

Dateline UN | October 24, 2012

Flavour of Puja-time Bengal

Day Eight: “Nomoshkar. Aaj Durga Puja, Banglar priyo utsav. Ei shubho dine aapnader shokolke janai abhinandan ar subhechha... (Nomoshkar. Today is Durga Puja, Bengal’s most cherished festival. On this auspicious day, I’d like to wish all of you the very best...)” As I finished the opening sentence, I could see delegates reach out for their earphones and the instant translation service. They relaxed as I switched to English. I relaxed too. The initial nervousness was gone. My address to the General Assembly had begun.

I woke up early in the morning and had my cup of coffee watching the sun rise over New York. My thoughts were mixed and contemplative. I’ve had my ambitions in life but not in my wildest dreams had I considered addressing the General Assembly at the United Nations. The walk to the UN Headquarters was brisk (it’s October and the weather is changing in the United States) but the news there didn’t do much for my nerves. My speech had been postponed from early in the morning to 3pm, after lunch, not the best time to address any audience.

The opening line — I’m not certain but I believe I’m the first Indian delegate to speak in Bengali at the UN — had come to me over the weekend, as I was wrestling with ideas of how I could give the speech a taste and smell of home. Once the speech began — I was slotted after the American delegate — the nervousness vanished. I had actually been more tentative when making my first speech in the Rajya Sabha. In Parliament you address the Chairman or the Speaker, right from where you’re seated. At the General Assembly you make a more conventional address, facing the entire audience of delegates. Maybe this made a difference.

My speech itself was on a spate of recent UN summits related to economic and social challenges and including the Rio + 20 Summit. I also addressed gaps that remained in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. I was required to touch upon issues as far apart (or as related) as gender equity and infant mortality, climate change and poverty. I had to urge, as India always has, a coordinated global approach.

“Our commitment to tackling infant and maternal mortality and augmenting women’s empowerment,” I said, “remains absolute and unflinching. It is part of our nation-building tradition.” I chose to quote Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar — “One of

the foremost minds of 19th century Bengal, a pioneer of modern India and among our country's great champions of gender rights, female emancipation and girls' education". It was deliberate. I've often felt Vidyasagar is one reformer from the Bengal Renaissance who doesn't get his due.

Towards the end I invoked the internationalism of another of Bengal's greats. "Space scientists," I said, "call our Earth the Goldilocks planet — not too hot, not too cold, just right for life. Indeed, in keeping with that imagery, humankind's evolution and prodigious attainments in the millennia that have passed have been nothing short of a fairy tale.... Our challenges are many. But given what we have achieved... what we are left with is, frankly, only the last mile. With our collaborative effort and collective will... we can fashion a better world for ourselves — and as a legacy for our children."

Here I turned to my favourite lines from Rabindranath Tagore: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy/I awoke and saw that life was service/I acted and behold, service was joy." "Let us," I said, "as a global community, awaken to service. And to joy."

I had been given 10 minutes but had taken 12. The first to congratulate me was the Bangladeshi delegate, a polished man who has memories of Calcutta, where he served as deputy high commissioner. He had also seen my quizzes on TV, as had, I was humbled to learn, the Indonesian delegate.

The entire team from the Indian Permanent Mission had turned up for moral support. They had helped me shape my speech. As one of the diplomats told a delegate from another country, the visits by MPs were a useful Indian innovation at the General Assembly. They imparted not usual diplomatic messages but "a flavour of India". In my case, it was a flavour of India and of Puja-time Bengal.



[This article was carried by The Telegraph | Thursday, November 01, 2012]