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Yearning for Puja in a heady 'Universe'

Day Five: When asking a question in a quiz, I like to be on top of the subject. I make it a point to get a bit of background and digest peripheral information. The reason is simple enough — in case of an argument or an interjection, I can defend the answer I am providing. There is no point being an actor who reads out somebody else's words. If you're found out, you could be severely embarrassed. In politics and public life too I try and write my own speeches, with research material I may have found or which has been made available to me for study.

Speaking before the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly — this is the Legal Committee, which deals with international legal issues — I ran into a very uncomfortable moment. I was due to make a statement on the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law or UNCITRAL as it was called. Despite the best efforts of the diplomats at the Permanent Mission, I'm afraid I didn't fully comprehend the text before me, with its arcane legal parlance; its reference to "arbitration institutions and other interested bodies with regard to arbitration under the UNCITRAL arbitration rules, as revised in 2010"; its stress on the "continued work of the Commission to ensure monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards, 1958 (the New York Convention)".

My discomfort must have shown. As I readied to speak, the delegate from Malaysia caught my eye and said, "Oh India ... Sub kuchtheekhaina? (All okay?)" I stuttered: "You know Hindi?" "Haan, haan (Yes, yes)," he responded, "Shahrukh Khan ... KuchKuchHotaHai..." With that opening, I began my statement on UNCITRAL.

The two-hour lunch break at the United Nations Headquarters is an indulgence. Four of us — Ambassador Sujata Mehta, India's permanent representative to the UN Conference on Disarmament, Geneva,

Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri, India's deputy permanent representative at the UN, BJP MP Ananth Kumar and me — went to a restaurant called Tulsi, located roughly halfway between the UN and the Indian Mission. It was a Michelin star Indian restaurant that richly deserved its accolade. I had a variety of kebabs, among the best I've ever eaten. Why the management at Tulsi had to spoil their excellent and varied menu with Gobi Manchurian was, of course, beyond me!

The conversation was engaging. Mehta and Puri are two of the best officers in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). Being at the UN, they swim deep in the oceans of multilateralism. They spoke about the domestic sources of foreign policy, and the gradual evolution from local concerns to representing India overseas to contributing to building global governance. Indeed, as one of them joked, perhaps it was time to “rename the ministry of external affairs the ministry of global governance”.

It was all in good humour, but also served as a wake-up call for me. While no doubt important, global governance and multilateralism form only a small part of the MEA's portfolio. From dealing with neighbours to promoting bilateral relations with big powers or facilitating trade and visa issues, the meat and bones often lie elsewhere. However, it is easy to lose sight of this in the heady, all-consuming universe of the UN, where the rest of the world almost doesn't exist.

There was a message here for me as well. The UN experience has been overwhelming but it is only an adjunct to the real politics back home. Midway through my UN sojourn that thought made me nostalgic for the political theatre of Lutyens' Delhi, and the smells and sounds of the approach of Puja in Calcutta.



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