

ORAL HISTORY

The Quest for the High Table

C.R. Gharekhan

Chinmaya Gharekhan has spent nearly a quarter century dealing with the United Nations in various capacities, ending with being India's Permanent Representative for over six years. Post retirement, he was appointed Under Secretary General in the United Nations - which provided him the unique opportunity to observe and record the working of the Security Council from both sides.

While he discusses India's 'quest for the high table' he also comments on other associated issues of the working of the UN system.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you, Ambassador, for agreeing to talk to the Journal. To start with, what would you like to say about your joining the Indian Foreign Service and Nehru's saga of Indian foreign policy?

C.R. Gharekhan (CRG): No doubt, Pandit Nehru is the architect of India's foreign policy. He was his own Foreign Minister. Those days were very exciting. When my batch joined in 1958, we were received by the Secretaries and the Secretary General.

Nehru, being also the Foreign Minister always made it a point to meet the young batch. Also, he used to have a separate meeting with the IAS probationers. This way we got a chance to interact with him but not individually.

IFAJ: Do you remember anything regarding Pandit Nehru talking about India's permanent membership in the UN at that time? As we remember, around 1958, he was talking a lot about China to be in the UN.

CRG: Nehru did not talk about permanent membership nor did any other country suggest our name for it. Nehru was talking about China because China, the People's Republic of China, had come into existence. When the Charter of the UN was discussed and drafted in San Francisco in 1945, India was a member of the Preparatory Committee. During the San Francisco Conference, two of the most contentious issues were: (1) the composition of the Security Council; and (2) the proposal of veto. You may or may not be aware that in the League of Nations also there was a Council and that Council had fluctuating membership, it did not

have fixed membership. The General Assembly of the League was free to decrease or increase the membership of the Council. There was a Permanent category, membership of which also was not fixed. The League Covenant only said that the most important countries would be members. Its General Assembly would decide who the important countries were. The interesting thing is that every member of that Council had a veto; there was no Permanent category with veto, because the decisions were taken by consensus or unanimity. When the UN Charter was discussed, the questions of permanent membership, non-permanent membership, and veto were also discussed. The question of veto was the most hotly discussed. There was considerable opposition to that and about the membership of the Security Council. Australia, Austria, and Egypt were very active on this issue. The Americans, the British and the Soviets were determined that there would be a Permanent category with veto power. The country most insistent on veto was the Soviet Union. There was a proposal, I think, by Australia that veto should be restricted to Chapter VII of the Charter and there should be no right to veto to decisions under Chapter VI of the Charter. Chapter VI, as we know, deals with pacific settlement of international disputes and Chapter VII deals with the mandatory provisions of the Charter like imposition of sanctions and ultimate use of force. To the proposal that the veto be restricted to Chapter VII, it seems the Americans were not disinclined. But the Soviets insisted on applying the right to veto to all substantive issues of maintenance of peace and security.

I am saying this because once again, when the Security Council reform is being discussed in the UN, this proposal has come up, namely that there should be a distinction between Chapters VI and VII as far as veto power is concerned.

IFAJ: How did the Five choose themselves?

CRG: They were the victors of the war and at that time certainly they were the most powerful nations. The British and the Americans worked together and proposed the first draft, and then the Russians came in. The Chinese were in but not that much forceful. The French came in a bit later. The Five appointed themselves as permanent members; they were not elected.

IFAJ: Was there any Indian suggestion at that time that India should come in as a permanent member?

CRG: No, certainly not. No country proposed our name nor did the Indian delegation put forward any such idea at any stage.

IFAJ: That was the situation in 1945 and so much has changed since then. By 2005, India said it needs to be in. The global power equation has changed, India's power has changed, India's self-perception has also changed. But the P5 do not think this way.

CRG: It is not actually 2005. It goes back to 1967 when the membership of the Security Council was increased from eleven to fifteen. At that time India was very active. The Indian leadership wanted that expansion to happen. After that, in 1978-79, we again included the item in the General Assembly agenda for an increase in the membership of the Security Council in the context of equitable representation. So from 1978, it has been going on. In 1978 it was extensively discussed. Brajesh Mishra was the Permanent Representative at that time. Nothing came of it. But the issue was taken up by the Non-Aligned Movement. In all deliberations the NAM endorsed the idea of expansion, without naming any country or how many there should be. After that, the item remained on the agenda but was not discussed.

When I was there in the UN, during 1986-1992, as Permanent Representative, I suggested to the Ministry that the item should be reviewed because it was already there on the agenda, though it was not debated. It was in 1989 or 1990 that we revived the item. I approached some friendly countries like Algeria, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Egypt, and they all agreed that we should start talking about it. But nobody had any clear idea at that time about the ultimate objective of this. So the revival of this item really started in the early 1990s. Since then, the item has been discussed and debated every year. I think it was in 1994 that the General Assembly decided to appoint a so-called Open-Ended Working Group. That Working Group has been meeting more or less every year, inviting suggestions from members on how to go about it. That item deals with not just the expansion but also with the reform of the Security Council's working methods for there is a lot of scope. By now, almost the entire membership supports the idea of its expansion.

IFAJ: Everybody agrees in principle that the Security Council needs reform, but how to go about that has become a difficult exercise. Could you anticipate some of the challenges way back in 1991?

CRG: Yes, it was very clear at that time that the expansion should be in both categories – permanent and non-permanent. So it was evident in the beginning itself that there was going to be a clash of interests or differences of opinion because those countries like us who had an ambition for a permanent seat had their own agenda. The vast majority of the members of the UN cannot aspire for permanent membership. So they were not really so keen for the expansion of the permanent category.

IFAJ: Was the idea of veto also there during the 1991 discussion?

CRG: No. Nobody discussed it at that time. There was not much discussion even within the MEA about the ultimate outcome of this whole debate. In the UN, many issues just happen and go on without much outcome. But on this issue always there was optimism that something would come out at the end of the debate. I think after that some momentum was perceived.

IFAJ: Beginning 1991-92 India proposed the reform of the UN and, most importantly, reform of the Security Council. Also, India has the idea that it must be in with veto power. At the same time in the UN, there was growing recognition that the time had come to reform the Security Council. Both processes are gathering momentum and from 1994-95 until 2005, so far as India is concerned, its position on the idea of UN reform is becoming more and more clear. As the issue is being debated in the UN and among other members of the world community, you find India increasingly insisting with greater force that nothing short of a veto-wielding membership will satisfy it. What caused this kind of momentum to gather? I don't see India is taking a rigid position, but when a variety of proposals come in, like permanent membership with or without veto powers, etc., India's position is becoming clear. Way back in 1992, there was no nothing-short-of-veto kind of issue. What prompted our insistence on the veto subsequently?

CRG: In 1991 nobody talked about it. That time it was just about the expansion of the Security Council in both categories. It was assumed that when we increased the number of permanent seats obviously the permanent members would have the right to veto. Nobody said that they would have no veto. When we talk about additional numbers in the Security Council, obviously, it suggests that the additional numbers will have the same position and veto power like the existing ones. This discussion came during 2002-3, I think. That time when India was lobbying extensively, some permanent members like the UK and France

were categorically assuring us of their support for a permanent seat. Russia in the beginning also supported, but eventually kind of diluted its support. The Chinese and the Americans had their own positions.

When the matter got somewhat serious, that is the stage when this distinction – with veto or without veto – came in. France said that it would support India fully but added that India would not be able to gather the support of everyone if it insisted on the right to veto. The French also offered to co-sponsor the resolution of the Group of Four if we did not insist on the right to veto. That is where the problem started, because the African members said that they would not accept any such discrimination between the present P5 and others who might come in. India at that time was quite flexible and realistic. I was and am clear that there will not be any new permanent member with veto; it is totally out of the question.

IFAJ: Is this the retrospection about the G4?

CRG: I don't think so. India alone could not have gone anywhere. Some say that if India had gone alone it could have got it. No way. This cannot happen. It has to be a package solution. Nobody is going to support India just by India itself. The Africans do not have a single permanent member. Asia has China; whatever it is, it is the biggest Asian country. Of course the Europeans are over-represented, there are three European powers. Since the cold war is over, all are ideologically in the same group including the United States. Russia is sometimes here and sometimes there. But from Africa and Latin America, there is not a single permanent member. So there was no way that the General Assembly would have endorsed India by itself to be the new member. So it will be a package solution – that there will be six new members. With veto or without veto, let us forget that for a moment. I think the number, six additional permanent members, is more or less agreed. "Agreed" means there is fair amount of consensus, you can say. The P5 have not agreed to that but among ourselves – the Afro-Asian and South American countries – there is a fair amount of agreement. Initially, the number was five but later the Africans insisted for two members since they constitute the largest group.

IFAJ: India says the G4 campaign was not a premature campaign.

CRG: No, I think, by itself it was useful at that time. If only the Africans had come on board and agreed on their two countries, then for Asia it was clear that it would be Japan and India. Brazil was for Latin America.

Germany has a much bigger problem than India has because we have Pakistan but Pakistan is not a player in this game. I don't buy the argument that Pakistan can come in the way of India effectively. It will try its best but cannot succeed. In the case of Germany, apart from Italy, there is too much representation from Europe. But Africa is the real problem. If the Africans will agree on which two countries should be from their continent, then the matter becomes much easier.

IFAJ: Is there any kind of understanding between the African Union and China?

CRG: Yes, China has been very active in many African countries to sabotage the whole thing. And it is very easy to play on the differences within Africa. Anybody can play that game. China is not being exceptionally brilliant in doing that. They are being ruthless because they want to prevent India and want to prevent Japan even more. Also, the Africans are doing where their self-interest lies. It is not that they are doing China's bidding. It will be a mistake to assume that the African countries are playing China's game. China is trying to exploit the differences within Africa and if the Africans themselves agree on the two countries to represent the continent in the UN, then they will not care about China. I can assure you on that. So the Chinese don't have veto on the Africans. But Africa's problem is that there is no consensus, whether it is South Africa or Nigeria or Egypt or Algeria to represent them. Now some other countries have also announced their candidatures like Senegal, Kenya, etc.

IFAJ: Since we are talking of 2005 and the G4 campaign, President George W. Bush came to India and he said the US would be happy to see Japan and one democratic country which has made larger contribution to the UN from the developing world. Did he mean India, since we have better credentials compared to Brazil and South Africa or even Germany for that matter?

CRG: No, only we interpreted his statement like that.

IFAJ: Subsequently, it seems, there is some kind of understanding between the US and China. Is it the reason that the whole proposal did not take off?

CRG: The permanent members are working together on this issue. There is no doubt that not a single permanent member wants any new member to join their club. The five want to maintain the exclusive nature of that club. They don't want anyone else to come in, with veto or

without veto. So, sometimes China will take that role, sometimes the US. Even, as I said, the Russians have diluted their support for us. Only the Brits and the French are fully supporting our aspiration. They know it is not going to happen, therefore, it doesn't cost them anything to support us. Thereby they get a lot of goodwill from us. But we seem to have made this issue a touchstone of our relationship with other countries.

IFAJ: It seems that the Japanese are of the view that they are quite an isolated country within Asia. The support of India is therefore a must because India can bring in quite a large number of developing countries.

CRG: Anybody who knows the UN system, as I said earlier, realises that no single country can come in by itself.

IFAJ: What about Brazil? When did it develop the ambition to be in the UNSC?

CRG: We together were in the G4 and, as I said, it is the biggest country in Latin America.

IFAJ: There was a time when Brazil did not take any stand on issues like the Arab-Israel conflict, Iraq-Iran War, and on many other issues. Its whole foreign policy was more directed by its trade interests. On political issues it would observe a kind of neutrality, the so-called 'disinterested neutrality'.

CRG: Well, Brazil was always very close to the United States. Brazil has followed a policy that suited its national interest. The most important thing for Brazil is that its people should progress and prosper, exports must grow, and the economy must develop. Brazil has extensive poverty. I think it has set its priorities and it is functioning within the parameters of its priorities. India, I think, from the time of Nehru had this grandiose vision of seeing itself as a big power, playing a big role on the international stage, which I don't think India has really played. Largely due to Nehru's vision, the way he saw India's position in the world and his ideas as to how India would become an influence for good, has become a positive moral force.

IFAJ: In 1991-92 you were at the UN as Ambassador. Regarding what you were telling about Nehru: you must have had many opportunities of meeting Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, especially when you revived the whole proposal of UN reforms and India's campaigning. Anything you would like to say on this?

CRG: Mr. Narasimha Rao was a very realistic person. He had no illusions about anything. He did fully support our campaign for expansion. He believed in *realpolitik*. He did not have the kind of idealism Nehru had. He was very pragmatic, very practical. But, I think, his role is not appreciated enough. You do not need idealism in international relations. It is good to be idealistic, but you have to have your feet firmly on the ground. It was during his time that our diplomatic relationship with Israel was established. Also the Security Council movement started during this time. But I do not think he ever thought that the Council was going to be expanded because India was asking for it. He knew it was an uphill struggle.

IFAJ: Did you express anything particular whenever you had the chance to meet him?

CRG: Yes, he used to say, "Continue to fight, sometime it will mature, it will happen at some point".

IFAJ: Something you would remember his telling you as Prime Minister.

CRG: No, about the Security Council, I don't think. I think the biggest challenge was two tough issues that we had. One was the election to the International Court of Justice. One of our candidates was in the race. And the second was the Babri Masjid episode. Babri Masjid happened in December 1992, the last month of my service in the Foreign Service.

IFAJ: How did you handle this pressure in the General Assembly? What was the advice from the Prime Minister?

CRG: Well, the Babri Masjid was a real pressure situation. He was asking for my advice actually because I had to face the music in New York at that time. Pakistan, as one can expect, was geared up to fully exploit the situation to embarrass India. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was very active. It was perfectly understandable. It raised a furore among the Muslim members of the United Nations. So, I was in touch with the Prime Minister and his Office. Then – I can't honestly say whether that was my idea or the idea was from his Office – maybe it was Mr. Narasimha Rao's own idea – to announce that we would rebuild the mosque.

IFAJ: Was this what you conveyed to the OIC?

CRG: No, I never met the OIC fellows. I do not believe in that kind of stuff. But I met the principal members of the of the Islamic countries at

the United Nations. Egypt, I remember, was quite helpful at least on that occasion. Many others like Algeria and Saudi Arabia were helpful. I used to know all the ambassadors, as one is expected to. I said to them, "Look, what happened, happened. We deplore it and we condemn it. Our government has condemned what has happened. Now our government has announced that we will rebuild the Mosque at the same place." I think the Egyptian Ambassador told me that with this one declaration you have completely disarmed us, and there will be no condemnation of India. And in fact nothing happened. But one had to do a lot of work because there will always be some countries who will not be satisfied with this. Pakistan continued to incite many countries in the OIC group. But finally, I think, this one thing saved the day for us.

The other thing was the election of our candidate to the ICJ, Justice R.S. Pathak, who was the Chief Justice of India at that time. That was very badly handled by the government in Delhi. We had Dr. Nagendra Singh who was judge at the ICJ. When he died he had an unfinished term of a year and a few months. Normally, if a judge dies in office, the country from where he came would nominate a replacement and that person would more or less routinely get elected for the remainder of the term. But at that time, an intense struggle must have been going on in Delhi among the various judges for nomination to fill up Dr. Singh's vacancy. There is a certain procedure for nomination. It is not the government that nominates Mr. X or Ms. Y. But if the government says it prefers to nominate Mr. so and so, then it gets carried. But the government could not make up its mind. For months I was pressing the government to decide quickly because we were losing time. As so many months passed, other countries started announcing their candidature. Thailand came in, Pakistan and Philippines announced their own candidates. Still we had not made up our mind. Finally they came up with the name of Justice Pathak, by which time it was too late. Not too late exactly, but late, as the other three countries had started lobbying for their candidates. They started getting commitments of support from other countries, since India did not seem to be interested.

IFAJ: Generally, democracy takes time in arriving at a decision. Why did it happen with us, was there something wrong?

CRG: I do not think democracy takes time, this has nothing to do with democracy. It won't be fair to blame the system of democracy for this kind of mishandling. It is just that the government could not make up its

mind because all the honourable and venerable justices must have been putting pressure on the government. Maybe each judge had his own lobby in the government. I do not know exactly what happened. But finally Justice Pathak's name came out. We started canvassing and lobbying. The people in New York were asking me all the time, Do you have any candidate or not? I used to say, Yes, we have a candidate and he is coming. It was a very difficult election. By God's grace, during my tenure (six and a quarter years), India never lost an election. But at this point, the only way to rescue ourselves was by putting a proposal which I made to the government and the government accepted. I said, Let's announce that Justice Pathak is our candidate only for the remaining unexpired period of Dr. Nagendra Singh's term; after that we will not field a candidate for a full term. For the rest of the nine years we will not field a candidate because Dr. Nagendra Singh also had almost done two terms. So it was time to rotate it with other countries in Asia. We did not have monopoly on this. I said that if we did not do this, we were surely going to be defeated; I could not guarantee that we would win. So, if you want to take the risk of fighting the election and losing it then go ahead, but there will be no assurance for the next term. But if you don't want to take the risk this is the only way and I guarantee that we will win. As I said, Mr. Narasimha Rao was a pragmatic man, he accepted my suggestion. I wrote to all my colleagues at the UN that Pathak was our candidate and assured them that he was only for the remaining period of Dr. Nagendra Singh's term; we were not going to run for a full-fledged nine-year term.

IFAJ: Sir, you are one of those top diplomats of the UN who were insisting on the rest of the members abiding by the law and conventions, especially when the UN Secretary General called for it. At the same time, there is a tendency among the big powers to go out of the existing norms and practices. Did you have persuasiveness about your deportment? This may be what really endeared you to the Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

CRG: I do not know about this, about endearing myself to anyone. Certainly he had respect for me. But I don't know whether he was fond of me or whatever. He respected me for the reason, I think, that I was reasonably independent in my assessments, in my advice, in my opinions, not allowing myself to be influenced by non-professional considerations.

Just before my retirement, Mr. Boutros-Ghali asked me whether I would join him. I did not jump with joy, but I said I appreciated his suggestion and that I would have to check with my Prime Minister. Actually, I was retiring in a few months time and did not need permission since I was not taking a job in a private company. I wanted just to let Mr. Boutros-Ghali know that he was not doing me a favour or something like that. I wanted to preserve India's dignity. So I said I would think about it, I would consult my Prime Minister. I also asked him about the level and he assured me that I would work with him directly. Of course I knew that the Prime Minister would be delighted at this offer. This is how it happened.

I could write a book on the basis of my experience in the Security Council. He had not much time for the members of the Security Council, the ambassadors who represented them.

IFAJ: How come he had no time? What does that mean?

CRG: He thought that intellectually they were not very exciting.

IFAJ: He did not think very highly of these informal meetings?

CRG: About the informal meetings he did not have to think very high or low. He did not think very highly of the ambassadors who represented their countries. He had respect only for the British and American ambassadors, as also the Soviet, subsequently Russian, ambassador. Usually the P5 had good quality ambassadors.

IFAJ: Would you say the same thing about John Bolton? Perhaps you have dealt with him?

CRG: When Bolton came around, I was not there. I never dealt with him, so I don't know much about him. But I will be surprised if he was a good professional diplomat. In the UN it is important to get on well with your colleagues, because you can't say all the time that I represent America, this is what I want. It does not work like that. It may work for some time to some extent but it can't work all the time with all the countries.

IFAJ: During your tenure as India's Ambassador, did you ever feel the culture of Pax-Americana impacting you and the UN?

CRG: Well, immediately after the end of the cold war America was very supreme.

IFAJ: Did you see a change in behaviour?

CRG: No, behaviour depends very much on the ambassador who is there on the spot. But USA as the superpower expected others to fall in line whatever it said.

IFAJ: But the Americans are on record saying that the UN is an instrument of American foreign policy.

CRG: Well, that's OK. There is nothing wrong with that. It is an instrument of India's foreign policy also. I have no problem with that.

IFAJ: But if the UN does not serve American objectives, they go out of it. That becomes arbitrary.

CRG: Some countries have the capacity to use the UN as an instrument of their foreign policy; others have less capacity or no capacity. India has some capacity in that sense.

IFAJ: But the difference is, if they feel that the UN is not working as per their wishes, they go out of it and do whatever they want.

CRG: Yes, they did that in Iraq.

IFAJ: Even if they remain in the UN, they have other ways; for example, starving the UN in terms of funding. We remember USA was at one time of the view to take the UN out of USA.

CRG: John Bolton said that. But America would be the last country to wish the UN to go out of the country, because it's a great prestige for them. The whole world comes there. They are earning billions of dollars because the UN is there. The diplomats and staff of 192 countries rent houses and apartments and do shopping, etc. The US is making huge money this way. It is earning seven or eight times more than what it is giving to the UN as contribution. So the USA is not doing any favour to us or anybody. It will hate the idea of moving the UN out of America.

IFAJ: Why then did they advance the idea of not making a contribution to the UN budget?

CRG: It's to do with Congress. They thought, especially it happened during Mr. Boutros-Ghali's time, that Mr. Boutros-Ghali was not pandering to the Americans. He did not satisfy American wishes on every occasion. The Americans were very upset with him. He was very outspoken. He criticised the Americans on the Somalia issue and held the Americans responsible for the mess in Somalia. So he was very unpopular with the Americans.

IFAJ: But initially the Americans were very happy with him

CRG: The Americans were surprised about Mr. Boutros-Ghali's election. They expected a stalemate to develop between Boutros-Ghali and Chidzero of Zimbabwe. There were many other candidates also, but these two were front runners. But to their surprise, there was no deadlock and Mr. Boutros-Ghali won with a clear majority in the first round with the first vote itself. I have mentioned in my book that the American Ambassador Pickering did not expect this. If they had really done their homework or spy work, they would have known that Mr. Boutros-Ghali was going to win. I and some others knew what was coming. The Egyptians were lobbying for Mr. Boutros-Ghali. They definitely knew they had the majority. What they were not certain about was whether any of the P5 would exercise the veto. If the Americans had done their work properly, they would have vetoed him. But they abstained. And that's how Mr. Boutros-Ghali won.

IFAJ: Why did they abstain?

CRG: They were confident that neither Mr. Boutros-Ghali nor Mr. Chidzero of Zimbabwe would get the majority or that both of them would get the majority. That's why they did not veto.

IFAJ: Was there any ideological factor which made Mr. Boutros-Ghali not so acceptable to the Americans? Was he a person with a different view?

CRG: The main thing is that the permanent members do not like the Secretary General to come from a big country. Egypt is a big country. It has a lot of influence in the non-aligned and Arab world, and it also has an active presence in Africa. The permanent members want the Secretary General to come from a small country so that they can exercise their influence over candidates through their countries. A small country would be dependent on America for many things – loans, food, and so on. That's why they were not happy with Boutros-Ghali's candidature. Secondly, Mr. Boutros-Ghali was not deferential enough to the Americans. I think he could have been more diplomatic. The thing is that he did not always satisfy American demands because they keep on asking all the time. So, how much could he satisfy them?

IFAJ: Did he ever ask you to handle the Americans?

CRG: Yes, I have handled the Americans many times.

IFAJ: Anything special you remember they would demand?

CRG: I often had to say to the American Ambassador, “Sorry, we cannot do this or that.” If you told the Americans that something could not be done, they would try and press very hard, they knew that they were making an unreasonable demand. In dozens of situations, I had to deal with not only the Americans but others also. But the Americans were the most demanding in the UN.

IFAJ: The Americans were very happy with Kofi Annan. They suggested his name.

CRG: Yes, he was the American candidate, the whole world knew that. Kofi Annan is a very likeable person. He had huge experience at the UN. He grew with the system. He is a very friendly person, gets along well with everybody – the staff and among the delegations. But in his second term, he took certain positions, such as describing the 2003 intervention in Iraq as illegal. That made him very unpopular with the Americans, and popular with the others!

IFAJ: Thank you, Ambassador, for sparing time with the Journal, sharing some of your discerning experiences at the UN. This will really be insightful to our readers.
