

**Remarks by Amb Sibi George, 'Projecting India Abroad: The Vision of an Ambassador'; Oct 21, 2020**

Director of Mar Ivanios College Rev Fr. Santhosh Azhakath, Principal Dr. M. V. Georgekutty Sir, Professors, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. Special thanks to my friend and senior Dr. V. Georgekutty, it is also an occasion to recall the old young days when we were PG students and working together, sharing notes and preparing our dissertations.

Dear Friends,

In this difficult times for all, all across the world, let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to hundreds of thousands doctors and nurses who all over the world work day in and day out to save lives in India and here in Kuwait. Let me also share my condolences to all those who lost their dear ones due to the pandemic.

Dear friends,

The topic that I would like to talk about is 'Projecting India Abroad: The Vision of an Ambassador'. As a serving Ambassador it is naturally, a very interesting topic personally for me.

For most Indians, when we hear the word Ambassador, what comes to mind is not a diplomat representing a foreign country in India or representing India abroad. What comes to their mind is our little old iconic 'Ambassador car'.

When I was a student, hardly anyone in my peer group knew what a diplomat Ambassador actually was. But everybody knew what an Ambassador car was all about. Personally, for the first twenty years of my life, also I hardly knew what a diplomat Ambassador was all about. When I learned more about diplomacy, I realized that Kerala had produced some of the best diplomats and Ambassadors in the world. We all heard about President Shri K. R.

Narayanan, Shri KPS Menon both Senior and Junior, Sardar K M Panicker, Shri Shivshankar Menon, Smt Nirupama Menon Rao, Shri Sashi Tharoor, Shri T P Srinivasan, who conducts Videsa Vicharam program in Asianet. Kerala has rather a large list of very famous Indian diplomats, who contributed immensely to build our foreign policy and implement it. They all have been able to project India abroad effectively.

We Malayalees are all over the world. There is hardly any country in the world where we cannot find a Malayalee. And almost every family in Kerala has at least one member of the family working abroad, particularly in the Gulf. And when abroad they definitely come across Embassies and diplomats. In this background, it is rather surprising that as students we did not know much about what an Ambassador does.

An ambassador is an official representative, appointed by the Head of State, in our case Hon'ble President of India, to represent him abroad. Hon'ble President gives a letter, we call the letter of credence which every Ambassador hands over to the Head of State of the host country. To share my personal experience, in 2017 when I was appointed as Ambassador to Switzerland, I carried three letters signed by Hon'ble President of India, one letter addressed to the President of Switzerland, another addressed to the Prince of Lichtenstein and a third letter addressed to Holy Father Pope Francis. Three letters because I represented India to three countries, Switzerland, Lichtenstein and The Holy See. Again this year, I carried a letter from our President addressed to the Amir of Kuwait, stating that I represent him in Kuwait. That day I start projecting my country in Kuwait with the Kuwaiti leadership and its citizens. I also started engaging the Indian community in Kuwait, addressing their concerns and interests, which are many.

Each Ambassadorship has specific needs and goals. As Ambassador to Switzerland, I had a different role from my present job. In Switzerland, I had a very small Indian community, twenty-five thousand. In Kuwait, I have a community of almost one million. In each of these places you undertake a series steps on behalf of the President in building India's relations in various

fields including political, economic, scientific, cultural aspects and discussing cooperation on global issues like climate change, energy security, renewable energy, fight against terrorism, cyber security, and maritime security. All these issues need deep study and specialization. Diplomacy is a vast ocean of exploring possibilities in order to promote and protect the interests your country and your people abroad. It is first step to ensure peace and stability. When and where diplomacy fails, war begins. As a diplomat you participate in treaty negotiations and hold regular dialogue mechanisms to maintain our relationship at highest levels bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally.

One feels so proud and honored to represent a fast growing modern nation, with a rich civilizational history, and has over 1/6th of the population of the world. Add to this the vibrant Indian diaspora of over 30 million abroad. In fact, he represents not only the Central Government, he also represents each state government and each Indian abroad. The career of a diplomat is a fascinating one where you travel across the globe and to do something meaningful in their life, contributing to the progress of your country. It's a career worth trying for. I invite you to learn more about Foreign Service. There is a vast ocean of opportunities out there, try and explore it.

When you address different audiences abroad, you do it with pride and satisfaction. I recall some of the occasions when I stood before many and stated with confidence that the economic and scientific transformation India achieved over the years was not under oppressive dictatorial regimes but under a constitution which guarantees liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity. An Indian Ambassador can say this, but the fact is that very few foreign Ambassadors can say this with confidence. I recall how we celebrated the festival of democracy in India during our general elections when 900 million people constituted our electorate. These are not small things in a challenging world.

How may Ambassadors abroad can proudly point out that their country is home to almost all major religions in the world? India is one of those rare civilisations which gave rise to four major religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. I proudly state to my audiences abroad that

Christianity reached India and flourished there since 52 AD, in the first century, immediately after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, much before it reached most parts of Europe. It came through St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ and flourished in India for nearly two thousand years. Today India has more Christian population than the total population of Australia or Canada. India also has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. The Jewish community found home in India for nearly two thousand years till the creation of modern Israel. The Jewish synagogue in Kochi is one of the oldest synagogues anywhere in the world. Today, Parsees, who came from Iran, are one of the most vibrant communities in India. This is part of our cultural heritage and diversity every Indian Ambassador proudly narrates abroad to project his country, and these are awe inspiring moments for many foreigners. This is part of our soft power diplomacy.

Let me share an experience that I had in Switzerland last year. I was addressing a diplomatic school in Geneva. Present were faculty and students from many countries, mostly European countries. As I was speaking on India's Foreign Policy, I thought it is important to start with a basic question. A question about two pioneer diplomats in ancient India. I asked them whether they heard about the story in our epic 'Ramayana', where Lord Hanuman, as a messenger of Lord Rama travelled all the way to Lanka and try to avoid a war with King Ravana. I also asked them whether they heard about the story our epic 'Mahabharata' where Lord Krishna tried to avoid the war between Pandavas and Kaurvas. I asked them whether they heard about Arthasastra by Kautilya our Chanakya written several hundreds of years before Machiavelli wrote his world famous The Prince.

I was surprised to know that most of the students had not heard about Ramayana or Mahabharata or Arthasastra. Of course, many of them had a lot of knowledge about India, they practiced some yoga and tried some form of Ayurveda. They were all aware that we are the largest democracy in the world, 600 million people went to polling booths to elect a new government early this year. They were aware of India's scientific achievements like our space Mission, but many still thought of India as a charity destination. This

showed the need for more soft power diplomacy. One of my vision was to change this image of India as a charity destination, and showcase my country as a cradle of civilization and a modern emerging economy. To this end in view, I coined a term 'Connecting Himalayas with Alps' and developed it as a multifaceted project to promote India – Switzerland relations.

Dear Friends,

In today's world of globalization, global competition and multiple challenges, soft power diplomacy and projecting one's civilizational links alone are not sufficient for any country to protect and promote its national interest. We need to do much more. An Indian diplomat needs to focus and project the economic and scientific transformation that India achieved. Our achievements in diverse fields, including atomic energy, space science, agriculture, bio-technology and, of course, information technology, for which India is well-known the world over. Our nuclear tests, our Chandrayan and Mangalayan are all proud moments for all Indians, these were game changing moments for our diplomacy.

India today is seen as a land of opportunities. When a billion population grows in standard of living, it offers a billion opportunity for technologically advanced countries. With half of India's population, that is 650 million people, below the age of 25 years, and about 550 million people as the labour force, our abundant and youthful human resources, are an asset if we are able to skill them well. These are no small achievements and are definitely worth projecting abroad.

In my over twenty-five years in foreign service, I have witnessed several major changes in world order, starting with collapse of Soviet Union to several rounds global financial crisis to the current Covid 19 pandemic has seen a real transformation of the world order. We see how the very nature of international relations and its rules change before our eyes. The Covid 19 crisis which began as a health challenge, has evolved as an economic disruption, a geopolitical shock and a social challenge of unimaginable proportions. We are all victims of this crisis. It has also affected relations

between countries at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. Our foreign policy and its implementation need to adapt to these changes. We need to continue to project our country adapting ourselves to this ever changing world scenario.

Today, one of my priorities as an Ambassador in a country with large Indian population, is to work closely with my host country and my community to fight challenge of Covid 19. Covid is throwing up new challenges every day to every country and every society including in India and here in Kuwait. Everything is work in progress including the Vande Bharat Mission of return of Indians stranded abroad and efforts to arrange return of stranded Indians to Kuwait. It is not over.

While we handle these priorities at different levels, we cannot afford to ignore the bigger picture and major diplomatic challenges that we face every day, including confronting the anti-India propaganda, from many quarters. India's diplomatic efforts to shape global thinking and project our perspectives need to continue through the Covid pandemic. We continue our bilateral, regional and multilateral engagement at all levels. We continue to engage world leaders at the summit level and the ministerial level.

During the Covid 19 crisis, Indian diplomacy has been at the forefront of digital diplomacy and we are maintaining our diplomatic momentum at every level. As we start our new membership with the UN Security Council in January 2021 we will play a more prominent role in addressing global issues including the global fight against Covid 19 pandemic.

I thank you for a patient hearing. I wish you all the best, Stay safe.