

DIASPORA DIALOGUES

India Looks East Through Singapore

Indian envoy says Singapore is critical to India in fundamental ways

By **SHOBHA TSERING BHALLA & NITHYA SUBRAMANIAN**

Months before his arrival, India's new High Commissioner to Singapore Jawed Ashraf's name had been spoken about in hushed whispers as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's blue-eyed boy, his hand-picked envoy.

Knowledgeable sources averred the respected career diplomat and former Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, was PM Modi's "speech writer", an honour bestowed only on the most trusted and deserving bureaucrats.

When India Se Magazine met the affable diplomat in his office a week or so after his arrival his quick wit and impressively fluent articulation of India's policy initiatives underscored his assessment by his peers of having one of the finest minds among India's foreign policy wonks.

Ashraf who joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1991 is a graduate of Delhi's prestigious St Stephen's College and the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. He has served in Germany,

Nepal and the United States and is considered an expert in Indo-US affairs. His wife, Dr Ghazala Shahabuddin, is an ecologist and conservation biologist who has taught at Yale.

India Se Magazine spoke to him on India's "Act East" policy and demonetisation among other current issues. Here are some excerpts:

India Se: India and Singapore have an ancient relationship that seems to grow warmer by the day so what are the most important areas of this relationship that you wish to focus on?

Jawed Ashraf: You are right, the relationship is ancient, there were links of civilization and commerce. The period of colonization was at one level disruptive, but in another sense reinforcing. Indeed, that provided another strand of inter-connected history. There were decades as independent nations where we didn't connect enough and pursued different priorities. Since the 1990s, three factors have simultaneously acted to build India-Singapore relations. One is India's own economic reforms and opening up to the world. As

we opened up to the world, we also began to look eastwards in ways we hadn't done for a long time.

The region, the larger Asia-Pacific region, was undergoing major transformation with unprecedented prosperity, rise of new powers and spread of democracy in many countries, but also unsettled questions that threw up new opportunities and challenges. All these changes meant that for India engagement with the region was vital for economic development and security and also larger strategic reasons.

India Se: So what role does Singapore play in your economic and security strategies?

Jawed Ashraf: Singapore was our gateway to the East, the biggest advocate of India's engagement with the East, not just urging India to look East but also encouraging Asean (Association of SE Asian Nations) and member countries to deepen engagement with India. And it emerged as a major partner in our economic transformation. On top of that we have seen enormous expansion of people to people ties, growth in the population of people of Indian origin and citizens living here, spurt in flow



of tourists and students. Cultural exchanges have also grown, driven not so much by the governments as by the people. We really have a relationship that is comprehensive and touches all aspects of human endeavour:

India Se: Can you give us more details of this India-Singapore partnership?

Jawed Ashraf: Singapore is a critical partner for India in three fundamental ways. One, in bilateral relations there are no irritants, it is politically very strong, we have convergent views and similar approaches on a broad range of international issues. Second, as we enhance our engagement with the East, consistent with PM Modi's "Act East" policy, Singapore will remain a principal partner. Three, we see Singapore as an important partner in our development – skills, education, cities, trade and investment, technology, connectivity...

Finally, we have the extraordinary wealth of people to people ties. There is hardly any country in the world where people to people ties are at this level. We see Singapore as a partner in all dimensions of transformation.

And we both recognise that we live in very challenging times, uncertain times where the fundamental foundations on which regional prosperity and stability rested is now in the shadow of uncertainty due to a number of international factors. We both would like to work together and with countries of the region, to create and work for a more peaceful, cooperative, collaborative and integrated region that comprises all of Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Work together to address a number a regional challenges to ensure that it remains peaceful and stable, which was the bedrock on which the region's prosperity has been built over the last several decades.

And finally, we have the extraordinary wealth of people to people ties. Hardly a country in the region where people to people ties are at this level. So if take all these factors, you will see a natural partnership between the countries and. I have personally seen it grow as working with two prime ministers, I have seen the importance our political leadership attaches to this, the priority the industry gives to the relationship and level of warmth that exists in the people in India. It is a very rich relationship but its potential is bigger. When I see my role here, I see it in all dimensions. The relationship must and can only move forward with speed and stability when it moves on all fronts together.

India Se: Singapore has been named as one of countries where a lot of offshore money is parked. With PM Modi's drive to clean up black money or the parallel economy, do you think this will have any impact

on the bilateral relationship?

Jawed Ashraf: I don't think it will have any impact at all. My sense is that demonetisation has been received positively, there is a strong sentiment of support here for initiatives. People are obviously looking at how it is implemented and the overall economic impact but experts I have spoken to here feel that the situation will normalise soon. I do believe that people appreciate that a decision so bold and enormous in scale and unprecedented in nature - we are talking about 86 per cent currency in circulation - will have some challenges in implementation. What people do recognize is that the government is not paralysed; it is reacting, adjusting, calibrating its response on a daily basis and that shows its willingness and ability to tackle the challenges in implementation.

More broadly speaking, we recognise Singapore as a place, which has stable financial and healthy markets and a large part is due to its good regulatory systems and mechanisms.

We are also strong votaries of the same and we, too, have healthy financial markets. The priority of the (Indian) government is tackling corruption, a parallel economy, tackling black money and to create a more transparent and efficient system. The long-term gains are widely recognized. One of them is the expansion of the organised financial system in the country, financial inclusion and move towards digital payment systems. We expect a stronger and more resilient financial system to emerge out of this. This is one of the several measures that we have been taking and international investors recognise that in the

long run, this is the path to a more stable, more transparent and accountable economic system which will stimulate more investments.

India Se: You said that the Modi government is following a "Look Northeast" policy. For the last 60 plus years, Delhi was mesmerised by its western neighbours and all foreign policy was predicated on that. Now the Asian Highway is the result of this interest in the East. What do you see during your tenure here, how do you see it speeding up? We remember the fanfare when it was launched, but there has been radio silence on it after that. Do you think people from Singapore will be able to drive all the way to India or was it only symbolic?

Jawed Ashraf: Yes I remember the summit of December 2012 when Mahindra jeeps drove in. You are right, there are two parts to the question. One is in translating our vision of "Act East" into some kind of real action on the ground and second what are we doing in the Northeast. Now both are related because when we talk of Act East, we can't in a sense build a flyover. As PM has said repeatedly, if you want Indians to progress, every part of India must

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Mr Jawed Ashraf & Mrs. Ashraf with Singapore's President Dr. Tony Tan

“We have a relationship (with Singapore) that is comprehensive and touches all aspects of human endeavour”

a voice and opportunity and can have confidence in her future. And that is because a) the constitution guarantees freedoms and rights b) it is also part of our ancient culture – openness, inclusiveness. It is a nation where diversity has been part of our evolution, our civilisational ethos has been based on that.

progress and walk in step with each other. The Northeast is a region of extraordinary talent, resources, and very high social indicators, so there is no reason why it should not be among our more prosperous, progressive and developed part of the country. So there is a strong commitment to the Northeast. It is in terms of infrastructure, skills, education, and harnessing the resources so it leads to greater employment generation. But the success of a region also depends on its connectivity. The Northeast, in a sense, lacks connectivity, so we are making great progress in terms of air connectivity, but also through Bangladesh. During PM's visit, we had made significant advances in terms of connecting the Northeast through Bangladesh. We are starting the Kaladan multi-modal project which would use the Bay of Bengal and through Myanmar connect to Mizoram. The progress is a little behind schedule but it is now receiving our highest attention. But even more important, if you want prosperity in the Northeast it must have some more natural and vibrant connectivity with SE Asia so the Asian Highway project, or Trilateral Highway as it will be called, is of foremost importance.

Whether it has been in the East Asia summit or the India-ASEAN summit or in our bilateral meetings with Myanmar or other countries, this is getting top attention. In terms of execution and implementation, whether it is in terms of financial resources or management attention, there is a dramatic increase in the last two years.

We are also encouraging airlines to connect the Northeast to SE Asia. If you can connect Singapore to Bagdogra, it can actually shave two-and-a-half hours of flying time, it will seem like flying within SE Asia.

Singapore will be setting up a skills development centre. They have signed an MOU with the Assam government, so we are seeing an effort and a very comprehensive and coherent effort at connecting NE India with the rest of India and to SE Asia, so that the Northeast becomes our springboard and gateway to SE Asia.

India Se: Recently there was a book launch by a Pakistani academic from Australia who posited that Muslims are struggling for citizenship in India. Do you think that Muslim in India find it hard to be citizens?

Jawed Ashraf: We all recognise it is a nation of 1.25 billion people of unparalleled diversity, culture, religion. It is a microcosm of the world. But there are social groups that have historically been exempted from society. But independent India has made enormous strides in making an integrated, united nation in which everyone has

For centuries, people have come from outside, settled here and become part of India and they consider themselves Indian. It is not as if the constitutional principle that guarantees rights and opportunities to citizens of all faiths and situations was imposed by an enlightened elite, it is something that was a natural evolution of our cultural values. Then we have a very strong legislative system that ensures not only the protection of individual rights and equality of all citizens but also provides for a broad range of affirmative action that enables socially disadvantaged groups and minorities to progress socially and economically and to walk in step with the rest of the nation. Then we have a judiciary that is active and independent and ensures that constitutional provisions and legislative measures are strictly enforced.

Regardless of whichever government was in power they have always followed this in spirit and in law. And in the past two years we have seen a number of measures taken to make it possible for socially and economically disadvantaged groups – whether they are religious or linguistic or ethnic minorities – to move forward. As PM has said, the strength of our nation and our progress is based on the joined hands and united voice of 1.25 billion people. Our prosperity will be based on that and our future will be defined by that.

India Se: Is there a message that you would like to convey to our readers?

Jawed Ashraf: We are very proud and happy to see the success and achievements of the Indian community and, even more important, their contribution to Singapore, its diversity and vibrant culture and its success as a nation.

People from India have come at different stages of history and they come from different parts of India. There are people who've been here, as I said, for generations. There are professionals who've come in now. It is not only important for all sections of the Indian community to be integrated with each other, to engage with each other, to be a part of one. But it's just as important for those who have arrived in more recent times to engage with, to interact with and to integrate with the rest of Singapore society. So this is something that I will continuously emphasise. This city is a great example of integration, of multi-culturalism and pluralism and for Indians who are used to living in diversity this comes naturally. ■