



**Oral History Series**

**Volume 5**

**ORAL HISTORY RECORD**

**of**

**AMBASSADOR SURENDRA KUMAR**

**Interview Conducted**

**By**

**Ambassador Balkrishna Shetty**

**(2016)**

**Indian Council of World Affairs**

**Sapru House, New Delhi**

**Bala:** Ambassador Surendra Kumar, you have had a very interesting career .What are the postings that you have done.

**SK:** Thank you Bala. Well, I started my career long back in 1975, in Mexico City, where I learnt a little bit of Spanish .My first Ambassador, Ashok N Mehta, was arguably the toughest Ambassador MEA has ever seen. I have mentioned in my book: **Beyond Diplomatic Dilemmas**, my experiences with him. Once you have been baptized by him, all other Ambassadors seemed like angels! We have had a very short, but memorable stint in Mexico. Our son Manu was born in ABC hospital in Mexico City, so it has a special place in our heart.

As the Chief Liaison Officer responsible for receiving and seeing off and taking care of them during the stay of 23 member Indian women's delegation to the first

International Women Year Conference in Mexico City, I had to bear the brunt of the ire and tantrums of mercurial Indian women leaders for a whole week. But it was a learning experience; I got to meet Mme Sadat when I accompanied Mrs Rajan Nehru, wife of the former Secretary General of the MEA, Amb. RK Nehru for her meeting with the wife of the Egyptian President.

We also cherish our interaction with Mrs Vijayalakshmi Pandit, who came to our small two-bedroom apartment for an informal dinner with her daughter Chandralekha Mehta and her husband, Amb. AN Mehta. Mme Chandralekha Mehta used to celebrate Diwali, tastefully decorating the Embassy Residence with lamps and Rangoli and laying out a dinner with contribution of dishes and sweets by the wives of the mission's diplomats and organizing a fashion show in which members of the mission and their wives including me and my wife participated enthusiastically. Thanks to my efforts, the largest selling Spanish daily, *Excelsior* had carried a four-page colour supplement on our Diwali celebration in October 1975!

On the instructions of my Ambassador, I saw as many as 365 documentaries on a projector installed on my table in a make shift office and wrote the synopsis of each of them.

**Bala:** That's interesting. What happened after Mexico?

**SK:** From Mexico, as the freshly promoted Second Secretary, I arrived in Santiago in Chile.

It was still struggling to recover from the after-effects of 1973 Military coup d'etat against **the duly elected Leftist President Salvador Allende**, which brought the Military Junta headed by General Augusto Pinochet to power. For me too, it was a sort of metamorphosis. In Mexico, I was a mere Third Secretary who didn't even have a proper room to himself at the Chancery of the Indian Embassy. Suddenly, I was Second Secretary/CDA, acting Head of India's Mission. I was travelling in a Mercedes car with India's flag fluttering on its hood and being addressed as your Excellency! For a few weeks, it sounded surreal!

**Bala:** So it was a baptism of a different kind!

**SK:** Because of the overthrow of the democratically elected President in a Military coup, as many as 23 countries had withdrawn their ambassadors; India was one of them. I was the CDA of India and also de facto CDA for the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia as Indian Embassy was entrusted diplomatically to look after their interests in Chile. But there isn't anything like a free lunch; the Indian government was collecting 25 per cent of my total expenses from the Soviet Government and 25 per cent from the Czech Government. In financial terms, I was just 50 per cent of a full time Indian diplomat!

With inflation hovering above 636 per cent, the availability of daily necessities very scarce and extremely low foreign allowance, Santiago was a tough posting. Daily blackout at 10 PM made things still worse. Still, proximity to beautiful beaches of Vina del Mar and cool mountains of Portillo at 9000 ft height, both barely an hour and half drive from the city, made week-end getaways easier and enjoyable.

Getting the first ever Festival of Indian films (Nine films with Spanish sub-titles) at Santiago University and naming of Delhi Bagh in the capital were satisfying ventures. Incidentally, with the same package of films, we organized a film festival at La Paz, capital of Bolivia, country of our concurrent accreditation, at the height of 9500 ft, perhaps the only Indian festival of India ever organized at such height; Sholay drew half a KM long queue! Thanks to less oxygen in the air, in hotels in La Paz, next to the Reception Counter were kept ready several oxygen masks in case guests felt short of breath! And, there were plenty of free tablets for headache.

**Bala:** Yeah! Sounds interesting and innovative!

**SK:** From Chile, I was transferred to Hong Kong, a bustling free port. There, for the next

three years, I was totally engrossed in trade and business promotion. And what an enriching and exciting experience it was in terms of protocol duties, community and public relations and business and trade promotion in a highly competitive and frenzied atmosphere. As so many VIPs transited through Hong Kong to different destinations, I had to go to the airport to receive them, on an average, thrice a week. But this number increased depending on their time of arrival and departure. As per the instructions of my learned, affable and efficient Boss, Rangi (Commissioner CV Ranganathan) any Indian VIP arriving or departing, except the EAM, between 8 PM and 8 AM had to be received or seen off by me in my capacity as the No 2 of the Post. So, once in a single month, I had to make 27 trips to the airport! Prior to Rangi's arrival, I had the accidental opportunity of receiving the EAM, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee with Commissioner MK Mangalmurti when he arrived in Hong Kong, unexpectedly, on a hovercraft ferry after cutting short his visit to China on account of their attack on Vietnam.

Hong Kong was the citadel of Sindhis, with tiny sprinkling of Malayali, Punjabi, Gujarati and Maharashtrian communities; around 14000 people of Indian origin living on H K Island and Kowloon out of Hong Kong's total population of 4.5 million, they used to contribute to roughly 20 per cent of Hong Kong's GDP of over US\$15.5 bn. They had Hindu temple and Gurdwara on both sides and celebrated Holi, Dussehra and Baisakhi with gusto and style. Indian Commissioner had to visit both sites on important festivals to maintain cordial relations with the Indian community, largely engaged in electronics, watch manufacturing and general trading. Hari Hari Lela on the Kowloon side and K. Sital on the Hong Kong side were politically two dominant leaders; Hari was a multi-millionaire with 40-bedroom house for eight brothers living under one roof, bigger than the official residence of the Governor of Hong Kong!

They literally controlled the Hong Kong Indian Chamber of Commerce as most of its Presidents came from their families. There was also Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce, which was patronized by local Hong Kong and Chinese firms, particularly the Chinese banks. Besides, there was the Hong Kong Trade Council, which promoted all Hong Kong products and participated in foreign Trade Fairs. But Hong Kong being a free port, most of the business was conducted by private firms and their agents from all over the world. No wonder, there were 12000 buying agents representing huge MNCs and prestigious Departmental Stores in different world capitals.

In the hectic pace of work in Hong Kong, none was free for a chit chat. CEOs of various companies showed no interest in meeting our heavyweight politicians as they had nothing to sell or buy or invest in Hong Kong. Once the Speaker of our Lok Sabha was horrified when he was told that the only person he could possibly call on was the Clerk of HK City Council!

Arranging dinners/receptions for Visiting/transiting VIPs was a perennial problem. It required all the diplomatic tact, persuasion and friendly interpersonal relations to make that happen. We were fortunate to have wealthy and hospitable local HK Indian Community leaders and Heads of Indian Banks and Air India, who willingly bailed us out by sharing the burden of entertaining the visiting Indian VIPs.

Organizing the first ever Textile Exhibition and a Fashion Show at hotel Hilton was the most satisfying experience of my tenure as the First Secretary (Trade and Commerce). I was greatly helped, assisted and guided by Ms Yasmin Khan, Director of Exhibitions, TFAI (Trade Fair Authority of India), who had coordinated from Delhi and had come down two days before when I had made most of the arrangements. Three months in advance, I had sent flyers about our exhibition to over 5000 buying agents based in Hong Kong. Two months in advance, I had installed big hoardings in the city at 30 strategic locations. One month in advance, we put up posters on 20 Double Decker buses. Two weeks before the event, I bought ten- second announcements on three TV channels and local radio stations, which were repeated every one hour. Finally, one day in advance, I had a 40-page special supplement in colour brought out by the *Hong Kong Standard*, which was delivered with the news paper to its 75000 subscribers and sold on news stand. The prestigious *South China Morning Post* also carried a four-page special supplement about our exhibition. We brought out posters, which were sent to various Chambers of Commerce and Trade Promotion organizations, colleges and community associations. We also brought out a 50-page A4 size brochure allocating one page each to 45 participating companies. Thus, we created a buzz and interest in this textile exhibition, which helped us attract buyers as well as visitors.

The highlight, obviously, was the Fashion Show for which garments were organized by Ms Vimla Patil, redoubtable Editor of Femina. I selected eight models after interviewing more than two dozen professional models; several of them were already appearing on TV shows, so the public could identify them. The Fashion show was such a big hit that on the

request of HK Chamber of Commerce, we had to organize a repeat show the next day.

What amazed me the most was the professional ability of the Company I had hired to set up the Exhibition. To transform Hilton Hotel's Crystal Ball room, which was used for dinner and dance till 23.59.00 hrs into a Exhibition Hall with 45 independent stalls with sign boards, signage, entrance gate, a cat walk for fashion show, registration counters, chairs, Director's chamber and meeting places for buyers and sellers by 6 PM the following day was something to be seen to believe. And to dismantle the exhibition in three hours and carry away all their stuff; none could believe there was an exhibition there.

From Hong Kong, I returned to the HQ in early 1981 and served as DS (EA) under three illustrious Secretaries: Eric Gonsalves, K. Shankar Bajpai and Kanwar Natwar Singh. As there was no Director, I was the Deputy Head of the EA Division. Working with these three senior diplomats with totally different individualistic working styles and Ranjit Sethi, JS(EA), a hard task master and a known hard line China watcher, whose proficiency in Chinese language was as good as in French, was very exhausting, but a useful and educating experience. India-China border talks started in 1982; as DS(EA), I also participated in three rounds of India-China Border talks, though I didn't study the Chinese language nor had I served in China. I actually handled the discussions regarding property dispute between India-China after the conflict of 1962. And thanks to Amb. Ranjit Sethi, I officially accompanied the then EAM, Shri PV Narasimha Rao on his official visit to Hong Kong and South Korea. I also visited China, Japan and North Korea on official trips though I was just a Deputy Secretary. I got to see the EAM and Amb. AP Venkateshwaran in China and Amb. KPS Menon in Japan in action. We handled the visit of the Japanese PM Nakasone, which paved the way for big Japanese investment inflow that facilitated the rolling out of Maruti cars with Suzuki collaboration.

Mansarovar Kailash pilgrimage began during my tenure as DS (EA), actually the lottery for the first trip was drawn in my room in the South Block; we used to receive so many recommendations from various sources with political connections. One Heavyweight politician told me that I was welcome to have a lottery draw, but his candidate must come out a winner! We also had tough time in getting Sujatha Singh, whose handlers lost way in a dangerous blizzard and landed in the Chinese territory after overnight journey on the back of a yak, located and airlifted after senior level diplomatic parleys between the Indian and the

Chinese authorities.

In July 1984, from Delhi, I was posted to Damascus, the capital of Syria. But it wasn't like today. Syria was politically stable and safe under the authoritarian one-party rule of Hafiz al Assad, father of the present President Bashar al Assad. Syria, Libya, and Algeria had formed a Rejectionist Axis, which opposed any kind of contact and interaction with Israel. The Palestinian Leader, Yasser Arafat was still holed up in Lebanon. Actually, he was being evacuated under the UN cover from Lebanon to Tunis, capital of Tunisia. But his departure was precarious; he was being bombarded by Israel as well as by some factions of the PLO based in Damascus, such as the Popular Front and the Democratic Front. They were opposed to Arafat. When Mrs Indira Gandhi died, President Hafez al Assad visited the Chancery to write the Condolences book as did the leaders of all the Palestinian Factions; it was rumoured in a hush hush tone that the dreaded Palestinian leader, Abu Nidal, wanted for various terrorist attacks, had also come incognito to pay his homage to the Indian PM. It underlined the high esteem in which Indira Gandhi was held in the Arab world as their staunch friend and supporter.

For the daily necessities, which the foreign diplomats are used to including the liquor (banned in Syria), we used to depend on the Lebanese border town Shatoura. As there was no Air India flight to Damascus, our diplomatic bag used to be carried to Lebanon where at Madhwani's glass factory in Shatoura, we used to exchange incoming and outgoing bags with the diplomats of the Indian Embassy in Beirut.

From there, I went to London to serve as the Counsellor (Press, Information and Culture). But it too was not the London of today. It was London under the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher.

**Bala:** When was this?

**SK:** I am talking about October 1987. The Fleet Street was still there though most of major dailies were moving away to dockyard in their new, modern and far more spacious offices with latest equipments and gadgets in glass and steel skyscrapers. Interacting, interfacing, befriending and cultivating influential media barons and known columnists was the most fascinating experience of my years at the India House. Generally speaking, British journalists are, arguably, the most well read, inquisitive and objective scribes anywhere in the world.

With the strong support of the High Commissioner (M. Rasgotra), I was able to send the Chief Editor of the *Times of London* to India with his wife. This resulted in favourable coverage in the *Times* till Charles Brown was the Chief Editor. In fact, he became so friendly that he sent MJ Akbar's article on Nehru's birth Centenary, commissioned at my recommendation, to have a look and change in any manner I wanted. It was carried on the Centre op-ed page of the *Times* with the headline: **Why Tanks will not Roll on the Streets of Delhi**. Similarly, at the height of the Khalistani movement in Punjab, I managed to send the renowned Irish politician, diplomat and writer, Conor Cruise O'Brien to India. After spending almost two weeks meeting all shades of players in Punjab, he wrote two long central op-eds for the *Times*, which were also carried by the *New York Times*; these were considered the most dispassionate and fair articles written by a foreign journalist about the sensitive subject of the Sikh militancy in Punjab.

Again, with High Commissioner Rasgotra's blessings, I organized exclusive performances by such celebrated maestros as Pt Ravi Shankar, Pt Bhim Sen Joshi (both Bharat Ratna awardees) and Pt Jasraj (Padma Vibhushan) at the High Commission for an august gathering of 100 guests only! We also hosted a joint reception for Pt Ravi Shankar and famous conductor Zubin Mehta at the High Commission. But the biggest event was, of course, the unveiling of a bust of Indira Gandhi at India House by the British PM Margaret Thatcher. A couple of months later, the Queen opened the Nehru Gallery at V&A Museum, which made it possible for the museum to display a large number of Indian object d'arts, which, otherwise, remained dumped in the basement for years. It was possible thanks to generous donations of the British Indian community.

**Bala:** where did you go from London?

**SK:** From London, I went to Mozambique as Ambassador. I was concurrently High Commissioner to the Kingdom of Swaziland. In many ways, both were unique. In Swaziland, the monarchy still flourished and the King was considered blessed by the Divine. A beautiful, tiny and landlocked country, it could rival Switzerland in natural beauty. And Mozambique, the poorest country on earth as per UN Statistics, was still facing the civil war in which Mozambicans were killing Mozambicans; the Frelimo government headed by Alberto Chissano was perceived to be close to the Soviet Union, while Renamo Rebels under Afonso Dhlakama were supported by the US, France, South Africa and Portugal. While the capital



and major cities were under government control, most of rural areas were controlled by the Rebels. Getting an Indian contingent to participate in the UN Peace Keeping Mission in Mozambique (UNOMOZ), renowned Flutist Pt Hari Prasad Chaurasia, disciples of Pt Birju Maharaj and Aditi Mangal Das and Indian rocker Remo Fernandez, and organizing Indian film festivals were serious efforts in cultural diplomacy in a war-torn country where foreign diplomats were not allowed to go beyond 12 Km from the city centre in its capital Maputo. We also organized the first ever food festival at hotel Polana where Indian dishes were prepared under the supervision of the wives of the Embassy officials and engineers of IOC. Besides, President Chissano, the Speaker of the Parliament and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Culture, attended the dinner along with 300 other guests. I used to meet, occasionally, Mme Graca Machel, little knowing that, one day, she will marry the South African President, legendary Nelson Mandela!

From Mozambique, I went to Libya under the mercurial self proclaimed Leader of the Revolution, Col Qaddafi or Gadhafi. Who could have imagined that one day, he would meet that kind of tragic fate he did; one of his own countrymen put the bullet in his head.

**Bala:** It would have been quite a new experience.

**SK:** Yes, it was. I came there in 1995 and I stayed till the beginning of 2000, thus setting a record of having served the longest as India's Ambassador for over five years. Libya under the UN and US sanctions and air embargo was a tough call. One could arrive in Tripoli from Malta after an overnight journey in boat or come to Jerbah, Tunisian port city on the Libyan border from Rome and drive down to Tripoli in a car covering a distance of 400 KM; it involved going through Immigration and Custom clearances on the border. Though most of the employees of the IRCC, NBCC and TCIL and other private companies had gone back to India, we still had around 14000 workers of the UNITECH, SSB and DS Construction Co building roads, ports, prisons and housing units. We also had a few hundred doctors, engineers, teachers and nurses working in different parts of Libya. Resolving their day to day problems vis-a-vis their employers and the local government was a time consuming and tedious job. Having helped in breaking 110 days long strike by the workers of SSB; organizing an eight hours long cultural night involving over 250 local amateur artists and raising several lakh rupees for the victims of Kargil conflict, facilitating a huge turbine contract for BHEL, forming Hindustani Qaumi Ekta forum and hosting Kavi Sammelans and

Mushairas kept us busy in otherwise tough and monotonous atmosphere. It was heartening to see over 1000 Libyans dance on the song, *Mere Sapno ki Rani Kab Ayegi Tu* when Aradhana was screened and the Foreign Minister Umar Mustafa al Muntasir expressing his admiration for Dilip Kumar's Mughal-e-Azam.

I left Tripoli for Chicago in February 2000 to serve as the Consular General.

**Bala:** Must have been quite a new experience with a lot of people of Indian origin?

**SK:** It was a great experience. Actually, people in India don't have an idea of what the Consul Generals do. They think that their main job is stamping visas, issuing passports and extending other consular services: birth registration, death registration, etc. But it is much more complex and demanding in the USA than any other country. When I look back, I feel, if one has not sort of served in the US, one has missed something unique, because the entire work culture and expectations, the whole scope of one's responsibilities and pressing need of interacting with diverse influential opinion makers are so different. It's quite challenging, but educating and rewarding as well in its own ways. Also depending upon your Ambassador in Washington, you could generate enormous goodwill for India by being imaginative, proactive and willing to go an extra mile to be of help to those, who approach the consulate for various services, i.e., facilitate, streamline and extend speedy public friendly consulate services. Be helpful to media, be prompt and resourceful in addressing issues related to commerce, trade and business. And, of course, to ingratiate and cultivate close relations with the Congressmen Senators, Governors, Mayors and Presidents of leading universities are indispensable. These contacts come handy when our Embassy needs mobilization of support for some of its initiatives with the US government; for example, the campaign for lifting the US sanctions imposed after India carried out nuclear tests in May 1998. But it requires considerable adjustment in attitude and approach. Most of the Indian CGs in USA had already served as Ambassadors in two countries and have got used to be addressed as Your Excellency and used to travel in Mercedes cars with Indian flag. And as Ambassadors, they fly in First Class on official duty. All this became a thing of the past. In Mozambique and Libya, I was entitled to be a member of a Golf Course and the MEA willingly paid for the membership fee. But not in the US, here this privilege could be availed of only by the Ambassador in Washington! So, serving as the CG after having served as an Ambassador turns out to be sort of demotion in terms of protocol and entitlements.

Unlike in India, lobbying is a legal and honourable profession in the US; it is not a dirty word. Some American Ambassadors act as Lobbyists after retirement. And lobbying is done in numerous different forms and ways. For the diplomats, lobbying means trying to put across your country's viewpoint, articulating and explaining its policies and decisions and trying to create constituencies, which can help you nudge policies of the country of your posting that might serve your country's interests. For the first time, at my own initiative, I started reaching out to educational institutions like universities, law colleges and other institutions of higher education as well as the academic community, which, unlike India, are taken very seriously by the US government. For example, before his departure from Washington to India in March 2000, President Clinton got Professor Rudolf Lloyd, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago for 45-minute exclusive briefing on India. Similarly, I am told, prior to his visit to India, President George Bush Jr. was briefed about India by the President of Chicago Council of Global Affairs.

For practicing economic diplomacy, there couldn't have been better places than Kellogg School of Management, North-western University and the Chicago Graduate School of Business of University of Chicago. I tried to befriend both and organized a series of discussions/talks at both the Institutions. I organized half a dozen functions at the Kellogg School of Management, such as India in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Gandhi in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, India-US as Natural Partners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with seven-eight Panellists, which included academics, Congressmen/Senators, diplomats, journalist and representatives of leading business firms. Once, I pitted Prof Raghuram Rajan, currently the Governor of the RBI and late Prof CK Prahlad, renowned Management Guru to discuss: **Assessing and Evaluating India's Economic Reforms since 1991; the session was chaired by Dr Gary Becker, Nobel Laureate for Economics.** Barely five weeks after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack at the twin-towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, I organized a panel discussion at the International House of Chicago University: **Relevance of Gandhian Thought after September 11, 2001, which was chaired by Dr Lawrence Carter, Dean of Martin Luther King Jr. Chapel in Atlanta; and the Panel** included the President of Chicago University, Don Randel, President of Chicago Humanities Festival, Dr Eileen Mackevich, and four others. And all these events and other cultural initiatives were undertaken without burdening the MEA for fund. To create institutional mechanisms for promoting Indian business and investment in India, I helped in launching **India-US**

**Chamber of Commerce for Mid-West at Kellogg** in the presence of the Presidents of three major universities of Chicago: University of Chicago, North-Western and North-Eastern universities, several Congressmen and Senators and representatives of more than a dozen Fortune 500 companies. It was the first time that such a Chamber was founded.

Similarly, to promote warmer and closer people-to-people relations, I conceived and helped in launching: **Indo-American Friendship Association, Chicago with Dr Sam Pitroda and Tom Miner, President of Mid America Committee, as Co-Chairs.** IAFA Chicago had some of the finest brains from different walks of life, such as Prof Dipak Jain, Dean Kellogg School of Management, Prof Raghuram Rajan and Prof Martha Nussbom from Chicago University and a Congressman, an Editor, Curator from Chicago Arts Council, Director of an Arts Gallery and Reps of some MNCs on it's Advisory Council. As the name suggests, it's objective was to promote greater friendship between India and the US through non-official channels.

Besides being the stronghold of the Democratic Party, Chicago was home of prominent American politicians. One such politician was Henry Hyde, the Chairman of the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs. My close relations with him helped us weather some tough political developments. For example, when in 2002, Dan Burton, rabidly anti-Indian and pro-Pakistani Congressman was likely to become the Chairman of Asia Committee, Henry was of great help.

**Bala:** How?

**SK:** Given Burton's record, we were very concerned. Ambassador Lalit Mansingh held a meeting of all the Consul Generals in Washington and asked them to reach out to Congressmen in their regions and lobby that Burton didn't get the job. As I was in Chicago, I had interacted with and hosted Henry Hyde, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Congress a couple of times for lunch and knew a few influential Indian Americans, who were very friendly to Henry. Thanks to one such friend's intervention, Henry himself phoned Amb. Lalit Mansingh and assured that he would see to it that Burton didn't become the Chairman of the Asia Committee and if he still did, he would shift India to the Asia-Pacific Committee. And that's what happened; India was shifted to the Committee headed by Jim Leach.

But I derived the maximum satisfaction from my efforts in the field of public and cultural diplomacy. I organized the first ever **Retrospectives of Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt, screening nine films of each with English sub-titles** at the prestigious **Gene Siskel Film Centre** and a festival of **Immortal Classics of Bollywood** at the same Centre and also screened some of the films at some prestigious universities. While Shyam Benegal came to North-Western University for six weeks to speak on films/cinema, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan not only performed at Chicago University and North-Eastern University, but stayed there for several days to give demo talk on Indian classical music. We were proud of having hosted the likes of Pt Ravi Shankar, Pt Shiv Kumar Sharma, Pt Jasraj, Pt Hari Prasad Chaurasia, Ustad Zakir Hussain, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Dr Soanl Mansingh, Pt. Birju Maharaj, Dev Anand, Shyam Benegal, Jaya Bachchan, Randhir Kapoor, Nandita Das, Raj Babbar, Jagjit Singh, Shabana Azmi, Sunil Gangopadhyay, MT Vasudevan Nair, Usha Uthup at our official residence. Mahatma Gandhi's one and half time life-like statue was unveiled by Prime Minister Vajpayee and the US President Bill Clinton in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington in September 2000. It took the Embassy almost 50 years; the proposal was initiated sometime in 1949. I got Gandhi Ji's statue of the same size and weight and same dimensions, created by the same sculptor, Gautam Paul, unveiled in front of Milwaukee County Courthouse in Milwaukee on October 5, 2002, thanks to the financial help and legal requirements organized by Darshan Singh Dhaliwal, the most prominent Sikh Indian American in the Mid-West.

**Bala:** And where did you land in after your American odyssey?

**SK:** Well, I was thinking that after my excellent work, I will be rewarded with a good posting or allowed to return to HQ as has been the case with others of my seniority. But neither happened as

I had no Godfather to back up my case at the HQ. So, I was consigned to Africa once again, i.e. Kenya, in spite of my written objections. Once there, as is my wont, I set out to do as many new things as I could possibly do in spite of prevailing security problems. As PR to UNEP and UN-HABITAT, I not only attended meetings and deliberations, but used the UNEP HQ for public diplomacy. I organized panel discussions on **Gandhi in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; Is the Gandhian Path the Right Way Forward in the War-torn World?; Nehru's Non-alignment in the Globalised World Today with the participation of the**

**likes of Prof Wangari Mathaai, who won a Nobel Prize for Peace and former President, Arap Moi and several Cabinet Ministers.** We also organized a mega festival of Bollywood classics, which was inaugurated at Fox Theatre by the Vice President, Moody Awori, and screened 21 films with English sub-titles on consecutive days. Subsequently, we organized Retrospectives of the films of Amitabh Bachchan and Shahrukh Khan. We also helped organize the performances by Dr Sonal Mansingh, Pt Shiv Kumar Sharma and Ustad Zakir Hussain, renowned Sarod Maestro, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and his two sons – Amaan and Ayaan, Hema Malini and her two daughters, Asha Bhosle, Jagjit Singh, Usha Uthup and others. I also arranged the visits of Shyam Benegal, MJ Akbar and Saeed Naqvi without MEA's help.

To promote trade and commerce, I helped form **India-Kenya Chamber of Commerce/India-Kenya Trade Council**, which was inaugurated by the Kenyan Commerce Minister. At my initiative, we organized an International Food Festival in which 45 embassies participated at Hotel Intercontinental; we served delicacies of 45 countries to 800 guests and raised a large sum of funds, which was presented to the President of Kenya for HIV/AIDS victims.

I was happy that in spite of insecure environment; we could be carjacked or attacked anywhere any time, I never missed a single official engagement on this count and raised the profile of bilateral relations. But sadly, the MEA couldn't agree to invite either the President of Kenya or the Foreign Minister to India. They should have invited both and some other Ministers of Economic Ministries as was done by China.

**Bala:** Well, we have covered almost all your postings. I think, now, we have time for just one more question.

**SK:** Yeah, I would now touch upon my last posting as the Dean FSI/Secretary MEA, which I consider the most productive and memorable. I myself feel amazed how all that was done in such a short period, that too, when I had returned to India after 22 years of exile! I came back to Delhi in November 2006. We were already shifting FSI from Akbar Hotel to the new premises in Ber Sarai near old JNU campus. It took us nearly three months to shift; when I arrived at the new building, it was a warehouse which felt like a ghost town at night. We had to put all the curtains/blinders, additional air-conditioners, plants/planters and ensure raising of the boundary walls, deployment of security guards, functioning of toilets, swimming pool,

kitchen, tennis courts, etc. In fact, the caterer, who has been running the kitchen ever since there, was selected by me. Almost 30 per cent of my time was spent in addressing day to day fire fighting issues and making the new premises fully operational. Besides, I tried to give it an elegant and aesthetically appealing ambiance. So, most of the object d'arts and framed paintings etc. were organized by me. After a lot of efforts, we became operational, but only by February 2007. As I was to retire in February 2008, I was left with just 12 months! In this short span, as many as eight Cabinet Ministers: Home affairs, Finance, HRD, Science and Technology, Panchayat Raj, Railways, External Affairs, Welfare and Empowerment and the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission attended the FSI functions. But in all, a total of 29 eminent individuals addressed the budding Indian diplomats; the list of speakers included Prof Wangari Mathaai, Nobel Peace Laureate; Dr Sam Pitroda, Chairman, National Knowledge Commission; Dr. Azim Premji; Sunil Bharti Mittal; Lord Meghnad Desai, Prof Economics, LSE; Dr Raghuram Rajan, Chief Economist, IMF; Prof. Dipak Jain, Dean Kellogg School of Management; Dr. Vishakha Desai, President, Asia Society, New York; the Chief Election Commissioner; the Chairman, Administrative Reform Commission; the Chairman, INTACH; the Chairman, National Human Rights Commission; Lt Gen Satish Nambiar, former UN Force Commander in Yugoslavia; Dr Sonal Mansingh; Ustad Amjad Ali Khan; MJ Akbar; Saeed Naqvi, Amb. of USA; and others.

To make the professional course for foreign diplomats really comprehensive, I increased the number of lectures from 56 to 112, an increase of 100 per cent! I believed then and I still do that serving and retired Indian diplomats aren't the sole repository of all the wisdom and understanding of foreign affairs. Therefore, newly recruited Indian diplomats should be exposed to the widest possible range of viewpoints to widen their mental horizon. No wonder, **in the foreword of the book: India of My Dreams, the EAM, Pranab Mukherjee mentioned that the lectures by eminent personalities at the FSI constituted an integral part of our diplomats' training.**

For me, training wasn't just listening to lectures and gleaning through files. It was also to sharpen their talent, encourage them to ask questions and articulate their views verbally and in writing and also expand their artistic talents. The in-house magazine: **Friendship Beyond Borders, which I started**, encouraged them to address serious questions and also to share their talent for writing poetry and stories. In this brief period, the FSI also organized a Hindi Kavi Sammelan and Mushaira, a Kathak dance performance and an

evening of Jazz by Jazz musicians from Denmark.

To help them keep fit, a well equipped Gym was created in the Residential wing of the FSI.

To have a comprehensive look at the whole training of the IFS probationers and to align the role of the FSI and the Dean in the scheme of functioning of the MEA, at my own initiative, I appointed Dr Abid Hussain Committee, which also included former Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh, Amb. Kishan Rana and three others.

Lastly, to commemorate the memory of the Architect of India's Foreign Policy, against some resistance from within the MEA, I got a huge bust of Pt Jawaharlal Nehru installed in the Reception lobby of the FSI, which was unveiled by the then EAM, Shri Pranab Mukherjee when he inaugurated the new premises of the FSI in August 2007. For me, it was a dream come true of my tenure as the Dean of the FSI.

I was saddened to note that the Ministry deliberately kept the Dean out of the loop of major decisions of the MEA, though he was the second senior most IFS officer at the HQ after the Foreign Secretary. He was rarely invited to the banquets hosted for the visiting Presidents/Prime Ministers. While he was allowed to visit countries like Morocco and Saudi Arabia to interact with their diplomatic academies, though they had very little to offer, invitations extended to him by countries like Canada and Germany, which have excelled in e-training couldn't be availed of as the necessary clearance from the concerned authorities strangely never came through.

\*\*\*