

Dateline UN | October 25, 2012

Catching up with AB!

Day Nine: The day began with a statement to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly — the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee — on the subject of child rights. The focus of my speech was to urge that nurturing the demographic dividend — both India's and the world's — be seen not merely as a social obligation but also an economic need.

“I come from India,” I began, “where one in every five of the world's children lives. I come from India, where 400 million children and young people below the age of 18 live; this is larger than the population of America, Argentina and Australia put together. I come from India, which manufactures 40 per cent of vaccines used in universal immunisation programmes across the world, protecting small babies and little children from disease and death. I come from India, where investing in the future of our country's and our world's youngest citizens is recognised as not just an economic necessity but a moral imperative.”

The evening had a different taste to it, literally. I had my second great Indian dinner of the week, this time at the residence of Ambassador Hardeep Puri, India's permanent representative to the UN. Puri is among India's best-known diplomats, on extension to see through India's two-year term at the Security Council. He is one half of the consummate New York power couple. His wife, Lakshmi, was a member of the Indian Foreign Service but left for a job at UN Women. She is today among the most senior Indian employees of the UN.

Dinner at their place was a magic mix of great food and great company. It began with mini idlis and fish flavoured with southern spices, among the most unusual starters I've had. Over the evening, the food and especially the kebabs got even better. There is a story to be written on the quality of and spin given to Indian food in New York, but that's for another day.

At the Puri residence, I met an old, old friend. I had known Ajay Banga 20

years ago in Calcutta, when he was at Nestle. He was in fact one of those I consulted before setting up my company. Ajay later moved to Citibank and is now president and CEO of Mastercard Worldwide. He is also chairman of the United States-India Business Council (USIBC), widely regarded as the most important bilateral business forum. An IIM Ahmedabad alumnus, he is one of a growing cohort of Indian corporate achievers in the US.

Ajay and I, and the others at the party, chatted about the two big Indian diaspora stories of the moment: the sentencing of Rajat Gupta for insider trading and the resignation of Vikram Pandit as chief executive of Citibank. It wouldn't be fair to reveal all that my conversationalists told me; cocktail party chatter and newspaper copy must be strictly sequestered! Nevertheless it did strike me that with the departure of Pandit and the diminished legacy of Gupta, Ajay Banga is perhaps the leading Indian face in corporate America at this juncture.

We discussed his role at USIBC and the future of West Bengal. There was interest and curiosity among the guests about Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamul Congress government.

We had a tentative chat about Ajay heading a USIBC delegation to West Bengal in 2013. US trading ships were visiting Calcutta as far back as the early 19th century, famously bringing a cargo of American ice, for instance. In 1794, the US sent a permanent envoy and commercial agent to Calcutta and set up what has become among the State Department's longest-surviving diplomatic stations. It's time to give the US-Bengal relationship a new momentum. Maybe Ajay Banga and USIBC will take us to the next frontier.



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