

The Ambassador Extraordinary: Representing India

Being the 29th Wilhelm von Pochhammer Memorial Lecture

delivered by Dr. Gopalkrishna Gandhi

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To Ambassador Ronen Sen, the distinguished President of the Federation of Indo-German Societies in India, I offer sincere thanks for his most generous invitation to me to give the 29th Wilhelm von Pochhammer Memorial Lecture. As also, to its secretary, my valued friend from school days, Anand Singh Bawa.

There is the ‘scholar-diplomat’ and there is the ‘diplomat-scholar’. In a scholar-diplomat, diplomacy is scholarly; in a diplomat-scholar, scholarship is diplomatic. Wilhelm von Pochhammer’s scholarship did not come from reading short books on long flights. Nor, from writing long books on several hopping flights. Over the many decades spent in scholarly diplomacy he met Lenin, Gandhi, Nehru, Zhou En-lai and also many very ‘regular’ folk who do not belong to the mastheads of history. Pochhammer reflected on his conversations with all of them, matching his observation with what was ‘in the air’, balancing the seen with the heard, before setting down his book on his principal interest, India. ‘India’s Road to Nationhood’ is not the most easy book to read but then India is not the most easy of subjects to study.

In asking me to give this lecture in Pochhammer’s memory, the Federation has placed me in its debt, serious debt. And all those gathered in this hall, at risk, serious risk for, until Ambassador Sen’s invitation to me, the life-work of Pochhammer was unknown to me and my knowledge of Germany itself minimal and adventitious. Starting with a child’s awe at my father’s versatile Leica camera, it had flowed into delight at the smoothness of the Mont Blanc nib and still later at the hold that a pair of Steiner binoculars has had on my wife’s bird-watching hours. This awe of German technology received an unexpected reinforcement which connects me to the subject of this evening’s lecture.

When I was working at the cultural wing of our High Commission in London in the mid-1990s, I called on the Bengali polymath Nirad C. Chaudhuri in his Oxford home. He ushered me into his book-lined sitting room with the exaggerated flourish of an eighteenth century English squire and within minutes decided to educate me about – of all things – firearms. Dominating the monologue was the Mauser rifle. His enraptured description of firing pins, bolts and rings was of zero interest to me. Delighted that I knew nothing of something he knew all about, my host then shot a question from the Great Unknown: Did I know what firearm was used for the murder of Prince Ferdinand, Archduke of Bavaria? Of course I did not. Niradbabu was even more thrilled because along with my ignorance of ballistics there stood exposed my ignorance, in general, of European history and, in particular, the detail that it was a Browning that started the First World War. And then came another bolt: Did I know that the Mauser factory had been bombed by the Allied Air Force in World War II, killing several workers? I did not and must say the information shook me. Those workers were

simple men, sons, husbands, fathers. Were they Nazi? Most likely not. And they were blasted out of life for doing what all of us want to do – earn bread to take home to the family.

The Niradian inquisition continued until, shot like a bullet during truce, came a loaded question: “Who exactly is His Excellency now? I mean India’s Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in London?” He said those words ‘extraordinary’ and ‘plenipotentiary’ to the fullest potential of their phonetic scope. The then High Commissioner for India in London was not exactly unknown. But that was not the point. The polymath wanted to miniaturise the line of India’s High Commissioners in Britain from V K Krishna Menon, B G Kher, Vijayalakshmi Pandit down to the present hour. He wanted that stream to look like a row of ants proceeding to a sugar bowl that is empty. I was not going to take that lying down. Whence, ladies and gentlemen,

Ambassadors Extraordinary: Representing India.

Within the padded walls of a Chancery, its diplomatic personnel have their own assessments of the Head of Mission. These can vary from the abjectly admiring in the HoM’s chambers where there is conversation (*varta*) to the front lobby where discussion (*charcha*) happens, to the unsparingly scathing in the back stairway which is the scene of pure *gup*. But outside those precincts, there works such a thing as an embassy’s collective ego. A swipe at the HoM is a swipe at the mission; a swipe at the mission is a swipe at India itself. *Izzat kar ke bhi hoti hai baat*. I not only disliked the polyglot’s question but the way it was put. Taking my turn at exploring the fullness of phonetics, I supplied Niradbabu the name – Doctor Lakshmi-Malla-Singhavi – making it sound as much like an excerpt from ‘Sri-Vishnu-sahasra-nama-stotra-namavaliyam’ as I could and gave a brief description of my High Commissioner’s distinguished attributes such as legal luminary, scholar, poet. And then, giving him no chance to put a supplementary, I asked him what he thought of the British institution of Poet Laureate and managed to change the subject.

To be sure, Niradbabu’s attempt at miniaturizing was unnecessary. Chancery *izzat* apart, the fact is that even by the 1990s, Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary had begun to look like a line of moving dots, more extra than extraordinary, and as for ‘plenipotentiary’, neither ‘plenus’ (full) nor ‘potens’ (empowered). The annihilation of distances by digital instantaneity and the annulment of time by 24x7 multi-media immediacies, had connected all capitals to New Delhi, every form and feature of reportage to South Block, North Block and the many-wired and un-wired receiving points in India’s capital where breaking news is a full-time occupation and making rumours, a nearly full-time one. By the time the world entered its twenty-first century CE, an Indian ambassador’s reflexes be they ever so quick had been overtaken by high technologies of communication and undermined by low psychologies of misinformation. The honest-to-goodness ambassador, trained to read Nehru and Panikkar for Indian history, The International Herald Tribune for world news, The New Yorker for enlightenment and learn never to put the butter knife on a piece of toast or the dinner knife on his tongue, was fast becoming a curiosity. The ambassador who observed, discussed, analysed, noted things around him and wrote with idiomatic care and grammatical flawlessness to people who read with attention was gone. Nobody really had the time for all that any more. Nobody really cared any more to appreciate or understand the fact that culture

is not about being loud but about being restrained, efficiency is not about being fast but about being sound. Quick conveying, rapid absorption was what was now needed. Delhi now wanted from an ambassador one-liners on a one-page note or two-liners in two minutes of talk.

An ambassador was expected to render what was the equivalent of first aid, everything being urgent, every call an immediacy, every car drive ambulatory, every flight out an emergency. What was called a new professionalism was in fact only a reliable uniformity, a predictable operational norm. There is a certain reassurance in standardisation for the standard minister who wants an ambassador to be standard. Render timely assistance, guidance, provide the right references, cite the right rules and precedents, be a rapid-fire memory system, speaking when spoken to, writing when asked to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard, never otherwise. Occasionally, an ambassador suspected of being well read may be tapped for quotable quotes such as from Kalidasa for an Eastern audience, Gandhi for a Western, Tagore for East, West, North, South. The professional ambassador needs to be an excellent Excellency but not a brilliant one. Brilliance shines. Ambassadors must only provide the polish for the minister then to shine. Excellencies should be excellent, not exceptional. They should be appreciated but not admired. They must deflect admiration from themselves to the minister, to the country. So, make your work, not impress; choose your words, sift them, to convey, not impress.

The Tamil classic Tirukkural, believed to have been written between 1 BCE and 8 CE, has a delicious set of ten couplets (from out of 133) exclusively on The Envoy. The author has observed the role, the manner, the genre of ambassadors. Valluvar says

Devoted loyalty, mastery of political lore, gift of the sifted word

These three make an envoy fit to speak for his lord

Graul's 1865 German translation of the Kural was made available to me by Professor Milind Brahme of IIT-Madras and Professor Thomas Mueller of the University of Wurzburg. This particular couplet has for 'the gift of the sifted word'

Liebe, Wissen und die Gabe das wohl Gedachte wohl vorzutragen –

which has the sense of something that has been carefully thought of, carefully conceived and carefully presented. Very diplomatic, indeed.

Devotion, loyalty to the King, are a desideratum. Mastery of political lore refers to what may be called diplomatic history, especially in relation to the politics of the concerned territories. But most important in the couplet is 'gift of the sifted word'. That gift, the sifted word, the chosen phrase, the rinsed expression, is calculated often to get the right thing done by posing it pleasingly, to get a proposed demarche approved, a wrong emphasis removed, a right stress introduced.

I will cite but one more Kural describing the envoy:

Who is in conduct never in error, in court never resourceless

Brave, ever, and truthful, is as an envoy priceless

Graul's German translation of this has for resourcefulness and bravery, *Entschlossenheit* with a suggestion (I am told) of resoluteness and for truthfulness, *Wahrhaftigkeit* which carries the further reinforcement of veracity.

These are classicisms of diplomacy, its quintessentials. An ambassador who knows the time and place for things is the classical envoy, the quintessential ambassador extraordinary. *Samay-sthan dekho pehle, bolo uske baad*. But a neo-classical interpretation has now arisen which takes away from the sifted word the beauty of uneven taffeta, replacing it with the smooth slipperiness of chiffon. The gift of the sifted word and a sense of the time and place of things have always been critical for an ambassador's progress in the science or art of diplomacy. Now they are essential for the ambassador's survival.

The Ambassador as a Symbol

An egoless egoism, a self-denying self-centredness, a modest hauteur has always marked the ambassador. The hand is personal, the handshake official. The feet, encased in close-laced Oxfords or top-of-the-vamp Derbys, flat, heeled or stiletto are all personal; the gait has to be diplomatic. The face is one's own, resembling one's grandmother, or some hermit lost to time, but the expression, oh the expression, has to be borrowed and put on, at state functions at least, from that of the leader back home. *Ayyo*, one may say in Tamil, *Ayyo*. The very quintessence of herself or himself, an adored host and adorable guest, the engaging golfer, bridge-player and movie-buff, the ambassador must graze, like a fleecy lamb, on an equal pasture. This has always been the case, and not with ambassadors of India but with ambassadors from everywhere to anywhere. But it is one thing to know 'I am a symbol', another to have to vacuum all selfhood out and fill the emptiness with the persona of the state being represented.

Ambassadors are important now not because one knows his Sanskrit, another her Urdu, one has Tagore on his finger-tips, another Yeats on her lips, one has read every R K Narayan and another knows her Graham Greene, one can paint another can pot, both have spouses who can do all these even better, and can represent, can symbolise India because they are as varied and as versatile as India but because now they must only represent, only symbolise, only be emblems of official India. They must have, at start and close of day, but one value, one supreme value: representative value. Be an ordinary 'you', be an extraordinary 'us'. *Ayyo*, as they might say in Tamil. *Ayyo Rama*.

Two new powerhouses

Even as the plenus is slipping out of the plenipotentiary, two new powerhouses are emerging. Old in origin they are now more plenus and potens than ever. They are, one, the behemoth of national security, connected to counterpart security structures and to nameless, faceless individuals no one would like to be stuck in a lift with and, two, the megalith of commerce, with its Chambers doing business with peer Chambers and with restless, ruthless individuals ambassadors have no option but to be stuck at business lunches with. Both powerhouses

function, needless to say, in frank contempt of the niceties of that Cinderella of all diplomacy, namely, protocol. And their representatives in the Mission, the Minister or First Secretary in charge of security and his counterpart in charge of trade and commerce are strong presences, very strong presences.

The diplomatic official in the Chancery dealing with security is Mister Mind. That rich brain has to have the intricate circuitries of fore and aft, capable of doing a Valluvar on a Chanakya, a Chanakya on Valluvar or, to be more contemporary, an Assange on a Snowden, a Snowden on an Assange or an Alan Rusbridger on both. He has a map of the host country which resembles a war map, pegged on arms, dossiers, deals. Must understand the working of a Mauser rifle that goes rat-a-tat-tat and of the chip that wafts unseen, unheard, unsuspected, on the back of a fly's wing. He has work to do, dangerous work, messy work. And so he is not to be messed with. Terror, you see, is the truth today. The truth none may deny. The rest is, shall we say, gift-wrap or confetti. Not all of the rest, though. There is one very golden ribbon there.

The diplomatic official in charge of trade and commerce, investments and joint ventures, is the other figure of substance in the mission whose 4G data-base puts the ambassador's diaries in the shade. She or he knows that it is by who buys from us and what we buy from who that will make the mission rank as viable or un-viable. Ours is the age of intelligence. If her 'Security' colleague collects political intelligence, she collects market intelligence. Her map belongs to a GPS cartography of moves too, pegged on oil, gas, on petro-dollars. Her moves are fuelled by the play of the market's forces, no less belligerent than an army's.

This leaves the traditional diplomatist in the ambassador, with but an uncertain hold over three prerogatives of pure representation: first, the hopeless task of interesting host media in India; second, that bane of all diplomatic missions, namely, consular business; third, the thankless duty of attending to VIP visitors from back home coming with impossible dietary prejudices, shopping preferences and quirks of personality that lie beyond choreography, beyond filmography. Neither of them is so crass as to undermine the ambassador but they do, unwittingly often, bypass the ambassador and that is not a DLQ – it is not a diplomat like quality.

Ordinarily, the ambassador is surrounded by flocks of people, a forest of handshakes, a flowing mist of hugs. But the ambassador is lonely, lonely as hell, in moments when a different clock back home and an indifferent mind, will not give her the instructions, much less the intelligence and even less, cripplingly less, the wisdom, to deal with an issue that has arisen, in real time, agonisingly real time, at the site of her work. 'Sort it yourself', the ambassador is told, 'these are not things for which you should turn to Headquarters'. Sort it. Easy to say from Raisina Hill. If sorted well, no thanks will be due. If sorted ill, God help you.

But. Yes, but. When occasion demands, which is ever so often, as when a ghoulish riot in Gujarat gets all Hindus painted as racist and communal, when an abominable crime in the national capital get a tendentious global media showing all of India as savage, when a sportsman testing positive has all Indian sport seen as drugging, when a minister sentenced for misappropriation gets Indian democracy itself portrayed as rotten, when all that and more

happens to embarrass India, misrepresent and misreport India, who speaks for India abroad, who fights for India in the lonely corridors of world opinion, who sifts the transient from the abiding, the blatant *asatya* from an ambivalent *satya*? Who is used by an over-heated India, then, and quietly forgotten when it has cooled? It is the ambassador of India, and no one else, who is required to transmute herself or himself then from a fleece of wool into a battering ram and raise a many-antlered head on the promontory of India's prestige. And that is when she is so extraordinary or he is, and so plenipotentiary.

The razor's edge – the *kshurasya-dhara* – of lonely decision-making, of un-supported fending, of solitary drafting, speaking, acting in an ambassador's life is sharp. And then there is danger.

The Ambassador in Danger

Despite being a proxy person, dressed like someone he is not for the sake of someone – his Sovereign – he does not necessarily admire, speaking for someone she does not necessarily agree with, keeping the company of people he does not relate to, toasting someone she wouldn't really care to see for the next hundred years, playing golf with gentlemen who, when the ninth hole is done, he would not want to spend an extra minute with, hugging and being hugged by people she would not, left to herself, want to touch with two gloves on, the ambassador is yet in danger, personal not proxy danger. She is, or he is, in need or dire need, of protection.

Ambassadors have received the flying dart of extraordinary deaths for no reason than that though empty – inanis – in their personal egos they are replete – plenus – in their professional fullness. The 1963 film *Cleopatra* is remembered for Rex Harrison's witty dialogues as Caesar, Richard Burton's angry good looks as Mark Antony and, of course, above all else, for Elizabeth Taylor's dramatic acting as Cleopatra. The one frame from that film that has remained firmly graven in my mind is, however, NOTA. It is that of the spearing, at the Forum, of Cleopatra's tutor, adviser and then envoy to Rome, the Greek astronomer Sosigenes, long-time resident of Alexandria. Imagine Egypt sending a Grecian as ambassador to Rome. Extraordinary diplomacy. In the film Hume Cronyn plays the short role, receiving the spear hurled by Octavian with an expression of 'Why, but why?' and of 'I cannot believe you have done this', and then falling gently over. An incredible similarity links that old frame to the chillingly real scene of but a few days ago, showing the murder of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara. YouTube footage of but yesterday shows Ambassador Andrei Karlov exactly as it does Sosigenes of over two thousand years ago, Ambassadors Extraordinary, both, done to death for symbolising that which they represented which is not themselves.

Starting with John Gordon Mein, Lyndon Johnson's ambassador to Guatemala who was shot dead in 1968 when returning from a State Department lunch, to Ambassador Chris Stevens killed in Tripoli five years ago, the USA has lost some seven invaluable diplomats to assassination. If Bolivia's Ambassador to Paris was shot dead by a group calling itself the International Che Guevara Brigades in 1976, the French Ambassador to Beirut was shot dead in 1981. Wikipedia tells us there have been others. There is such a thing as the diplomatic life. There is no such thing as the diplomatic death. Death is death, murder is murder. They

are for real. Indian ambassadors have been under the cobra's hood for years and continue to do so. On the flamed wick of the ordinary Indian security guard glows the safe-keeping of our Ambassadors Extraordinary. And this is true not just of Heads of Mission but of all those who serve in Diplomatic Missions for they are all clothed in the colours of diplomatic representation. The abduction and murder in 1984 of Ravindra Mhatre, a diplomatic official in India's Deputy High Commission in Birmingham, has burned itself into the history of India's diplomatic missions. Forty-eight years old at the time of killing, he could conceivably have retired as an Ambassador in 1996 and been present in this audience today, a healthy eighty year old. The Mhatre murder is and will always be regarded as an inflection point in the history of India's diplomatic security.

Diplomatic missions share this with Houses of Cards: they stay, cross-leaningly together in precarious balance because a Euclidean Design of Balanced Fears keeps them in a state of timorous stability. Invisible air-waves of mutual reliance and of mutual insurance delicately poised in an exact measure of dependability or non-dependability ensure their structural integrity, vouchsafing protection. The euphemism of 'renewed assurances of the highest consideration', the finest piece of verbal artifice devised by affected courtesy, comes into real operation then, to hold within its coat of conviviality, assurances of the highest retribution.

There is a tangibly intangible or intangibly tangible protection that the Vienna Convention, by its mutually protective manoeuvres, has created. Its aura precedes armour, its image doubles up for guards. And, if the host sovereign offers guards, offers some element of what could be called 'local security' to diplomats resident in his territory, it is because of another intangibility. The exchange of envoys is, in effect, a counter-positioning of vulnerability. Each envoy is a privileged guest; each envoy is also a hostage for the security of his opposite number 'back home'. Trouble the Cambodian in Peru, the Peruvian will be in trouble in Cambodia.

The Embassy in Danger

And apart from the personal danger to an ambassador, there is another in which the importance of the diplomatic official in charge of security becomes all too clear. And that is a cyber attack on the mission itself. Wikileaks are a nightmare any ambassador would, should, dread. Today, ours is a multipolar world in another sense, the more than one or many super powers being Microsoft, Apple, Google... And in its own chilling sphere, of course, the IS.

Howsoever good and useful her First Secretary handling security matters is, an ambassador must now know cyber strategy. She may not have read Schopenhauer or Dante, she should know diplomatic and security strategy in the cyber age. He may or may not have known of the tormented soul of Albert Speer and the possibility of poisonous gases being insinuated into air-condition ducts, he should know the technologies of digital warfare, the world of cyber space, the potentialities of cyber warfare. He or she may or may not know the Queen's English, but must be a post-doc in digital English. Whether he or she knows German, French, Spanish, Arabic or not, he and she should know Java, C, C++ running Windows, Solaris, Linux. The inherently numerate if not mathematical mind of the Indian has lent itself like sugar in milk to diplomatic digitisation. I am surprised that an Indian digital language has not yet been introduced in the cyber market, inaugurated of course with bhumi-pujas and Vedic

chanting, under the name of Mantra and Mantra+++ flowing evenly, soundless, colourless, odourless, and – tasteless.

Digits at War

It is known that in 1948, 1965 and in 1971, when India and Pakistan were locked in war, one of the reasons that favoured a cessation of ballistics was the apprehension of the war escalating into a larger war, a world war. Today, there is a danger of nuclear, chemical or germ war blackmail. But whether another conventional or un-conventional war engulfs us or not, we can be certain that a cyber war is more than likely to break out between the two countries and between them and a third player in the shape of a non-state entity. Such a war is perhaps, at a low intensity, already on. And it could very easily and almost at one click or swipe become the world's third war and the first using cyber-space. I say this not by way of a smart prediction but a deep anxiety.

This possibility is having, already, two deleterious impacts.

One, the ambassador has become, inevitably, inexorably, digitised. Old style individuality being replaced by a digital sameness that perpetuates and multiplies itself indefinitely and without any mutation, not only leaves little room for an ambassador to be extraordinary. In fact ordinariness, in the sense of non-uniqueness, an un-variable predictability, a stencilled repetitiousness, a coding and a hum-drumming formatted so as to automaton the mind into just storing, receiving and sending signals, constitutes a danger. That danger is the danger of dullening reflexes that the human genome and diplomatic DNA have trained ambassadors to meet unexpected contingencies, unanticipated situations. Like, for instance, new bilateral alliances that are against our interests and our sense of diplomatic ethics as could emerge between Trump's USA, Russia and China or a completely new twist in Afghanistan by a Moscow, Islamabad, Beijing, convergence.

Two, a digitised ambassador and a call centre of a Mission are a loss to the heart of diplomacy which is by its biochemistry, sceptical about war. Diplomatic robotism replacing diplomatic singularity presupposes a state of war as being the natural human condition. This is lamentable and dangerous. Diplomacy is not a human tool, it is a human faculty. Like meditateness or what Theravada Buddhism calls mindfulness, diplomacy reflects an inherent human predisposition to negotiate, arbitrate, mediate between combat and co-existence, between bellicosity and peace. The re-booting of a diplomatic engine from its negotiating quiddity to war-mongering is a structural monstrosity.

Ambassadors need to remember this: States are geared to war; they send and receive plenipotentiaries. Societies are attuned to peace; they send and receive emissaries. Ambassadors represent and are symbols of both the State and of society, of nations and of civilisations. Nations send ambassadors extraordinary; civilisations send extraordinary ambassadors. The latter kind are not accredited, they are acclaimed.

India has had some great ambassadors extraordinary; many of them are present in this hall. India has also had some extraordinary ambassadors. India has had both those in one. Nehru sent to Pakistan as India's first High Commissioner a barrister and a Sanskritist, Sri Prakasa, as our first Ambassador to the Soviet Union, his gifted and charismatic sister Vijayalakshmi

Pandit, and then the world's leading philosopher of religion, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, to China, the historian K M Panikkar, to the USA, the entrepreneur G L Mehta, to the UNO, one of India's foremost jurists, M C Chagla whom Nelson Mandela remembered with admiration for raising, for the first time, in 1946, the matter of apartheid in the General Assembly. "We want to make a splash at this General Assembly meeting", Nehru told Chagla, and more than a splash it was, leading to unpopularity with the USA but also to a seat in each and every one of the UNO's six commissions. The Indian Foreign Service was under formation then, a pool of professionally trained diplomats was as yet unready. But when that happened, the choosing and training of personnel was, again, very careful, very particular. More than eagerness was looked for. Perspective was sought, a broad understanding of India's history, her destiny, her place in a world that had been at war and was struggling to emerge from what Ambassador Thomas Abraham once described to two persons working under him – Ambassador Ranjan Mathai and me – as 'the debris of departing empires'. Personal attributes were looked for, attributes of knowledge, understanding, articulation. Not a level sameness. A shola of varying floristics, like India itself, not a desert seamlessness. Today, the requirements are different. Uniformity is to the fore. One might say that the goal, for all that it is un-declared, is a uniform diplomatic code.

What is the result? India's ambassadors extraordinary run the risk of being looked upon as extraordinarily ordinary. This could be a precursor to India's ambassadors looking extraordinarily expendable. And then, being – what is the word? – right-sized. In our speed-of-light communication times, it could be argued, why incur the expense of ambassadors with all their perks and allowances, when all that is needed is a call centre in each capital that takes and sends digital messages in Mantra+++ ? Instead of an EoI or an HCI, a CCI – Call centre India, the operational costs of which could be outsourced to the CII or FICCI or Assocham, with a commerce and a security official alone present. A cabinet decision at 10 am can be e-mailed at one minute past 10 am, converted into a Note Verbale at 15 minutes past 10 and mailed, first thing in the morning, to the F&CO. Save time, save paper and save the expense of a flag car, a flag house, and all that goes with representation. Get green credits in the bargain. My nightmare includes the Indian ambassador extraordinary, in the days to come, getting to being taken less seriously by the Indian establishment than that undiluted horror called the Brand Ambassador. Celebrities calling themselves brand ambassadors for goods as trite as chocolates, noodles, biscuits and jewellery are about private profit, not national good. They disgrace the calling of ambassadors. Call yourselves brand salesmen, brand models, brand anything but please do not steal from the calling of Megasthenes, Mahinda, Sanghamitra, Hiuen Tsang, Fahien, Kumarajiva and in our times, M C Chagla, Apa Pant, K R Narayanan, C B Muthamma, P N Haksar, T N Kaul, A N Jha, J N Dixit, Muchkund Dubey, Arundhati Ghose, its hallowed name. The pity is that there is no official disapproval of the brand ambassador phenomenon. So subservient has Indian diplomacy become to trade diplomacy that it dare not protest this brazen misuse of the most precious word in diplomacy – ambassador. Today, the future of the Indian ambassador is uncertain. The ambassador's all-too-ready acceptance of her or his own demonetization is to a large extent responsible for this uncertainty. This uncertainty has to be reversed, not for the sake of the incumbents but for the sake of the institution. I say this because the institution of the ambassador is not about representing the Indian state alone, but representing India's civilisation. And just as the

Chinese, the African, the Latin American, the Arabic civilisations have a contribution to make to the world, so does the Indic.

The Future of the Indian Ambassador

When India's interim government was formed in 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister-designate chose to be in charge of the portfolio of external affairs. He retained that when he became Prime Minister. This is because he knew what is a universal verity: a nation's foreign policy reflects certain core values, civilizational values, by which it wants to be identified by the world. They are its signature. Certain values that informed our freedom struggle went into the shaping of our foreign policy. With Gandhi's South Africa years hovering over them, they found early articulation at the Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress in 1940. With Asia's future leaders like J R Jayewardene and Aung San in the audience, the then Congress President Maulana Azad said: "I am a Musalman and am proud of that fact. Islam's splendid traditions of thirteen hundred years are my inheritance... It is my duty to protect them... But in addition to these sentiments... I am proud of being an Indian... and without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete... If there are any Hindus amongst us who desire to bring back the Hindu life of a thousand years ago... they dream... vain fantasies. So also if there are any Muslims who wish to revive their past... they dream also, and the sooner they wake up the better... We must accept the logic of fact and history, and engage ourselves in the fashioning of our future destiny." Later in the Asian Relations Conference at both of which leading players from this part of the world were again present, this very vision was repeated. This vision may be called the Asokan, Akbari and Nehruvian core – the AAN – of India's ethos. That *aan* (dignity, self-respect) has been our *imaan* (honesty, trustworthiness). Non-alignment, our position on Palestine, on Tibet, on Afro-Asian unity, on disarmament, grew out of that vision. That policy looked at the world's future, its future in conversation, if not in concord, in negotiation if not in absolute peace. It also looked at the future in terms of equality between nations, not in terms of power-centres, regional or global. More than half a century on, we have moved or been made to move from the age of *aan* and *imaan* to what seems a more spectacular age, an age that could be called the age of *shaan* (grandeur). Whose *shaan*? The question begs an answer.

The Foreign Secretary

Ambassadors by their very training cannot and do not speak for themselves. But they have an extraordinary spokesman, one who personifies, embodies all of them. I refer to the Foreign Secretary. A Foreign Secretary is the Ministry's conscience-keeper. And that conscience has to be about negotiation, discussion, dialogue. Not about belligerence, bellicosity, ballistics. A Foreign Office is not meant to be a War Office in embryo. A Foreign Secretary is not an alternate Defence Secretary. We have had extraordinary ambassadors, extraordinary foreign secretaries. They know this: A Foreign Secretary must quell, not fan the fires of prejudice; must douse, not inflame suspicion. By definition diplomacy must explore the scope for peace in the noisiest rumbles of war, it must excavate solutions from the deepest seams of voltaic furnaces. In a psychosis of war, it must choose its thoughts and words with an intent to prevent the psychosis from becoming a morbidity. That is its calling, skill. It is only when negotiation fails, at the farthest horizon, at the last margin of possibility that it may leave the field to the calling and skill of war. Today, when the acids of suspicion have over-run the channels of foreign policy and the iron of retribution has replaced the alloys of negotiation in

diplomacy, a Foreign Secretary cannot be an applicant for the Nobel Peace Prize but he cannot afford to look like an un-starred General either.

Conclusion

Ambassadors have emerged from the need to convey messages beyond borders. They need to converse from a belief in conversation, dialogue, negotiation. An ambassador's word must follow the track of his nation's thought. If the nation is in anger, the ambassador must reflect it in the host country. But the ambassador must counsel to his own government on the desirability of parleys, even truce parleys over the advantages of strife, hostilities, war. If he is not heeded, the non-career diplomat can quit. Harish Khare has only the other day discussed in his editor's column in *The Tribune* the resignation a few days ago of Britain's ambassador to the EU, Sir Ivan Rogers, in the context of the terms of Whitehall's "messy divorce" from the European Union. But it is not open to career diplomats to resign. There are, however, other things that a career diplomat can do. Sir Ivan, in a letter to all his colleagues expressed the hope that they would "continue to challenge ill-founded arguments and muddled thinking... never be afraid to speak the truth to those in power...and to deliver messages that are disagreeable to those who need to hear them". We have here the Kural's injunction, rendered in German as *Entschlossenheit* and *Wahrhaftigkeit*. Those two have to be a diplomat's full and final signature, the *purnahastakshari*. Everything else is *ardhahastakshari* or even *nimnahastakshari*.

On the soil of accreditation, the ambassador must leave the state's signet – clear, unmistakable; on the imagination of the hosts, the ambassador must leave her own mark, his own mark, lucid and un-reproachable. A State appoints an ambassador; a trusty ambassador will not betray it. A civilisation creates an ambassador; a true ambassador will not disown it. India is, moreover, many civilisations, as Maulana Azad showed us, not one. At once austere, and celebratory, bound in thought, in creation, un-bounded. Who, which King of his own or conqueror can tie it down?

Asked by his Norwegian hosts what the Indian equivalent was to *Skol* ! an Indian ambassador did not want to say there is none. He did not say there is one. And so he did what ambassadors often have to do. He improvised quickly and said "*Skol* ? Oh, for *Skol!* we have a great equivalent in Sanskrit". And raising his glass the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, representing India, said "*Chiranjivi!*"

India's Ambassadors Extraordinary: *Chiranjivi bhava!*

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