

Dateline UN | October 17, 2012

Ma Mati Manush reaches UN

Day Three: The Indian Permanent Mission to the United Nations is located at 235 East, 43rd Street, New York. It's not far from the East River, which flows past the UN Headquarters. The Permanent Mission is housed in a building redolent of Indian associations, and designed by the well-known architect Charles Correa. As you enter the reception area, a striking and massive painting, 20 feet high, captures your gaze. Painted by M.F. Hussain in 1993, it depicts the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

The painting, with the tragic episode it depicts, is apposite for the location, as the UN was set up to sequester humankind from the ravages of war, violence and bigotry. One of Husain's most monumental works, it is also, the assessment goes, probably worth more than the value of the property it is displayed in!

One principle of the UN General Assembly is egalitarianism. This is the Lok Sabha of the world and all of its 193 members — with their flags displayed outside the UN building — have an equal voice and standing. You experience this enforced equality when you walk down to get your identity tag. It's a short walk from the Indian Mission but it has to be done by everybody when he or she arrives at the UN as a delegate. You could be an ambassador or a minister, an MP or a civil servant, it doesn't matter. You still queue up, and become part of the most multi-ethnic, multicultural and multinational single file you will ever be privileged to join.

My first statement at the UN was to the second committee of the General Assembly, the Economic and Financial Committee. Each committee meets in a separate chamber, with a capacity of about 200 people. Statements are made sitting down — a novel experience for me — and translated simultaneously into the many languages that the UN uses. I was speaking on issues related to “funding of operational activities of the

UN development system along with Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review and the state of South-South Cooperation”.

It was a short statement, about 1,200 words, but I will leave you with the operative opening paragraph: “Poverty eradication still remains the overriding priority for developing countries and the greatest global challenge. It is therefore our considered conviction that poverty eradication should be at the heart of UN’s operational activities for development, as its primary objective. In Bengal, the region of India I come from, we call this humanistic philosophy one of ‘Ma, Mati, Manush’ — signifying an equilibrium of the universally caring Mother, the Earth that nurtures us, and the Human Beings who must be central to our developmental endeavours.”

I felt both humbled and satisfied as I finished my statement. I was humbled because I was speaking before the most august audience I had ever addressed. I was satisfied because I had managed to integrate the Trinamool Congress’ core philosophy into the message India wanted to give to the UN, and one which I believe is relevant to large parts of the developing world.

It was a reasonable beginning, but much remains to be done during my stint at the UN. As somebody else put it in a different America at a different time, “Tomorrow is another day.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arun Jaitley', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

[This article was carried by The Telegraph | Wednesday, October 17, 2012]