

Dateline UN | October 26, 2012

Click to end digital divide.

Day Ten: They say I've been lucky. My 10 days at the United Nations yielded five statements to various Committees of the General Assembly, one address to the full General Assembly and a stint at the Security Council. Even though MPs from India visit the UN Headquarters every year, few are privileged with such a rich experience. Maybe I was fortunate there were only two of us for most of the period I was at the UN.

One of my final engagements was making a statement before the Third Committee of the General Assembly — the Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee.

I was speaking on the subject of media and urged digital media, including social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, be treated as equivalent to traditional media — or the fourth estate as we know it — in the privileges and legal protection accorded.

“It is important,” I said, “not to treat the digital media, which in many countries caters to a different segment of society, differently from the traditional media.” To treat it differently “would be divisive”. I felt this intervention was relevant to the debates we have had domestically, in India and in West Bengal, in the recent past.

There was piquancy to my concluding bit of work at the UN. I helped prepare a statement on human rights that I was meant to deliver on India's behalf. As it happened, the schedule changed and the statement will now be read out by another MP in the following week. A text drafted in consultation with a Trinamool Congress MP will be read out by either a Congress or BJP or CPM MP! When you're part of Team India, party affiliations don't matter.

I left New York on one of the last flights before Hurricane Sandy. As we drove to the airport, I was contemplative. I'd visited the city many times but this trip had been different. The UN was such a transformational experience; it opened so many windows in my mind. After checking in at JFK airport, I sent chief minister Mamata Banerjee — or Mamata Di as I've always called her — a text message: “Dear Mamata i... I've been on many stages and in many studios. Thank you for giving me the biggest stage of my life.” The reply was instant: “Okay. Phire esho (Come back).”

Postscript: As an MP, I've interacted with civil servants very often and very closely. The UN visit was my first extended interface with our foreign service.

Just before I flew out, I was chatting with senior diplomats at India's Permanent Mission and asked them if politics back home affected them.

They spoke of the continuity of Indian foreign policy and the general pattern of a government keeping to international commitments given by its predecessor. “Many secretaries in New Delhi are changed when a new government takes charge,” one of the officials told me, “but not one foreign secretary has been changed. The IFS has that privilege.” It retains a certain aura, sequestered as it is from domestic politics.

The official recounted the one time a foreign secretary left his job prematurely. It was in the 1980s when something the then foreign secretary had said was contradicted by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. “Almost immediately,” the official told me, “the foreign secretary resigned. He was A.P. Venkateswaran. I had worked with him, one of our finest diplomats since Independence.”

The conversation ended there. Hours later, I was on the Etihad flight from Abu Dhabi to New Delhi, the second leg of my journey home. The passenger next to me was a middle-aged lady, soft-spoken and polite, and we got talking. I gathered she had once lived in India. “So did you go to school in Delhi?” I asked.

“For a while, yes,” she said, “I went to school in many cities. My father was in the foreign service.”

“Really? What’s his name?”

“A.P. Venkateswaran.”

Thirty-five thousand feet above the earth, you could have knocked me down with a feather.



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