

**Oral History Record of
Ambassador A. N. Ram
Interview conducted by Gajanan Wakankar**

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Interview Conducted by Ambassador Gajanan Wakankar in 2015

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



Name : Ambassador Amar Nath Ram
Date and Place of Birth : December 30, 1939, Lucknow, UP
Education : M.A. (Economics),
Delhi School of Economics,
Delhi University (1961)

He joined the IFS on May 21, 1962

His various postings, at home and abroad were:

Office/Position	Tenure
Probation	From 21 May 1962
Third/Second Secretary, Embassy of India, Paris	November 1963 to May 1966
Under Secretary (Europe West)/ (Coordination), Ministry of External Affairs	June 1966 to October 1968
Second/First Secretary, Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan	October 1968 to May 1971

First Secretary, Deputy Permanent Representative of Bhutan to the UN, New York	June 1971 to August 1973 (on deputation)
Deputy Secretary (North), Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi	August to October 1973
Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Commerce	October 1973 to December 1974 (on deputation)
First Secretary/Counsellor and Alternate Permanent Representative of India to UNESCAP, Embassy of India, Bangkok	December 1974 to July 1976
Counsellor and Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of India, Tokyo	July 1976 to May 1979
Joint Secretary (Northern Division), Ministry of External Affairs	May 1979 to November 1981
High Commissioner of India to Zambia with concurrent accreditation to Botswana and Angola (also liaised with ANC and SWAPO from Lusaka)	November 1981 to October 1983
Ambassador of India to Bhutan, Embassy of India, Thimphu	October 1983 to October 1985
Minister and Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of India, Washington DC, USA	November 1985 to January 1989
Ambassador of India to Argentina with concurrent accreditation to Uruguay and Paraguay	February 1989 to April 1992
Additional Secretary, (AD & ED), Ministry of External Affairs	April 1992 to June 1992

Ambassador of India to Thailand and Permanent Representative of India to UNESCAP, Embassy of India, Bangkok	June 1992 to December 1993
Ambassador of India to The European Union (EU), Belgium and Luxemburg and Economic Envoy to Western Europe	January 1994 to December 1995
Secretary (Economic Relations) and Secretary looking after bi-lateral relations with countries of Africa and Southeast Asia	December 1995 to December 1997

He also served as Government's Economic Envoy to Western Europe, Member, Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB); was a Member of Governing Boards of bodies like EXIM Bank, ICCR, IIFT, RIS, Trade Fair Authority, etc. He represented India in over 100 International Conferences and led Indian Delegations in bilateral talks with about 30 countries. He has been Prime Minister's Envoy to G-15 (1995-7) and was Prime Minister's Emissary for a Special Mission to Africa in 1998. He was actively involved with SAARC, ASEAN, EU, and BIMST-EC (as one of the original signatories). In 1975-76, he negotiated the Bangkok Agreement as a part of the Indian team. He also attended the Davos Meeting of the World Economic Forum in 1997 as a member of the Prime Minister's high-level team.

Superannuated from the Indian Foreign Service on December 31, 1997.

Post-retirement:

Until recently (2000-6), he was the Chairman of the India National Committee of Council for Security Cooperation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), of which he continues to be a Member; he is the Founder/Patron and permanent Honorary Advisor to India Study Centers in Thailand and Belgium; he is a member of several Boards of Governors and Think Tanks. He also serves as an Eminent person/Expert (EEP)

on ARF from India; Member, Editorial Advisory Boards of various Journals; Member of Advisory Committee of JNU's European Studies Programme. He was appointed Adjunct Professor at National Law University (NALSAR), Hyderabad in July 2012. He is a Member of Advisory Committee, SSARC LAW Centre, National Law University, Hyderabad. He was the Co-Convener of Track II body called Council for South Asian Cooperation (CASAC) in which capacity he also organized the meetings of the high level Citizen's Commission for South Asia, Chaired by former Prime Minister, I.K. Gujral. He writes extensively on international affairs and his articles/papers have been published in over 40 books/academic journals. He has recently edited two books on India's Look East Policy and our Asia-Pacific Engagement.

He has contributed to the setting up of three ZP High Schools in his native villages in Andhra Pradesh in memory of his late parents; to his Alma Maters in Lucknow and Delhi; to Lucknow University for an endowment in his late Father's memory; and to various social, cultural and educational causes dear to him.

He was closely associated and directly involved in providing policy inputs for India's Look East Policy in the initial stages. In that capacity, he was involved with the process of India's full dialogue partnership with ASEAN (1995), membership of ARF (AESAN Regional Forum) in 1996, membership of BIMST-EC (1997) and in 2000, after retirement, in piloting, directing and processing India's full membership of the Track II regional body, CSCAP (Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific).

He is the recipient of Bhutan's highest Decoration and other international awards including Life Time Achievement Award for contribution to Southeast Asian Studies.

Languages : Hindi, English, Telugu,
French and Spanish (limited).

Special interests : Sub Himalayan Cultures, SAARC
and South East Asia

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Oral History

Interview with Amb. A. N. Ram (ANR)

by Amb. Gajanan Wakankar (GW)

GW: Ambassador Ram, it is an honour for me to interview you for the Oral History Project. You are one of our most respected diplomats. We remember you representing the Bhutanese Government in the UN in the early seventies, when they opened their Mission in New York. It was a unique honour for you personally as well as for the Indian Foreign Service. Besides this, you were the pioneer, who started the Economic Relations Division and initiated what is now known as the Look East Policy.

I would like you to kindly dwell upon these different subjects along with your other career highlights for the benefit of our readers.

ANR: Thank you, Gajanan. I consider it a great honour and privilege to have been a member of the Indian Foreign Service. My career in the Foreign Service, spanning approximately 36 years and my post retirement work of over 16 years, for the purpose of discussion, can be divided into four distinct segments.

In the first segment would fall my interest in our immediate neighbourhood. You, specifically, asked me about Bhutan. I

have had a long association with Bhutan, first having served there in the 1960s as Second/First Secretary in our newly started Mission; subsequently, in the early 1980s, I served in Thimphu as Ambassador; earlier, I had the privilege of representing Bhutan as Deputy Permanent Representative in their newly established Mission to the United Nations, after Bhutan became a UN member in 1971; in the headquarters of MEA, I was responsible for looking after our relations with our northern neighbours, first as Deputy Secretary in 1973 and later as Joint Secretary and head of division from 1979 to 1981.

The second segment of my career could be said to have revolved around economic diplomacy. As you correctly mentioned, I have a Master's degree in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics. My career gave me an opportunity to use my interest in economics to specifically focus on issues concerning trade and commerce and multi-lateral diplomacy in my assignments, especially in Bangkok, Tokyo and Brussels.

The third segment of my career covered my association and deep involvement with the Look East Policy since its inception. I had an intense involvement with the Asia-Pacific region in my last assignment in the Ministry, in the mid-1990s, as Secretary (ER), which gave me an opportunity to provide inputs for policy formulation and oversee its implementation in its early phase. Earlier, I had served in the region, twice in Bangkok and once in Tokyo.

The fourth segment of my long career covered my postings in countries, which impacted and influenced global policies and

events. For example, I served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington D.C. at the time of the end of the Cold War; DCM in Tokyo when our relations with Japan were still fluid and evolving; Ambassador to the European Union in Brussels in the ongoing reform era in India; and as Permanent Representative to ESCAP during the very early phase of the Look East Policy.

I had started my professional career in Paris during the de Gaulle presidency where I observed the interplay of global diplomacy during the post war evolving order. All these opportunities provided insights from a vantage perspective at different times and placed a unique learning experience.

Let me start with Bhutan. I was very fortunate that very early in my career, when I was Under-Secretary in the Ministry, I was asked by the then Secretary, Amb. T.N. Kaul, if I would like to go to a difficult posting; in response to my query, he said that he had Bhutan in mind where I would be required to help in setting up our new Resident Mission.

I was not clear then about what remote Bhutan would offer to me, professionally and personally. However, it did not take me long to get persuaded to go to Bhutan on this “challenging” assignment; this was the starting point of a love affair that I have had with Bhutan from the time I set foot in that beautiful country – unending, continuing and everlasting. My subsequent career, fortunately, brought me back in close contact with Bhutan on a number of occasions: as our representative in that country; representing them in the UN in New York; as Deputy/Joint Secretary (North) in the Ministry, looking after relations with Bhutan; and as Secretary in the Ministry towards the end of my career.

I left for Bhutan in an uncertain frame of mind, reaching Hashimara from Kolkata at the crack of dawn by an unpretentious private airline, Jam Air. In those days, there were no direct air connections to Bhutan. A long journey by an extremely uncomfortable army jeep followed and I, eventually, reached Thimphu exhausted and disoriented after nearly 14 hours, late in the evening.

The Border Roads were building the Phuentsholing-Thimphu highway, which was far from ready. We encountered landslides and construction delays on a very bumpy surface; in fact, on some stretches, I had to travel on horseback! The Border Roads detachment under then Colonel V P Yadav, offered me the best comfort and hospitality they could, lunch and tea at regular intervals included.

My first glimpse of the Thimphu Valley, as dusk was falling upon the hillside, left a lasting impression of the most picturesque setting. It was truly a picture post card that I saw. This was in 1968 when we were setting up our first resident mission in Bhutan. My brief was to assist Amb. B. S. Das, who was India's Special Officer at that time, in establishing our mission in Thimphu with the help of a skeleton staff and no office building. Until then, our relations with Bhutan were being handled by our Political Officer in Gangtok, Sikkim.

As I mentioned to you, my first glance of the Thimphu Valley in the setting sun was simply breathtaking. The large and impressive Dzong, in my view, is one of the architectural wonders of the world, absolutely stunning, located right in the centre of the valley along the Thimphu River, in all its splendour and glory. It is one of the most beautiful buildings I have seen.

The soup bowl shaped Thimphu Valley, at that time, had no more than a population of 500. Settling down was neither easy nor quick. To start with, there were no regular supplies of daily necessities or piped drinking water available; there were no roads, markets, shops, etc. A weekly market was the only source of procuring bare necessities. Evenings were bitterly cold, but days were warm because the sun was bright. My first night was spent in the Special Officer's unostentatious guest room with a "bukhari" to keep me warm in the night.

The following morning, Amb. Das informed me that he was leaving for India on home leave and I was to hold the fort in his absence of nearly six weeks. The next day, I sought an audience with His Majesty, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (third King of Bhutan). He was gracious enough to grant me an audience immediately. Those days, we did not have any transport; there was a makeshift office with virtually no support. The Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT), which had an established presence in Thimphu, occasionally, used to help us with transport and they agreed to send me a Jonga to take me to the Dzong.

I reached the Dzong early in the morning, the same majestic building that I had admired the evening before. I had not realized that it was going to be so exhausting to negotiate the steep steps to the top level of the Dzong at an altitude of over 8000 ft above sea level, unacclimatized as I was. His Majesty the King occupied only one wing of the Dzong. Another wing was occupied by senior government officials; the third wing was occupied by the Royal Bhutan Army and the fourth was exclusively reserved for

the monks and had an imposing Gompa (temple) within. This wing also housed the Tsongdu or the National Assembly.

I managed to negotiate the steep steps to the audience room, gasping for breath. It was not easy, even though I was young and fit. His Majesty received me with his trademark disarming smile and warmth. Noticing that I was totally out of breath, he made me feel comfortable by asking me to sit on an adjoining seat, carved in exquisite Bhutanese design. The incredible warmth he radiated at once made me feel at home and relaxed. In fact, for his subjects, he was not just the King of Bhutan, but also a mentor, a father figure, who was inspirational, caring, generous, gentle and large hearted. He taught me so much about the Bhutanese way of life, its traditions and practices. In the years that followed, I closely studied the Bhutanese way of life and began to admire many of its good points. The King, at the end of our conversation, said to me, “Look Ram, I am afraid, there is no readymade house for you; you will have to wait for some time for a new house to come up.”

After His Majesty’s orders, a makeshift and modest bamboo and mud plastered cottage with a tin roof was made for me, just behind the Special Officer’s Cottage. I moved in there before my family arrived and ordered furniture, etc. from the local Saw Mill run by a Mr. Hing in Phuentsholing. Life in Thimphu began to take shape slowly. I made some very good friends there, Bhutanese and Indians alike. These included Dawa Tsering (who later became the Foreign Minister), Sangye Penjore (later Minister and my boss in New York), Dasho Chogyal (later Finance Minister), Dasho Tamji Jagar (later Home Minister), Dago Tshering (later Home Minister

and Ambassador), Lam Penjor (a bright senior official), C. Dorji (later Secretary-General of SAARC and Minister), Karma Letho (later Minister), Lam Dorji (Chief of the Royal Bhutan Army), Om Pradhan (later Minister and Ambassador), Dasho Jigmey Thinley (later Prime Minister), Nado Rinchin (later Minister and Ambassador), Dr. T. Tobgye (later Ambassador), Dasho Sonam Rabgye (Surveyor-General), Benji Dorji (later Chief Justice), Tobgye Dorji (diplomat), Dasho Ugyen Tsering, Tsering Wangdi, Rinchen Tsering, Meghraj Gurung, Rinzin Dorji, Phub Tsering, Pema Wangchuk, Lhatu Wangchuk (later Ambassador), N.F. Suntook, G.N. Mehra, K.P. Medhekar, Police Advisor Soman, then Brig. T.V. Jeganathan, then Brig. O.P. Dutta and many others, who used to visit our home regularly and opened their own homes and hearth to my wife and myself at all times. My son, at that time, was only a few months old. Since no fresh milk, baby food or farm produce was available locally, Brig. Jeganathan, Commandant of IMTRAT, was kind enough to have essential supplies ferried for us from Siliguri. However, as time passed, we made ourselves comfortable in our little home.

The next morning, I paid a courtesy call on the Home Secretary, Dasho Tamji Jagar, an imposing large personality, who personified dignity and goodness. The Home Secretary was virtually the Home Minister and the senior most official, later to occupy the post of Home Minister. The courtesy call took place during the absence of the Special Officer, Mr. Das, who was on home leave in India. I reached the Home Secretary's traditional home in Motithang, then just outside Thimphu, and was escorted to the first floor of his charming home, which stood on stilts, as most Bhutanese homes did. A large tree trunk with enough space for steps carved

into it was used to climb to the first floor. I managed to negotiate the steps to find myself in the simple, but charming living room, designed and decorated in the Bhutanese style. The large frame of the Home Secretary was waiting there to receive me warmly.

Soon thereafter, my host's staff brought in half a glass of neat whiskey and placed it on a table in front of me. I am a teetotaler and had not consumed spirits even in Paris, my first posting, where occasionally I would sip a glass of wine. The Home Secretary greeted me with "Tashi Delek", which means, 'Cheers', as he gulped down the neat whiskey, urging me to do the same. I gulped down the beverage, which had an immediate effect as I began to feel light headed! As soon as we finished the first helping, the staff poured a second drink, which my host gulped down with satisfaction. He again looked at me and I followed suit, this time, feeling a bit intoxicated. Then came the third helping and I gulped down this one too. I must have nearly passed out as I do not recall any meaningful conversation with my host. I was very young and on my second foreign posting. I reached home where my wife was waiting for me with some black coffee!

The following day, I called on Dasho Dawa Tsering who, at that time, was the Secretary-General of the Development Wing in charge of our development cooperation programmes. Dawa Tsering was an extremely intelligent, able, well educated and articulate official. The King used to depend on him for his administrative and negotiating skills, particularly with foreigners. He spoke excellent English and was the most "westernized" senior government official, having been exposed to western education in

India. He graciously welcomed me to his large home, just on the edge of the market in downtown Thimphu.

He had heard about my experience the previous evening at the Home Secretary's residence and said to me "Mr. Ram, in Bhutan, there is a custom that when your host offers you a drink the first time, he is extending a welcome to his home; the second is to extend friendship and the third to invite you to be an honoured part of his circle of family and close friends. You did not have to gulp down the entire glass; you could have merely sipped the three servings of whiskey offered to you. That would have sufficed."

I did not know this as nobody had briefed me. This was my first experience of Bhutanese customs; later, I learned much more. For example, one such custom is that you never walk into the Dzong or the Gomba with an umbrella; another is that you do not point a finger at anyone. The reason why I am mentioning this is that, in my view, before one is posted to a traditional Asian country like Bhutan – and, indeed, other countries too – an orientation is highly recommended, even necessary. I wish, I had had that kind of an orientation. Instead, I had to learn through experience about Bhutanese customs, traditions and way of life.

My first few weeks in Thimphu were devoted to calling on people from different walks of lives and making new friends. I am happy that I continue to remain in touch with some of them. If they happen to be in Delhi or during my postings abroad, they would, invariably, visit my home. My "love affair" with Bhutan continued irrespective of whether I was in service with the Royal Government or the Government of India in their country. I recall

that in Washington DC, where I was the Indian Deputy Chief of Mission, I organized a couple of “Bhutan Evenings” at my home for one of which I had invited the Bhutanese Ambassador to the UN, Lyonpo Jigme Thinley, who later became the Prime Minister, to come and grace the occasion.

In the large basement of our home, an exhibition of Bhutanese objects d’arts, handicrafts, religious objects, Tankas and other items was organized. Jigme Thinley spoke on Bhutan to a large number of guests, who were all impressed and showed much interest in learning about this Shangri-la. I had similar events in some of my other postings too. One room or a corner in my home, no matter where I was posted, even today, is dedicated to Bhutan. I am fortunate to have a good collection of Bhutanese objects d’arts, books, textiles, etc., which reflects the deep impression that Bhutan has left on my family and me.

GW: You had close relations both with King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck as well as his son, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, (1972-2006, father of the present King). King Jigme Singye Wangchuck is famously known for the concept of Gross National Happiness as well as for voluntarily abdicating the throne in favour of his son in 2006.

ANR: I was fortunate to have enjoyed access to the King. As I began to get familiar with Thimphu, the people and personalities there, the King would, on occasions, ask me to do small errands. For example, I would be asked to assist the Editor of the Royal Government’s monthly magazine, Kuensel, Rinzin Dorji. I would look at the contents and provide my inputs to the Editor. Likewise,

on occasions, I would provide informal inputs for the King's few and far between public speeches. Then, there were social errands too.

My recollection of those days is one of trust, friendship, informality and respect that India and Bhutan exhibited in their personal and official interactions. Our interaction was frequent, highly informal, based on trust and mutual respect and reflected our cordial relations. Bhutanese dignitaries, including the King, would not let protocol come in the way of visiting our homes. Indeed, soon after I presented my credentials as Ambassador to the King, he came to the embassy residence for a chat and a cup of tea, disregarding protocol. We would often be invited to the Royal Palace for informal family occasions and, sometimes, would be invited to join them for outings.

There was no substance in the impression held by some that India was acting as a big brother. There was no such latent, overt or covert feeling in our personal relationships at that time. We would try and observe every Bhutanese custom and participate in their social and family celebrations. Indeed, Mr. Das himself set an example. A word about Mr. Das. In my view, he is one of our foremost voices on Bhutan. He not only set up our Mission there, but set high standards of diplomatic sensitivity and etiquette. I was only assisting him.

Both Mr. Das's and my families were profoundly influenced by the Bhutanese way of life and Buddhism. While I did not follow Buddhist rituals in my daily life, I found and still find peace in a Buddhist Gompa. I would like to believe that Buddhism, as

practiced in Bhutan, has broadened my vision and helped me to understand myself and my surroundings better. Some of my good friends were monks and I used to visit them regularly. The monasteries, usually, are far removed from habitation and settlements and are at high altitudes. In Thimphu, which is more than 8000 ft above sea level, I had to climb another 4000 ft to reach the Phajoding monastery. I used to go there at least once every two months. Likewise, there were three monasteries north of Thimphu. In those days, I was young and fit and could manage to go there frequently. Looking back, the memories, friendships, conversations and my work in Thimphu were probably one of the most satisfying periods of my life, those two and a half years.

After about one and a half years of my very happy and fulfilling assignment in Thimphu, I was asked by His Majesty the King to assist the Royal government in an unanticipated role. He said “Ram, I want you to go with my brother on a short mission to New York”. His brother, His Royal Highness Prince Namgyal Wangchuck, was then the Minister of Trade and Industry (Tengye Lyonpo).

In the preceding several years, Bhutan had slowly begun to acquire an international personality, a sovereign international personality. After Bhutan ended its policy of self-imposed isolation, Bhutan opened up to India following Pandit Nehru’s historic visit to Bhutan on horseback in 1958. The development process had begun with Indian assistance. Thereafter, Bhutan became a member of the Colombo Plan in the early 1960s; membership of the Universal Postal Union and some other organizations

followed soon. Bhutanese 3-D stamps were already well known in philatelic circles.

The momentum generated, expectedly, resulted in the discussion on possible UN membership for Bhutan. Small groups would meet at homes and in the market place to push for membership. The National Assembly also reflected this popular aspiration. Prince Wangchuck was an advocate of Bhutan's UN membership. The subject also came up for discussion between Bhutan and India and the Indian Mission and the Bhutanese leadership.

Following discussions with Delhi, in 1970, the King sent for me and said "Ram, I want you to accompany my brother to New York to assess the prospects for Bhutan's membership to the UN at that time". I accompanied the Prince to New York during the 25th session of the UNGA in September 1970. The Prince had meaningful discussions with a large number of Ministers and PRs as well as UN officials and others. I arranged and coordinated these meetings, kept notes and assisted him.

I had the good fortune of spending long hours in close proximity with the Bhutanese royalty, not only with the Prince, but also with the King's sister, HRH Ashi Cheoki, who was also staying with the Prince in a house in Sutton Place, overlooking the East River, in New York. I spent considerable time with them at their home, not only discussing UN and other official matters, but also talking about personal matters, interests, hobbies and Indo-Bhutan relations. I would dine with them frequently; Ashi Cheoki would cook Bhutanese delicacies for us. They were gracious to treat me as a part of their own personal entourage.

I experienced then that the Bhutanese Royalty would go the extra mile to make me feel at home. One of the things I learned by working with Prince Wangchuck is that in Bhutanese culture, if they disagree with you, they would remain silent rather than say, “No, I disagree with you”. This is something you learn from personal observations. Thus, when the Prince remained silent for more than a few minutes, it was left for me to understand that he held different views. However, he would be open to further discussion and persuasion, and if I was convincing enough, would graciously agree with me and even praise me. As it happened, he did not disagree with me on too many occasions.

On return to Thimphu, I briefed the King and the Royal Government on the discussions and meetings we had in New York and, later, the Prince presented a report to the Bhutanese National Assembly and to the cabinet. Later in 1971, Bhutan decided to formally apply for UN membership. His Majesty the King asked for my services to be made available to the Royal Government to open their first Mission to the UN in New York. I was to be the deputy to Lyonpo Sangye Penjore, a senior minister in the RGB. The small team selected comprised Kunlay Wangdi as second secretary, Rinchen as PS and Meghraj Gurung as administrative officer. Two local employees were recruited later.

Representing Bhutan at the UN, I remember, was a learning experience; to serve a foreign government in a multi-lateral organization was new to me. The task assigned to me was both sensitive and delicate. I, an Indian, was serving a foreign government, whose thinking on many issues was not entirely known to me. The makeup of my own mind, naturally, was

conditioned to uphold and further our national interests, as I saw them. To serve a foreign government – and to have to look at things from a different perspective without compromising our own national interests – was not easy, not that I faced any specific difficulty during my service with the Royal government.

I recall that in the years that I was with the RGB in New York, I was not only expected to set up the physical infrastructure of the new Mission, but also called upon to handle sensitive political issues. Importantly, at that time, the Bangladesh liberation war was happening and the UN was seized of the matter in its various Committees, General Assembly and the Security Council. Bhutan became the only country, apart from India, to vote in support of India on the UNGA resolution against India.

I was sitting in the UNGA on the Bhutan seat, next to the PR. This was a sensitive issue impacting on our national interests. Before that, in the Third Committee, I made some interventions on the human rights abuses in Bangladesh perpetrated by the Pakistani armed forces. I must acknowledge that the Bhutanese PR gave me full freedom to articulate Bhutan's position. I did not reflect India's views, although there was total convergence between the two. The PR and I would discuss each morning the day's agenda and issues involved at length and invariably agreed on the position that Bhutan would adopt.

I recall that when I was acting as the Charge d'affaires, in the absence of the PR, the new Chinese Ambassador came to pay a courtesy call on me. The Chinese PR, at that time, was Huang Hua, I think; he later became the Foreign Minister of China. I had

an interesting conversation with him; he did not know that I was an Indian, expressing interest in working closely with Bhutan, a country with which China had no relations.

On formal occasions, like the National day, I used to wear the Bhutanese “Baku” with full regalia, including the sword. We tried to serve Bhutanese cuisine at our home on formal occasions (my wife had learned to cook a few Bhutanese delicacies). His Majesty had told me before I left Thimphu for New York that the sword he had given me symbolized trust and confidence in me, as a part of Bhutan’s representation in the UN. I used to travel outside New York giving speeches at various campuses and in organizations like the Asia Society. I also represented Bhutan as a senior member of the delegation at the UNDP, UNCTAD and UN ECAFE conferences held outside New York, during this period.

For all practical purposes, I was a Bhutanese diplomat; my appearance and personality was that of a Bhutanese. Perhaps, I had a dual personality, one related to my work, which made me a Bhutanese while keeping in the background my Indian affiliations. My other personality manifested when I returned home after work. I would then switch off from my professional demands and revert to speaking in my language, eating my kind of food and listening to music of my choice. I was more relaxed then. This was a challenge, a challenge which, in the end, I must have met well enough.

On completion of my assignment with the RGB, in a very special and rare gesture, I was awarded Bhutan’s highest decoration “Druk Thuksey” and that too in a full session of the Bhutanese National

Assembly by the King himself. Very few, if any, foreigners have been given this award. I wore the Bhutanese Baku on that occasion. This was in 1974. By this time, the present King's father, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, had become the King of Bhutan. His Majesty paid handsome tributes to my work and to me personally. The citation too was flattering! The Keunsel gave a prominent front page coverage to this honour. It is proudly displayed in my home in Delhi.

The end of this innings with the RGB did not end my long association with Bhutan. After returning from New York, for a short period, I was appointed as Deputy Secretary in the Northern Division, a territory familiar to me, having earlier served in Thimphu. Later, in 1979, after returning from a posting in Tokyo, I was appointed Joint Secretary, Northern Division, handling relations with Bhutan, Nepal and some other work.

The opportunity to once again deal with our relations with Bhutan was the most satisfying, both personally and professionally. This, after many years, enabled me to travel on work to Bhutan, on an average once every month. In the intervening period, Bhutan had changed a lot. Apart from becoming a full member of regional organizations, like SAARC, international forums like NAM and other UN specialized agencies like UNDP, UNESCAP, UNCTAD, FAO, WHO, etc., Bhutan had also expanded its diplomatic relations and had started to set up and receive foreign missions.

The kingdom had reached a new significant development phase giving its people a high quality of life. The Chukha Hydro-electric project was ready to generate clean energy. I was on the Board

of the Chukha project. Then there were regular consultations on Bhutan's development plans, projects and other cooperation matters, political and economic. Bhutan, by this time, had also extended its external interaction with countries friendly to it. New diplomatic representations now covered Bhutan and the RGB too expanded its foreign relations. There were regular consultations between India and Bhutan on foreign policy and other aspects of our close relations.

Frequent visits to Bhutan gave me an opportunity to closely observe developments in that country from a new perspective, after a gap of several years. I had completed my assignment with RGB in New York in late 1973. I was awarded the Druk Thuksey in 1974. In 1979, after a gap of nearly six years, I was appointed Joint Secretary (North). This was a learning curve and I was astonished to observe the changes that had taken place in these intervening years since I first came into contact with Bhutan in 1968 and until this point of time in 1979, 11 years later.

The Thimphu Valley was now fully electrified, modern and lacked no conveniences; there were markets, hospitals, hotels, cafes and several concrete buildings, even outside the valley. I recall the time when we only had a weekly market and a few shops from where we would source our supplies of essentials. Now, there were large stores, even a bakery run by a Swiss resident. Thimphu had physically changed beyond recognition.

This period also gave me the distinct impression that new Bhutanese aspirations were manifesting and gathering steam. It appeared that they were no longer prepared to be strait-jacketed

– and rightly so, in my view – into a status quo relationship with India. They wanted to see the relationship reflect the realities of the present day, even as they clearly wished to develop stronger and closer mutually beneficial relations with India. The external dimension of this was their desire to have relations with other countries, including diplomatic relations; they had also begun to receive more foreign visitors into Bhutan than in the early days during my posting there.

Then, of course, there was a latent, not on the surface yet, suggestion of revising some instruments of our bi-lateral relationship to bring these to a contemporary level of usefulness. The economic transformation of Bhutan had also given new confidence, assurance and pride. For example, the electricity power lines running from Bhutan into India, into our eastern grid, changed the perspective; many people are not aware that until the Chukha Hydro-electric project became operational, Bhutan's dependence on Indian cooperation was overwhelming; even their civil budget was largely dependent on our cooperation. However, once Chukha started to earn revenues by sale of power to India, the need for Indian support for the civil budget almost ended. They did need support for their development budget, which India continues to extend generously.

Chukha has given confidence to Bhutan that without sacrificing much, they could generate sizable resources by harnessing their swift flowing rivers. I am not surprised at all that during our Prime Minister's recent visit to Bhutan, an agreement for the generation and sale to India of 10,000 megawatts of power was, in principle, agreed upon. As a result of such cooperation with India – many

people do not know this – Bhutan today, enjoys the highest per capita GDP in South Asia, much higher than India’s per capita income. In that sense, Bhutan is a more prosperous country than India. However, they measure prosperity and progress through their concept of Gross National Happiness, not in terms of per capita income or purely material indices.

GW: We hear so much about the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness. This is a holistic concept and certainly a better way of evaluating welfare – which is normally expressed in terms of either development or health or education taken separately.

ANR: It is entirely a Bhutanese concept based on Buddhism and their traditional values. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who conceptualized, propounded and articulated this principle, can be credited with a new philosophy in international discourse. It is a great contribution that the Bhutanese have made to thinking in contemporary times. Satisfaction and contentment, for them, is much more important than mere material gains.

I must add that in spite of all the development that has taken place, Bhutan has not made any serious compromises with its tradition and way of life. They continue to wear their national dress, the ‘Kho’ and the ‘Baku’; their diet comprises traditional yak meat, pork, brown rice, red chillies and yak butter tea; they have not changed their traditional architecture or designs for their now modern homes; and their deeply religious life style continues as for centuries before.

Their Dzongs are still the headquarters of the de-centralized state and monastic order. Nothing seems to have changed. This is a country where, almost close to 80 per cent of its land is densely forested. They have strict laws – and tradition – that does not permit large scale deforestation for development. This is also a country where tourism is strictly regulated, as they do not want to be flooded by tourists. Their philosophy is that money will not save their environment. It is truly a remarkable country from whom we can learn so much on relative merits of different development models.

GW: We learn that the King was very sensitive to environmental issues and about education.

ANR: I am only trying to summarize and encapsulate in a few words what I have, myself, observed. Let me add that Bhutanese rivers today, as for centuries, remain pristine and pure. Even the Thimphu valley, which appears brown, bare and barren, is much greener today, largely because of the RBB's extensive aforestation programme. Nor has the traditional system of farming and animal husbandry been compromised. Although horticulture is a major new export, care is taken to protect the environment. I observed all this during my JS (North) days.

Even as we sometimes talk about what India could share with Bhutan in terms of expertise, technology and experience, I feel that we should also look at what we can learn from Bhutanese knowledge and experience in some of these areas by organizing structured interactions between different segments of our societies. This was noteworthy during that period; it was not one way

traffic of India giving to Bhutan and Bhutan receiving; it was two way traffic in which Bhutan's rich "gifts" to India were equally valuable, not just material but, more importantly, philosophical. This was about the time when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck had set up a Chair of Buddhist Studies at Nagarjuna University in Andhra Pradesh to promote studies and research on Buddhism.

My assignment as Joint Secretary (North), which had allowed me to renew my close interest in Bhutan, ended in November 1981. However, very soon, in late 1983, I was reassigned to Bhutan as Ambassador. This meant that my close interaction with Bhutan, which had started with the setting up of our first resident mission in Thimphu in 1968 – an almost unbroken interaction – continued, albeit in another incarnation. During this period, in September 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, on becoming PM, paid his first official visit abroad to Bhutan. The visit helped in strengthening our already close and cordial relations with Bhutan. We were able to synergize our views on a number of issues of importance to both, including some issues related to external relations.

This was also a period of policy responses to evolving India-Bhutan relations and Bhutan's impressive economic progress. To be able to provide inputs to MEA at this time of transformation and to be able to further consolidate relations, taking into account mutual sensitivities and national interests, was very rewarding and satisfying. Soon after PM Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Bhutan, I was shifted to Washington DC as DCM. I doubt if many others have had the privilege of such intensive and close interaction with Bhutan for such an extended period when momentous changes

were underway in Bhutan. I was fortunate to be a part of this historical process.

GW: It was indeed a splendid and memorable inning. Now you might say something on your work in the late eighties and the nineties.

ANR: From time to time, as the senior most Secretary, one had to fill in for the Foreign Secretary when he would be away on tour. There were times when, in his absence, I would look after his responsibilities, which included Bhutan. Also, by choice, sometimes I would share my views with the Foreign Secretary on, for example, our economic interaction with Bhutan. He was gracious enough to listen to me. I must reiterate that I was not looking after relations with Bhutan, as Secretary (ER), although I did participate in SAARC related meetings.

Whenever the Bhutanese Royal Family or the King himself would visit India, I, as per protocol, would be invited to greet them at the Rashtrapati Bhavan or on other ceremonial occasions. On such occasions, the King and the Royal family always showed that extra warmth in their handshake! There were also occasions when the Queen (now Queen Mother), on visits to India, would invite us at the Bhutanese Embassy or speak to us on the telephone.

However, there was no direct interaction until many years after my retirement, when the present King, Jigme Kesar Wangchuck, as Crown Prince – who was then attending the National Defence College – had invited me for a cup of tea, during a lecture I was delivering there. Later, when he came to India on an official visit,

he invited me at his hotel suite for a cup of tea along with some other former Ambassadors. We briefly talked about Bhutan. He seemed to be aware that I had been decorated by his Father with the Druk Thuksey award and asked me if I still had the award with me.

Since then, there has been no direct contact, apart from regular Losar (New Year) greetings from the Queen/Queen Mother. Occasionally, I would visit the Bhutanese Embassy on social occasions. However, I never returned to Bhutan after I left that country in 1985 on the completion of my mission as Ambassador there. That really has been the story of my long association with Druk Yul or the land of the Thunder Dragon. With your permission, I would now like to talk about other matters.

GW: Your account of your work in Bhutan is very impressive. I consider Bhutan as an ideal State. Where else do you find a King retiring voluntarily and abdicating the throne at the age of just 54? It contrasts sharply with other living monarchs in the world, European as well as Asian, continuing in office in their eighties and even nineties. Now, may I request you to elaborate on other issues, such as the Look East Policy and Economic Relations.

ANR: My deep interest in the Look East Policy (LEP) should, I think, come first.

GW: O yes. Please.

A: One of my great satisfactions as a member of the Foreign Service has been the opportunity I got to be a part – an insider – of an important policy initiative, almost from its very inception. The

LEP, happily – after a long hiatus – has now become an integral and irreversible part of our foreign policy. I had done three postings in the Asia-Pacific, two in Thailand and one as DCM in Tokyo. Later, as Secretary (ER), I was responsible for not only our bilateral relations with ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific countries, but also at the macro level with ASEAN and other regional groupings like BIMSTEC, etc.

I was closely involved with the BIMSTEC negotiations and had signed the agreement setting it up in December 1997 in Bangkok. I was also able to travel widely in the region, both at personal and professional levels. It was in the summer of 1992, after my return from Argentina en route to my next posting in Thailand that I first seriously learned about our LEP. Former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, with whom I had worked when he was the Foreign Minister and whom I used to meet from time to time, was kind enough to grant me a courtesy call. Since I was going to Bangkok, I naturally focused on our relations with Thailand and South East Asia. I was hardly prepared but volunteered to articulate my own thinking on my brief in Thailand.

He must have liked what I said for he, at the end of the meeting, asked me to give him a few points of what I had said. I passed these on to Amar Nath Verma, his Principal Secretary. This was my first brief exposure to the LEP. As my move to Bangkok was taking time, I was asked by Foreign Secretary, Mani Dixit, to join the Ministry on temporary assignment. I was asked to look after AS (AD)'s and AS (ER)'s work for a brief period, as they were away on leave.

During this period, I got another opportunity to meet and discuss my assignment in Thailand with the Principal Secretary to PM, Amar Nath Verma, whom I had known well from my school days in Lucknow and, later, in the Commerce Ministry, where we had worked together. He asked me to provide some fresh “inputs” for the LEP, particularly its economic dimension. Because Verma was a very pragmatic person and because of his ESCAP background, his main interest was in the economic aspects of the LEP, particularly as India was facing serious economic challenges at that time. After several conversations with him, he agreed to brief the PM. I must add that there was no formal or any other attempt at involving me with the LEP; but Amar Nath Verma repeatedly talked to me on this subject.

A few months later, I left for Bangkok to take up my assignment there. This was a momentous period in our evolving LEP. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao came on an official visit to Thailand in April 1993, his first visit to any ASEAN country. During this visit, in my view a defining visit, the LEP got a new direction, definition, momentum and purpose. He had a very cordial and useful hour long audience with the King and very productive meetings with PM Chuan Leekpai and others during which there was a significant meeting of minds. The LEP received a new thrust following this visit. The ice was broken and a thawing process had begun after nearly two decades of hiatus in relations with ASEAN.

The Thailand visit was followed by visits to other ASEAN countries, including one to Singapore, where he delivered his path breaking lecture at the ISEAS, further defining and elaborating on

India's Look East engagement (now called the Singapore lecture). In Bangkok, he inaugurated the India Studies Centre at the prestigious Thammasat University, the first such Centre in South East Asia set up entirely with local Indian community funding and had wide ranging meetings with people from all walks of life, including with the Chief Abbot of the Buddhist Order, again, the first such meeting. He also announced visa fee abolition for monks visiting India. The course of India's moribund relations with Thailand and ASEAN changed following this visit.

Unfortunately, I was prematurely transferred from Bangkok to Brussels as Ambassador to the European Union. I had just spent two very productive and satisfying years in Brussels when I was sounded if I would return to Delhi as Secretary in MEA. I hastened to respond in the affirmative. I had always wanted to work at the head quarters as Secretary, having in my earlier service served in the ministry at almost all levels.

At that time, I was not aware of my new responsibilities in MEA. Some months earlier, the then External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, had visited Brussels for the annual India-EU Troika meeting. He casually sounded me if I would like to return to Delhi. Earlier, the then Foreign Secretary had also enquired. I heard nothing further from the MEA for some time. When, therefore, the call came, I was not entirely surprised. I enquired about my new responsibilities and was told that I would be a part of the government's new economic reform team looking after diplomatic aspects of the government's policy as Secretary (Economic Relations), a post that would be revived for me.

This post of full Secretary had remained dormant for a number of years. I was told that I would be in charge of all aspects of economic diplomacy and economic relations from the foreign policy perspective.

I had no second thoughts in my mind and joined my new appointment in December 1995 as the first full-fledged Secretary in MEA looking after Economic relations in the ongoing economic reform period. It was not easy – and it took time – to carve out a well defined turf for me. There were too many toes not to be trampled. As I saw it, MEA's primary role was to create and sustain an assured economic space for India, consistent with her growing and expanding requirements. Access to markets, capital, technology, top of the line equipment and other opportunities was crucial and MEA had to ensure that this was available on competitive terms with assurance.

As a part of my responsibility, I was able to get the desired charge of our relations with ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific. The LEP had just begun to take shape and consolidation and quick new follow up initiatives were needed. Our sectoral dialogue partnership with ASEAN had commenced in 1992. Preet Malik, who was then Special Secretary (Economic Relations), deserves much credit for it. The Sectoral dialogue partnership in the four areas of trade, investments, tourism and science and technology was very successfully and purposefully implemented. The next logical step was to elevate it to full dialogue partnership. I am happy that this happened during the very early part of my tenure as Secretary. This was soon followed in 1996 by our membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum for which we had to work a bit.

The then Joint Secretary (MER), Lakshmi Puri and others in the team were highly motivated and of great support to me.

The relationship further flowered to a new level when, after my retirement, India became a summit level dialogue partner. Since 2012, India and ASEAN are strategic partners. Our engagement today goes beyond the Southeast Asian geographical space and covers the entire Asia-Pacific. Japan, South Korea and Australia, apart from ASEAN, are our strategic partners. The evolving configuration makes me believe that the larger Asia-Pacific space including Japan, China, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN and India and the broad range of issues that are covered in our bilateral and macro-level engagements, such as security, defence, maritime, political, cultural and Diaspora issues – and regional and global issues – makes our engagement an important plank of our Act East Policy.

It is noteworthy that we have moved from one level of relationship to a higher one so swiftly and smoothly. Indeed, a Russian delegate at one of the SOMs I had attended, when I was Secretary (ER), wondered how we were able to so swiftly consolidate our relations with ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific, noting that we not only have the ASEAN +1+3 arrangement, but also summit level dialogue with ASEAN and strategic dialogues with a large number of countries in place. Obviously, this was a result of the imperatives and impulses inherent in the region. It was not India's desire alone, but equally the reciprocal interest of the regional powers to involve India in their now important Look West Policy. There was a convergence and congruence of interests which brought us together.

Even as all this was happening at the Track 1 level – government to government level – at the Track II level, we saw some important movements as well. After my retirement, I was asked by MEA to explore and pilot our full membership of the Track II Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). We did so successfully and I was appointed as the first Chairman of its India Chapter for nearly six years. MEA also nominated me as a member of the ARF Eminent Persons/Experts Group. This enabled me to travel and meet opinion makers in the region. At the same time, I pursued my deep interest in our LEP and the region and wrote and spoke extensively at Universities, think tanks, institutions and at government platforms. I also edited two books on our LEP. In 2012, I was awarded the Life Time Achievement Award by the International Society for Asia-Pacific Studies for my work.

GW: You were also associated with regional cooperation. Would you like to say something about your role on this subject?

ANR: Yes, I am. I was the first Chairman of the India Chapter of CSCAP for nearly six years, until I voluntarily stepped down. As Chairman, I used to attend their meetings at the policy level; thereafter, I decided to step aside, but MEA has retained me as a member. At the Track II level, apart from CSCAP, there is another forum called the ARF Eminent Person's/experts group. The Ministry has nominated me in this group. I attend their meetings, from time to time in an individual capacity. This is a high level forum and some of its members are distinguished personalities. Issues of concern to us, of strategic concern to the region, particularly in areas such as maritime security, non-traditional

threats to security, including terrorism and piracy, regional conflicts and their prevention, confidence building measures, disarmament, environment, natural disasters, etc. are discussed and views exchanged. The recommendations go to the ARF.

At the non-governmental level too, our involvement with the region has now acquired a critical mass in the second decade of our LEP. I can safely surmise that it has become integral to our foreign policy priorities and is now irreversible and indispensable. As we develop relations with Japan, China, ASEAN, South Korea, Australia and other regional countries, one signal that must go out clearly is that India is an inseparable part of the Asia-Pacific strategic scene, one of the five pillars of strategic equilibrium and stability in the Asia-Pacific along with China, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN and Australia.

GW: What about APEC? We have not been invited to be a member presumably because of the Chinese opposition. Similarly, what would be the effect on us of other groupings, such as the TPP?

ANR: Unfortunately – in 2007, if I am not mistaken – APEC had extended its moratorium on new membership; technically that moratorium continues. It is not widely known that even though we are not members of APEC, in the past, we have informally participated in some of their working group meetings. Arguably, APEC itself is now in search of a role and relevance. In the region today, perhaps, there are two competing alignments evolving with both economic and strategic dimensions. On the economic side, these alignments comprise the US sponsored Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the South East Asia driven Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), supported by China and India. It is not clear as to which of these two would dominate the Asia-Pacific scene.

India certainly believes that there should be a united pan Asian Economic Community (AEC) and RCEP could become one first step, a building block, in that direction. Things are still evolving. The political side of the coin appears to be the US sponsored “rebalance” or “pivot to Asia” policy supported by a number of countries, though not specifically by India, which wants good relations with China. The group of countries that supports this policy is driven by its concern over China and her intent to dominate the region by adopting an assertive unilateral approach on disputes with some Asia-Pacific countries.

On both these initiatives, India has her own independent point of view driven by her interests. We are loath to become a part of any grouping, which seeks to encircle or cause discomfiture to anyone. Recently in Japan, the Prime Minister had clearly spoken on these lines. We do want good and mutually supportive strategic relations with Japan – and have shared perspectives on many regional issues where there is a convergence, – but also seek good relations with China, a close neighbour with whom we share a 4000 km long boundary.

What I am trying to suggest is that for India, RCEP appears a preferred option at this point of time. APEC is currently not the central subject of discussion. India has free trade agreements with ASEAN and bi-lateral FTAs with South Korea, Japan, Australia and others. With China, we are discussing a FTA. We also have

agreed to upgrade our FTA with ASEAN to cover not only goods, but also services, investments and technology. Once this becomes operational, India's economic interests in the region will have an institutional framework, thus, furthering our economic and commercial interests in this fastest growing region for our economic interests.

GW: The TPP would adversely affect us because of their TRIPS Plus IP and customs rules. We feel that they are not in the interest of the developing countries.

ANR: The Americans, obviously, want TPP to be the cornerstone of the region's evolving economic architecture. This, they expect, will include countries bordering the Pacific on the American continent right up to Chile. ASEAN appears to be divided; some of its members are participating in the TPP dialogue, while some others are choosing to keep their options open. So far, China has stayed away from the TPP as it looks at it with a degree of suspicion – and not without reason. India too, for our own reasons, not those of China, would like to watch how TPP evolves and what the “club” rules, advantages and purposes are. There are aspects with which we are uncomfortable. While we have not closed any option, my guess is that we would prefer to see RCEP as a step towards an AEC. Many believe that this is a win-win partnership, the arc of advantage as former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh put it.

I personally believe that, at present, the Asia-Pacific is in a state of transition – politically, strategically and economically. India is very much an integral part of this transition. Which way the

pendulum will swing, time alone will tell. But one thing is clear that the Asia-Pacific will not revert back to the uni-polar dispensation. It is likely to reflect the multi-polar realities with countries like India, China Japan, South Korea, Australia and ASEAN emerging as important power centres shaping the future of the region. There appears to be consensus on this.

Having said that, let me add that much will depend on the way China and India play their cards. If China pursues an assertive policy of domination, not only in South China Sea, but also in the East China Sea and in the Indian Ocean in our neighbourhood, then things could become very difficult and different. If, however, China chooses to pursue a benign non-intrusive policy based on mutual respect and sensitivity, then, the possibility of a stable strategic architecture with the involvement of all countries emerging could become a reality, taking on board the interests of all. In my conversations, writings and speeches, I have articulated these personal views.

GW: You were our Ambassador at Brussels at a very crucial time, when our relations with the EU countries were being forged. What are your observations on this subject?

ANR: You are absolutely right. The EU is one of our most significant trading, investment, technology, development and tourism partners. Nobody can overlook that reality. EU is also strategically important; UK and France are nuclear weapon powers and permanent members of UNSC. Other major countries, such as Germany and Italy are among members of G-8, and potential permanent members of UNSC. EU's membership now transcends

Western Europe and extends deep into Central and Eastern Europe. Above all, EU has an important position in global affairs. Most of the G-8 members are from the EU and are among the leading economies of the world.

Because of EU's importance, strategically, politically and economically, India cannot underestimate EU's importance for it. We have had over 500 years of continuous links with Europe and EU today is one of our largest trading partners accounting for about 30 per cent of our total economic exposure. India was the first developing country to have entered into an institutional relationship with EU during Amb. K.B. Lal's time in the 1960s, when we signed the very first development cooperation agreement with EU, which resulted in the EU granting us the GSP, which now has been phased out for India. This arrangement became a model for other developing countries.

Our two major problems in Europe are (a) market access; and (b) Europe's inflexible and restrictive policy on granting work permits/visas to Indian professionals, such as our techies, experts and personnel in the service sectors. These are two continuing problems. In the early 1960s, when India was a GSP recipient, we were looking for preferential market access that enabled us to export our textiles, leather goods, gems, jewellery, handicrafts, etc. Since the GSP was phased out during my time in Brussels in the mid-1990s because EU felt that India had graduated to an acceptable level of competitiveness, our market access has been further impaired. A next generation agreement was signed encompassing some of these features as also some positive aspects of our growing economic relations.

Above all – and importantly – we were able to reach, for the first time, broad understanding with EU on a paper outlining EU’s new strategy towards relations with India, recognizing India’s growing potential. This reflected the changing context and direction of India-EU relations and focused on India’s growing all round importance as a global player. What does India mean for EU? What are EU’s strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific? What are the implications of China’s rise? We had extensive exchange of views with the European Commission officials and were able to share our perspectives with them on some of these issues and convince them on our concerns and sensitivities. Eventually, the paper was approved making it the first such exercise at that time.

Even as all this was happening at the government and official levels, we, in the Embassy, were pre-occupied with some significant initiatives to build institutional support with thinkers, opinion makers and eminent personalities of Europe to broad-base, sustain and further our relations at the people to people level, beyond the EU and the European Parliament. For example, we proceeded to set up a Friends of India group in the European Parliament (EP) at Strasbourg. The membership of this group represented a virtual who’s who of EP at that time. Counsellor V.P. Haran did a commendable job. We would have open ended interactions with them, over lunch, 2-3 times a year to listen to them and to brief them on our perspectives and concerns on issues of interest to us. Another purpose was to seek their understanding and support, which we found useful on a few occasions when critical references to India were successfully pre-empted.

A second initiative that we were able to launch during my

tenure related to organizing informal periodic get-togethers at my residence of extremely eminent, high level, high profile personalities including Nobel Laureates, renowned artists, painters, intellectuals, academics and others. This group of “Friends of India” would meet at my home, the Embassy residence, over an Indian meal, to witness small cultural events put up by available local talent and discuss issues ranging from culture to history, focusing on India’s concerns, priorities, image, engagement with Europe and suggestions to make the relationship stronger and better understood. The idea, at that time, was not to “use” these eminent friends of India for any specific purpose. The intention was to cultivate and inform them about India. This turned out to be a major success and we earned much goodwill in high quarters, which wielded considerable influence.

GW: Are you in touch with Bangkok after your retirement?

A: I have not been in regular touch. The third major initiative that the Mission in Brussels took was rather unique. When I was in Bangkok, I had started, with local Indian community support, an India Studies Centre at the prestigious Thammasat University. This highly successful initiative gave me much satisfaction as it was the first of its kind in South East Asia. Just before PM Narasimha Rao’s state visit, we gathered the captains of the Indian community, who readily pledged, I think, 10 million Baht to set up the Centre.

I understand that the Centre is doing extremely good work and has become the first stop for scholars interested in India. They have made me an honorary life patron of the Centre, which enables me

to remain in touch with its activities and many academics. Inspired by that example, I started a similar venture in the University of Antwerp, an India Study Centre. The Centre is flourishing and runs several programmes of India studies.

Like in Bangkok, this Centre too was set up through donations made by the Indian community of Antwerp, many of whom are prosperous diamond traders. An agreement with Antwerp University was signed to manage and run the Centre. Here also, I am honorary life patron. I must acknowledge the help of the then First Secretary, Atul Khare, who was closely involved with the Bangkok Centre and the then First Secretary, Avdhesh Bihari, who was a crucial resource person for the Antwerp project. The Centre is teaching courses on India and a number of students are said to be interested in these courses.

Another continuing initiative involved the sending of select opinion makers on ICCR sponsored visits to India. One such personality was Nobel Laureate, Ilya Prigogine, a Belgian academic, who visited India at that time. He went back very impressed with what he saw and the people he met. By this time, I had returned to Delhi and had hosted a lunch for him. Though a Physics Nobel prize winner, Prigogine also writes on metaphysics and is now interested in Indian philosophy. A former Belgian Prime Minister also visited India.

These are the people, who are willing to spare a lot of time and give attention to India. The monthly newsletter started by the Embassy as a new initiative to inform people about developments in India was also well received. The relationship today, I believe,

is broad based and multifaceted. India now does figure on the EU's radar screen. At the government level too, we had expanded and intensified our interaction beyond the EU and the EC. Our strategic dialogue is broad based and covers all aspects of our relations. The summit level dialogue is supported by technical and official level exchange of views/consultations.

GW: What do you think about our proposed FTA with the EU? There are misgivings about their IP and Investment proposals. They want us to agree to something, which is grossly disadvantageous to us and the other developing countries. There are other issues like market access, NTBs, etc.

ANR: Yes, the FTA is meant to upgrade the existing cooperation agreement with EU.

GW: Then what are the difficulties?

ANR: As I had mentioned to you, there are two specific difficulties that we encounter in EU, not in the context of the FTA, but otherwise; one such is the important issue of freer market access for Indian goods, services, investments and professionals. The FTA with EU will also have to cover these issues. We have cultural and other differences with Europe (e.g. on human rights, "individual" freedom, social issues, environment, etc.), which also need to be reconciled in the FTA.

EU is a hard negotiator and would demand its pound of flesh when they concede something, even symbolic. The FTA will take some more time. At the last summit meeting, it was decided that the process would be expedited. The FTA has huge implications

as we are dealing with a 37 member grouping, one of India's largest trading and investment partners. We would like this to be a complete and not a patchwork agreement. It is a work in progress.

Another aspect of our EU interaction that caused us concern was EU's policy of maintaining equi-distance between India and Pakistan on issues affecting our core interests. For example, on Jammu and Kashmir, EU would make a "procedure" (statement) each year in the UNGA. The written statement is usually pre-prepared reflecting EU's policy. In these statements, they would take an equi-distant position on Indo-Pak issues, often disregarding their own principles and merits of the issue.

We were able to give them a realistic assessment of what Pakistan's terror infrastructure is doing all over the world and specifically in J&K and other parts of India. The EU/EC has now started looking at these issues in a more objective way. I would not suggest that they have abandoned their policy, but have started looking at issues more objectively, in consonance with changing regional and global realities, perhaps, following the US lead. As a part of our strategic dialogue, we now discuss all these issues with them. Naturally, our focus and priority is on terrorism, transnational crime, our region and issues affecting our interests.

We now have institutional arrangements to discuss these issues at the expert/technical levels, TROIKA and summit meetings. At the political and strategic levels, our relationship has come a long way after the end of the Cold War. Now that the Cold War is over and the Berlin Wall has come down and Europe is

united, they are willing to look at India and Asia more closely. We too must look at EU as a global strategic partner in terms of our perspectives, reflecting our national interests. Europe appears to now see strategic advantages in developing closer relations with a democratic India, even as it, perhaps, attaches higher priority to relations with China.

GW: What was your role on the nuclear cooperation matters with reference to the countries of the EU?

ANR: Absolutely. While there may not be much immediate interest, some EU countries are prepared to consider a nuclear energy cooperation agreement with India. France is one such country and Germany too could be interested. We now need to discuss the micro aspects of our relationship, not in a holistic way, but equally in specific terms – political, economic, energy, cultural and strategic. I mentioned the problems of market access. We should now discuss the specifics and make concrete pragmatic suggestions. EU is a difficult trading partner; their stringent regulations on health, sanitation, packaging, technical requirements, etc., in effect, act as non-tariff barriers (NTBs) with which developing countries are frequently unfamiliar. We need to discuss these with EC to find workable solutions.

GW: This issue is long overdue. They are constantly upgrading their standards, which we are not able to cope up with. What we consider as NTBs, the EU considers them as legitimate upgrading of rules relating to phyto-sanitary and other measures. There are problems on these issues.

ANR: In effect, these are NTBs largely arising out of unilateral imposition of EU's stringent standards and absence of a system for advance consultation/intimation. I recall a few examples. Some of our exports of textiles were facing access difficulties because of an offending chemical called the AZO dye. We asked them to let us know as to what they would like us to do and requested time and technological assistance so that we could set up labs with proper equipment in India to meet EU standards and not take punitive action against India's exports until then.

Another example was in the case of our exports of marine products. The Commission informed us that our packing standards were not in consonance with EU standards. When we asked them for details, they gave us a long list. The point is that such issues can become NTBs unless they are discussed and resolved in good time. Penal action, in itself, is not a solution. What are needed are understanding, skill training, equipment and technology. EU's technical assistance programmes could easily take care of these. We did not want to violate any EU laws but, equally, we did not wish to be penalized only because our exporters were not given any advance warning.

The child labour issue is another such matter. Some EU countries had decided that they would not import handmade carpets from India because child labour was allegedly being used. My point was that if, indeed, child labour is being used, please help us and give us advance intimation of your intentions. India does not approve of child labour and our laws prohibit the same. We have no intention of disregarding EU laws, but would like to discuss such social issues with a view to resolving them. We need to talk

and discuss if we want to resolve difficulties of market access. We expect EU to assist us technologically, in upgrading our skills and standards and in other ways to enable us to meet EU standards.

GW: May I now turn to some other issues affecting our policy. You were associated with the G-15 Group. What is our policy relating to OECD, G-15 and other such groups?

ANR: Being the PM's special envoy for G-15, it goes with the post. Secretary (ER) is the designated special envoy for G-15. In the 1990s, the G-15 – South-South Cooperation platform was a major plank of our foreign policy; now it appears to have been pushed back a little. I was required to attend meetings and consultations on behalf of our government. I accompanied Prime Minister Deve Gowda to the Harare G-15 summit in 1997 and was also in attendance at the 1996 summit at which the Vice-President, Shri Krishna Kant, represented India. The special envoys are expected to prepare for the summit meetings, discuss and finalize the agenda, prepare draft documents, arrange the “retreat” and liaise with other members. The other mission was a little different. I was sent on a special mission to a number of countries in Africa to promote India's candidature for the non-permanent UNSC seat for which elections were to be held. To the heads of governments of the countries visited, I handed over our PM's letter and made my demarche.

But this exercise – I reported my conversations back to Delhi – did not make too much difference as we lost the election. In my view, the initiative itself and its timing were probably flawed; we seemed to have made an error of judgment. On another occasion,

soon after retirement, I was sent as PM's envoy after the Pokhran nuclear test in 1998. I visited a few countries to explain and reiterate our commitment to the cause of nuclear disarmament and peace. Our interlocutors expressed understanding of our position, and even supported it in a nuanced way. The view that generally came across was that India had the right to defend herself and develop nuclear technology for developmental and strategic purposes, although no one said so openly.

GW: You were also posted as Ambassador to Zambia and Argentina.

ANR: I was fortunate that during my career, the government gave me an opportunity to serve in Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe. My other assignments in MEA enabled me to travel to other parts of the world. The postings in Lusaka (Zambia) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) were productive in two respects. In Lusaka, where I was the High Commissioner, I came into contact with one of the greatest freedom fighters and nationalists of contemporary times, Kenneth Kaunda. It was a privilege to know him closely. When I was being transferred from Lusaka, he wrote a very warm letter to PM Indira Gandhi praising my work.

From Lusaka, we were also following the freedom movements in Southern Africa, both in Namibia and South Africa. Sam Nujoma was the President of SWAPO, the independence movement of Namibia and Oliver Tambo was the President of the African National Congress, on the forefront of the struggle against apartheid. Both were based in Lusaka. My conversations

and meetings with them gave me an insight into the African aspirations and the problems being faced by a subjugated people, disadvantaged and discriminated. I was also able to get African perspectives on issues of development, indebtedness, exploitation and the effects of long years of colonial rule. The richness and diversity of Africa also impressed me. The goodwill that Africa has for India – and admiration for Smt. Indira Gandhi – was the most evident.

Argentina was a different kind of posting, in the Southern hemisphere, far away from India. There were very few Indian visitors and little interest or involvement. I myself figured out my brief and priorities, concentrating on economic and commercial work. Politically, there was nothing much to divide India and Argentina. They had a very enlightened president, Raul Alfonsin, who was well disposed towards India. His successor, Carlos Menem, was also well disposed. There were untapped commercial opportunities, which we pursued. We opened a separate Consulate in Paraguay and upgraded the one in Uruguay to make it more commercially oriented (I was concurrently accredited to these two countries).

We took a few initiatives by organizing exhibitions, buyer-seller meets, putting potential importers in touch with our exporters and held meetings at both governmental and business levels. Other than that, in Argentina, I greatly valued my interaction with the 125 year old small Indian community, which had been sent by the British from the Punjab to build a railroad. Today, they have become 100 per cent Argentine; they have inter-married, speak

Spanish (hardly any Punjabi), eat local food and have very little contact with India.

I hope that I was able to kindle a little fire in their hearts for India, not that they needed any encouragement. Their response was warm and touching. In Salta, the senior most Argentine of Indian origin, Dhan Singh, was so emotionally surcharged that he asked me to provide him a fistful of the soil of his village in Punjab so that he could keep it in his temple to worship his motherland every day. That little fire, I think, was able to light in the hearts of many in the Indian community. They were simple people, who were willing to do anything, anything, for India.

During such visits to far flung places, sometimes, people would come and touch me in the belief that they had, through me, touched India. What remarkable love for their motherland! Puttaparthi Sri Sai Baba had a large following in Argentina, including at the high echelons. Likewise, Swami Shivapremananda of the Divine Life Society, disciple of Swami Sivananda, was instrumental in propagating yoga and Indian philosophy. He had a large number of followers all over South America. These were assets for India in a distant corner of the world. Argentina was that three and a half year period in my life when I was able to sit back, relax and introspect. I was also able to write a little there.

GW: What was your experience about the super powers?

ANR: Yes. It gave me an opportunity to observe firsthand the enormous influence of the “super power” of which I had very little experience. From a distant place, you do not always get a

complete picture of the huge influence of the super power and its ability to shape events. During my tenure, global equations were undergoing a transformation and a new order was taking shape. The US, as an important player, was at the centre of this change. Indo-US relations were also beginning to undergo a shift in a positive direction. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi paid two visits to the US during this period, visits that began the process of opening new vistas of dialogue and cooperation with the US. This phase can be said to be a defining period in our relations. Washington, therefore, was an active post, demanding and challenging.

There are one or two instances of our growing interaction with the State Department that come to mind. One morning, after midnight, I received a call from a senior State Department official informing me that a coup was underway in the Maldives; the official asked me to inform Delhi. The US, apparently, was the first country to learn about the coup in the Maldives and wanted to alert us. The Americans always monitor global developments, round the clock, and try and “manage” developments to protect their interests. When the erstwhile Soviet Union was in the process of disintegration and the Cold War was about to end, I observed how the US had thought of and planned for every eventuality, in advance.

I also recall my conversations at the State Department on Afghanistan, an area on which we had very different views. By the time I was about to leave Washington DC, on transfer after nearly three and a half year tenure, the situation in Afghanistan had changed and the Americans probably realized that their approach was flawed. At a farewell lunch hosted for me by the Deputy

Assistant Secretary of State, he was gracious enough to admit that we may have been right in our assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. This demonstrated that the US establishment was not averse to relook at their policies and initiate corrective steps, when the need arose.

Ambassador P.K. Kaul was very active with the Indian community. He was quick to realize the potential strength of the Indian Diaspora and we made a modest beginning to intensify our interaction with them in an organized manner. We would, in different parts of the US, organize meetings every three months with leaders and members of the community to inform them of our concerns and priorities and to elicit their views. This yielded almost immediate results in establishing, through them, closer contacts with senators and congressmen. We were able to inform them of our views and perspectives and, in one or two cases, they even helped us on the Hill.

I had an excellent team in the Embassy: Neelam Dhamija Sabharwal, S. Jaishankar and Ashoke Mukherjee were the political officers assisting me. With their help, our contacts with and access to congressmen and their aides improved dramatically. We started a system of regular briefings and social gatherings. Eventually, an informal “friends of India” group took shape, which later became an important instrument, along with the Indian Diaspora, of our efforts in the Embassy. I recall that in one instance, we were able to get an adverse reference to India withdrawn.

GW: I have been CG at New York in the early nineties when our country sort of ‘opened’. We were actively associated with

congressmen, senators, press, etc. I remember a specific case. The *New York Times* was very critical of India's human rights performance (they called it violations) in Jammu and Kashmir. We arranged a meeting with the Editorial Board of the NYT (Handling NYT was my responsibility). Minister Salman Khurshid specially flew in from Delhi for this meeting. The meeting was a success and resulted in stoppage of their adverse reporting of our (legitimate) actions in J & K.

ANR: I am aware of this. Indeed, our Consuls General were the most active on this. In their respective areas, they helped arrange meetings with congressmen, senators, editors, business leaders and others. Because of our outreach efforts and personal contacts, at the time of my transfer, I was privileged to receive several farewell awards and citations from the Indian community associations and others, including the prestigious Gandhi Peace Award.

Washington is a demanding assignment for a DCM for he has to deal with complex issues both within and outside the Embassy. There were at least six officers at the Minister (Joint Secretary) level. The present Principal Secretary to the PM, Nripendra Misra, was Minister (Economic) in our mission at that time. I was fortunate to get their fullest cooperation and support. It is with their help that I was able to coordinate the mission's work and evolve a cohesive work environment.

GW: Are you continuing with your work on these matters after retirement from active service?

ANR: I am fortunate that I have enough interests to keep me occupied in retirement. I have tried to limit my post retirement work to just two or three areas of special interest to me. I have studied and written on South Asia and SAARC related issues. I was involved with a now defunct track II regional organization called Coalition for Action on South Asian Cooperation (CASAC) of which I was a co-convener. As a part of its advocacy and pro-active programmes of regional cooperation, mainly under SAARC, a very high profile Citizens Commission for South Asia with participation at the highest level, was set up. Several ex-SAARC Prime Ministers/Ministers/eminent personalities were members of this Commission of which I K Gujral, former Prime Minister, was the Chairman and Shri Manmohan Singh, former PM, a member.

A few meetings of the Commission were held in Kathmandu at which a roadmap for SAARC was agreed upon and sent to the SAARC summit. I, as the co-convener, was deeply involved in this process. About this time, I had also edited a monograph on India's pivotal role in SAARC. My later writings and lectures focused on evolving a new approach to SAARC if it is to remain relevant and an instrument of progress and change in the region. I have articulated this viewpoint in my writings and lectures, as also in discussions. As an editorial board member of a number of publications and as honorary Adjunct Professor at the National Law University, Hyderabad, I have endeavoured to focus on this theme in a pragmatic manner.

Another area of continuing interest to me is the Asia-Pacific. I have already spoken about this and my long association with the

region. I have recently edited two books on our LEP and our Asia-Pacific Engagement and have also published over 30 articles on the subject. I am a regular speaker/participant at seminars, in Universities, think tanks, etc. I am a recipient of the Life Time Achievement award from the International Society for Asia-Pacific Studies.

I am also on a few academic Boards and committees that give me a chance to remain involved with research and young minds. The Endowment set up by me in my late father's memory at Lucknow University, and the three high schools started by me in our ancestral villages in Andhra Pradesh keep me in touch with my roots and extended family. While in Hyderabad, as Honorary Adjunct Professor, I give a few lectures at the prestigious National Law University (NALSAR), twice a year. I derive great satisfaction through my contacts with the young minds and youth of India.

GW: NALSAR is a prestigious law university.

ANR: It is a very prestigious Law School, ranked number one, I think. It has India's only SAARC Law Centre where I give lectures. Briefly, my retirement years have been full, productive, educative and very satisfying. I hope that I have been able to give back a small fraction of what I have received during my long years in the Foreign Service, which I consider to be a lifetime opportunity that any Indian could hope for. To be a part of such a service is truly a rare honour.

I must add, within parenthesis, that I consider the intellect, calibre, ability, professionalism and contribution of the Foreign Service

to be exceptional, given the constraints of resources and a very challenging brief. The experience, knowledge and abilities of our retired colleagues are valuable resources that our Ministry could tap usefully. I reiterate that to be a part of such an illustrious group of individuals, who have served the country with distinction, is a privilege. I will remain eternally grateful for the opportunity I got to serve my country through the Foreign Service.

GW: Thank you Ambassador. As I said earlier, you are a role model for all our younger diplomats. I was very happy to interact with you about your career. Please accept my profound thanks and gratitude for your cooperation. Thank you once again.

ANR: Thank you very much, Gajanan. I greatly enjoyed speaking to you.