

Address by  
Ambassador Graciela de la Lama, former ambassador of Mexico to India (1980-1988)  
at India Mexico bi-national Conference  
on  
**Democracy, Diversity and Development**  
Indian Council of World Affairs,  
Sapru House, New Delhi  
21 October 2010

Since the discovery of America 500 hundred years ago, a sui generis relationship between Mexico, then New Spain, and India, was established. Columbus thought that he had reached India; therefore the indigenous people of the continent were called Indians. Though the mistake was soon understood, the denomination persisted creating a kind of mystical connection between our cultures.

Unfortunately to transform that mirage into a concrete relationship has taken a long time in spite of many efforts. These started as soon as the conquest of Mexico was achieved in the beginning of the XVI the century, and was followed afterwards in the course of history.



We are gathered here to commemorate sixty years of Mexico India diplomatic relations which reflect the success of that endeavor. Again, by unpredictable destiny this commemoration coincides with the bicentennial of our Independence from Spain, the centennial of our Revolution and the 100 years of the recreation of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

I deeply appreciate the initiative of Ambassador S. T. Devare, from the Indian Council for World Affairs, Dr. Karan Singh, Suresh K. Goel, Ajit Gupte and Yogeshwar Varma, from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Professor B.B. Bhattacharya from the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Ambassador Jaime Nualart for organizing this seminar with the collaboration of so many academic and cultural institutions as well as distinguished scholars who are joining hands to make of this opportunity a lasting contribution to enhance the relations between our two nations, and give us the opportunity to celebrate together all these happenings.

Before approaching Mexico India diplomatic relations allow me to comment very briefly on some landmarks in the history of contacts between our two nations. I subscribe to the theory that political, economic or diplomatic relations between any two nations are always influenced by internal and external factors; this is a good example, moreover when these factors are deeply rooted in the history of their previous contacts.

As soon as the Spaniards established their power in central Mexico, they reassumed their original purpose: to find a way to reach India. They ordered the construction of the needed vessels for that purpose on the Pacific Coast. Three ships to explore the northern coast of Mexico and to cross the ocean

in search of a new route to the Indies. Their first and second attempts failed but they were stubborn enough to pursue their commitment.

They armed the project with three vessels that reached anchor at the end of the first half of the XVI Century, from Acapulco. They recruited all the talent available and in spite of the interdictions of the metropolis, an experienced Portuguese sailor, Joao de Barros, was also engaged. Thanks to him we know in great detail about the vicissitudes of the enterprise. The attempt failed again, though the ships reached Asia.

The relevance of this adventure for our purpose is that a priest joined the explorers as a chaplain. He and Joao de Barros were the only survivors after shipwrecks, attacks of islands aboriginals and treacherous behavior of the Portuguese at their settlements. They reached Goa, Joao left for Europe and the priest stayed in India. He was the first resident of New Spain to reach India through the Pacific Ocean.

Later, after Andres de Urdaneta discovered the Tornavuelta (how to sail back to Mexico from the Philippines), regular contact was established from 1565 through the Manila Galleon. Once or twice a year during 250 years, the Galleon touched the ports of Acapulco in New Spain and Cayao in Peru. The Galleon carried back to Manila the needed situado of Mexican silver for the running of the colonial state. The ship was full of Indian products, textiles, cinnamon, pepper and clove, fruit trees such as mango, tamarind and coconut which fed the expectations of the Mexican and Spanish societies.

But one of the most valuable imports was people from India and other places of Asia displaced from their sites of residence by the illegal Macao traffic who were embarked at the Parian of Manila. We know that many of those were Indian women to be engaged by wealthy families and convents in Mexico City, Puebla and other prosperous cities of New Spain. One of these women was Catarina de San Juan, a princess, if we believe her own statement, who after an incredible odyssey from the beaches of her father's small kingdom in Gujarat, was engaged to work at Santa Clara's convent in Puebla. Her story could be like the one of many others, but she became famous because her mystical raptures called the attention of the church. She also has been known because of her garments, her way of dressing that introduce the fashion that eventually became the national Mexican dress, though it is difficult to asses how this happened. Her reputation was such that she was proposed to Rome, one hundred years after her dead, for beatification jointly with Juan Diego, the indigenous peasant to whom the emblematic Guadalupe virgin appeared.

Neither was beatified but thanks to the priest that supported her recognition we have her biography, an invaluable document for history. Regarding her influence in the Mexican way of dressing, tradition relates her to the myth of the China poblana with her characteristic colorful plaited skirt with a band at the fringe. One can assume the importance of the textiles and other materials brought by the Galleon for more than two centuries that included not only the cloth but the spangles and the fine mock colored beads (chaquira) required for that dress. So, this trade had a deep influence in the ways of dressing of the popular classes of the Colony.

Even today it is amazing to see the similarities in design and color in both textile traditions. Other influence not yet studied is the one on Mexican and Indian cuisines where chilies and curries or moles define much of their character.

The trade with India, through Philippines, did not end until 1823 when the private traders, successors of the Galleon stopped functioning due to the climate of uncertainty stirred up in Mexico by the War of Independence. The Galleon had been cancelled by the Spanish Crown in 1815 because of the same reason.

As the traffic of goods and persons proceeded in the Pacific Ocean the political and economic strength of the Mughal Empire declined. The importance of the foreign European trade companies in India increased until the British controlled great part of the Subcontinent. Mexican silver had an important role in that process since the XVI Century at the time of the Portuguese and later with the British East Indian Co., and through the years, until the independence of India, as we will see later on.

In the mean time, during British India, Mexico had achieved independence and continued to be an important exporter of silver and sugarcane to Europe. Mexico imported, through England, large quantities of jute bags from Bengal. The Mexican customs authority advised the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explore the possibility of importing them directly. The proposal was in consonance with the new policies of trade diversification of the Government of Porfirio Diaz and he gave the instructions to the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, to open an Honorary Consulate in Calcutta. The Mexican ambassador in England was asked to proceed. After several months, the British Foreign Office issued the required authorization and Mexico opened the Consulate at Calcutta. A well-known British businessman was agreeable to the request of Mexican government and he presented his letters to the local authority at the beginning of the century.

The work of the Consulate was very soon affected by the deterioration of the political and social climate in north India due to the Bengal partition in 1905. The political conditions were not ripe and the consulate disappeared after a very fragile existence. In Mexico, the celebrations for the Independence Centenary had just finished when major instability started. The Mexican Revolution meant fundamental changes in all fields and also on the approach to India from the part of Mexicans as well as from some Indians to Mexico whether for economic or political reasons.

At the beginning of the XX th century the policy of Mexico to attract migrants to settle in new fields attracted the attention of Punjabis and later on, the Mexican revolution aroused the interest of some Indian freedom fighters that looked for shelter to avoid U S or British police or thought it convenient to peer into the folds of the First social revolution of the Century.

The Indian peasant migration to northern Mexico was an answer to the demographic policies of President Diaz and also to the restrictive 1917 migration policies of Canada and U.S. that forced the migrants to look for other host countries. So, some migrated from Canada and Northern US to California and eventually to northern Mexico to the States of Baja California, Sonora and Sinaloa, others entered via the southwestern ports of Salina Cruz, Oaxaca; Manzanillo, Col. etc. though the information obtained from the National General Archives and other sources is contradictory, at least as far as the port of entry. During my stay in India as ambassador, I had the opportunity of meeting some members of the new generation of those migrants who came back to Punjab to get married.

At the political level the short presence in Mexico of M. N. Roy left a deep imprint. Fleeing from the Californian police, he crossed the border with his wife, and established in a central area of Mexico City. His contacts with a group of Mexican and foreign radicals led him to participate in the foundation of the Communist Party of Mexico and, a few months later, to become its representative at the 3d International meeting of the CP in Moscow. He wrote that he met President Carranza and shortly after,

in 1919, he left to Europe leaving behind unsolved controversies and a lot of admirers. He was a journalist publishing at the Herald, a Mexican newspaper in English, and a prolific writer, at the same time that pursued his unfruitful contacts with the Germans to get the promised support for the struggle for independence of India.

Pandurang Khankhoje, another Indian freedom fighter who found shelter in Mexico is a case apart. He was a revolutionary close to Tilak, and an agricultural scientist that made pioneer work towards the Green Revolution. He was an active nationalist at the beginning of the Indian struggle for independence. He came to Mexico in the 1920s after the failure of his intent to promote a mutiny in the northwest frontier of British India during the First World War. As a founding member of the Ghader Party and an active promoter of the Hindu German conspiracy, the British banned him from India. So he went to Mexico, met President Calles and was invited to teach at Chapingo, the National School of Agriculture, where he was devoted to research on corn breeding. He helped to organize a large number of peasant committees to improve agriculture. Later he married, had two daughters and opted for the Mexican nationality. He was in contact with Diego Rivera, Tina Modotti and a number of intellectuals. He is portrayed in the Diego Rivera murals. Perhaps he met Jose Vasconcelos. He was appreciated and recognized by intellectuals and revolutionaries, worked for the Zapata rural movement.

As soon as India achieved independence he tried to return. Some years later, he obtained the needed authorization and went back to Maharashtra. His lasting contribution to establish and develop scientific links between India and Mexico deserve greater recognition.

The Mexican intellectual's interest in India also evolved during the convulsed period of the revolution. Jose Vasconcelos is perhaps the most astonishing personality of this period. He was a convinced revolutionary who supported Madero, the first leader of the struggle who appointed him as his confidential agent in Washington. There, he pursued his studies on philosophy, history and religion, initiated when he and other young intellectuals founded the famous Ateneo de la Juventud in 1906. He was an admirer of German thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche and theosophy, particularly of Helena P. Blavatsky. His firm believes in the universality of man drove him to acquire a deep and extensive knowledge of European culture and to approach other civilizations. He was a prolific writer, and during his second stay in U.S. as an exile, he became more interested on Indian struggle for independence going with his readings of Gandhi and Tagore, and produced four fundamental books, one was an extensive history of Indian philosophy published in 1920, named Estudios Indostanicos. Moreover, when he was Minister of Education under Alvaro Obregon government, he created one of the most inspiring programs to introduce the youth to world cultures. The Ministry published in Spanish a series of more than 100 titles of world literature and thought. India is represented with Gandhi, Tagore, the Panchatantra, etc. The books were well distributed through all the system of education.

Also, it is relevant to mention that sixty years ago, when the Bank of Mexico realized the imminence of the end of the Indian struggle for independence, sent a first mission to try to establish agreements related to silver trade with the new authorities. A young graduated from London School of Economics, Victor Urquidi was in charge of it. He reached Bombay on the eve of Nehrus Independence declaration. Nothing came out of his discussions with the officials he could contact because the transition to free India was tarnished by the most terrible communal partition riots. Later on Victor Urquidi played an important role in the development of cultural and diplomatic relations with India.

As soon as India achieved independence it was decided through diplomatic channels to establish formal diplomatic relations. India appointed in 1951 Madame Vijayalakshmi Pandit, a distinguished

freedom fighter that combined a fine education as a lawyer, great experience as a member of the INC with a personal diplomatic charisma, as Ambassador to Washington and concurrently to Mexico. She was Prime Minister Nehru's sister. Two years later she became the first woman to serve as President of the United Nations General Assembly.

Mexico also made a very careful selection of its representative. A senior politician and experienced diplomat in France and as an inviolate to the League of Nations, with a long and fruitful career as Governor of his state, Foreign Minister and two times Home Minister and acting President of the Republic from 1928 to 1930, a crucial moment after the death of the elected candidate, was chosen. Emilio Portes Gil was appointed the same year the first Mexican ambassador to India, posted at New Delhi. So the incipient relations started in the most promising way. Let me add that Octavio Paz was one of the junior officials of the Embassy. Paz befriended a number of young promising intellectuals and artists and became more interested in Indian Sanskrit literature. Later, the first scholarship to study Mexican modern art was given. Satish Gujral joined the Esmeralda where he studied with Siqueiros and met Diego Rivera and other famous Mexican muralist as well as painters of other nationalities working in the country, as Arnold Belkin the important Canadian disciple of Orozco that became a close friend of Satish.

The strengthening of diplomatic relations due to similarity of views and communality of endeavors as far as international issues are concerned gave a special character to the approach of both countries. Constant consultations at international forums related to peace and disarmament and all current international issues in a world confronted in the Cold War, required many times a negotiation of support or the presentation of an alternative, etc. at the Chancery. Also the position of India as a Non Aligned country and the fact that a very large number of nations had embassies in Delhi added value to the Mexican diplomatic effort. After the presentation of his credentials, Portes Gil stayed in India for a short time.

I am not going to describe the achievements or failures of each one of the Mexican Ambassadors to this country. Let's just say that the next step in the development of diplomatic relations was the visit of Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India to Mexico. The visit took place in 1961 when Adolfo Lopez Mateos was President. His daughter accompanied him. Though the international issues had a prominent place in the agenda, the will to strengthen cultural ties was stated and a preliminary draft of an agreement was submitted.

Mrs. Gandhi had very pleasant memories of her visit to Mexico on that occasion. She could stay a little longer and went to Monte Alban. She declared in a long interview given to Emmanuel Pouchpadass that Mexico had always exerted on her a great fascination, and intended to go back. Nineteen years later she was able to do so in the context of her participation in the Forum of Cancun. But a visit planned for the 80s was frustrated by the Sikh revolt.

The President of Mexico visited India the year after on the frame of the first visit of any President of Mexico to Asian countries. Luckily he was in Delhi before the Sino Indian conflict broke out but this unfortunate event affected the immediate outcome of the visit. The cultural agreement had to wait until 1975 to be signed.

One of the most relevant periods of our cultural relations with India took place during the tenure of Octavio Paz as an Ambassador. He reached Delhi in April 1962. At that time Mexico did not have a residence so he stayed at the hotel. His many friends from the time of his first assignment were very

pleased. He made a lot to strengthen the links with the intellectuals and scholars from a great diversity of interests. In a short time he was at the center of the most qualified and critical of the Delhi intelligentsia.

I had the opportunity of visiting him in 1963 and benefited greatly from his knowledge. He introduced me to Romesh and Raja Tappar, to Satish Gujaral and his wife, to the painter Swamynathan the head of the Group 1890, to Raimond Panikkar, etc. I helped him to redecorate the just hired new residence of the Embassy. We visited the big bazaar close to Jama Masjid. Unfortunately I was in Delhi for a very short time and had a very tight schedule of work. I made his acquaintance in the 50 s at El Colegio de Mexico when he used to attend the Wednesday meetings of writers, during Alfonso Reyes tenure.

Afterwards, he helped us at the CEAAN in everything related to the invitation of Indian professors, buying of books, etc. One can assess the impact of Indian culture on his writings, his poetry, The monkey grammarian, as well as in his many other books. His last contribution was Glimpses of India, an extraordinary but some times harsh appraisal of modern India published after his resignation in 1968, due to discrepancies with the Diaz Ordaz policies. Later the bilateral relations continued to be good but experienced again the periodic lethargy that was characteristic of the first decades.

Since his assumption to power, President Luis Echeverria, showed great interest in strengthening the links with the developing nations of Asia and Africa; for that purpose, he created the Center of the Third World. He invited scholars in science and technology and other disciplines from India but he could not visit India until 1975. At that time two important agreements were signed: the Cultural and the Cooperation on Science and Technology.

Nevertheless somehow the relations could not progress as one could expect, though some exchanges as far as shrimp catching technology, and shrimp fishing boats exports took place. The emergency in India and the following political instability did not help either.

With the coming back to power of Mrs. Gandhi and the changes on policies that signified the beginning of the economic liberalization opened new avenues of cooperation. Also, Mrs. Gandhi showed interest in the international role of Mexico and its economic and scientific development. In Mexico, President Lopez Portillo was also interested in India. She visited Mexico in 1980 on the frame of the Cancun International Forum as was mentioned before. The Mexican President did the same in 1981. An ambitious program of economic and cultural exchanges was intended. This was some how frustrated in part by our economic break down of Mexico and the sprout of the Sikh problem in India. The programmed bilateral visit of Mrs. Indira Gandhi Mexico did not take place but the first ever visit of a President of India was realized in 1984 and a number of important economic missions, legislative and cultural visits took place. Mexico started offshore drilling for oil at Bengal Sea, the cooperation on steel production and some of the Mexican private companies as Hylsa, Protecsa and some pharmaceutical started interesting ventures.

In the cultural field the exchanges of writers, painters, dancers and artists in general intensified as well as on the academic world. Octavio Paz received the Nehru Award. The Indian economic liberalization process continued under Rajiv Gandhi and the visit of President Miguel de la Madrid to India in 1985 was followed by the one of PM Rajiv Gandhi to Mexico next year. The economic cooperation between both countries began but was in the infancy, the balance of trade was very small. Soon the first important investments of India in the Mexican steel production were going to be materialized. But somehow the diplomatic relations at the bilateral diplomatic level suffered and slowed down. The next high level visit took place after a gap of 18 years.

The economic relations on the contrary experienced a real boom, the trade balance increased from 251 millions of US Dlls. in 1999 to 2,950 millions US Dlls in 2008. In 2009 due to the world economic crisis things slowed down but recovered quickly. President Calderon's visit in 2007, followed by the one of Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil in 2008 renewed the contacts at the highest political level. International and bilateral diplomatic activity from both sides is increasing. Visits and agreements to facilitate the further rapprochement of both nations are in the hands of ablest diplomats who work through the official channels to ensure that the appreciation of the culture and history of each others nations can follow the path traced by the artists and intellectuals as Octavio Paz and Satish Gujral.

One cannot finish this schematic appraisal of Mexico India diplomatic relations without referring to the most valuable of the outcomes of this endeavor: the joint growing interest in enlarging economic exchanges between the two countries and for the global environment.

It is also quite satisfactory to see that contemporary artists, thinkers, scholars and students, as well as people in general, are creating avenues of understanding and friendship between our two nations.

Please allow me to thank again the government of India, the ICCR, and the JNU, for this gracious invitation. I anticipate and sincerely hope for a flowering future in the relationships between our two countries.