

Indian Diplomacy through Ages

Distinguished Lecture by Amb (Retd.) Mahesh Sachdev

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Salutations (As Appropriate)

It is indeed a privilege for me to be amidst you in Amarkantak. Your city combines an ancient, holy and scenic location with one of India's emerging seats of higher learning. I am grateful to you all for making me feel welcome with your gracious hospitality. It is an honour to deliver first-ever Ministry of External Affairs sponsored Distinguished Lecture at your esteemed university on "Indian Diplomacy Through Ages". I deem the subject to be well suited to the setting of this historic city.

With its ancient history, Indian civilisation has a long, comprehensive and elaborate tradition of diplomacy. In this lecture we shall study the history of Indian diplomacy from its initiation in the Puranic era till date. We shall also take the opportunity to briefly describe the current structure of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs as well as the Indian Foreign Service. Towards the end, I would be glad to listen to your comments and questions, if any.

Diplomacy is the art and practice of conducting negotiations between representatives of states. It is derived from the Greek word δῖπλωμα (diploma) meaning making a deal with other countries. In India the word used is Kootniti or law of dealings. The diplomacy is an important element of statecraft and can be presumed to be as old as concept of the State. In fact, it can be argued that the diplomacy came into being when human society got collectivised into tribes which needed to negotiate the mutually overlapping matters with their counterparts.

Being among the world's oldest civilisation, India, naturally, had evolved her own ancient concept of statecraft which included elaborate and mutually agreed tradition of diplomacy. It was both inclusive among various rulers of India as well as exclusive - with states beyond geographical confines of the sub-continent. The practice of diplomacy was initially rooted in concept of Dharma, or morality. Subsequently, however, more realpolitik-based diplomacy came to be justified. The practice of inter-state alliances, based on linkages among the royal families as well as on strategic or tactical considerations came into being. Treaties were negotiated by the states and largely honoured by the various parties. Diplomatic envoys, both permanent as well as mission-based, were mutually accredited. They were expected to report back unhindered to their principals.

At this point, it is necessary to mention a few historical examples to illustrate the ancient history of Indian diplomacy. The following three instances are cited:

(i) Ancient Indian scriptures are replete with numerous diplomatic instances. For instance, in Ramayana, Lord Rama sent Hanumana and Angada as his envoys to King Ravana to persuade him to avoid war and destruction. Although King Ravana contemptuously rejected these entreaties and wanted to kill the envoys, he was prevented from doing so as the envoys were inviolable under the established diplomatic practice. In Mahabharata, Lord Krishna himself played the role of a mediator of last resort to avoid hostilities between the Pandavas and the Kaurvas. The war of Mahabharata was preceded by feverish diplomacy as both sides sent envoys around to form military alliances. The war itself was a Dharmayuddha (or War of Righteousness) with well-established rules with chivalry and diplomatic contact being maintained among the two warring sides. The concepts of immunity and amnesty were well established and were respected.

(ii) Manu-Smriti, is considered to be the first Indian legal code compiled by Maha-Rishi Manu around 1500 BCE. Commenting on different roles of authorities in a State, Manu stated, "Let the king appoint an Ambassador; the army depends on its Commander; control of subjects (depends) on the army; the Government of the kingdom on the King; peace and war on the Ambassador".

An interesting and recurring concept in Indian history was the Chakravarti Samrat (Universal Emperor) whose suzerainty or zone of protection, after wars, if necessary, was acknowledged by surrounding kings. It is quite akin to the modern-day concept of Super-Power, with their pacts, doctrines and areas of influence.

Chankya's Arthshashtra, world's first comprehensive treatise on diplomatic practice, occupies centre stage in any narrative of Indian diplomacy. Chankya - also known as Kautilya - was Prime Minister and mentor of Emperor Chandragupta, the founder of Gupta dynasty which ruled Patliputra from fourth century before Christ. With Chankya as his mentor, Chandragupta successfully overthrew the Nanda dynasty and expelled the Greek footprint in India's north-west. Although Chankya's Arthshashtra or 'The Science of Material Gain', written around 300 BCE (before Christ) is mainly concerned with statecraft, nearly a fifth of it is devoted to the conduct of foreign policy and diplomacy. Astonishingly, much of its discourse is still relevant today, nearly twenty four centuries later. Following citations would underline the sagacity and foresighted nature of Chankya's recommendations and observations:

(i) The concept of "Raj Mandala" or ruling universe is central to Chankya's Foreign Policy construction of a State desirous of consolidation or expansion. Raj Mandala is a matrix comprising of a maximum of 12 type of states and Arthshashtra prescribes best ways of dealing with each of them.

(ii) The protection and promotion of political, military and economic interests of a State rested on six constituent elements, viz. the king, the ministers, the fortress, the countryside, the treasury and the army.

(iii) For the purpose of settlement of disputes, four methods were advocated, namely, 'Sama' (conciliation) , 'Dana' (appeasement), 'Bheda' (dividing), and 'Danda' (use of force) to be employed as the last resort.

(iv) According to Arthashastra, the State should follow a six-fold policy with other States: (1) Sandhi (treaty of peace); (2) Vighraha (war); (3) Asana (neutrality) (4) Yana (marching) - presumably a threat; (5) Samasraya (alliance) and (6) Dwividhava (making peace with one and end war with another).

(v) Among more cynical advices Kautilya offered to the king are about his stress on diplomatic manoeuvres and espionage activity. Similarly, he recommended that the king to make treaties knowing that he may not keep them in the long term, his 'doctrine of silent war' or a war of assassination against an unsuspecting king, his approval of secret agents who killed enemy leaders and sowed discord among them, his view of women as weapons of war, his use of religion and superstition to bolster his troops and demoralize enemy soldiers, the spread of disinformation.

(vi) On other hand, Arthashastra emphasised that foreign relations be determined by rationale calculation of self-interest rather than by ethical considerations. Chanakya preferred peace over war and urged humane treatment of conquered soldiers and subjects. Arthashastra's conception of foreign policy is brilliant, cohesive, comprehensive and logically sound. It is entirely theoretical without any moral subjectivity.

(vii) Among examples of Arthashastra's practical foreign policy prescriptions to a king are the following specific advices:

(a) "When the advantages derivable from peace and war are of equal character, one should prefer peace; for disadvantages such as loss of power and wealth, sojourning and sin are ever attending upon war."

(b) "One shall make an alliance with a king who is stronger than one's neighbouring enemy; in the absence of such a king, one should ingratiate oneself with one's neighbouring enemy, either by supplying money or army or by ceding a part of one's territory and keeping oneself aloof; for there can be no greater evil to kings than alliance with a king of considerable power, unless one is actually attacked by one's enemy."

(c) "A king, who is situated between two powerful kings, shall seek protection from the stronger of the two or one of them on whom he can rely; or he may make peace with both of them on equal terms."

Apart from theoretical treatment of various foreign policy options, Arthashastra also provides elaborate advice on conduct of the diplomatic practice to implement it. The following salient points emerge:

(i) According to Chanakya, a high degree of intellectual equipment was necessary for an Ambassador. In selecting people for diplomatic missions, one must choose persons who are "loyal, honest, skilled, possessing good memory, fearless and eloquent". An envoy must also be sweet voiced, persuasive, industrious, well-versed in sciences and possessed of faculty of reading others' thoughts and feelings from their behaviour and appearance etc.

(ii) Arthashastra discussed classification of Ambassadors, his qualifications, status, immunity, duties, salary etc. in great details. A successful Adviser (Minister) was deemed suitable for the post of Ambassador, a practice followed by many nations even now for important Missions. The envoys had the following four classifications:

(a) Duta (Ambassador Extraordinary):

(b) Nisrishtartha (Minister Plenipotentiary);

(c) Parimitarhah (Charge d'Affaires); and

(d) Sasanarhah (Diplomatic Messenger / Special Envoy).

(iii) Kautilya describes the "duties of an envoy" as "sending information to his king, ensuring maintenance of the terms of a treaty, upholding his king's honour, acquiring allies, instigating dissension among the friends of his enemy, conveying secret agents and troops [into enemy territory], suborning the kinsmen of the enemy to his own king's side, acquiring clandestinely gems and other valuable material for his own king, ascertaining secret information and showing valour in liberating hostages held by the enemy." He further stipulates that no envoys should ever be harmed, and, even if they deliver an "unpleasant" message, they should not be detained.

(iv) Detailed rules regulated diplomatic immunities and privileges, the inauguration and termination of diplomatic missions, and the selection and duties of envoys. Thus, whether the diplomatic mission is ad hoc or permanent, the mission had to follow well accepted principles in inter-state relations. Adoption of appropriate 'diplomatic language' was considered important in dealings between rulers and kings. Guda lekha (code language) was adopted for diplomatic correspondence.

(vi) Other related structure prescribed were "Commercial Counsel" who was charged with managing commercial relations and transactions. Arthashastra described two kinds of Spies: those charged with the collection of intelligence and those entrusted with subversion and other forms of covert action.

In ultimate analysis Arthashastra's discourse on foreign policy and diplomatic practice can only be described as a profound timeless classic book of realism, ahead of its peers written two millennia later. Its objective treatment of possible foreign policy options facing a king and cold calculative diplomatic actions required has often been criticised for being an amoral, cynical policy prescription in which 'the ends justified the means'. However, protagonists of Chanakya's recommendations point out that pursuance of these policies led to establishment of India's first empire by Maurya dynasty which at its peak straddled well beyond South Asia's natural boundaries. In urging the king to rely on science and not the precepts of religion, Kautilya separated, for the first time in India, political thought from religious dictum. It also ushered in stable polity and two generations later led to Ashoka's pacifist policies after conversion to Buddhism in the wake of carnage of war with Kalinga.

Ancient Envoys: During era of Chandragupta Maurya, Megasthenes was Greek ambassador to India and authored his account of the country in his book Indika. During the reign of Indian King Bindusara, Delmachos was sent as an Ambassador by King Antiochos of Syria and Dinyosius as an Ambassador by King Ptolmy of Egypt (298 BC - 273 BC). During the Buddhist period and later, many rulers entrusted delicate and strategic missions to diplomatic agents for the security of the State and for the maintenance of friendly relations. Emperor Ashoka (273 BC - 232 BC) established diplomatic and evangelical relations with the Kings of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Syria, Egypt, Macedon, Cyrene and other countries. During the 7th century AD, there were diplomatic relations between the Indian King Pulakesin II and Shah of Persia, Khosru Parwez. There is evidence of diplomatic relations between King Harasha Vardhana of India and the Imperial Court of China.

Similarly, during the medieval period of Indian history diplomatic relations were maintained among States in the Indian sub-continent, as well as with States beyond it. The Afghan and Turks rulers based in Delhi and other places, maintained diplomatic relations with States in Central Asia, Persia, Arab world, Asia Minor, Greece, Levant and even with States in Tibet and China. The Kingdoms of South of India on the West Coast, maintained diplomatic relations with States along Arabian Sea Littoral and Indian Ocean littoral in Africa. The ones on the East-Coast and South, maintained relations with Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaya; some of these countries were conquered and colonised by the Kings of South India. During medieval times, Chola and other south Indian dynasties' overseas empires in South East Asia had an economic underpinning.

The Moghuls maintained diplomatic relations with most of the states mentioned earlier and in the later stages received envoys from European states like Portugal, France, Britain, Holland, etc. In times of Akbar the Great, India was world's largest economy and a coveted partner for economic diplomacy for various European trading nations - many of whom sought trading facilities and patronage. By

liberally dispensing these permissions, unsuspecting Indian rulers sowed seeds of their own nemesis. Sir Thomas Roe was envoy of British queen Elisabeth I to the court of Emperor Jahangir. Even until 1820 - before Industrial Revolution gained salience, India's economy was bigger than Great Britain's, her colonial masters. During the period of decline of political influence of Moghul Emperors and rise of other Indian States, there was intense diplomatic jockeying for influence by the British, Portuguese, French and other European powers. The Indian kings, like Hydar Ali, Tipu Sultan and others maintained diplomatic relations with countries in the Arab world, Ottoman Sultans and European powers (esp. Napoleonic France) in order to obtain support in political and defence technology and training. Even during 1857 first war of independence against East India Company, there were episodic contacts with foreign powers such as Nepal, Afghanistan and Russia. Subsequently, during freedom struggle, Indian National Congress maintained links with similarly inclined political parties abroad. Indians abroad often launched diplomatic campaigns against colonial rule in India and sought diplomatic and material assistance from foreign powers such as Japan (e.g. Azad Hind Fauz during Second World War), Nazi Germany, Russia, France and the US.

After independence in 1947 and proclamation of a republic in 1950, Indian diplomacy resumed function of a sovereign state. The structures such as the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Foreign Service were established and a large number of diplomatic missions abroad were set up. Separately, India's foreign policy took shape together with its diplomatic content and style. India chose a non-aligned foreign policy which was seen to be an extension of our freedom struggle as we did not want to surrogate our foreign policy to a particular power block. Mahatma Gandhi's adage, "India should be like a house with open windows to all winds, but we should refuse to be blown by any of them" has remained the hallmark of our foreign policy since independence. We took principled stand on decolonisation, anti-apartheid and various military aggressions. At the same time, our diplomacy took into account our national interests in terms of our conflicts with Pakistan in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999 as well as with China in 1962. Our socio-economic priorities were also factored into our diplomacy. We remained influential member of the non-aligned world, G-77, etc. As Indian economy gained strength and market got liberalised after 1991, India gained importance as important economic partner and is counted among most prominent countries in the world. Our nuclear tests in May 1998 created a new paradigm in our international profile which was reconciled a decade later through an exceptional treatment granted to India by the Nuclear Suppliers' Group. India, nevertheless, has continued to call for universal nuclear disarmament and considers the global Nuclear Proliferation regime as discriminatory. We have also taken a strongly pro-development view on issues such as climate change, food security and trade facilitation. While we have found support for reforms in the UN system to make it reflect the changes in global political architecture since Second World War, our quest for a permanent seat at the Security Council has proved elusive so far. Moreover, our ongoing challenges as terrorism,

climate change, South Asian regional security need to be tackled satisfactorily. Additionally, Indian diplomacy is required to contribute towards our socio-economic development, through such inputs as access to foreign capital and technology, raw materials, markets for our exports of goods and services, promotion of inbound tourism, etc. Hence, Indian diplomacy has its work cut out for foreseeable future.

In the second and last part of my lecture, I would like to give you a bird's eye view of the two instruments of Indian diplomacy, viz. the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Foreign Service.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was founded in 1948. Since beginning till his demise in 1964, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru held the portfolio of India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) and guided country's foreign policy through its formative period. It was only in 1964 that an independent Minister with Cabinet rank was appointed. Currently, Smt. Shushma Swaraj is the EAM and Gen (Retired) V.K. Singh is the Minister of State. The Ministry operates from South Block as well as Jawahar Bhavan, both located in central New Delhi. As would be seen from Ministry's organigram (attached below), it is divided into functional units called divisions which cater either to specific territories (such as East Asia) or issues (UN), or functional aspects as External Publicity, Finance, Administration, etc. The Ministry runs over 160 Missions and Posts abroad headed by Head of Mission (usually an Ambassador or High commissioner) and Head of Post (usually called Consul General). While a "Post" is usually for consular and commercial work alone, a Mission represents Indian government in its entirety - be it political, defence or economic ties.

The Indian Foreign Service, or IFS, is the civil service cadre which mans Ministry of External Affairs - both in India and abroad. First batch of the IFS was recruited in 1948 and since then every year the candidates are recruited through Combined Civil Services examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission in New Delhi. 31 officers have been recruited to the IFS in 2014. Of these, 12 are ladies and 19 gentlemen. 14 of them studied engineering, 6 studied sciences and three are qualified doctors. At present the IFS cadre is around 700 officers strong, spread 1:2 in India and abroad. A number of guest officers from other backgrounds also serve in the Ministry of External Affairs.

After selection in IFS, the "Probationer" is trained for nearly three years in general administration at LBSNAA (in Mussourie), at Foreign Service Institute (in New Delhi) as well in foreign language school abroad. It is only after passing all the relevant departmental exams that the Probationer gets confirmed in IFS as Second Secretary. He or she progressively rises to First Secretary, Counsellor, Minister and Ambassador. When posted in India, his or her designations are Undersecretary, Deputy Secretary, Director, Joint Secretary, Additional Secretary, Secretary and Foreign Secretary. In many cases, IFS officers are also deputed outside the MEA to

such organisations as Rashtrapati Bhavan, Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Commerce, Finance, Defence, etc.

Although mainstream functions of IFS does not involve direct public dealing, the officers dealing with consular, labour and community matters abroad as well as passport, visa and Haj related matters interface with large number of Indian nationals. As a career, the IFS offers considerable variety - in terms of deployment in various parts of the world as well as various functional domains as political, commercial, cultural, media, etc. It also offers considerable freedom to choose your calling.

Moreover, India being an increasingly important country, her representatives command attention and respect among their peers. By nature of its functional specialisation and deployment mostly abroad, IFS work more autonomously than most Indian government services. Although IFS's perquisites are possibly the best among Indian civil services, these permit, in general, a middle class existence abroad. At the same time, an IFS officer has also to contend with a number of challenges. Family stability is affected by frequent transfers to widely different stations. The best among these, such as the Western capitals, are undoubtedly glamorous, but most other postings may rank even lower than New Delhi in standard of living, security and availability of healthcare, education and basic amenities. Moreover, family life is particularly problematic with a professionally qualified spouse. Last but not the least, unlike India-based services, each time an IFS officer returns to India, his or her moorings need to be set all over again. Still, on balance, Indian Foreign Service is a well sought after career for those who seek adventurous and unscripted professional life.

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