

A chain that links us all

How a governor of Andamans influenced the Barbados programme of action for Small Island Developing States in 1994

BY RAMU DAMODARAN

In February, the effortlessly elegant Indian permanent representative to the United Nations, Ruchira Kamboj, presented a cheque to the ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda as contribution for hosting the fourth global conference for Small Island Developing States from May 27-30. It was a reaffirmation of the support India had extended to SIDS from the very first conference 30 years ago, which put small islands on the map of global responsibility and saw a pivotal contribution by an individual who might otherwise have been considered an unlikely presence on the multilateral diplomatic stage.

The ministry of external affairs had proposed that India's delegation to the 1994 conference, held in Barbados, be led by one of its ministers of state. Prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, in whose office I was working at the time, was not enthused. "This is not an expression of altruism," he remarked. "It is a question of self-interest, of our identity as a nation that has 1,300 islands within the geography of our union. The problems that are being discussed, and the solutions that may be attempted, are

not external affairs."

He paused, reflected a moment, and instructed: "Let me speak to Purushothaman." I was used to the telegraphic quality of Rao's instructions and understood he wished to be connected on the phone to Vakkom Purushothaman (VP), then lieutenant governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (I should say "largely used to"; there was an occasion in 1992 when he said, "Let me speak to Narayanan", meaning K.R. Narayanan, then member of Parliament, and I mistakenly connected him to M.K. Narayanan, director of the Intelligence Bureau, who was bemused to hear the prime minister congratulate him on his nomination as the Congress party nominee for the vice presidency of India.)

In any event, after a ten-minute conversation, Rao called me in to tell me VP had agreed to lead our delegation to the conference. "Tell Sreeni to contact him and tie up details," he added, a reference to T.P. Sreenivasan, our deputy permanent representative to the UN, who was leading the officials' segment to the conference. "Purushothaman wants to know how best to update him-



P. MUSTHAFA

KINDRED SPIRITS

Former Andamans governor Vakkom Purushothaman (above) and former Barbados prime minister Lloyd Sandiford

self on our foreign policy priorities; please get him our last three speeches in the UN General Assembly which I have told him are the best resource."

VP had read the speeches thoroughly by the time he reached Delhi a few days later; he was particularly moved by a reference in the 1993 speech to the "inviolability of the individual as one of the profoundly humanistic traditions of Indian civilisation," a truth he felt, and with which the prime minister agreed, should be central to our contribution to the conference, affirming that change derived from the ideas and actions of the person and, cumulatively, the people.

It was something he himself fervently believed in; on the very day he left Port Blair for Delhi, April 23, the

panchayat system came into being in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, flowing from the 73rd constitutional amendment piloted in Parliament by the Rao government the previous year. VP brought his pen to the announcement which noted that Panchayati Raj "confirms the belief in the people of the country ... that they are capable of formulating their own plans for material prosperity, social upliftment and economic independence."

When VP arrived in Barbados, he found a country whose excitement at hosting its first global conference was tempered with the disappointment and disbelief of the upset loss by the West Indies cricket team to England at the Bridgetown Test ten days earlier, a match made legendary by the two centuries thundered by English captain Alec Stewart. "He showed us yet again that the brilliance of a team depends on the brilliance of each player," Barbados prime minister



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Lloyd Erskine Sandiford remarked to VP at the opening reception that evening. VP beamed. He may have found a kindred spirit.

He recalled Sandiford's remark

"You get so much from idle talk," VP said. "Idle talk?" asked Sandiford. "What is that?" "What you and I are having now," said VP equably, as he took a sip of the cheerlessly chicory-less coffee.

the next morning, when he found himself, at the coffee break, at a table with the prime minister and the conference's precise yet imaginative coordinator, senior UN official Miles Stoby. He took the opportunity to suggest to Sandiford that, in that spirit, the conference "outcome" document should focus on the potential unleashed by individuals and in their collective identity and centrality as peoples.

"But, Governor, we have affirmed that in our opening paragraph," Sandiford responded. He leafed through the folder he carried and found the draft. "Here it is. In fact, we have taken it in entirety from the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development adopted two years ago. 'Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.'"

"But that is precisely my point, Prime Minister," VP responded. "This portrays human beings as beneficiaries of entitlement, not as the source and agent of change. I myself have found the best ideas for what government and administration can do comes from conversations with thinking, reflective individuals."

"How do you have those conversations, Governor?" Sandiford asked, as Miles Stoby recalled to me some months later.

"Walks," VP replied.

"Walks?" Sandiford queried.

"Walks," VP replied. "Every morning, I walk through the streets of our capital, Port Blair, and talk to people. Some have particular problems, which we try to resolve. But most of them have ideas and many of those ideas can be implemented. You get so much from idle talk."

"Idle talk?" asked Sandiford. "What is that?"

"What you and I are having now," said VP equably, wincing a little as he took a sip of the cheerlessly



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SYMBOL OF PEOPLE'S CENTRALITY

The Speaker's chair, donated by India, in the Barbados House of Assembly

chicory-less coffee. "When we speak without purpose or agenda, often our best ideas come from that."

"Well, this idle talk has certainly yielded one," Sandiford replied. "Miles, we should rework our opening. Governor, we will continue to draw upon your guidance."

"Mine is a simple approach," VP replied. "We have to focus on environmental dangers, development assistance, lack of freshwater resources... all these must find mention in our document. But the people, and the person, come first."

"We also sometimes forget the cultural dimension," VP continued, "but it is the most personal attribute of the human being and one we must respect if our islands and their peoples are to flourish but, even more importantly, simply survive."

The spirit of VP's counsel was well received by delegations as they finalised the "Barbados Programme of Action," although he was careful not to take public credit for it. And its eventual opening affirmation could be seen to derive directly from his conversation with Sandiford.

It read: "The survival of small island developing states is firmly rooted in their human resources and cultural heritage, which are their

most significant assets; those assets are under severe stress and all efforts must be taken to ensure the central position of people in the process of sustainable development."

As Sandiford read the plan of action aloud for unanimous adoption by the conference, Miles Stoby recalled, his eyes left the script at this paragraph and seemed to focus on a distant point in the room. In fact, they were meeting VP's eyes and an unobtrusive touch of right hand to forehead conveyed his gratitude and appreciation.

Once the conference concluded, Sandiford came up to VP. "Vakkom," he said (they were now on first name terms, or at least what Sandiford, unfamiliar with the complexities of Kerala nomenclatures, considered a first name), "let me show you our symbol of the central position of people."

They got into the prime minister's car and drove a short distance. "This is an institution with which you are familiar, Vakkom," Sandiford said. "Our parliament's House of Assembly." They were now in the chamber and Sandiford walked up to the front. "And this another symbol you know well: the Speaker's chair."

VP paused before it. "It is magnifi-

cent," he said.

"It should be," Sandiford said quietly. "It is made of the finest Indian teak. It was a gift from your government to us when we attained independence in November 1966."

VP knelt before the chair and placed his forehead on the floor. Without the least trace of self-consciousness, Sandiford did so, too. They rose a moment later and left the chamber quietly, in companionable silence.

At VP's hotel, where Sandiford dropped him, the two men shook hands. They both knew it was a goodbye, but left the word unsaid.

Hilary Beckles, vice chancellor of the University of West Indies, has written of Caribbean small islands as "adamant enough to say to the mighty ocean that seeks to engulf and erase them — "if you want to pass, go around!" VP brought a measure of adamance to the Andamans, too; while an assertive adamance, it was not combative, but a measure of the confidence its people possessed as an entity of their own, "a great chain of being," in Sandiford's phrase, a part of the great and vast country which was their home.

Sandiford and VP passed away less than a year ago, within weeks of each other. In the wealth of their lives, the Barbados conference was just one punctuation point, but a point whose imprint was embedded in time and in heart, with its legacy of a swift friendship that brought an enduring transformation in the way nations regarded their peoples, from beneficiaries to creators of change.

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Free to be me

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BY REYA MEHROTRA

