Oral History Record of

Ambassador A.P. Venkateswaran

Interview conducted by Ambassador Kisan S. Rana

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Name : Ambassador A.P. Venkateswaran

Date of Birth : 2 June, 1930

He passed away on 2 September, 2014

Education : MA (Economics)

MA (Political Science)

Fellowship, Harvard University

He was in the Indian Foreign Service from 1952 to 1987.

His various postings, at home and abroad were :

Office	Position	Tenure
Embassy of India Prague	Probationer/Charge d' Affaires	1955–1957
Consulate General of India New York	Vice Consul/Consul	1957–1959
Embassy of India Addis Ababa	Head of Chancery/ Charge d' Affaires	1959–1962

Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi	Deputy Secretary	1962–1964
Embassy of India, Moscow	Counsellor	1964–1967
Embassy of India, Bonn	Counsellor/ Charge d' Affaires	1967–1969
High Commission of India, Fiji	High Commissioner	1969–1971
Center for Industrial Affairs, Harvard University	Chairman of the Group of Fellows	1974–1975
Embassy of India, Washington DC	Deputy Chief of Mission/ Chargé d' Affaires	1975–1976
Embassy of India, Damascus	Ambassador	1976–1977
Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations	Permanent Representative	1980–1982
Embassy of India, Beijing	Ambassador	1982–1986
Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi	Foreign Secretary	1986–1987

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My Oral History

Interviewer: Thank you Ambassador Venkateswaran for agreeing to this oral history interview. May we begin with the very first stage of your career when you joined the service – the selection process, the training period?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Well, my original intention was to become *John Maynard Keynes* and I had planned to go to London and study. But my father persuaded me to take the Foreign Service Exam and I agreed with him that if I entered the Foreign Service, I would give up the original desire to become an economist. One day, I returned home and heard the news over the radio that I was one of the five people selected in the 1952 batch for the Foreign Service. I joined Metcalfe House in April 1952 along with the other four and I remember that, with a rare unanimity, all of us said that we would join on April 2 rather than on April 1! We studied along with some 50 other IAS probationers and in the course of the training, we learnt some things about our teachers as well as ourselves.

Our principal was Mr Bapat and the Deputy Principal was Mr Shukla, both from the ICS and I vividly recall one of the IAS probationers getting up and asking Mr Bapat in the 'prayer' meeting, which we had every day, 'Sir, is it true that the ICS was a much better service than the IAS' and Mr. Bapat, as a Principal should have encouraged the boy. But instead, he hummed and hawed, indicating that perhaps it was so!

My father was an ICS and I had heard him say that the very few Indians, who qualified for the ICS, were those who managed to take the exam in London. Under British rule, the hurdles for taking the exam were higher, in terms of the numbers, who could apply. So I got up and told Mr. Bapat that, as far as I knew, the ICS was proud of calling itself competition-walahs as against the 'box walahs', who were businessmen and merely made money. By that yardstick, I argued that the IAS must be a better group of people because the competition was much wider and tougher. Mr. Bapat had to swallow that! I am only mentioning it to show that even with the best of intentions, there is a desire to practice one-upmanship in those, who already have power as against the people, who are aspiring for it.

After months of training in the Metcalfe House, we were posted to our probationary training of languages. I got posted to the London School of Afro-Asian studies and Slavonic studies and in their Slavonic Studies Department, I picked up Russian. Instead of being sent to Moscow as should have been done, I was posted to Czechoslovakia, possibly because there was no opening in Moscow.

My first recollection of Czechoslovakia was a very pleasant one, because the Czechs were and still are a much gentler people among the Slavonic countries and they're all highly musically inclined. They are proud of saying that every Czech is a musician – and so they are! In the meantime, I managed to get through the Russian language examination.

My basic recollection there is of my first Ambassador, who subsequently became Cabinet Secretary in India, Mr. Dharma Vira. He was a very warm man, but even more than him was his wife, who was a truly gracious lady. Both she and I were vegetarians and I got a

lot of moral as well as material support from her. She always carried with her a little bottle of red chilli powder, which was ideal to use to eat available vegetarian food, which was not particularly tasty!

Shortly after my arrival though, Mr. Dharma Vira had a heart attack in Prague and then he had to leave. Having barely entered the Service, I had seven months as Charge d' Affaires, thrust upon me, literally like greatness being thrust on somebody. I was the Charge d' Affairs in the Mission for many months. It was a wonderful period because there, as a probationer, but with the title of Charge d' Affairs, I had access to all other Ambassadors. It was a very rewarding learning experience.

One instance I recollect in Czechoslovakia is that of our then Vice President, Mr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who came on a State visit and lectured at the Charles University in Prague. I knew him through my father before he became the President. He was very warm to me and asked what was it that he could say which would bring the Czechs and the Indians closer together? I recalled that the national motto of Czechoslovakia was 'Pravda Vítězí', which means 'Truth Conquers!' and I told the President that our national motto was the same: 'Satyameva Jayate'. He used this with telling effect and had all the Czechs applauding him for anything he said afterwards!

Another funny episode was about a service message sent from Prague about Mr. Radhakrishnan arriving in Washington D.C. I sent the telegram, but even four days later, there was no reply from Washington D.C. We found out that the telegram had never been dispatched from Prague. We must remember here that at that time, Czechoslovakia was a highly pro-Stalinist country, so I had to find out what had happened.

When I made inquiries, the Post Master General of Czechoslovakia told me that they didn't know which Washington the telegram had to be sent to in the USA. That was a fact, because there are 20 odd Washingtons in the USA. When I asked the Post Master General whether there were a dozen Washingtons, which were also the capital of the USA and that this telegram was sent to the Indian Embassy in Washington, so it could not mean any other Washington than Washington DC, their Foreign Office in Prague replied that the erring clerk would be 'liquidated'.

My new Ambassador Mr. Jagannath Khosla was a very sensitive man and he said: 'My God, have we been responsible for the death of the clerk?' I said no, they say these things to put you off and placate you. I don't think the clerk would have been punished in anyway, because there must have been higher orders that delayed the telegram.

Interviewer: What were India-Czechoslovakia relations like when communism was relatively new and, perhaps, India was not seen too favourably, although we had good relations? Also, did the Czechoslovaks remember Nehru's visit to Prague in 1938, when he made a detour to Prague on his way to Britain and Switzerland to express support for this country when it was faced with a demand from Hitler under the Sudetenland issue? Was that at all on their radar?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I suppose it was, but it was not very visible. One thing I could say was that they remembered more of Tagore than they remembered Nehru. Tagore had been to Hungary and it was a reflection of their own literary interest. Although Nehru wrote a great book *Discovery of India,* it was not written at that time and, secondly, at that time, as a writer, Tagore's attraction was much greater. During my stay in Prague, the Hungarian revolt of 1956 took

place and Russian tanks moved into Budapest. Nehru, who was then Prime Minister, asked Ambassador KPS Menon from Moscow to go and report on what had happened in Hungary. However, KPS Menon, apparently, was not keen to go there. Eventually, my Ambassador in Prague, Dr Jagannath Khosla, was asked to go to Budapest, which he did, and gave a very useful report, which was read in the Indian Parliament by Nehru, describing the Hungarian uprising as a people's movement, much to the chagrin of the Russians.

Since Ambassador Khosla was travelling by car, I advised him to refrain from flying the Indian Flag on the vehicle, since it closely resembled the Hungarian Flag. Shortly, thereafter, along with a friend of mine from Air India, I also went by car into Budapest just to see what was happening. There was a very adventurous colleague, MA Rehman, who was then the Charge d' Affairs in Budapest, because Hungary, then, was under the concurrent jurisdiction of the Ambassador in Moscow. When we went in, apart from getting struck in snow drifts and so on, we got shot at when entering Budapest, because it was beyond curfew hour and the Russian troops were there. Fortunately, we were not hit. The next day, the Russian occupation chief apologised to the Indian Embassy for this incident and all was well!

What was important was that the interview that Ambassador Khosla got from the Hungarians was a very valuable input for Prime Minister Nehru's statement in Parliament that it was a people's movement. That was the first time that any head of Government had spoken sensibly about what happened in Hungary; whereas the Americans wanted to condemn outright what happened in Hungary for their political reasons; the Indian Prime Minister was very balanced in what he said and I think that stopped the Russians in their tracks.

Interviewer: Were the Russians not very unhappy with the statements that Pandit Nehru made?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: We don't know. I suppose that they can't have been happy, but the Hungarians were very happy and so were other East European citizens, because none of them really liked the hegemony of the Russians, but they couldn't have any voice in expressing their resentment.

Interviewer: So what were the next destinations after Prague?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Well, the next destination was New York. A destination, which I can only describe by a question asked at my farewell party by the Chief of Protocol in Prague as to where I was going and how? So, I said that I was going to a place called New York and I was sailing by the ship called the 'Liberty'. The Chief of Protocol had a sense of humour, and so he looked at me twice and said, 'Did you say the Liberty?' I said, 'Yes, the Liberty.'

I sailed from Southampton. I think, we went by train to Southampton and to New York across the Atlantic Ocean and it took me five days. It was the most modern ship at that time; five days to cross the Atlantic was considered very fast, as against eight days by other boats, and I joined the service as Vice Consul in New York. That was a very fascinating period, because even at that time, America was a phenomenon – technologically, economically and commercially and, above all, with an enormous sense of confidence, which had come to the Americans after winning the Second World War, which was palpable. They could feel that they were on the top of the world and they indeed were because they were not only victors in the war, but they were more or less feeding the rest of the world, in a literal sense, after the war.

We had reasonably good relations with America, then, because in India, we remembered the interest taken by President Franklin Roosevelt in India's own Independence movement and so on. The first impression, which I had of New York, apart from the tremendous traffic and prosperity, was that everything to an American was measured in terms of money; he would look at the Rockefeller Plaza and state its cost, or look at the suspension bridge across Manhattan and say how many million dollars it cost.

Interviewer: What was the nature of work there?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Well, I went there as Vice Consul, but I got my promotion within a few months and became Consul. The nature of my work was two-fold, because there was a Vice Consul dealing with visas and I became the Consul for trade, which gave me an opportunity to visit a large number of States in the United States, which I could not have otherwise visited. The highlight of my stay there was doubling our trade, which, at that time, was mainly confined to two commodities, one was cashew nuts and the other was jumbo-shrimps. Many other things also started to develop and I felt proud when we started the first commercial report systematically, every week, from New York, which was sent to the Government and which, I hope, helped the Government of India streamline its export procedure.

Interviewer: Was the Embassy in Washington not very much in charge with trade issues in those days?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I suppose, it was, but New York was and, I am afraid, still remains the commercial capital of the United States and to that extent, everything has to go through New York, and Washington can be, in a funny way, a substation, the main

station being New York. In my time, another memorable period was the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway via Canada whereby large ships could come straight into the Great Lakes and they had a huge exhibition in Chicago to commemorate this. I think, Queen Elizabeth II came by ship down the St Lawrence Seaway and I recall going to Chicago for a commemorative International Exhibition.

Interviewer: We had no Consulate in Chicago in those days, I imagine.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No. So, it was a remarkable period. In some ways, what I remember most about New York is looking for an apartment to live in. The allowances at that time were very low. Today, of course, the foreign allowances have been linked with the UN rates of allowances, so we are much, much better off. Our housing allowance was low and one could not find a place, which was really worth living in, because most of the apartments then overlooked garbage cans in the backyard, because you couldn't afford a view from the front of a building! Travelling around in the subway looking for an apartment, I suppose I looked very sad.

One day, somebody sitting next to me asked me 'How do you like New York?' When I replied, 'Well, I like it, but I would like it much better if I had my own apartment, which I liked.' He asked me, 'What do you like in an apartment?' I told him that I wanted an apartment with a view preferably of a park, not overlooking garbage cans. He kept quiet, but after a little while, he said, 'How about my apartment, I am leaving on a foreign assignment next month.'

I agreed. I found out that he was a Professor in New York University and his apartment was on Washington Square, which overlooked the Washington Arch. I took the apartment straightaway and I still

remember very fondly the two years I spent there. Even today, the area is called The Village and the apartment has a beautiful view of a park.

Interviewer: Would you like to share something about the building in which the Consulate General is housed?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: It had a very nice location at 3 East, 63rd street, as I recall and was adjacent to the Central Park. It housed both the Permanent Mission and the Consulate General in those days and there was a wonderful ballroom on the second floor. And a lift that was something; it was really antique and in spite of many letters requesting the Ministry of External Affairs to sanction a new lift – the sanction never came. One day, the Minister of Finance, Mr TT Krishnamachari was visiting and we more or less conspired that the material fault of the lift should be displayed to him. If two people simultaneously pressed the button, the lift would stop half way. Then, it would neither go up nor come down. It was planned that when Mr TT Krishnamachari was in the lift, two people would press the buttons; and he was stranded half way for only a few minutes.

To people, who get stuck in a lift and if they are claustrophobic, you know what the result is. We got a sanction straightaway from Mr. TT Krishnamachari, who got out of the lift with a sigh of relief and said, 'Why has this lift not been changed'. We told him that we had been trying for the past two years. We got it straightaway!

Interviewer: What other recollections come to you of the New York days?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Since the Permanent Mission was in the same building, there was a much greater interaction between

the Permanent Mission and the Consulate and it was assigned to take care of the work of the Second Committee of the UN, which is the economic committee. My Consul General, Mr. Gopala Menon was in charge of that and I was his faithful aide running around and writing speeches, which nobody wanted to hear. But this meant that we had a free access to the UN building.

Two things I remember there. One was having lunch with Gina Lollobrigida, who was then a raving favourite for the whole world. The other was meeting Arthur Miller with another glamorous lady, Marilyn Monroe, who was his wife at that time.

Interviewer: What was the next stop from New York? You got there in 1957, when did you leave?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I was in Prague from 1955 to 1957 and during 1957-1959 in New York. In 1959, I wanted to get back and see my family. I was posted to Ethiopia, but I got three months' leave to go to India. In those three months, I got married to the daughter of an old friend of my father, whom I had also met years earlier. I have had a very happy life with this very charming lady, who became my wife and to whom I owe everything else.

Interviewer: Then, you went to Ethiopia from New York.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: After marriage in 1959, we were asked to go to Ethiopia by a ship called the Saudia. This particular ship was a horrible tug and one dreaded to travel by these old tugs, which were not really liners; they were ghastly ships, more like cattle ships. However, because of some problem, eventually, my wife and I travelled from Bombay after an unscheduled halt of about a month in Bombay, where we stayed with some dear friends.

We sailed from there to Aden by P&O Liner, SS Stratheden and from Aden, flew by Air India to Addis Ababa. It was a very unique experience because immediately after landing in Addis Ababa, one of the Embassy staff rushed into the aircraft and told me, 'Sir, please don't call your wife by her name here.' I was a little taken aback, and asked why. He said, 'I will tell you later'.

Later, I learnt that Usha, which was my wife's name, pronounced with a little more emphasis on the Sha, meant dog in the Amharic language and with the feminine gender that would be even more distasteful. I asked my wife what name I should call her by. She said: 'I was christened as Sita'. So, she was called Sita from then on in Ethiopia.

One embarrassing aspect of this was that, very often, when foreign diplomats called her Sita, she would not turn around because she did not recognise Sita as her name! But that was a fascinating experience again because Ethiopia was an ideal honeymoon posting. There was not too much of work, but there was a lot to see. It was an amazing land at that time ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Defender of the Faith, Conquering Lion of Juda, the three titles which he had, and a man, who had a good feeling for India and who had also suffered during the Italian aggression in 1936 and lived in Britain in exile. He had sympathetic feeling for all the underdogs, I imagine, and in a way, all the Asian and African countries had been underdogs to the colonial powers for a long time.

Here, I had an Ambassador from the Indian National Army, Niranjan Singh Gill, a Sikh with a hearty laugh and an enormous capacity for holding his drink. The very first evening I landed there, he said, 'So you are my Head of Chancery, let us have a drink' and he literally

filled my glass with neat whisky. I remember saying to myself, 'What the hell, I am not going to give in to this fellow' and I quaffed it in almost one gulp. I think that made him feel a kind of kindred spirit for me and we got on very well together afterwards, although later, I found out that if you take neat alcohol in such a quantity, you could even die! But I was blissfully ignorant of that or I could have hesitated and maybe had a worse time in Addis.

However, he had to leave after a while and I was again Charge d'affaires for six or seven months before the arrival of the new Ambassador, perhaps, the best Ambassador I have ever had – Rao Raja Rajwade. His wife was an equally amazingly charming and kind lady called Indumati Rajwade. They had a son called Ananth.

One of the highlights of our stay in Addis was how the Emperor behaved and the way he responded to the Indian 'namaskar', which we started using as a greeting because the tradition there was that whenever the Emperor passed by in his limousine, all other cars stopped and people had to get out of their cars and bow to him. When we were travelling and the Emperor was passing, my wife and I said that we would not be bowing to him; we shall give a 'namaskar' to him, instead. The Emperor looked at us and gave a 'namaskar' to us, after which, it became customary for him to give a 'namaskar' to us. That also got around very fast because in an Imperial Kingdom, nothing is more effective than getting the favour of the Imperial Power.

The Indian Embassy became more or less envied by all the other embassies, because the Emperor had shown us this special consideration. When Ambassador Rajwade, whom I remember very fondly, was presenting his credentials, dressed in a churidar

pyjama and achkan, the Emperor had lion cubs playing around in the court. They were quite big, about a year or so old, which meant that they were three feet high. But they were tame, because they were under control. When Ambassador Rajwade was presenting his credentials to the Emperor, the lion cubs started to tug at his churidar pyjama, but the Ambassador remained quite unperturbed! When the presentation of credentials was over, the Minister of Palace asked him: 'Mr Ambassador, were you not worried by the lion cubs when they tugged at your feet?' The Ambassador then gave his famous reply: 'I only had eyes for his Imperial Majesty, 'the lion amongst lions!' Word got around to the Emperor himself and then he took a special fancy to Ambassador Rajwade and that also made us even more envied by all the other Embassies.

Interviewer: I had heard another version of this story that the cubs were actually sent into the waiting room while the Ambassador was waiting for the credential ceremony deliberately by the courtiers in order to mildly terrorise him.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No, that is not true because the lions were always there roaming around. They were lion cubs, but enough to cause harm in case they became angry. They were not deliberately sent, because I was there. Secondly, they would not dream of having an incident in the palace, which would affect another country's representative. The Emperor took a fancy to Ambassador Rajwade, who was a very gracious personality. The other highlight of our stay there with Ambassador Rajwade was the Tagore Centenary that was celebrated on May 8th 1961. We said to ourselves that we must celebrate it properly. There were 5,000 Indian families in Addis Ababa, mainly Gujarati merchants and teachers. Teachers were employed on a contract basis.

The real backbone was the Indian community in Addis Ababa and Asmara and the Gujaratis were the predominant Indians. All Indian communities started with one or two people coming from a particular Indian village and then inviting their cousins and so on and suddenly you had a whole group of people, who had come from one area. The Gujaratis were largely from Rajkot – almost 90 per cent of them. One quality of the Gujaratis even today is that, apart from their propensity to make money, they are willing to put their best foot forward for their country.

Once the Tagore centenary celebrations were discussed, the Gujarati community gave their commitment along with their effort, their time and they even scraped up enough funds for costumes.

We had a remarkable performance of Tagore's dance and music, which my wife organised because she was a trained dancer. I was the chauffer, because I had a huge Chevrolet Impala, which had been brought from New York to Addis Ababa, courtesy of the government baggage rule, and could accommodate six kids at a time for rehearsals. I was more or less the cheerleader because it was a project, which I wanted to succeed. I remember jocularly telling the children that if they performed well, they would get a gold medal from the Emperor. It was just a flight of fancy and the performance was held at the famous Haile Selassie Theatre, which was run by the Austrians; so it was a very well equipped theatre in terms of the lighting, the sound and so on. There was also a very talented slide maker, whose slides made it one of the best shows I have ever seen in my life.

Anyway, the highlight of the ceremony was that I was the master of ceremonies, and I had to wear my churidar achkan to welcome the Ambassador and the Emperor. While welcoming the Ambassador

and the Emperor in the box, I made my bow, I suddenly felt a draft of air on my back and I knew that a terrible thing had happened! My churidar had ripped, but fortunately the achkan covered the embarrassment and I could march off with dignity back to the Imperial Box and take my seat behind the Ambassador.

Half way through the performance, the Emperor turned to me and asked, 'When did this troupe come from India?' I replied, 'Your Imperial Majesty, these are your subjects; they have not come from India. They are people residing in Addis Ababa'. Then, I saw the Emperor speaking to the Minister of Palace and telling him something. The Minister disappeared and, 20 minutes later, turned up with about 50 small velvet boxes. The Emperor had decided to give them all a gold coin each. My prophecy came true!

When the presentation was over, I wrote in my diary: 'There are some people, who always speak the truth: there are others, whatever they say, becomes the truth! Who is greater?' That was a bit of pomposity on my own part, but nonetheless true.

Interviewer: So, overall, Ethiopia was very much at the centre of Africa in those days.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: It was not only at the centre of Africa, it was the only truly independent African country of all the countries in Africa including Egypt, which claimed to be independent. Ethiopia was never subdued except for three or four years under Mussolini, who attacked it and was responsible for terrible atrocities. He napalmed them from the air and one of the terrible ways of striking terror was to take some of the tribal chieftains by air and drop them over their village from a height of 2,000 or 3,000 feet.

Addendum on Ethiopia

Ambassador Venkateswaran: The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) was located in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was the only country of that Continent that had remained independent ever since the Menelik I Dynasty was founded in the time of King Solomon, who is referred to in the Old Testament, and Emperor Haile Selassie I, who was a direct descendent, was ruling the country, when I was posted there in 1959, along with my newly wedded wife. I consider myself, indeed, very blessed in having her as my partner in life. She has been and is, in every way, my 'better half', as the story of my career in the IFS will show.

A cardinal event during our stay in Addis Ababa was the birth of our only child, Kalpana, who was named 'Ababetch', by Ras Imru, who was the uncle of the Emperor. 'Ababa', in the Amharic language, means 'Flower' and the name 'Ababetch', in Amharic, means 'Little Flower'. Kalpana, eventually, turned out to be a natural linguist, fluent in Russian, German and Arabic, and has since blessed us with a grand-daughter and grandson, a theatrical performer and a marine biologist, respectively!

The other event, which was not so pleasant, was the Coup against the Emperor, when he was away in Brazil on a state visit. Despite the Body Guard successfully taking over Addis Ababa, the Emperor returned to Asmara and the Coup collapsed amidst great celebration of the people, who worshipped him. During the days that the Coup makers controlled the Capital, one of the long lasting friendships of ours with Dr. and Mrs Bhouraskar was cemented by our sharing their basement with our new-born daughter to escape the strafing from the air and stray gun-fire between the Body Guard Unit and the Army, which remained loyal to the Emperor.

Rumours had it that the US ambassador in Addis Ababa had played a crucial part in restoring the Emperor's return to power by bribing the Army Commander! The US had its Military Communications Centre (MAAG) in Addis Ababa, for the whole of Africa, and it was important for them to protect it! The coup was led by the Head of the Body Guard, General Menghistu Neway and his brother Girmame whom I had known personally when he was the Governor of Jig Jiga, bordering Somalia. They were later hanged in public. It was the only public hanging I ever attended, to say a prayer for his soul, since I admired their personal courage in trying to modernize the Ethiopian Feudal Society.

The First Independent African States Conference was held in Addis Ababa during my tenure, where I personally met many of the future Heads of State of Africa, who had then attended the Conference as "Petitioners"! The most impressive amongst them was Julius Nyerere, an intellectual, who wrote, prophetically, about the coming of Second Colonialism, which followed the rapid liberation of the African Colonies, and whom I met later, when he had become the President of Tanzania!

Interviewer: When did you leave Ethiopia?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: We left in January 1962 and the next destination was Delhi and there I found myself as Deputy Secretary China from early 1962 up to the end of 1964. That is about two and half years. The infamous Chinese invasion in the North East of India took place at that time and it was a mixed period of memories, because it showed how obtuse even intelligent people like the Indians could be of what was happening. How a leader like Nehru, who was a true patriot, could have his vision clouded by pre-conceived ideas of friendship, or how you had sycophants running around the

place, who tried to tell him that he was right, all the time when he was patently wrong. No person can presume to be a God and know everything and Nehru was not an exception. It was courtiers around him including a prime one called VK Krishna Menon, who, I think, was the main person behind it. After the Chinese invasion, with his dreams of two great countries, China and India leading the world from darkness unto light shattered, Nehru never really recovered from that.

Interviewer: It was surely more than that in the sense that perhaps even by 1960, Panditji understood that China was, in fact, a power that could threaten India. There were a number of misperceptions that emerged or as you call them 'courtiers' around Jawaharlal Nehru, who kind of managed his vision or fuelled a certain vision. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I think Nehru was his own victim because his Deputy Prime Minister, a person of enormous talent, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had, as early as 1950, written two notes to him, which I have seen with my own eyes. One, warning Nehru to beware of China. 'The Chinese have taken Tibet,' he said 'and they are now our immediate neighbour and we have to take precautions against them.' Nehru did not heed his advice. Even after that, he went ahead with his famous Panchsheel principles and the trade and transit agreement with China in 1954. Patel also wrote a very important note on Nepal more than 50 years ahead of his time about what is happening in Nepal – Sardar Patel had foreseen it at that time.

Interviewer: It is said that GS Bajpai drafted the first note on China before Sardar Patel.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No, that is quite untrue. I know it is claimed by some, but anyone who makes such a claim has to give evidence for it to be credible. Girija Shankar Bajpai was sent as Agent General of India in Washington, specially to argue against India's independence during the Second World War. He was arguing against India's independence, but that does not matter to me. However, for him to later claim that he was doing everything for India's independence is unconvincing and unacceptable, especially when no clear evidence by anyone is produced.

Interviewer: Moving on to the India-China issue, by the late 1950s, Panditji was aware of what was happening, there clearly was awareness on his part. But in the management of the border issue, were there mistakes made? Mistakes of other actors, who contributed to what Panditji did.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I think the main actor, who contributed negatively was VK Krishna Menon. Menon was a communist; whether he held a card or not does not matter, if you are completely enslaved to the idea of communism. I remember Menon often arguing that we should have a cadre system. The cadre system is a communist system and his whole objective was to make the system in India a cadre system, rather than a Civil Service system. While VK Krishna Menon had many talents, I think, he was primarily a hypocrite. I can say that with more authority than most because Menon was known to my father and, even as a young boy, I used to be present when they had discussions, even before Menon became a political luminary of India.

I have heard him argue that the whole system should be changed in India and that we should be a cadre based system. Anyway, whatever

that may be, all that is in the past. Let us focus more on the future and hope that similar mistakes are not made again and again.

Interviewer: Any other recollections of that period, during the period of the Chinese invasion

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Many recollections! The first is of my own Director, Sumal Sinha, who was a very talented Chinese scholar, who served in China and had returned. He had worked in Lhasa at the time of the Chinese takeover of Lhasa and was intimately connected with the move to try and get a Resolution passed in the United Nations on the Chinese takeover of Lhasa. At that time, India did not want to do anything against the Chinese and even the few statements, rather anodyne statements, made by Jawaharlal Nehru were highly resented by the Chinese. The result was that you had a very competent and knowledgeable scholar on China, who was not allowed to state what he felt was true, even when he was in the External Affairs Ministry.

I remember a telegram, which Sumal Sinha had sent in 1956, when he was the Charge d'affaires of the Consulate General of Lhasa in Tibet – 'The Chinese have entered Tibet. The Himalayas have ceased to exist!' This telegram was one of the most powerful telegrams I have ever seen in my entire life. Yet such a powerful telegram did not shake the Indian establishment as it should have. I think, it largely reflects negatively on our idol, who happened to be Jawaharlal Nehru and who continued to harbour very fond images of China and India leading Asia forward and, through Asia, the world forward.

I am convinced that Nehru, at no time, fully comprehended that China was not a real friend to anybody. My own stay in China many years later in the 1980s convinced me further that the Chinese cannot

be friends with anybody. They are too full of themselves to be able to share anything, including an idea with anybody else. That is why the Chinese call themselves the "Middle Kingdom". When I was there in China from 1982 to 1984, I remember the Chinese still using the expression [in Chinese] to refer to foreigners – 'foreign devils'.

Once I asked the chairman of the People's Institute of Culture or the Institute of Social Studies, Ma Honq, in the presence of his colleagues as to why was it that highly cultured people like the Chinese called other foreigners 'devils'. He was taken aback because he did not expect this question from me. When the Chinese are embarrassed, they go into a huddle in a corner of the room, which they did in this case too and after a few minutes, they came and said, 'No, no, we don't call all foreigners devils, we only call those foreigners, who were from countries, which invaded China to impose the system of extra-territoriality in the 1880s on us, as 'foreign devils.' These were some 20 odd countries. But I think the Chinese still, within themselves, think of every foreigner as a foreign devil!

Interviewer: Coming back again to the 1962-65 period, specifically during that period of the border conflict, was there a great air of tension in the Ministry, was there a great air of uncertainty? Who were the main actors there? Sumal Sinha was the Director, reporting to the Foreign Secretary, who else?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: M. G Desai was the Secretary General.

Interviewer: And there was also a Foreign Secretary…

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No, MG Desai was the Foreign Secretary; I think the post of the Secretary General had been

abolished by then, because after NR Pillai and RK Nehru, there was no other Secretary General.

Interviewer: I think, RK Nehru was a Secretary General for a short period, perhaps. What were your recollections of that period?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Of the actual war, I remember a sense of great excitement and great anger, because many of us were convinced that the Chinese were not really our friends and a number of mistakes were committed. I was the main officer dealing with the situation on the ground, because of my links with the Director of Intelligence Bureau (DIB), which was more closely connected with the land intelligence at that time, because there was no R&AW.

The Director of Intelligence Bureau was a very fine gentleman, but the deputy, AK Dave was dealing with China. In fact, there were no proper maps of the Aksai Chin area and I remember as Deputy Secretary China, going to the military cartographic department, which was just across the road from South Block to get these maps printed. The first maps showing the various outposts in Aksai Chin and what happened were printed by us and shown to Mr Nehru.

I had to explain those maps because there was no DS there and Sumal Sinha had been moved. We had two or three instances with China during that period, which come to my mind. The first was about Sumal Sinha himself, who, as I said, I had great respect for and he was a gem of a person, really. But I can't say that I had much regard for him as a chief, because he was a very irascible gentleman. It is a remarkable contradiction, but I have the highest regard for his mind. I remember once, telling him to his face after I got to know him and he got to know me enough, that I wished his lips could

be permanently sealed and only his thoughts put down without his emotions!

One of the instances when I had a scrap with him started off with this horrible Hindi expression, 'S*ahib yaad karte hain',* (The officer is asking for you), which the peon said. I went along and I saw two of my younger colleagues, Mani Dixit and CV Ranganathan already in Sinha's room. I knew that nothing good was brewing. When I went in, I saw Sinha waving a piece of paper and asking me how this 'Note Verbale' had been released without his approval. I asked if I could see the paper. I looked at it and saw that it was a routine note on China's air intrusions. At that time, there was a paper war and may be a dozen notes were exchanged every week on air intrusions, land intrusions and so on.

Seeing nothing wrong with it, I asked him, 'What's wrong with the note?' Sumal Sinha got angrier and said, 'No, no! That is not the point. This note should never have gone without my approving it.' My temper was also going up. I told him that I would make sure that each note came to him and he could sign it himself! Sumal Sinha was further enraged and with his jaw muscles bunched, he said: 'Do you know the difference between a senior and a junior officer?'

I replied: 'Yes, I do'. 'What is it?' he asked and I shot back, 'A senior officer usually retires before a junior officer,' upon which he almost had a heart attack and waved his hand saying that all of us should go. Dixit, Ranganathan and I went and had a cup of coffee in my room. I am glad to say that after that, we had no further problem with Sumal Sinha, who became a very normal civilized being and treated us with respect and consideration, which we deserved as colleagues.

Interviewer: You mentioned some other incidents, what else comes to mind?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: The other incident, which, I think, could have saved the situation, was when the Chinese troops poured in through the Tagla Pass into Indian area and were advancing towards Tezpur. The three of us, Ranganathan, Dixit and I, had a discussion and said that the only way to stop the Chinese advance was to bomb the Tagla pass. We had an air force and we knew that the Chinese did not have an air force in Tibet. They had a few planes, but they had no oil supply: there was no oil pipeline to Lhasa and we had a much stronger air force, in relative terms, than the Chinese had. If we had bombed the Tagla Pass, the Chinese would have had to retreat, because there was no way they could withdraw before the full winter. They knew that they could not withdraw afterwards and we could make mince meat of them thereafter. That is the only reason, in my view, for the so called 'unilateral withdrawal' of the Chinese in the 1962 winter.

We also spoke to Mr G Parthasarathy, who was then the Ambassador, but who was staying in India for many months before the war saying that we should communicate this suggestion and get this done by Nehru. It was communicated to Nehru, but nothing happened. Later on, we came to understand, and I am not sure how authentic it is, that the Chief Minister of West Bengal, I think, it was Dr BC Roy at that time, was totally against using the air force, because his logic was 'What if the Chinese bomb Calcutta?', which, in my opinion, was neither here nor there, because in a war, you don't wait saying 'What if they bomb?' You go and do what you can.

I am still convinced that if we had bombed the Tagla Pass at that time, the Chinese would have had to go and we would not have suffered that humiliation, which we have still not got over, in spite of our defeating Pakistan many years later. The effect of defeat under the Chinese is still there and we have not yet got over that.

Interviewer: In those days, you had no access to Jawaharlal Nehru?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I did. Many times, I was there because I had to explain the map, but I can say this, Nehru was not the same man by then. G Parthasarathy's famous statement was that the Chinese attack killed Nehru. Nehru, I think, was past his heyday by the time the Chinese struck.

Interviewer: In those days, PK Banerjee was the Charge d'affaires in Beijing. Was he specially sent as Charge or did he happen to be the second in command when Ambassador Parthasarathy was withdrawn from Beijing?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I think, he was the second in command even earlier, but you can always check.

Interviewer: Did you read PK Banerjee's book, in which talks of his time in China?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: May be yes, but I can only say that PK Banerjee was a very delightful person, a very nice person, who I came to know in Geneva. I knew him also when he was the Charge d' Affairs in Peking, but he was not exactly the picture of courage at that time. A very fine gentleman and I remember getting a telegram at that time saying how the Chinese sent for him at 2 a.m. whenever there was a problem, not Chou Enlai, ordinary underlings.

Interviewer: I believe, that is what he claimed.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: He may have had meetings with Chou Enlai, but not when the conflict was taking place. (Interviewer: I think after, immediately after perhaps.) The Director of Foreign

Office would bang the table before him and he would ask: 'What do I do?'

Interviewer: You said that he said this in a telegram.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: And said it too. So, I sent for the Chinese Charge d'affaires at 2 a.m. twice and this business stopped on their side; which again proves that the only way to stop them is 'tit-for-tat, butter for fat'!

Interviewer: What about the period after the clash. Next year or year and a half when you were Deputy Secretary in the Division, what recollections do you have of that period because Jagat Mehta reached Beijing at the end of 1963, early 1964. What are your recollections of that period, the post-border war phase?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I think the freeze in Delhi continued as far as I know. About Jagat Mehta, I will tell you one instance and then I don't have to expand it further to tell you what I think. He sent a private letter to me, a long two or three pages letter. The trouble with Jagat Mehta, who was a very bright officer otherwise, was that he would say in 10 words what you can say in two.

In the letter to me, he said that he had a private meeting with the Chinese Director dealing with India, who told him that they must improve their relations and suggested that, may be, they should go out on a picnic with their families. I wrote back saying that since he had asked my personal advice about it, I strongly advised him not to go out on any private picnic, because nothing could be kept a secret for too long. If it became public, there would be an uproar in India, as it was shortly after the 1962 debacle.

A few weeks later, Jagat Mehta got a letter from the Foreign Secretary and he thought that I had told the Foreign Secretary about his letter and he said that he would not have expected me to do that! I told him: 'Jagat, don't judge others by your standards. I certainly did not. I have not sent your letter to anybody other than my reply to you.'

You also know what happened during the Charan Singh government when Jagat as Foreign Secretary failed to recognise Indira Gandhi, when they were at the same airport and he turned his back on her. When she came back as PM, she would have nothing to do with his posting and he was, otherwise, sent to Germany as our Ambassador.

Interviewer: Any other comment you want to make of that period when you were in Delhi; what was it like to work in the Ministry in those days or the working methods in the Ministry.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Working methods are a bit wooden, I think. There was too much of hierarchy, which I remember, continues. I am speaking about 1962 and when I became Foreign Secretary in 1986, the hierarchy was very much there. The first effort I made was to try to break it down and have coordination meetings every week with all the joint secretaries. These were never held thereafter. In my time, these were held for one and half years or two years. What I am trying to say is not to claim credit, but that if you want to have a collegiate sense of functioning, if you want the youngest as well as the oldest to be able to say something, which they felt and then to mull over it a little bit, and you don't do that, you have lost a wonderful opportunity.

Interviewer: In the British Foreign Office, every morning the top management of the Ministry, 14 at the main table and 12 on the

chairs behind the main table, meet. They spend 20-25 minutes together. That is all they need because they meet every day. But in systems where people never meet, then, of course, every meeting becomes a Mahabharat.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: And, even when they meet, they don't talk, which is much worse. Because, then, it gives an impression of a collegiate functioning without a collegiate functioning.

Interviewer: After Delhi, what was the next destination?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: In 1964, I got posted to Moscow, which I accepted with great pleasure because Moscow had fascinated me since childhood. We decided to go from Delhi to Frankfurt and from Frankfurt by car to Moscow. In October 1964, it was approaching winter and in Bonn, we ordered a car, which was delivered to us in time as we reached Germany. We stayed for three days with my sister, who lived in Bonn and was married to the Educational Attaché in Bonn, Mr NK Sundaram.

We drove by road from Germany via East Germany to Russia. Although it was the beginning of winter, the weather was nice. The car was tested in this long journey and the first thing, which struck me during the journey apart from the strangeness of people, who had gone from a so-called democratic system to a so-called Communist system, was of course the rigidity of the East Germans compared to the West Germans and the relatively lax atmosphere of the Russians in Russia itself!

One incident that has remained in my memory all these years is our stopping for petrol at one of the gas stations in Russia, where gas stations are few and far between. The gas stations are largely run

by middle aged women of gigantic proportions. This lady, having filled the gas, asked me in Russian if the car was mine. Immediately warning bells rang in my head, because I was in a Communist country and she was asking me if the car was mine. I gave her a half-truth, I said it was my government's – because I had bought the car on government loan. She seemed to relax after hearing this, which only reminded me of the thirst of the Communists to own.

My wife and I reached Moscow without any untoward incident, where we were put up in a hotel called the Ukraina Hotel until our own apartment was made available. Ukraina Hotel is a very nice hotel on a street called Kutuzovsky Prospekt named after the famous Russian General, who defeated Napoleon in 1812. Ambassador Kaul was not there: he was taking a vacation somewhere and Rikhi Jaipal was the Minister, a very fine person again, whom I have known briefly. When I was in New York, he was the First Secretary along with me in the Permanent Mission to UN. Now, he was the Minister in Moscow and I was joining there as the First Secretary.

Two days after we arrived in Moscow, news came that Khrushchev had fallen and there was great excitement in the air as to what was going to happen. Ambassador Kaul had been asked by the Ministry to come back to Moscow immediately. He arrived and my recollection there was very strange, because I called on him when he came, as is customary, and then I said to him that my wife had also come and wanted to know when we could call on him at his house. He said, 'No, it is not necessary for her to call, I don't have a wife,' while what he meant was that his wife was not there!

However, having said that to me and me taking him at his word, when we met the next time at a party, with my wife, he did not

acknowledge her. My wife inquired why he had not responded to her greeting. I told her to behave as if she did not know him. This game went on for two or three different occasions when we met. I would greet him because I had met him and he would return the greeting, but my wife would not greet him! I knew victory would eventually be hers, because if the wife does not greet the Ambassador and the Ambassador does not greet the wife, who loses; it is the Ambassador who loses. So, on the fourth such occasion, he came with gushing affection towards Usha and said 'Hello Usha, how are you and so on.' So, shall we say that the breach was filled and everything was alright again?

Having said that, I would like to rate Ambassador Kaul as the second best Ambassador I have been with. I would even say the best Ambassador, but for the fact that he did not have the real human warmth that Ambassador Rajwade had. Ambassador Rajwade also had the advantage that he had a remarkable 'lady wife' to use a north Indian expression, a wife who more than made up for anything, which an Ambassador may or may not have.

Ambassador Kaul spoke Russian fluently, although not very grammatically correct, but enough to pass at any gathering. He had an outward going nature and had the natural wit of, I would say, a Kashmiri because they literally have to live by their wits, as they have done through the centuries and are doing even today and he was a remarkable civil servant as well. He could lead a team very ably and we had an excellent deputy in Rikhi Jaipal, who is, perhaps, one of the best colleagues I have ever had.

The other thing, which I found in Russia, was the willingness of people there to listen to you and to judge issues on what they

considered was logical. One instance was my worry about the long Russian winter and the horrid time that my wife would have to spend with our little daughter, who was born in Ethiopia and who was then about three or four years old. We put her in the Detski Sad, which was a Russian Kindergarten, which was in the basement of our building in Kutuzovsky Prospekt.

Then the question was what my wife would do during her long vigil, when I was not there. She was interested in learning choreography and there could be no better place than Russia to learn choreography in Russian ballet or any ballet. I had made two friends, one called Kaminev and the other Titayev, who were in the Cultural Ministry. I spoke to them and I told them that my wife had Indian dance qualifications and she would like to learn at GITIS (The State Institute for Theatrical Arts), which was world famous.

First, they replied that they had not had a non-Communist member. I said, 'You say you are friends with India and here is an Indian, so what is wrong with your admitting her?' They thought about it and saw no reason why they should say no to an aspiring Indian student. She was admitted and for the next two years, she studied choreography in the best institute that exists in the world and she carried that forward. She is now a fully trained choreographer and dancer, which makes an unbeatable combination. This is what I meant when I said that the Russians are practical.

Anyhow, one of the plusses there was that apart from being the Political Counsellor, I asked Ambassador Kaul to also make me the Cultural Counsellor, because the Political Counsellor was always looked at suspiciously by the Russians. However, if you were a cultural counsellor, you were not viewed suspiciously. Thus, I visited

various places, which even Ambassador Kaul could not visit as Ambassador, as there were strong travel restrictions and you had to seek permission to go 40 km away from Moscow. (*Interviewer*: But the cultural counsellor could make those visits.) Of course, we would ask for permission and we were given permission automatically and we could travel with any cultural delegation, which came to Moscow. Many cultural delegations used to come there.

Interviewer: Those were not the days when India received special treatment in the Soviet Union.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: They were, but don't forget that the period of Stalin was not so far away and it took time for them. They were much more relaxed with India; that is true. We used to travel and I remember that every cultural delegation also had a commissar, who came along as one of the members from their side.

During one of these visits, the man, who was accompanying from the Russian side, went on plying me with drinks. By that time, I was a hardened drinker as any Russian. We went on drinking and the result was that he went under the table. I literally escorted him back to the hotel helping him to move along and put him to bed in his room when his wallet fell out. Naturally, I looked at the wallet and it showed that he was a KGB agent. I put it back and went off to my own room.

The next morning, he came with a hangover to the breakfast table and went on asking me as to what happened the previous night. I told him, 'Nothing happened, you came with me, you put me in my room and you went to your room.' It was a slight distortion of the truth. It only showed that in spite of it being 1965, they were still

very suspicious of any outsider. But I liked the Russians and one or two incidences will show why.

We could see that every Russian Republic (at that time, there were 15 and eight of these were in Asia and only seven were in Europe), whether Asian or European, had the same 100 per cent education, which was remarkable. If the so called Central Asian Republics of the erstwhile USSR are today in a much more advanced state than other Asian countries, it is largely due to Communism. These are the plusses, which people should give to Marxism and Communism, which we could not give even in India. We somehow think that the American system is better. How is it better? I think a system, which feeds the people, clothes the people, educates the people, is more important than a system, which only flaunts freedom for the few because the majority suffer as slaves.

Interviewer: Okay, moving on to our political relation, were there any events or issues that came up during that period, which are memorable, which showed how the relationship was moving between the two countries.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, I would imagine so. When we had been in Moscow for a year, in 1965, being our daughter Kalpana's fifth birthday, we decided to take leave and go to Capri. I chalked out a programme with my wife and my little daughter and got into the car and went by road. The itinerary was rather ambitious – to Capri in Italy through every other East European State. We went through Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, down to Austria and to Italy and then on the way back to Bulgaria, Romania, and back to Moscow. When we reached Capri and were just relaxing for 2-3 days in Rome, we got the message of the Indo-Pak war breaking.

In a typically parsimonious Indian manner, I got a message saying that the Ambassador would like me back in Moscow. If the Ambassador had ordered me to come back and given me instructions to come back, I could have claimed my travel cost back from the government. I suppose, he did not want to create a burden on the government for this.

No Indian could remain out and have a holiday when he knew that his country was at war. We decided to go back straight away, but, this time, we had to do it in a hurried manner. We drove during the night and in the day time, we would see whatever we could see of the country we went through, the capital we went through and things like that. The interesting thing was that when we came to a border check post in Romania, we did not know that it was closed after 8 pm. So, we did not know what to do.

Fortunately, I spoke Russian and I asked the guard, 'Who is your commanding officer, call him at once.' The man gave me the telephone and I spoke in Russian telling him who we were and we needed to return to Moscow because war between India and Pakistan had broken out and I had to go back to the Indian embassy. This poor fellow came out literally in his underwear and was good enough to stamp our passports and let us through. In a sense, I would say that it was a special courtesy, which maybe I would not have got in any other country. The Russian sympathy to India was very transparent there.

I believe that if it was not clear that Russia was with India, you could have expected the Chinese to do a little more to help the Pakistanis. In the 1971 war, the Chinese and especially the USA under President Nixon were prevented from any such move when the Russians sent their submarines to the Bay of Bengal following the US 7th Fleet.

Interviewer: This was also the time when the defence relationship, defence equipment supplies had taken off.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: We bought our very first submarine from Russia after the British declined to sell us a second hand submarine saying that since our relation with Pakistan was strained, they could not supply it to us. The Russians not only sold us their submarine, but when Rikhi Jaipal, who was in charge of procurement, went to the Minister in the State Committee for Economic Relations, and said somewhat hesitantly that we would like to buy a second hand submarine from the Russians, they said, 'Why a second hand submarine, we will supply you a new one.' That was the positive approach of the Russians for which, I am afraid, even today, India has not shown enough appreciation.

They used to take out stuff from their own stocks to give to India, which no country ever does. Countries usually supply according to their production. In Russia, not being a capitalist country, they produce according to their plans. They expect you to place the order well ahead of time, so that they can produce it in their plan. I know of cases where the Russians went out of the way and took out stocks from their own supplies and sent it to us. We don't show enough appreciation for that. Our armed forces are, I am afraid, still slavish in their approach. They like to buy things from Western countries, partly, I suspect, because of the corruption.

The Russians gave us the submarine and I remember Admiral Gorshkov, who was the father of the Blue Water Navy in Russia, saying in a speech, 'You are our Indian brothers, you can depend on us to always stand by you.' Even today, the Russians have stood by India on the nuclear reprocessing, which no other country has done.

Interviewer: Any other thoughts about the assignment in Moscow?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: If you asked me which country did I benefit the most from my stay, in my education, in my attitudes, I would say that it was my posting to the Soviet Union. I saw how it pulled itself up by its bootstraps. What it was like before and what it was like during the war. They sacrificed 20 million lives to win the war for which credit has not been given to them by the glorious Allies, which did not lose even a fraction as many people.

Interviewer: What about India-Soviet Union relations?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: They were very good. They became even closer because of the emerging problem with East Pakistan and the dictatorship, General Tikka Khan having been appointed to ensure that the Bangladeshis behaved themselves.

A huge number of refugees were coming in. At some point India would have to intervene to prevent this massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan and it was clear at that time that the entire West was with Pakistan and the only country on which India could depend was the Soviet Union.

Interviewer: Were you directly involved in the negotiations for the Indo-Soviet Treaty?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell us a little about that because it is the kind of information that is not easily available.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Well, the Indo-Soviet Treaty was largely negotiated by a gentleman called DP Dhar. DP Dhar was one

of the cleverest men I have ever met and a Kashmiri, therefore, very close to Mrs Gandhi and he was put in charge of negotiations for the Indo-Soviet Treaty. Somehow, DP Dhar whom I had not known before, took a fancy to having me as his advisor on Russia and took me on every trip he made to Moscow. That is when I formed a very high opinion of Mr Dhar's mental acumen and also an awareness of some of his foibles. He was basically a man of remarkable intellect. I was asked by TN Kaul, who was then the Foreign Secretary in Delhi, to be in charge of the nitty gritty of the Treaty and when the main points had been worked out, I was asked to take care of the translation of the Treaty into Russian and Hindi.

Interviewer: If you go back for just a moment to the main clause of the Treaty, how was that negotiated, how did that come about and what were the complexities involved in that negotiation?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: The complexity was mainly to make it clear that we were not a satellite of the Soviet Union and that we were our own masters, at the same time to ensure that the Russians would feel strongly enough to come to our support in time of need. We did not want to make it a kind of Treaty, which made India into a Warsaw Pact kind of country. At the same time, we wanted to have the confidence that we have one of the big powers on our side because we knew that the Americans were not, which meant that the other permanent members were not and the Chinese were out of the question in any case.

Interviewer: Did that negotiation go smoothly?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, it did, in the sense that the Russians did not make much objections to what we wanted.

Interviewer: So, it was essentially our draft.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: It was essentially a mutual draft because the Russians were willing to have formulations, which were acceptable to us without making it heavily dependent on them. One amazing episode here was, since I was in charge of the translations and so on, there were perhaps only half a dozen people, who knew about the Treaty. Even the Americans would not know like they knew about every other thing. It was only our Ambassador in Moscow, PN Haksar, TN Kaul, of course, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, not more than a dozen persons.

Interviewer: Not the Cabinet?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No. One amusing episode was that a journalist whom I knew well, dashed into my room the day before Gromyko's arrival and said that Gromyko was coming and that he was going to sign an important document. I went cold feeling that he was asking me something very close. I asked him what important document, he thought, was being signed. We went into a discussion on that and he did not report immediately. The next day, when the Treaty was signed, he came dashing into my room and asked me why I misled him. I told him that I did not mislead him and we remained friends, because I had not told him that we were not signing a document.

The second interesting thing that happened was the coming together of the Germanys, which was not supported by the Prime Minister's principal secretary, PN Haksar. I had to go and tell Mr Haksar because TN Kaul and Haksar did not get on very well. My argument was that the Germanys were moving ahead and there would be no point in our

recognising East Germany after West Germany had recognised it, so we should do it a little earlier. I told PN Haksar that we would lose any weightage we had with East Germany if we recognised them after West Germany had and that convinced him. We recognised East Germany a couple of weeks before West Germany.

Interviewer: Any other aspects of the 1971 phase that come to mind – managing the relationship with the Soviet Union during the lead up to the Bangladesh War and during the war that was absolutely key.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Well, after the Treaty was signed, the crisis with East Pakistan became worse and the last trip, which I had with DP Dhar to Moscow, was along with General Manekshaw in December. The war was on and we went because DP Dhar asked me too since I was the advisor on Russia. DP Dhar asked me, 'What should I do, should I mention to Kosygin, seeking their assistance'. I said that he should just tell them that he knew that the 7th fleet was steaming up to Bay of Bengal and see what they say. Ambassador Shelwakar said that we must ask for their help. I pointed out that it would be a big mistake to ask for their help, because then we would be bound to them.

Shelwakar was insistent and tried to keep me out of the meeting with Brezhnev and Kosygin. But Dhar took me. So at the meeting with Dhar, Manekshaw, Shelwakar and me, Dhar suggested the formulation I had given, 'don't ask for a favour, if the man wants to do the favour he will do it in any case'.

When Dhar mentioned this, Kosygin said that the Russians knew, and that India did not need to worry as Russian ships and submarines

were following them very closely. Now that meant that they were totally with us then. That also meant that the Americans could not establish the beach head in Bangladesh, which was President Nixon's intention. Thus, that crisis was over and we know what happened. If Nixon was upset with India, it was because he could not move ahead on that. That is where I think we really owe the Russians.

Addendum: Federal Republic of Germany

Ambassador Venkateswaran: We had moved from Moscow to Bonn in 1967, which was then the Capital of West Germany, after a very fulfilling stay there. That was the first time we learnt that the Railway Lines were of different gauges from Moscow to Poland and onwards to Germany, since the Czar had decided that the Railway lines in Russia should be the broadest! Similarly, the Czar had taken a foot ruler and drawn a straight line as the proposed alignment from Moscow to Leningrad. The carriages of our train were hydraulically lifted and the wheel-sets changed at each point for the trains to travel!

Our daughter, Kalpana was put into the local German School in Kreuzberg (Bonn), where we found a lovely new residence, partly because she had flourished in Moscow in the local school there, but mainly because the Ministry had not yet liberalized the system as had happened later on, by allowing the rather high fees to be paid, on government account, of the International Schools, mainly run by the UK and the USA in English Medium. We had also seen how moving with the local children helped our only child to learn the language and feel at home, without developing the snobbishness of the children of most diplomats! In retrospect, we have no regrets on that score!

As the Number Two man in the Embassy and designated also as Commercial Counsellor, I had the opportunity to visit all the major cities and industrial organizations there in the Ruhr and their small industries, which were concentrated in the Black Forest Area near Stuttgart. Incidentally, a pioneer industrialist from Germany to setup a project in Bangalore, India, was Robert Bosch, a family concern, which has flourished and has a huge establishment there. Siemens and other companies followed and Indo-German cooperation has grown by leaps and bounds ever since.

A very interesting aspect of my stay in Germany was that the Grand Coalition of the Socialist Democratic Party and the CDU/CSU was then running the country, which had Willy Brandt as the Vice-Chancellor, in charge of foreign affairs. The so-called Oest Politik, fashioned by Brandt had succeeded, eventually, in the re-unification of Germany after the fall of the wall separating West and East Germany! I recall Prime Minister Indira Gandhi transiting Frankfurt Airport. I was CDA then and had gone by car to receive her on arrival, during the transit halt. Vice Chancellor Willy Brandt was a little delayed and joined us when Shrimati Indira Gandhi had deplaned, resulting in an interesting photograph of myself, escorting the PM on my right and Willy Brandt to my left!

Another episode of interest was Shri Morarji Desai, who was Deputy Prime Minister then, also transiting Frankfurt, during the lunch arranged for him at the Airport VIP Room with vegetarian food as per his specifications, my wife as well as Shri Suresh Kumar, the Indian Consul General in Frankfurt was also with me. During the casual polite conversation at the Lunch, about the need to have a more equal relationship in Indian Society between men and women, the DPM suddenly interjected, much to everyone's embarrassment, to

proclaim that one job no woman should have, namely, to be Prime Minister!

I had also the unique experience of meeting officials, who had acted as liaison for Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, when he met with the Fuhrer Adolf Hitler and then decided to undertake the perilous submarine journey to Japan. By all accounts, the meeting, which took place between the two, had not made much of an impact, which was one reason why Netaji had decided to proceed onwards to Japan on the grounds that the warfront was closer to India there!

Addendum: Fiji Islands

Ambassador Venkateswaran: My posting to Fiji was mainly as the result of two other colleagues, who were senior to me, getting out of the posting, which was seen as getting posted to the boondocks! One respected colleague, Shri Gurbachan Singh, commented to me years later, that he sincerely wished that he had not avoided the posting to Fiji, since the posting he got, subsequently, was to Morocco. The fiasco of India's efforts to join the Islamic Conference there, on the argument that we had a much larger Muslim population than most of the Islamic countries represented at the Conference, is well-known and had cut no ice with India having to retire hurt!

Personally, my wife and I found Fiji a fascinating posting. It had a population of ethnic Indians, who had gone there as indentured labour in the later part of the 19th Century and up to the time that this obnoxious practice ended in 1917. These ethnic Indians, much like those sent to East Africa by the British Colonial Masters to build the railways there, had prospered. However, in Fiji, they were prohibited from buying land, which was solely reserved for the

Fijian Tribal population and the Indians, perforce, worked as coolies in the sugar cane fields run by the British. It is a tribute to these Indian coolies that they were the first to set up schools, which were earlier reserved only for the Europeans and the Chieftain families. Incidentally, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the first Prime Minister of Fiji, which became independent in 1970, was educated in one such Indian school. The later downfall of the Indian population, compared with the status of the Fijians, was due to their lack of interest in joining the Fijian Army or Police, which has remained exclusively Fijian and resulted in a number of later coups, which ensured that the executive control was in Fijian/European hands.

A major highlight in Fiji was getting a very first Indian Naval visit to Suva and Lautoka, when the Fijian population turned up in huge numbers to see the ship, since they had been conditioned earlier into believing that only the Europeans could sail the oceans! The friendly football matches by the sailors and the playing of the ship's band, was enthusiastically received. I had learnt some Fijian by then and my speeches in Fijian were repeatedly broadcast over the Fiji Radio! We had moved the Commission's premises, shortly after my joining in Suva, to the tallest building in the city and the Indian Flag flew alongside the Union Jack, raising the hackles of some of the colonially-minded population! The clarification that was given by me in a letter to the Fiji Times that every independent nation's flag was legally entitled to fly at the same height and inviting the day when Fiji's flag would also fly at the same height after the country's independence, silenced these critics, who must have silently gnashed their teeth!

My wife, meanwhile, had organized a splendid dance group of children of the Indian population at the country's Independence Day

Celebrations in 1970, to which our Speaker, Sardar G. S. Dhillon, came as India's Official Representative, and the Prince of Wales came to present the Charter of Independence, is remembered to this day. When I entered the venue, Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, greeted me as the High Commissioner of India and I replied, much to his amusement, that until then, along with my British, Australian and American colleagues of the Diplomatic Corps, we had been only Commissioners, but had now become High Commissioners and Ambassadors as a result of Fiji's Independence!

My wife had also fruitfully participated in the activities of the Fijian Women's Association. An Indian Cultural Centre had also been established in Suva, the capital. When we left Fiji, the send-off was splendid with the Fiji Military Band in attendance! (We were later on to meet the Police Commissioner of Fiji when we were posted to Beijing and he was posted as the Police Commissioner in Hong Kong!) The Farewell Song of Fiji, Easa Easa Lei, sung only as the Fijians can, was sung, leaving us in tears.

Meanwhile, by volunteering to report on the various Island Territories, the jurisdiction of the Indian High Commission in Fiji was expanded to cover most of the Island Territories of the South Pacific Ocean, which enabled us to travel and see many of them, including Tahiti and the New Hebrides, which was one of the last remaining Condominiums ruled jointly by the British and the French. The natural beauty of each one of these remarkable South Pacific Ocean Island Territories is, indeed, breath-taking, and cannot be easily imagined! A truly unique experience to remember through one's life!

Interviewer: Moving on, from that field you went on to Harvard for a year.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Where I did not want to go, but I was persuaded by Jagat Mehta.

Interviewer: Which year was that?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: End of 1974.

Interviewer: What did you do there and what were your brief impressions.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I was the Chairman of the Group of Fellows at Harvard, where there were about 30 of us. We could choose to do what we wanted.

Interviewer: You worked on papers?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, there were papers on development and the Triarch theory.

Interviewer: From there you moved on to Washington.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Against my will. TN Kaul had gone to Washington already and I told the Foreign Secretary Kewal Singh to please let me have my own post. I don't want to go to Washington as No. 2, even though Ambassador Kaul was an old colleague whom I respected. Kewal Singh said that Kaul was an Ambassador and my senior, so I must go to Washington. This was 1975. I stayed there for two years because I had no intention of continuing in Washington as No. 2, what for?

Interviewer: What are your recollections of that period?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: My reflection was good in a way and not so good in another. Good in the way that it was a period of seeing

what was happening in the biggest power at that time. Bad, because Emergency had been imposed in India, which was an anathema to the so called democratic crowd. Anyhow, the Americans were also playing a funny game about democracy and we had sub-commissions. I remember somebody saying, 'How can we have open relations with India?' I asked the man, 'Do you think the Chinese are a better democracy?' He had to back off because they had no argument. This was the time when they were currying favour with the Chinese and trying to do things with them.

Interviewer: Did you see Kissinger in action?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes. In fact my ID card was signed by him as the Secretary of State.

Interviewer: Any recollection of Kissinger and his style or methods of working.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I respected his intellect, but I despised his lack of character. The man had no character whatsoever and if you read an item in the (Foreign Affairs?) no, no, that slightly pornographic magazine, Playboy, there was an article on Kissinger in my time in Washington, written apparently by a person, who knew Kissinger very well and, may be, he had been his classmate, where he sketches out Kissinger's character of how as a young scholar, he joined the interpreters department of the American Army to be sent to Germany as a debriefer for prisoners in Germany and took it out on the German prisoners for what he had to endure as a Jewish emigrant. It is a very nicely written psycho-profile of Kissinger, which I think catches the essence of Kissinger's personality better than anything else I have read.

Kissinger was responsible for setting up the first Indo-US Joint Commission during my time in Washington. All said and done, Kissinger was a man like anyone in those delicate situations, who play a double role. For example, there was a lady called Charlotte Washington, who was the principal of the school where Kissinger's daughter was studying. She told me that Kissinger's daughter and other school children were concerned about the 'Christmas bombings' that took place in Hanoi. When Kissinger's daughter asked her father if he had ordered the bombings, he denied it and later it was revealed that he had. His daughter lost all respect for him. What a terrible thing to happen when a child loses trust and confidence in one's own parent.

Interviewer: Any other things that you remember of Washington and where did you go from there. What was the next destination?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: In Washington, one's energies were largely taken up by trying to keep the Indian community together, which was very divided because of the Emergency in India. One way I could help in doing that without getting into the plus or minus sides of the Emergency was to get the Indian community back together culturally as Indians. I got all the heads of different organisations, about 18 of them – the Bengali Association, the Punjabi Association, the Tamil Association, Andhra Association, and we set up the India Cultural Coordinating Committee (ICCC).

I said, 'Let us not be interested in politics; as Indians, let us observe Indian festivals, ceremonies, functions like Independence Day, Republic Day together. While you may have differences whether the Emergency was right or wrong, you have no doubts that India should be democratic and independent, then observe these days.' That was a success. I would say the ICCC still continues.

Interviewer: What was the next destination from Washington?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Damascus. When I came back to India on my way to Damascus in 1977, Mr Vajpayee was the Foreign Minister and when I called on him, he said, 'I hear that you have been active defending the Emergency.' I said that I had been active defending India.

I think he was immediately taken aback and I added that if he had reports, he should institute an inquiry and then decide whether I should go to Damascus or not. 'But don't send me with this doubt in your mind whether I am an Indian or not,' I said. He backed off.

I went to Damascus and this was the first Islamic country where I was posted. I don't think I could have chosen a better Islamic country to go to because Syria was the most civilised of the Islamic countries, culturally and even historically, a country with enormous history.

When I went there, even before I presented my credentials, there was a message that George Fernandes would be visiting, so I had to take care of the arrangements. I had to make appointments, get him to meet people, go with him to various places and things went off quite well. George Fernandes gave a big lecture about how terrible the Emergency was and after listening to him for a while, I asked him point blank if it was better than what happened after the Emergency – two full Secretaries of the government of India were arrested in their office by the Government that followed.

I said that as he was speaking about the demoralisation of the services and George Fernandes had no answer. When he returned, he must have said that I was a hardened pro-Emergency man. Soon after, I got a letter from Jagat Mehta saying, 'We chose you for the qualities

of head and heart to go as Ambassador to Syria, but now we see that you are not applying your mind to these things.' I replied asking him to wait a little, until I had spent at least three months before he came to a conclusion.

When I presented my credentials to President Hafez Assad, I found him to be an extremely charming person. Spontaneously, I told him, 'Mr President, I find you an extremely charming person, smiling and relaxed. Here I see your pictures on the walls looking very grim. Why can't you show yourself like you are to me, to your own people?'

He burst into laughter, and believe it or not, within the next month, pictures all over Syria were with Assad smiling. Later on, we became very close. There are stories he told me about himself, which I don't think he has told anybody else. When we had to leave our daughter to complete her graduation in Arabic Language in Damascus, he himself told me, 'I am going to be her guardian and you have nothing to worry about.'

Interviewer: I know, it is very difficult to get close to any Arab leader and you achieved this in a country like Syria with a man like Assad. I have not heard this before. How long did you stay in Damascus?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Two and half years, from 1977 to 1979.

Interviewer: Any other reflections of Damascus that come to mind.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, the Syrian Minister of Wakf visited Delhi and met the Imam of the Jama Masjid and told him to be a more understanding person of Indian culture. He returned and told me this himself.

An equally interesting aspect was when the Minorities Commission Chairman, Mr Ansari visited Damascus. I decided to accompany him to meetings, which I had fixed. The first meeting was with the same Minister of Wakf, who had become a personal friend by that time. Ansari had come with an agenda and the first question he asked the Minister in Damascus was as to what he thought of the sanctity of saying 'talaq, talaq, talaq' to get a divorce.

The Minister told him that in Syria, they did not accept that because saying 'talaq' three times was a system that was in place when there was not much order in society. Now in Syria, a divorce was accepted only when it was also approved by the civilian magistrate, not merely by the Mullah.

Then the visibly embarrassed man asked about Muslim graves; because at that time, there was a big court case going on in India about a grave yard being acquired for a public purpose for some airport or something. The Syrian Minister told him that in Syria, they certainly allowed that to happen. Ansari asked, 'But what happens? Who will take back the remains?' The Minister said that they announced it beforehand that the relatives should take the remains to the new site, which had been provided by the government, to reinter the bodies.

Ansari continued, 'But there must be some graves, which are not claimed.' The Syrian Minister replied that they removed the remains reverentially and reinter them. He also told our Minorities Commission Chairman that the living must have precedence over the dead.

The third question was about having up to four wives and the Syrian Minister explained that this was allowed by the Prophet at the time of the Islamic wars. There were many widows with children and these

were rough times, hence, they had to be supported. 'The Prophet said up to four wives, but it was being misconstrued to mean four wives,' he said.

Interviewer: What was your next destination after Syria?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: After Syria, it was Geneva.

Interviewer: What were the years and what were the experiences of the time?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: The year was 1980 to 82, I think. When I went to Geneva, my predecessor, a good friend and colleague, Chinmaya Gharekhan was in an apartment, which I found extremely inconvenient. It was right on a main road with enormous traffic and seemed to be rather a poky kind of accommodation.

I looked around and found a beautiful place in a village called Vesna, which was just four kilometres from the centre of Geneva city, with seven acres of land with fruit trees and overlooking Lake Geneve. I found that the difference in rental between that area and the area where Gharekhan had lived was only 1,000 francs more, that was about 20 per cent more than what was being paid earlier.

Then, we got the lady to agree to sell that land to us with the building for an amount, which was not unreasonable, two million francs. The then Finance Minister, Venkataraman agreed, but the Ministry did not agree. Although I was leaving, I had got the deal more or less tied up. They later went to the other side, which is Palace de Nasio.

Interviewer: The work in Geneva was always divided between the Ambassador, who handled Disarmament and those issues and the other Ambassador, who handled GATT affairs. Was that an issue during your time?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Of course it was and I managed to sort it out to some extent, because I got a ruling given by the Ministry that I would be in overall charge and there was no idea of a separate jurisdiction of the GATT. At that time, the Ambassador in Belgium used to be the Ambassador for GATT.

Interviewer: Was that terminated during your time?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: It was not terminated; it was a kind of hazy situation because Ambassador PK Dave was very upset about what I had done. He thought that I had done something behind his back, which I had not, because there was obviously only one Head of Mission possible in any one Mission. It was a somewhat unpleasant situation and I had to bear the brunt of the unpleasantness, because I insisted that I was the Head. At that time, Mrs Gandhi had come for the WHO Assembly meeting.

I think it was very improper of the Government of India or any Mission to have two heads in the same place, unless they had clearly demarcated jurisdictions. As far as the UN is concerned, it recognises only one head. You cannot have two permanent Mission heads in New York; you can have two Ambassadors, but not two PRs.

Interviewer: You stayed in Geneva only for two years. What was the next destination from there?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: China.

Interviewer: You were in China from 1982 up to 1985 when you came back as foreign secretary.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: No, Secretary (East).

Interviewer: Let us first talk about China, where you stayed from 1982 to 1985. Wasn't that the period during which there was an offer on the table to settle the boundary issue, which we, perhaps, did not pursue on the grounds that we would tackle the border issue only sector by sector?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I am afraid, there were many times when this offer was there because I have been dealing with China since 1960. Anyone, who gets hooked on China, never loses touch. The first offer was made well before the 1960 conflict itself by Chou Enlai in 1959 and it was not even looked at. You see, the problem, as I see it, is that we took our borders as given by the British, without inquiring whether we agreed with those borders or not. We did not even go into depth to study what the borders were. These were traditional boundaries, as we had been told, but traditional for whom? They were not demarcated, they were not delineated, they were not even properly defined with the result that there was a lot of haze surrounding this.

When the Chinese built their road through Aksai Chin, only then we began to wake up to our problem. Even then we were not sure about the Chinese road until we saw it in a Chinese map! I know because I studied all that very carefully. In a sense what is popularly believed to have happened, namely the speeding up of Nehru's downward trend in health as a result of the 'Chinese aggression', was a result of our own ignorance and haphazard treatment of something very vital to us, namely the territorial frontiers of India.

The British could have hazy boundaries because they were a big power at that time. We were never a big power, but we assumed that everything would go our way. When Chou Enlai made this offer,

we should have looked at it seriously, but we did not. Mind you, the Chinese also played games. I once told the Chinese Vice Minister, because I used to head the border talks on many occasions, of the two people, who made claims, India's claims were perhaps more sustainable than those of the Chinese because the Chinese were nowhere in Tibet! So where was the boundary with India? But the way the Chinese speak about their boundaries with India, they presume that Tibet belonged to them forever and ever, which we know, is historically not true.

When I said this, the Chinese Minister backed off. I remember that in one discussion, he put on the usual stance – looking very serious – and said, 'Mr Ambassador, Indian forces have been moving up tens of kilometres up to the illegal McMahon Line.' I let him go on and at the end of it, I said, 'Mr Vice Minister, were you even in Tibet until 1950, when you forcibly entered Tibet. If you say we moved up illegally tens of kilometres, you moved up hundreds of kilometres. Let us not talk about that.' He backed off completely.

Interviewer: What other recollection do you have of the period when you served in China in terms of the border negotiations? Eric Gonsalves, I think, led one or two teams that came into China. Was that during your time or just before that?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: In my time, Natwar Singh came; I don't think Eric came.

Interviewer: What about the talks, what about the negotiations? I think he did.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: When you mentioned the Chinese offers, the last offer made openly in my presence was by Deng

Xiaoping to Mr G Parthasarathy, who had led a general delegation of social scientists to China.

Interviewer: Would you remember the year, probably 1982 or 1983?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Shortly after I joined, so it must have been in 1982. I recall that Deng Xiaoping used the same expression that Chou Enlai had made. Clearly a repetition of what Chou Enlai had said because the Chinese make up with consistency what they lack in facts. We make up in facts, but we have no consistency, that is the problem. This is a subtle difference, but a vital difference at the same time.

Deng Xiaoping said using the same expression, 'You have a populated area and here is an area where even the air is thin.' Basically he was trying to say that it was a fair swap and what they were offering was eminently reasonable. But Mr G Parthasarathy obviously was not in a position to accept or say anything on that, nor did we follow it up.

I recall that when I was an Ambassador there and during one of my visits, I had spoken to Mrs Gandhi. There was a meeting on the border question when we were authorised to make an open offer by her. That is when Shankar Bajpai, as Secretary East leading a delegation, did not make the offer. When I queried him, he claimed that he had talked to Mrs. Gandhi about it. This is not factually correct. India has been let down by her own representatives, so we cannot blame others if they let us down.

Interviewer: That is a major issue for sure. What were other recollections of China?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: They were extremely pleasant to me. In fact, the Vice Minister Liu Shao Quing even composed a poem

about me when I was leaving that he gave to me with his seal. He gave me a Chinese name Wen, for Wen Gua, which means culture, and Kha for thankha, which is a Tank, 'Culture Tank'. We went to as many places in China as we could, we travelled up the Silk Route; we went to Turfan and Dun Huang. We went to various places by train and even by road. Then we saw the beginnings of the change.

The Chinese, I find and I think, I am right, are very literal people. They take very literally what is said to them or what they say. Sometimes, I wonder how they produce so many objects of beauty when they think literally, because even their paintings and scrolls, if you look at the scrolls, you may think that they are imaginative paintings of mountains, but if you look at the Chinese Karst mountains, as they call them, namely the Chalk mountains, which got eroded, they look exactly like these in scrolls.

I am trying to explain that what we think is poetic, with them, it is literal. I find that the Chinese also have almost no sense of humour. There is a story about a Chinese butler, who had been serving a British Colonel in the old days. After 30 years of loyal service, the Colonel decided to reward the butler and he told him, 'Li, you have served me very well for 30 years, so I am doubling your salary from today'. Li looked at his master and did not seem to be pleased. The Colonel said again, 'Li I am doubling your salary; why don't you look pleased?' And Li said, 'Master has been cheating Li all this time?' What the Colonel meant was right, but the Chinese was also literally right, because if he was worth twice his salary today, he surely was worth more than one salary yesterday, but he did not get it!

Interviewer: From China, you moved back to Delhi as Secretary East and then as Foreign Secretary. Do talk first about the time as

Secretary East, when Ramesh Bhandari was the Foreign Secretary. Is there anything that strikes you of those days, which you recall?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Very briefly, I tried for the first time in my long career to evade coming to Delhi. I had never tried to evade any posting including a posting to Fiji or to Damascus or wherever. But this time, I felt that I had spent a little over two years in China and I should be allowed to complete three years.

However, the reason for me wanting to complete three years was that Mrs Indira Gandhi had been assassinated and we had a new Prime Minister, who had clearly become Prime Minister by default rather than for any other reason. It was clear to me at least because I happened to be in China with Mr Kao, the head of R&AW, when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated and I had received a call from Rasgotra, who was then the Foreign Secretary saying, "Mrs Gandhi has been shot and we are trying to resuscitate her." I asked him how many times she had been shot and he said around 20 times. I could see that there was no chance of resuscitation at all.

I put the phone down, went back to Kao, who was having lunch with me and told him what had happened and that he had to go back to Delhi at once even though nobody had asked him to come back. He said," Why Venkat? Why should I go now?" I said, 'You must, because you are the only person, who knows some things that others might not know in Delhi and you have to be in Delhi at this critical moment.'

Was I right? I think so. This was the first time when I saw the man totally flustered. I told him, 'Don't worry' and we found an Alitalia flight going that night from Hong Kong to Delhi. I arranged with the Chinese government to have Kao flown from Beijing to Hong Kong

and I sent my deputy Shyam Saran along with him to see him off in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, the Commissioner of Police was a gentleman called Henry, who was the Commissioner of Police in Fiji when I was there and I knew him well. I telephoned him and said, 'Henry, I am sending my deputy Shyam Saran along with Mr Kao, please ensure his entry as he does not have a visa for Hong Kong." Henry said that he would see to it and it all went through.

Then, instinctively knowing our system and how the sycophants will play, I was prepared. I was told firmly to return, which I did. When I went there, I saw things exactly as I had foreseen: The coterie, courtiers and so on around the new Prime Minister and a very inchoate situation. On what transpired subsequently, when I was Foreign Secretary, I would like to reserve for the time being. *(The issue was later written by Ambassador Venkateswaran as* ***Addendum***** *given hereunder)*

Interviewer: Fair enough, I have absolutely no desire to push you into speaking of things that you do not wish to share.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: I have not spoken about it anywhere.

Interviewer: That is entirely your right.

Addendum

Even prior to my transfer from Beijing to Head Quarters, as Secretary (East), I had requested for the first time in my entire career in the IFS, that I be allowed to complete the normal 3-year term as Ambassador to China, however, I was informed that I had to report back immediately, since the decision had already been taken by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and could not be changed.

I abided by the decision with great misgiving since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had just been assassinated and her son, Rajiv Gandhi, had taken over as PM even before the congress parliamentary committee had formally elected him to succeed her as a consequence of the general alarm and confusion that prevailed. The appalling mass killing of two thousand innocent Sikh men, women and children in Delhi that had followed the assassination were egged on by Congress sycophants including even Members of Parliament. This had been subsequently capped by Rajiv Gandhi's off hand and unforgivable comment that "When a big tree falls the earth is bound to tremble"! I had myself briefly met Rajiv Gandhi, when he was a pilot in the Indian Airlines, flying AVRO TURBO PROP aircraft, after being sent down from Cambridge University in the UK. He had later obtained his license as a pilot in India, on the advice of the then Deputy High Commissioner in London, Shri. P. N. Haksar.

Very shortly, after returning to New Delhi, it was clear to me that the new Prime Minister preferred to function through a chosen coterie of earlier friends from Doon school and associates from his airline days, rather than through the Congress Party or established governmental machinery. Senior officials of the rank of secretaries were routinely given short shrift and even humiliated in public. This was especially galling to them, since the party members and officials

were accustomed to a certain level of courtesy and formality when dealing with their superiors. Two senior secretaries to Government, when giving presentations about their respective Ministries to the Prime Minister, were abruptly asked by him in the presence of all the other officials, whether they should not be sent back to their parent States to which they belonged. This created consternation and dismay in the bureaucracy and demoralized them to a great extent.

When I was secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi asked for a presentation on the External publicity Division and in the midst of it interjected that much more had to be done to project the image of India favourably to the world, despite the severe budgetary constraints of the Ministry. It fell on me to point out to him that, even according to the Laws of physics, an image could never be brighter than the object, and that it would be first of all necessary to improve the reality of India before any projection can be really successful! It was obvious to all present that this did not endear me to the PM! There were many other similar instances in which standing one's own ground was certain to displease him, but had to be done to prevent things from getting even worse!

Shortly thereafter, the time came for Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari to retire. Rumours began to float around and I was advised by friends, Shri. Arun Singh of the Defence Ministry in particular, to clear the air by directly speaking to the PM. I decided that it would be the best course for me to take. Rajiv Gandhi seemed to me somewhat uneasy and categorically dismissed all the rumours, saying that I would indeed take over as Foreign Secretary.

The time for the change-over was drawing near, but I had to urgently visit some countries in my charge in South East Asia. As I was

transiting through Bangkok, on my way back, I received a telephone call from RK Dhawan, PS to the PM, to say that my appointment had been approved and I should get back immediately to New Delhi. I took over from Bhandari, who was at that time handling the escalating ethnic problem between the Sinhala side and the Jaffna Tamils. After I became the Foreign Secretary, Rajiv Gandhi made a strange request of me. He asked if I would have any problem with Bhandari continuing to advise him on developments in Sri Lanka. Bhandari had earlier organized an infructuous meeting in Bhutan, under Indian auspices, to bring about a settlement between the Sinhala side and the Jaffna Tamils. It was at his initiative that an attempt had been made by the Indian Government to convene a meeting in Bhutan to reconcile the two groups.

Needless to say, the attempt proved to be abortive and in fact counter-productive. I realized at that point, how confused PM Rajiv Gandhi was, but, perforce, contented myself with replying that it was up to him, provided I was fully involved in all the deliberations concerning the subject.

Meanwhile, I settled down as FS and initiated regular coordination Meetings every fortnight of all officers of the MEA from Director level upwards. This was greatly appreciated by them since the meetings helped every official to understand developments in regard to India's interaction with the rest of the world. The PM, however, seemed more interested in regular meetings with the Intelligence Bureau and R&AW than in being briefed by the Heads of any of his Ministries, including the MEA on international developments, as such. He also had the strange habit of getting together all officers travelling with him on visits abroad and discussing the drafts of Joint Statements and Joint Communiqués to be issued at the conclusion of

state visits. Frankly, he seemed to have a rather limited understanding of issues and no desire to dig deeper.

One example that illustrates this is during a visit to Washington in 1987 on the invitation of President Ronald Reagan and discussions were held with members of the delegation to anticipate questions that may come at the meeting with the Washington Press correspondents. It was agreed that if the question of Khalistan would be raised, the PM should say that when there was a Sikh State, in historical terms, its capital was in Lahore and not anywhere in India. That question did come up at the meeting from a Pakistani correspondent and the Prime Minister's immediate response as planned made headlines the next day! Unfortunately, this made Rajiv Gandhi feel infallible in all that he said and did thereafter! Now, I come to the SAARC Heads of State conference that played a crucial role in Rajiv Gandhi's eventual assassination. (by a woman LTTE agent, Dhanu, whose family members are said to have been killed during the IPKF attack on the LTTE while taking Jaffna city).

The president of Sri Lanka, Jayewardene, sought a separate meeting with Rajiv Gandhi, which was held in the Nandi Hills Resort near Bangalore. Apart from PM Rajiv Gandhi, Natwar Singh, an earlier colleague in the IFS, P. Chidambaram and myself were present at the meeting. The Sri Lankan President's entire efforts were directed towards urging our PM to send the Indian Army to prevent his government from falling. His arguments were well-rehearsed and he pleaded that the Sri Lankan Government would collapse soon, without India's help. He said the Sri Lankan government could not withstand the attacks from the (JVP), Janata Vimukti Peremuna (a group of wholly Sinhala Leftists, which had regrouped after its decimation in 1982) from the south and LTTE forces from the north.

Interestingly enough, Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister of India had, in fact, helped with the Indian Air Force, to assist Sirimavo Bandaranaike to defeat the JVP.

Rajiv Gandhi lent a sympathetic ear to Jayewardene and was clearly inclined to rush in "where Angels fear to tread", by giving a helping hand to the Sri Lankan President. He took the drastic decision to send the Indian Peace Keeping Force to help President Jayewardene's government from collapsing under the joint assault of the JVP. Looking back, one can say that Rajiv Gandhi now felt supremely confident, after his much hailed Washington visit in 1987. He believed that he was a world statesman and should act like one! Immediately after the meeting with President Jayewardene was over, I strongly urged Rajiv Gandhi that he should not agree to involve the Indian Armed Forces, in what was actually a civil war in Sri Lanka, and help Jayewardene, who was nick-named the "Silver Fox" by the Sinhalese people themselves! Alas, it was clear, even then, that his mind was made up. Shortly after the SAARC meeting in Bangalore, a Press conference was held in Vigyan Bhavan in January, 1987 where he made the statement to a Pakistani correspondent: "You will soon be speaking to a new Foreign Secretary!"

This much criticised statement by most commentators was brought to a head because the PM felt that I was questioning his judgement. There had been many exchanges between me and the PM, even when I was Secretary (East), which had visibly irked his imperious nature in most matters. I therefore place on record the above two incidents to highlight this.

Interviewer: As we conclude this oral history interview, would you like to reflect on your years in the Service and comment on two or

three points? One, how effective, in your view, has Indian diplomacy been and could it have been more effective? Are there any thoughts that come to mind in terms of how in a practical doable way, India can better project its interests abroad? My second question is a soft question, but an important one, I think, and you are, perhaps, very well placed to comment on that, the role of the spouse in diplomacy. What are your thoughts on this?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: About the impressions I have about the Service, I have no hesitation in saying that to me, the Foreign Service was perhaps the only Service for me to have joined for a number of reasons. The main ones being that you meet people of different walks of life all over the world, different cultures, customs, languages and you see in the diversity, the unity of the human race.

Secondly, the diplomat could move from the lowest to the highest without restrictions; you would meet the kings, the nobles, Prime Ministers and Presidents as well as ordinary workers at various levels and you would learn an enormous amount about the unity of the human race. As the profession is concerned, I am very happy and grateful that I belong to the Foreign Service.

About making it better, there may be a number of ways. The primary one is to have a better interaction at various levels of the Service itself, because there is a tendency for people to try and keep secrets from each other. You can keep secrets from your enemies. But to keep professional secrets, when you are a member of the Service from other members, the desire to be mysterious about things, when there is no need to be, is counterproductive.

In the Indian ethos, there is a tendency to play one-upmanship, i.e., you keep back information, which is useless to you, but which may

be useful to somebody else, but you believe that it is better to keep it away from that somebody else so that you have the high ground.

Interviewer: In a sense, team work, capacity to work together.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, I suppose some of these faults are in every service, in every country, not only ours. Since we are speaking about ourselves, I think, we should consciously work to remove these hindrances and try and see that a member of the Service is really considered a member of the family. If there are people who err, they should be taken to task immediately and eliminated if necessary. They certainly should not be kept because that kind of black sheep will also be there in every service, you must ensure that they are not allowed to make others bear the brunt of what they do.

To conclude the first part of the question, I think that the system we have of political leadership and civil service situation cannot be so rigid in the Foreign Service. It can be a little more rigid in other services, I think, but in the Foreign Service, it is very necessary for the civil servant, i.e., the diplomat to speak very openly without being accused of being anti-national, because sometimes what we consider 'national' may be the most anti-national thing to do. We have to look at things through another person's eyes and not merely from our own.

Interviewer: Which means the need for diplomats to understand political issues a little more.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: A little more in the sense that everyone's welfare is dependent on everyone else's welfare, it cannot be only your welfare.

Interviewer: That is a greater sense of regional and global cooperation, perhaps.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Yes, and we in India are better placed to understand that because we speak about Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, whereas most people of the world do not know what Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam means.

Interviewer: Would that also imply that, particularly in our own region, we could have played our diplomacy much better.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: We should have and I think one of the prime falsehood of our leadership in the last 60 years of our freedom has been a tendency to look far away from our borders and neglect immediate neighbours, with the result that today India has no friend. I would say that again, no friend at all nearby, whereas our eyes are always fixed on people, who are tens of thousands of miles away, who have no need to be friends with us on their part.

Interviewer: Particularly in the West.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Absolutely, which perhaps is a reflection of what happens due to centuries of colonisation.

Interviewer: Would you also agree that there has been a major neglect of Asia.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Obviously, because when I say neighbours, where are we; we are in Asia. I may tell you here half-humorously because I am not very serious about these things, we started an Asia Centre in Bangalore and it has been running well for the last 10-15 years and somebody said why do you call it the Asia

Centre, why not International Centre. My reply was that you have to first become a father before you become a grandfather. I said, if you are a proper father, then you will automatically be a good grandfather.

Interviewer: About the role of the spouse.

Ambassador Venkateswaran: About the spouse, you have raised a very important question. I believe that whatever I think I may have achieved in my life, in my career, it has been due to my wife, not due to me. She has been more than a partner and a help, she has been literally the better half. Women, I think, have a quality, which is superior to that which a man has; a man may claim to have intelligence, a woman has also the same intelligence. The woman has something more, she has something called intuition, she can sense things, which a man seldom can, unless he is trained to do that.

Interviewer: Can you apply that to diplomacy in particular?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Completely. In diplomacy, it is not so much what is said, which is important, not even how it is said, which is important; but what is there behind what is being said and how it is being said. A woman can perceive at once intuitively as I said. That is why Berkeley, the philosopher, says that 'intuition is the highest form of knowledge' and I think intuition for a diplomat is terribly important, in fact, vital, and much more than any amount of intelligence, which he may have.

When we speak about intelligence, I am coming to the crass aspect of intelligence. What is the Central Intelligence Agency in America doing? It has got an enormous amount of information, but it has no intelligence, certainly, it has no intuition that is why it will always find

itself in trouble. Now, they go and have wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other places, do you think they are solving their problems; they are only multiplying their problems.

Interviewer: That is a good note on which to conclude, but any other final thought that you have in this interview?

Ambassador Venkateswaran: Final thought is that we Indians are perhaps the most intelligent amongst the peoples I have ever seen in my life. Somehow, we are unable to translate that intelligence into what I call creative intelligence. We seem to be at cross purposes even with ourselves, let alone with others and that comes, in my view, because of diffidence, our lack of self confidence, our lack of trust in each other, and I think this trust and confidence can come about only with conscious training. It cannot be just left to develop by itself. It is a discipline, which you have to inculcate, a mental discipline, otherwise we will be like weeds growing in the farm land rather than flowers.

Interviewer: Thank you very much; I think that is a very fine point on which to conclude. I think what you said is entirely pertinent.

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