave on transfer within days of my taking charge. I am afraid you will have to alter your plans and stay for another six months at least." My first thought was that may be he was just pulling my leg. But soon it was very clear that he very much meant it. This prompted me with the following reply: "Sir, I am afraid that will not be possible. This is my first Ambassadorship and that too to an important country in Africa. The post is already lying vacant for two months and the Ministry wants me to reach Addis Ababa very early now that all formalities have been completed. Any delay on my part will very likely prompt headquarters to appoint somebody else instead. I would thus be missing out on this opportunity, virtually a turning point in my career, and cannot, therefore, be expected to take it lightly. Besides, there are major and serious practical difficulties in my staying on in Moscow any longer. We were all packed up and my wife and I were literally living in a near empty apartment just out of a few bags. Most of our belongings, including the heavy winter clothing, had already left Moscow in the lift van. I had already sold my personal car and was dependent on public transport. Both our boys, and even the India-based cook, had already gone to India on their entitled home leave passage. My date of departure from Moscow for Addis Ababa was fixed as also the date for the presentation

of my credentials in early December. The Ministry's clear instructions to me were that I should proceed directly from Moscow to Ethiopia by the direct Aerofloat flight, present my credentials, settle down fast and come thereafter to India on some home leave, after hosting the traditional Republic Day reception on January 26. All this is not just known to the Ministry but, as desired and approved by them. You must have known about it as you were yourself coming directly from headquarters. In view of all that I have just explained, my extending my stay in Moscow at this stage by even a few days, leave aside six months, was simply not possible and, therefore, totally out of the question. Whichever way I look at it, from my career point of view or personal factors, I could not even think of prolonging my stay in Moscow. The very thought of going through another winter in Moscow when I had virtually wound up my establishment, was something simply unthinkable." After this long explanation, I was almost certain that Ambassador Ahuja would understand, relent and not come in my way. But I was wrong in this expectation. He just dug in and refused to budge from his position, adding that he will immediately send a message to headquarters and have my departure from Moscow delayed. This was simply too much for me to swallow and with a changed tone stated as follows: "Sir, I have tried my best to explain my position and circumstances. But, it is to be regretted that you are refusing to show any consideration whatsoever both for my career prospects as well as my personal and family comfort and wellbeing. If you insist on forcing me to stay on in Moscow under these conditions then let me make it very clear that though physically I will be here, you will not get an iota of work out of me. You will have a Minister (Economic) in name only. It will be total non-cooperation on my part. Suit yourself."

I could see that this shook him up as something unexpected. He turned red in the face with anger and curtly remarked: "Alright, then go. I do not want you here any more". I got up, but before leaving his office handed over to him the invitation to a reception that my wife and I were hosting two days later to say good-bye to our friends and colleagues. Still lacking in grace, Ambassador Ahuja remarked: "After all this, you still expect my wife and I to come to your reception." My reply was: "Well, I am extending the courtesy of inviting you both. If you and Mrs Ahuja attend the reception, my wife and I will be happy. If you do not, we will understand." I then walked out of his office. As it is, they both did put in a brief appearance at our reception. As planned, my wife and I left Moscow for Addis Ababa by the overnight Aerofloat flight on November 26, 1980. Interestingly, amongst the first lot of New Year greeting cards that we received in Addis Ababa there was one from Ambassador and Mrs. Ahuja which was suitably reciprocated by us. The lesson I learnt from this brief but highly unfortunate and unpleasant encounter that I had with Ambassador Ahuja was that if you do not fight

and stand up for your legitimate interests, nobody else will. He was, I think, simply trying to bully me into submission. When that failed to work he must have felt deflated and ultimately came on the right track. I only wish he had not, in the first place, gone about it the way he did.

In subsequent years, I was to go through two more such unpleasant experiences. The manner in which I was asked to hand over charge as Chief of Protocol and the unpleasant time with Ambassador Alfred Gonsalves when I was Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow. But having dealt with both these experiences at some length in reply to some of your earlier questions, I need not go into it all over again.

INTERVIEWER: What would you have done differently, given another opportunity if you travel back in a “Time Machine”?

AMBASSADOR: A good question, even a somewhat loaded one. However, it should not be difficult to answer since my life generally has been a simple straightforward affair, at least so far. In my childhood I did hit a rough patch. I was barely eight when the country’s partition hit our family hard and we had to come over from Lahore, now in Pakistan, as refugees. It was quite a traumatic experience and life was hard. I missed out on the carefree life that a child would love to aspire for. I often realise that if I had not been on different scholarships from an early stage even my studies could have got disrupted. As it is, right up to MA I was a scholarship holder. While doing my MA in Political Science from Delhi University I was getting the University Grants Commission’s All India Merit Scholarship in Humanities, a princely sum those days of Rs. 100/- per month. Currently, I am told, it is Rs. 1500/- per month in view of the progressive rise in inflation over the years. But there is always a bright side to things. The hardship experienced in childhood taught me the value of thrift, discipline and hard work, qualities that have stood me in good stead over the years. I am ambitious but I have never let my ambitions have the better of me. This has resulted in a certain peace of mind which I value very much. Believing that each person can and does have different circumstances, I have always avoided comparing myself with others. I very much believe that those who keep indulging in comparisons can never be fully happy or satisfied. As long as you do not feel denied of what your genuine needs are, you should be at peace with yourself. I am often reminded of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s definition of good life, namely; a virtuous life with adequate physical comforts. I am happy living within a certain comfort zone. My married life has been a happy one. My wife, Kusum, has been a wonderful companion for over forty years now. We share many things in common and yet, happily, we are not a carbon copy of each other. We have our healthy differences that

only make life more interesting and meaningful. Both our sons are well settled in life, married and we are happy grandparents now.

Even post retirement, I never hankered after or asked for anything. Instead, I welcomed it as a phase in life when one could seriously pursue those interests in life for which you never managed enough time while in Service. Our choosing the pattern of life that keeps us in Delhi only during the winter months, with the long, hot and miserable summer months in the plains spent in the salubrious climate of Kumaon hills in our cottage at 7,500 feet has been a wonderful pattern. It is our quality time spent on more meaningful activities and past times. In the last ten years I have written and got published five books and my wife two. We have travelled extensively within India, something we always wanted to do after all these years abroad, travelling to different corners of the world. We pray for continuing good health so that we can carry on with this life style that both my wife and I always wanted. Generally speaking, with the grace of God, life has been good so far.

As regards the choice of career, right from my early college days I was quite determined to be a diplomat. Consequently, I pursued the goal of being in the Indian Foreign Service with single minded determination, worked hard and was rewarded with being selected in my very first attempt. After over thirty five years in the IFS, I can recall this period with a considerable sense of achievement and satisfaction. The few adversities that came my way, I tried and faced them with courage and in the long run it only further strengthened my fibre. I stood for certain principles all these years and never had to compromise on them. I continue to maintain that a Foreign Service career is a wonderful choice and if, somehow, I could start life all over again it would be, for me, with eyes shut, the IFS again.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you Ambassador Budhwar, it has been wonderful interacting with you, listening to your rich experiences and views on a wide range of subjects and expressed so frankly.

AMBASSADOR: Well, I sincerely feel that considerable credit goes to you. You made a very good interlocutor with searching and probing questions that went a long way in bringing out all that I have said. Thank you.

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