

ORAL HISTORY

Reminiscences of a ‘Fly on the Wall’

Prabhakar Menon *

Ambassador Prabhakar Menon served as advisor on foreign affairs to Prime Minister Shri P. V. Narasimha Rao, while he was posted as Joint Secretary (Prime Minister’s Office) from 1992 to 1996. He was privy, on numerous occasions, to high-level interaction between the Prime Minister and his counterparts around the world.

Earlier, from 1980 to 1982, he served as Director (Foreign Secretary’s Office) where again he was an eyewitness to some significant developments.

In this conversation with the Journal, he recounts some of the events that shaped India’s Foreign Policy postures – as he saw from close quarters (as the proverbial ‘fly on the wall’) during those two tenures.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Twice in your over thirty five years career in the Foreign Service, you occupied two important chairs in South Block: once as Director of the Foreign Secretary’s Office (FSO), and later, as the advisor on foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister, as Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

During both these assignments, you were privy to some high level, hitherto less catalogued events in the foreign affairs fields. You were, in one way, the proverbial ‘fly on the wall’, quietly observing events at the highest levels. Of course, you were also an active participant in many of these developments.

Before we talk about specific events, can you tell us about how you came to be chosen for these posts?

Prabhakar Menon (PM): Let me begin by thanking you and the IFAJ for inviting me to tell my story. Postings like these presumably happen when a combination of circumstances picks one out. Ambassador Ram Sathe succeeded Ambassador Jagat Mehta as Foreign Secretary towards the end of 1979, and he, Mr. Sathe, was looking for a person to supervise his personal office. Mr. T.P. Sreenivasan had been looking after Mr. Mehta’s office. Our Ministry, I’m told, had a roster of names for Mr. Sreenivasan’s successor, and my name

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happened to be in that roster. I joined FSO in the beginning of 1980.

As for the JS(PMO) job, my predecessor, Mr. Shyam Saran, had been appointed our High Commissioner to Mauritius. I happened to return to Delhi around that time, after a stint as Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative in our Permanent Mission to the U.N. in New York, and was working in MEA as Joint Secretary (UN). Foreign Secretary Mr. J.N. Dixit felt, perhaps, that he could take the risk of proposing my name as Joint Secretary in Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Office, which was then headed by his Principal Secretary Mr. Amar Nath Verma. Mr. Ramu Damodaran was then Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. All of them were familiar with my name, and I guess they took the plunge in agreeing to my appointment, which materialized in 1992.

Prime Minister Rao was himself familiar with my name – but that is another curious story that we can come to later, if you agree.

Recollections as Director of the Foreign Secretary's Office: 1980–82

Soviet Union / Afghanistan

IFAJ: Ambassador Sathe took over as Foreign Secretary at a crucial juncture – in the sense that we were confronted then with the problem of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Do you recollect how he dealt with this?

PM: His natural instinct was to be squarely critical of it. Afghanistan was, in those days, going through a bad patch, with a kind of carousel-like round of governments, none of which seemed stable. The former Soviet Union couldn't, I suppose, tolerate its soft underbelly becoming vulnerable ... you might recall the *buzkashi* game that the Afghans used to play, where a goat's head was furiously chased by teams on horseback. It is a rough-and-tumble game, with much yelling and dust being raised. This was what it might have looked like to the Soviets. They saw Afghanistan being confiscated by forces inimical to their strategic interests. Hence their drastic decision to invade – which most of the world, including ourselves, considered a forcible violation of the national sovereignty of another independent nation, and hence not just inexcusable but in contravention of international law.

But, to return to our reaction. Foreign Secretary Sathe and his senior MEA colleagues drafted a statement that was clearly critical of the Soviet action. The draft was sent upwards, right up to the then Prime Minister and, somewhere along the line, it assumed a form rather different from

what Mr. Sathe and his colleagues had worked out – in the sense that criticism of the Soviet Union had been toned down. I do remember being asked to work on the original draft, the one that was superseded at higher levels.

Anyway, this episode was, in course of time, overtaken by the world-wide criticism that the Soviet action attracted. And, our own stand also underwent a hardening, so to speak. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi put her imprimatur on this when she bluntly reprimanded Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko for his country's misadventure in Afghanistan. He came to Delhi to explain things, and got an earful that he hadn't anticipated. I'm told this vastly experienced Foreign Minister, who had been at his post for I don't know how many years – twenty, twenty five years – this veteran Soviet diplomat was rendered speechless. Being rendered speechless is an unfamiliar experience for diplomats, as you know.

I should add an amusing sidelight to this. MEA's East Europe Division, which then dealt with the Soviet Union, had an officer in the division who was scathingly critical of the Soviet invasion. The Soviet Ambassador in Delhi then was Ambassador Vorontsov, one of his country's diplomatic superstars. He grumbled to the Foreign Secretary about the anti-Soviet sentiment in the EE Division. In fact, Mr. Vorontsov went to the extent of admonishing our officer concerned for what he felt was a lack of understanding of the Soviet action. The fact that Mrs. Gandhi did what she did when she scolded Gromyko, vindicated our officer, who, when he next met me, breathed a sigh of relief, and remarked: "I must say, that was a lucky escape for me! I don't know what would have happened to me if things hadn't turn out the way they did. You know how the Soviets deal with dissidents!"

Pakistan

IFAJ: Let us now talk about our relations with Pakistan and the United States during those days. Did you find yourself playing a role in events connected with these?

PM: Well, relations with Pakistan remained as volatile as they've always been. Foreign Secretary Sathe did make a useful visit to Islamabad, but he had no illusions about what his visit could achieve. He worked on various scenarios, and I remember helping him with these whenever he asked me to do so. Incidentally, Ambassador Sathe was a remarkable person in more than one respect. A perfect boss for a much younger junior officer like me – he was equanimity personified, even-tempered, polite, soft-spoken, appreciative of good work, a patient guide whenever needed, a man whose good nature,

decency, diplomatic acumen, vast experience and talents were recognized not only in our Ministry but by everyone he came into contact with.

IFAJ: Did anything come out of the visit?

PM: Nothing very substantial came out of the interaction, if I remember correctly. But because Mr. Sathe had lowered his expectations, he wasn't going to make India–Pakistan relations, and their improvement, a kind of touchstone of his tenure as FS.

China

IFAJ: Tell us something about our relations with China at that time – when you were Director (FSO).

PM: Well ... nothing earth-shaking or spectacular. Foreign Secretary Sathe was a veteran of Chinese affairs, having served in China twice. And, given his superlative reputation as a diplomat, I don't believe that any unanticipated fluctuation in our relations would have gotten past him without being resolved. I mean, relations remained relatively steady, although fundamental differences between the two countries couldn't be ignored. An underwhelming relationship, if one might put it that way. You might remember that, some years later, around 1986–87, we had some serious problems with China again, because of the Sumdorong Chu border military build-up by China, and our response to it.

United States

IFAJ: And relations with the United States...?

PM: Ambassador Eric Gonsalves, one of the other Secretaries in the Ministry, looked after Indo–US relations in that dispensation within the senior-most levels in the MEA. And the impression I got then, sitting in FS's outer Office, was that the Americans, at least the ones in Delhi, or the ones dropping in from Washington from time to time, were a demanding lot, and difficult to convince. India's unflinchingly independent line in foreign affairs, its consistent championship of Non-aligned objectives, its perceived closeness to countries like the Soviet Union and Cuba, and so forth, might have irked the Americans on a regular basis, I suppose, like a nagging foot blister for a runner.

You asked me if I played any role in all this. The answer is: No, not in the policy-making sense. I was then a junior Director-level official in the MEA, and while I had the privilege of watching what was going on, and helping our senior officials and others with some sherpa-style work like drafting

documents, or taking messages here and there, or taking down minutes of meetings ... What I mean is that I was too junior then to be considered a key participant or a game-changing participant.

IFAJ: On a lighter note, we do recall the drama around the Americans refusing to give you a visa when you got posted to our Embassy there, at the end of your FSO tenure.

PM: That was something amusing in retrospect; but at the time it kicked up much dust. I was in the routine course posted as Political Counsellor in our Embassy in Washington to take over from Mr. Parthasarathi. I even had a preparatory meeting with our Ambassador to the United States, Ambassador K.R. Narayanan, who was then visiting Delhi on consultations.

Meanwhile, the Americans had posted a new Counsellor to their Embassy in New Delhi. Our intelligence agencies felt that this person's shadowy antecedents made him undesirable, and opposed the posting. For various reasons, it was decided at the highest levels to block that posting. Mr. Sathe was not happy about this at all. Why should national governments get into this business of blocking mid-level diplomatic postings? That was his feeling, if I understood it correctly. And, I remember Ambassador Narayanan telling him that when our decision not to allow their nominee to join their Embassy was communicated to them, "the Americans are going to hit the ceiling" – which they did, in a manner of speaking, by refusing me a visa to take over as Counsellor in our Washington Embassy. Tit for tat! The Americans did add that they had nothing against Mr. Prabhakar Menon, and that this was retaliation pure and simple for our blocking their Counsellor from taking up his post in their Delhi Embassy.

IFAJ: There was a hullabaloo in our Parliament over this. We recall the Foreign Minister, while commenting on the substantive issue, also spoke about you - as a person!

PM: Yes. Shri Narasimha Rao was then our External Affairs Minister. It was a Calling Attention Motion. In response, he made a statement in Parliament expressing disappointment at the American decision. Mr. Sathe entrusted to me the job of trying out a first draft, which was naturally superseded by an improved draft that the then Head of our Americas Division, Ambassador Arvind Deo, provided. A curious situation, you'll agree: a mid-level official like me being asked to work on a statement about himself for his Minister to use in the national Parliament. What a temptation it was to turn oneself into a paragon, and have your Minister give you a vote of confidence in your national legislature! But seriously, to cut a long story short, the draft obviously

had to be impersonal, objective and factual – which it was. However, Mr. Narasimha Rao, if I remember correctly, was generous in his references to me during the Parliament debate.

Spain

IFAJ: Any other interesting memories from the time you were Director (FSO)?

PM: There are quite a few. One of them might interest you – our visit to Spain with Mr. Sathe for Foreign Office consultations. We landed in Madrid as scheduled and were taken to our hotel. Some time later, we got a telephone call from our Embassy telling us to stay in the hotel, and not venture out because of reports of gunfire in the capital. It turned out that the Spanish Civil Guard had attempted a coup against the Government. You think of coups in countries with feeble governance, not in a developed West European country. It was apparently touch and go for a while until the Spanish King, highly respected by the people, went on TV to restore calm. The Civil Guard abandoned their coup attempt and returned to their barracks.

Mr. Sathe, our Ambassador in Madrid Mr. Surendra Singh Alirajpur, and myself, we called on the King and Queen the next day. I remember the King wryly commenting on the disturbance of the precious day – almost as if to say that ‘boys will be boys’. Here was an instance where routine Foreign Office consultations became more than just routine. One can embroider this and say – don’t ever take diplomatic life for granted. It isn’t just honey and roses. Some postings can be extremely trying. War-torn countries, for instance, or countries devastated by bad governance or internal conflict. But overall, there’s enough variety and challenge and excitement to make a career in diplomacy like no other.

Earlier Stint in Vietnam: 1974–75

IFAJ: Though not strictly within the time frame for this interview, and outside the two important positions you occupied in the South Block, we cannot miss this opportunity to talk about your stay in Hanoi during the Vietnam war?

PM: Yes, during 1974–75. It was a spell-binding experience. I reported to MEA on North Vietnam’s strategies that finally brought them victory over South Vietnam and its American allies; and eventually the re-unification of Vietnam, north and south. I was a very junior officer then – a First Secretary. We had an outstanding person there as Ambassador, Mr. Sisir Gupta, the well-

known political analyst. I remember him telling me once, soon after I had reached Hanoi in early 1974, that North Vietnam would be victorious within the next year and a half. His prediction, astonishingly enough, was correct to the month.

Ambassador Gupta had to return home to convalesce due to ill health, so I ended up as *Charge d'Affaires* for most of my tenure in Hanoi, an exciting experience for a junior officer.

IFAJ: Exciting in the sense you reported on world-shaking events, you mean?

PM: Yes. And more. The newspapers carried reports some time ago of Vietnam's legendary military leader, their former Defence Minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, passing away at the venerable age of 102 years. As Cd'A in Hanoi, I had the privilege of meeting him several times. On one occasion, discussing his war strategy, he leaned across to me, closed his fist tightly and said: "In an open hand, each finger is weak. The fingers represent various parts of our nation – our party, our government, our people, and so on. When we bring them all together, we get this fist, which is strong. That is why we are going to win."

I recall another experience. As Cd'A in Hanoi, I was asked to negotiate with the then Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam with a view to our granting some diplomatic privileges for their office in Delhi. These privileges would be short of full-scale diplomatic recognition. Negotiating this was an important and sensitive task. South Vietnam then had its own pro-American Government in Saigon, and the PRG, which was essentially the North Vietnamese, was not recognized, except by Communist countries. The war was still on in the southern part of Vietnam. Our policy was supportive of North Vietnam, and so was the Non-Aligned Movement. Hence, Delhi's decision to offer some diplomatic privileges to the PRG establishment in Delhi.

However, I felt that this was too little too late in the sense that the North Vietnamese were inching towards victory in their war against the USA–South Vietnam combine. They were registering military victory after victory – and anything short of full diplomatic recognition of the PRG would be half-hearted and anachronistic. On the other hand, full recognition would place us on the right side of history, so to speak. So I sent a telegram to Delhi. The reply I got was curt, a stinker, from the then Secretary in MEA telling me to follow instructions and not shove my oar in! An experience like this, so early on in your career, scorches you and teaches you not to exceed your brief, especially if you're feeling over-smart on that day.

IFAJ: So what happened then?

PM: Well, I negotiated the sort of semi-diplomatic recognition that our Government had decided on. But it was overtaken by a rapid succession of events. The North Vietnamese eventually, if you recall, overran the south, deposed the then Government of South Vietnam in Saigon, and made the Americans carry out a hurried retreat of their forces. It made no sense, in such a context, to continue negotiating on who would receive their credentials in Delhi, whether or not we would allow a flag on the PRG's official vehicle, or accord immunities to how many of their personnel, and so on and so forth. Granted that these were sensitive diplomatic protocol technicalities being negotiated; but as I said, they were becoming increasingly, and rapidly, irrelevant.

In the Prime Minister's Office (PMO): 1992–96

Pakistan

IFAJ: Let us move on now to your time as JS(PMO). You joined in PMO in 1992. That was the year 'Siachen' was discussed with Pakistan. We recall that there were hopes of a settlement, but something went wrong.

PM: The talks were substantive and promising; but underneath it all was this uneasy feeling that our side started having – particularly our military and our intelligence, and some of our officials too. They were wary. They had misgivings about what was being touted as a solution, especially by Pakistan. Siachen had been recovered by our side at heavy cost, and was being defended at heavy cost. I remember Prime Minister Rao's drawing room crowded with military uniforms, Ministers, and people like us. You know how taciturn PM Rao could be. But being taciturn didn't mean that he wasn't reflecting deeply – which seemed to him necessary at that crucial state in the discussions. Then, there was the question of what the Pakistanis were demanding. Not just withdrawal of Indian troops but more in terms of guarantees. These guarantees would have had the effect of nullifying our gains, and jeopardizing our strategic interests in the future.

There's an impression in the public mind that PM Rao stepped back from the deal at the last minute. Or that he was ultra-cautious, which torpedoed the deal. That is a somewhat warped version of the story. Pakistani demands must take the blame for scuttling the deal. As I mentioned earlier, at one stage PM Rao's room was crowded with Ministers, senior officials, military personnel, and so on. Mr. Rao asked everyone to leave the room, discuss the

matter further, and then come back to him. I happened to be left alone with him for a few seconds. I must have been hanging around with some files to clear, I suppose. He said to me: "This is serious. Tell them to be absolutely sure." I conveyed the message to the Principal Secretary. You know the rest of the story.

IFAJ: Let us now move to

PM: Could I mention something more general about PM Rao and his view of Pakistan?

It's like this. Unlike many, Narasimha Rao was a realist when it came to India–Pakistan relations. He was under no illusions that, as Prime Minister, he could effortlessly or facilely turn the tide in India–Pakistan relations. He had, as External Affairs Minister, dealt with many Pakistani dignitaries, including their wily Foreign Minister Sahibzada Yakub Khan. He understood the existentialist disjuncture, if I might put it that way, between the two. As a result, no matter what India did, the Pakistanis would treat it with disdain and suspicion. And, in many cases, *vice versa* also. One has to admit this. PM Rao and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met a number of times, but the foundations of the bilateral relationship remained shaky.

So Narasimha Rao's attempt, keeping in mind Pakistan's complexes regarding India, was to find a *modus vivendi* that would let the two countries improve relations in various other fields, without being held hostage to issues like Kashmir. You know how frustrating it is for us to deal with a suspicious and recalcitrant Pakistan. To say nothing of its state policy of terrorism that has India for its prime target. Well, Narasimha Rao was aware of all this. "What else do you want to do?" he once asked. "You don't want to deal with your neighbour because he can be difficult, is that it? What kind of foreign policy are you talking about?"

IFAJ: You mean, he didn't expect anything positive but felt that talking was unavoidable or necessary?

PM: You know that we've been talking to the Pakistanis for decades about everything under the sun. Call it a comprehensive dialogue, or a composite dialogue, or a compulsory dialogue ... call it what you will; but the visceral nature of our bilateral differences, and the problems that they cause, like ripples spreading in a lake, make the discussions frustrating. But, as I said, Prime Minister Rao saw no alternative to talks. And while he was realistic, he was never pessimistic. "Another generation," he once remarked, "might find this easier."

Some people felt that our Parliament adopting a resolution that Kashmir was an integral part of India – this happened during Mr. Narasimha Rao’s time as PM – some people felt that this tied his hands in his discussions with Pakistan. Others felt that this strengthened his hands by putting the whole country behind him. PM Rao himself wasn’t swayed from his conviction that, no matter how knotty the relationship, it held some promise of improvement, provided both sides approached each other in the proper frame of mind.

China

IFAJ: There was a visit to China in 1993, and the signing of the Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity on the border. What can you tell us about that? And about how PM Narasimha Rao saw China and India – China relations?

PM: That was a very worthwhile visit, meticulously prepared by our then Ambassador in Beijing, Chandra Shekhar Dasgupta, along with the then Head of our China Division, Mr. Shivshankar Menon. The signing of the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity on the Line of Actual Control along the Border Areas, to give it its full name – this Agreement enabled the two countries to concentrate on building up bilateral relations in other areas free from the – how shall I put it? – free from the morbid influence of the boundary dispute. Not that the dispute was ignored by us, but that – and this is what Prime Minister Rao kept stressing – these two great Asian countries, inheritors of great civilizations ... they couldn’t go on glowering at each other across the border. Their individual histories, and the history of their contacts with each other, demanded a much more optimistic view of their future together. And they needed to work together to bring this about.

There was a sense of ... of higher things in Mr. Narasimha Rao’s mind when it came to China and India–China relations. That sounds vague, so let me try and explain. He believed that the two countries, inheritors, as I said, of great traditions and culture, far from ignoring or irritating each other, had everything going for greater friendship and cooperation across the board. He wanted to see how the two sides could tap into their respective rich legacies and work towards this mutually beneficial goal. I remember that, when he was going through the brief that officials had prepared for his visit to Beijing, he seemed somewhat dissatisfied – a sense of something missing, if I might put it that way. This was characteristic of Prime Minister Rao. Great countries, he believed, didn’t come together like two totally unknown or unwilling individuals. They came together seamlessly. And the result was something

bigger. They didn't lose their individual identities, but the coming together had to take the best of each identity, and add to the commonalities thus created. I'm not sure I'm making sense here but that –

IFAJ: You mean countries like India and China, when they came together, brought synergy into their relationship and beyond.

PM: Exactly! And, something more also, because each country had much more to offer the other than just iron ore or electronic gadgets or whatever. So, when PM Rao visited Beijing and met Chinese President Jiang Zemin, he wanted to talk about not the nuts and bolts of diplomacy, as it were, but the larger picture, the larger canvas, the larger building blocks of which the nuts and bolts would be a part. Like scaffolding – scaffolding is indispensable; but the building that comes up is the real objective. The idea, and the goal was that this synergy between two nations who understood each other would percolate down to the lowest level, and establish stable foundations for their relations.

The discussion between the two was wide-ranging, and didn't confine itself to bilateral issues. It went into the broader questions that influenced relations among nations. I must stress that this wasn't anything airy-fairy or impractical. Neither we nor the Chinese were soft-headed enough to ignore what would make the relationship work, and what was needed to be done for this purpose. We're fond of the term 'nitty gritty', as you know: well, the nitty gritty is all right, but it isn't everything. What I'm trying to say is that while our boundary dispute, about which the two sides were talking anyway, couldn't be ignored, it shouldn't turn into the elephant in the room, overshadowing everything else.

IFAJ: But it is the elephant in the room. How can one ignore that?

PM: Prime Minister Rao had a somewhat different take on that. He believed that India and China, given their civilizational values, and the history of their friendly relations for hundreds of years, possessed the maturity and capacity to find a solution to the boundary problem.

IFAJ: The general feeling around is that China isn't keen on a quick solution, and wants to use this issue to keep us on tenterhooks.

PM: Well, let me put it this way: Prime Minister Rao was impatient with facile solutions. And he knew that there could be no facile solution to this long-standing problem. But he was clear in his mind that the two countries had the capacity to resolve the problem. And that they could, in the meantime, repair or enhance other parts of their relationship. Even the most intractable of problems would be resolved in the course of time. History has given us examples – relations between Germany and France, between America and Vietnam.

Maybe the resolution would come through a generational change, so that bitter memories didn't militate against better relations. Or through the influence of a changing world in which animosity among nations, or bilateral territorial disputes and so forth, gave way to cooperation because everyone realized that cooperation brought much greater benefits than tension and conflict. Equally important, that in the course of global change and development, when people gave up outdated prejudices and complexes, nations would find it easier, more natural, to trust one another, and come together. It might sound fanciful, as I said, but there's an element not only of truth but of realism in it. Far-sighted realism.

There's one thing, though, that Mr. Rao especially noted, and that was repeated references by Chinese leaders to their country as a developing country, and their need for global peace and cooperation to build up their own nation. Mr. Rao wasn't willing to dismiss this as mere talk.

IFAJ: What about trade relations?

PM: He sided firmly with those who believed that India–China trade had only scratched the surface. The fact that trade volume has skyrocketed since his 1993 visit to Beijing only validates his view.

IFAJ: Was there any significant variation between the world views of the two? I mean, with the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the dominance of America in world affairs, how did the Chinese see themselves in this emerging scenario?

PM: They believed that the world was in a state of flux. Also, that single superpower dominance was not an eternal fact of life. They were quite clear about two things, and they mentioned this to PM Rao on more than one occasion. First – and I referred to this a moment ago – that China was a developing country, and needed peace at home and abroad for its growth. Second, countries of the world should cooperate peacefully – which sounds like a worn-out platitude, but which the Chinese clarified by adding that such cooperation presupposed that there would be no hegemony by any one country over others. And, that superpower status did not automatically mean subordinate status for others. This fitted in well with our own views, and provided a good take-off point for our relations to take an upward curve.

Russia

IFAJ: Let us move to 1994 and the Prime Ministerial visit to Russia.

PM: It turned out to be a very salubrious one. Russian President Yeltsin had

come to India the previous year, and the two countries had signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership. This was the outcome of the unavoidable realization that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, as also the creation of several independent states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the world's political and strategic map was changing drastically. The USA appeared to be the sole, indisputable superpower. And everyone was trying to curry favour with it. Not least Russia itself at one stage. India was forging its usual independent line, but what modified this to some extent was that most countries, and the Non-aligned Movement itself, had to re-orient themselves to new realities. India was no exception. Everything had been churned up, in other words. In such a context, what about India–Russia relations? Obviously, they needed re-nurturing, maybe re-definition. Indo–Soviet relations had been very close, so now India and the new Russia had to re-work their new equation.

IFAJ: The 1993, Yeltsin's visit had already provided some reassurance in this regard – in terms of the stability of Russian–Indian relations.

PM: You're right. And Prime Minister Rao's 1994 visit reinforced this trend. During the two reciprocal visits, a clutch of agreements were signed that gave tremendous substance to the bilateral relationship. This ranged from the utilization of India's heavy debt on the old rouble–rupee account to deliveries of armaments to renewed credit facilities to some other very sensitive strategic collaborations. All this laid the foundations for a refurbished and very robust Indo–Russian interaction. President Yeltsin was extremely forthcoming during the one-to-one talks. I remember there seemed to be nothing that he wouldn't agree to, and that Prime Minister Rao just had to ask. The vibes, as they say, were excellent. I don't remember witnessing such political *camaraderie* between top leaders as what I saw in the Narasimha Rao-Yeltsin *tete-a-tete* – except maybe on another occasion, when PM Rao and German Chancellor Kohl got along like old buddies. No differences that couldn't be overcome, mutual understanding of a high order, a sense of mutual trust that could dispel all doubts. It's a heady thing to witness this.

IFAJ: You said something just now about the world being churned up. In that context, what were Mr. Narasimha Rao's views about Indo–Russian relations as a whole? Keeping in mind how close Indo–Soviet relations had been when the world was multi-polar, and a much weakened and distraught Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

PM: A very important consideration. And one to which PM Rao had given great thought. On more than one occasion, he impressed upon us, his officials, that even if the old Indo–Soviet relationship had been overtaken by events, we had to remember three or four things. This is how he put it, I remember

I'm only paraphrasing, mind you ... these are not his exact words. He said: 'Never forget what the Indo–Soviet relationship was like, and how much we gained from it. We should never be ungrateful. You don't forget your friends when they are less powerful or less influential or anything like that. You have to stand by them. And don't be like children, running to this sweet-seller or that sweet-seller, or to whoever tempts you. There must be some consistency, some steadiness in relations. Russia is a great country, with a great history and a great culture. You can't treat it like a cheap novel that you read and throw away.' It's a lesson worth remembering when one is tempted to devalue a relationship just because it isn't bringing you the goodies it once did.

IFAJ: When you went to Russia, wasn't Yeltsin on the decline? Did you get that impression?

PM: Well, his tremendous confidence and sense of magnanimity seemed to suggest that he was the sole arbiter for Russia. But one can't be absolutely sure. Yeltsin on an army tank defying opponents, or Yeltsin in his early days in power was like a hurricane. But when you're actually holding power, various factors start operating, and your freedom of action is circumscribed. Also, we – I mean those of us who were in the Prime Ministerial delegation – we noticed that Yeltsin was puffy-faced, bleary-eyed, and breathing laboriously. So one could, if one wanted, say that he wasn't in top form physically. But otherwise, yes; what Yeltsin promised during that visit of PM Narasimha Rao was, so to speak, engraved in stone. More importantly, and this is something I must stress ... more importantly, in the average Russian mind, and I'm sure also in many of Russia's governing circles, the Indo–Russian relationship is precious. There may be many in Russia who think otherwise in the new situation, when the temptation to prefer the West to the East is much stronger. But there is still a vast Russian constituency that considers the Indo–Russian relationship extremely valuable. For both sides, I must add. And so, whether it's Yeltsin or someone else, the relationship has strong foundations. And should continue to have strong foundations unless either side undermines them.

Our Ambassador in Moscow then, Ambassador Ronen Sen, repeatedly stressed the special nature of our relationship with Russia. And Prime Minister Rao, who respected Ronen Sen's professionalism, agreed.

United States

IFAJ: Moving on to the United States. In 1994 Prime Minister Rao went to Washington. What were the results of that visit? How did relations develop?

PM: It was a strange visit in some respects. And it had somewhat inauspicious beginnings. The brief that was prepared for the Prime Minister left him very dissatisfied. He wasn't going to Washington, he said, merely to ask for this or that item, like a shopping list. He was going as India's Prime Minister to another friendly democracy that happened to be the most economically advanced country on earth. India was not the eternal supplicant; it had a great deal to offer America. And, if the two countries realized their true worth for each other, their mutual relationship would really take off. The relationship held real promise – promise that hadn't been realized and needed to be pursued.

IFAJ: Wasn't there another dilemma before the visit? Our Prithvi missile test?

PM: That's right. We were on the verge of testing it; but it was felt that doing so on the eve of our Prime Minister's visit to Washington would be inappropriate. The postponement of the test, which was leaked to our newspapers, created a ruckus in our Parliament on the grounds that we had succumbed to American pressure, and postponed what was a vital security exercise. Mr. Rao had to spend valuable time trying to calm tempers.

Anyway ... to get back to the story ... what Mr. Rao did was to abandon the official brief, and scribble several points on a piece of paper, which he used as his talking points. President Clinton gave him a proper welcome in Washington, of course, but it was neither effusive nor indeed special in any respect. At that time, the Americans were preoccupied with Russia and Eastern Europe, firstly; and secondly, they were on their nuclear non-proliferation high horse, which was riding roughshod over the security arguments of nuclear-capable countries like India. The idea apparently was that Clinton would give our PM a "good talking to", as it was reported. And dissuade the Indians from pursuing a policy that the Americans found distasteful.

Mr. Rao and Clinton went in for a relatively short *tete-a-tete*, with no one else present. But the meeting lasted longer than we expected. And at the end of it, Clinton emerged looking as if he'd been sandbagged, something his entourage found untypical, knowing as they did how energetic and articulate their President usually was. Clinton was also uncharacteristically quiet at the lunch that he hosted for Mr. Rao. What had caused this change in demeanour? Nobody knows; but a hint I got from Mr. Narasimha Rao, when I asked him for the talking points that he had written down himself, was that he had explained at length to President Clinton the potential inherent in the bilateral relationship, and the need for both sides to work to realize this potential. Mr. Rao's conviction was that the two countries shouldn't fritter away their energies in this or that difference of opinion, but combine their resources for their own mutual benefit and for the common good.

IFAJ: From what you're saying, we get the impression that the visit fell short of expectations. Is that a correct reading?

PM: Well, that would be a somewhat limited interpretation. I think the Indian media was somewhat underwhelmed by the results of the visit, if I remember correctly. But PM Rao had a different take on it. For one thing, he had underlined certain basic "givens", as it were, in the relationship. He believed that these "givens" –

IFAJ: "Givens" in what sense?

PM: "Givens" beyond the usual bilateral *mantra* of shared ideals, democracy, the rule of law, the English language, and so on and so forth. All these were important; but there was much more that drew the two countries together. Shared or overlapping areas in the world view of each nation. Or something more down-to-earth but significant all the same – like contacts in the field of education, for instance. Or culture. These were seeds in the relationship that would sprout in due course into healthy trees, if one might put it that way without sounding woolly-headed. Or – and this was perhaps the most important – the shared emphasis that the two countries placed on a peaceful and cooperative world where fundamental values would prevail. This was the essence of Prime Minister Rao's approach, namely that India and America looked at the world, and at relations among nations, through the same pair of eyeglasses, as it were.

IFAJ: How would that be reconciled with the fact that the two countries differed widely and deeply on many issues?

PM: The realization of the strong motivating force, as it were, of the shared values, and the mutual desire to build a relationship upon them, would resolve these differences. It was his conviction that the inherent strengths of the two countries had a – how shall I put it? – had a symbiotic connection: two sides being naturally attracted to each other. And something more, in the sense that the sum of the two together would exceed a simple combination of the two. A synergistic connection.

'Look East' Policy

IFAJ: Let's move on to another aspect. Mr. Rao's tenure as Prime Minister is often associated with, what has come to be known as, the "Look East" policy. If not its originator, at least he is credited with reviving and re-defining it. How did that develop?

PM: Narasimha Rao believed that this was axiomatic for India, given its location, its strategic interests, its cultural values, its history, and so on. I mean, on several parameters, India's focus on the countries of East and Southeast Asia was not just inevitable and compulsory, but urgent. He recalled how we had in the past lost the opportunity of playing a more substantial role in ASEAN. He felt that we should not lose another opportunity. Indeed, we should try and create opportunities for ourselves and for our Eastern Asian and Southeast Asian friends to enhance relations. Clearly, through history, through cultural contacts, through common experiences of colonialism and so on, there was so much to bring India closer to its East Asian neighbours that to ignore or neglect this fundamental fact would be unpardonable.

He was more than keen to undertake this exercise himself. You might recall that he visited a number of countries in the East, starting from China and Japan and going on to South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam. The visits, and return visits to Delhi by some of their leaders, were very successful. In Singapore, for instance, I remember their senior leader, the very perceptive and highly-regarded former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, remarking to me at one point during Mr. Rao's visit: "Your Prime Minister is a very impressive man. And he has a clear vision for your country's relations with our part of the world."

Mr. Rao once mentioned, I remember, Pandit Nehru's far-sightedness in hosting the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi back in 1948, when many of the invited countries were still colonies. Apart from Prime Minister Nehru's prescience in this matter, Narasimha Rao felt that this urge to know one another better, to come together, was what gave strength to relations among Asian nations. An understanding of each country's unique destiny, and the way it was intertwined with Asian destinies as a whole was absolutely necessary.

To summarise our discussion on our "Look East" policy – the kind of relationships we now have with these countries, the strong understanding on many issues, the great advances in trade, S & T contacts, the security networking, the greater trust with which they see India – all this is, I believe, a happy outcome of Mr. Rao's long-range vision when it comes to our "Look East" policy.

Israel

IFAJ: Let's rewind back a little, and talk about diplomatic relations with Israel. Prime Minister Rao decided, in early 1992, to formally open a mission there. What was the background to this development?

PM: It was inevitable. The question was not “would India?” but “when would India?” establish diplomatic relations. In his discussions with his counterparts around the world, Prime Minister Rao was only too conscious that, in a changing world, for a country like India to keep Israel at arm’s length was unrealistic, unnecessary and unproductive. The West Asian crisis was not going to be resolved overnight. Meanwhile, countries like Egypt were openly dealing, negotiating, and working with Israel. Even the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organization, was in constant touch with Israel. And Israel itself had many accomplishments to its credit that India could usefully explore. Irrigation, for instance; or some aspects of information technology, to say nothing of security cooperation.

But Mr. Rao was patient, if nothing else. He pondered over this for a fairly long time, and consulted a variety of people – foreign affairs veterans, newspaper analysts, political figures. I remember one visit to Delhi by PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Like most visits by Arafat, this one was also an effusive exercise on the part of the visitor. Our Prime Minister confided in him our intention to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. And Mr. Rao was encouraged by Arafat’s response. In fact, at the end of one cordial meeting between the two during which this question came up, Arafat turned to us on the sidelines – we were there holding our folders and trying to look indispensable – he turned to us, nodded, and remarked: “We know what you have decided. We agree. India is a great country. Our friend.”

Exercising the Nuclear Option

IFAJ: Lastly, can we talk about reports of our decision, postponed at that time, to embark on a nuclear weapon test. In 1995?

PM: That’s right, 1995. But I must say that it was a closely guarded thing. Officials like us only had an inkling of it, and were not involved in the decision-making process, except in a very marginal way. PM Rao’s Principal Secretary, Mr. Amar Nath Verma, was a kind of point man for this. But I do remember that, at one point, he called a couple of us in the PMO – myself, Director Sujata Mehta – to work on the possible repercussions of undertaking a nuclear weapons test. We did what was expected of us, and gave an idea of what some of the repercussions could be. But I think the exercise went much deeper than that and included, naturally enough, our security and defence experts, our atomic energy people, and one or two key advisors. The number of people in the know clearly had to be kept to the minimum.

But as it happened, as much because of international repercussions as for domestic reasons, the test never took place during Prime Minister Rao's tenure. But you might recall that his successor, Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, gave the credit for the success of our 1998 nuclear tests to PM Narasimha Rao. Mr. Rao was the progenitor, in other words.

IFAJ: Well ... Ambassador Prabhakar Menon, thank you for a very interesting interview.

PM: Before we conclude, may I make a few additional points?

IFAJ: Most certainly.

PM: Firstly, the public perception of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, particularly in regard to what he did in the foreign affairs sphere, does not do him justice. Far from it. I think he was probably the most cerebral of our External Affairs Ministers after Jawaharlal Nehru. He brought to foreign affairs a sense of gravitas, of soundness and trustworthiness that was not just valuable in itself but which impressed all his interlocutors abroad. His counterparts around the world considered him a balanced, thoughtful, far-seeing, insightful and dependable interlocutor. And this rubbed off very positively on their countries' relations with India.

Secondly, the public perception of Mr. Rao as a person, is again far off the mark. He was visualized or unfairly portrayed as a dour, indecisive, over-contemplative, over-scholarly person. Incidents like the demolition of the Babri Masjid dented his reputation further. But those of us who worked with him found him patient, accommodating, courteous. He was a quiet person, but the quietness hid many admirable qualities. And he had a keen sense of humour too – this is something the public wouldn't know about him. And of course, his mastery of the nuances and currents of foreign affairs was undoubted and unmistakable.

To give just two examples, and very briefly: long before anyone in India had thought about it, he realized the strategic importance of enhancing ties with the newly-independent States of Central Asia. Countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and so on. He went to each one of them, built up an excellent rapport with his counterparts there, and strengthened our relations with these countries.

And then there was Davos, the World Economic Forum. For the first time, he enunciated what came to be known as the "Middle Path"; that is to say, inclusive economic growth; economic growth that would take into account, and provide for, the deprived sections of society – the ones who never benefited from growth. I recall the praise he gathered when he addressed the WEF at

Davos in 1994. When you combine this with the fact that he fathered our economic liberalization policies, you come to realize how far-seeing and statesman-like he was.

I should also pay tribute to the PMO team that I was part of during those days. You cannot deny that your success owes a lot to the support you get from your team. Principal Secretary Amar Nath Verma, who enjoyed the confidence of the Prime Minister, was a savvy officer, sharp-witted and decisive, a confident and knowledgeable boss who, at the same time, gave one full freedom in one's work. In Ms. Sujata Mehta, I had a colleague who was a pillar of strength for me in my work. Mr. Dilip Sinha was another valuable colleague. There were others, non-I.F.S. officers too, of exceptional ability, and whose presence in the same office in which I worked was not just supportive but inspirational.

And lastly, congratulations on this excellent oral history project! Indian diplomacy has had a very creditable record of accomplishments. Knowing more about how this was done, who were the prime movers, the players, the facilitators – all this deserves permanent record so that our historical memory doesn't suffer from either amnesia or neglect. It, therefore, becomes a pleasure and a privilege to be part of this valuable exercise.

IFAJ: Thank you, Ambassador Menon, for your kind words, and for this interesting account of your experiences in service.

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