

## An interview with Richard F. Celeste, the United States Ambassador to India

Richard F. Celeste, the United States Ambassador to India has played a significant role in furthering cooperation between the United States and India, especially in the field of Science and Technology (S&T). This has been achieved in the form of an Indo-US S&T Forum. He came to India backed with abundant experience in the S&T establishment in Washington and also the government–university–industry research roundtable. He has been a member of the Advisory Board of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, the Secretary of Energy's Advisory Board, Appropriate Technology International, the Council on Foreign Relations and a Visiting Fellow in Public Policy at Case Western Reserve University. He presented his credentials to the President of India, K. R. Narayanan on 28 November 1997.

On the eve of his departure from India, the outgoing Ambassador, took time off from his busy schedule for an interview on 13 April 2001.

Celeste graduated from Yale University and also attended Exeter and Oxford University in England as a Rhodes scholar. When I enquired about his field of interest as a Rhodes scholar, he said, 'At the time I was a student of history. My subject was American diplomatic history towards Africa. I was looking at 19 century history. It was not aimed at a future career of diplomacy in India'.

Following are excerpts from the interview:

### On the subject of Indo-US cooperation

*It is nearly three and a half years since you took over as US Ambassador to India. In your opinion what is the status of Indo-US cooperation in S&T?*

I believe we have made very significant strides in Indo-US science cooperation. We have restored the position of Science Counsellor at the US Embassy which is a very important post. There used to be a Science Counsellor position, but it was vacated in 1995 before I

arrived. It stood vacant, and I persuaded the State Department to reinstate the position and we have as incumbent now Marco Di Capua who is not only a very highly trained scientist but also someone with real experience in this arena, having served as our Science Counsellor in Beijing. We have, in the last two years in particular, seen an increased emphasis in our work of collaboration in the medical field, especially in the development of vaccines. About two years ago, visitors from the National Institutes of Health focused on the HIV AIDS programme and met with many distinguished Indian scientists. They developed an agreement to do collaborative science in HIV AIDS research, to do joint field trials for new vaccines simultaneously in the United States and India for speedy innovation into the market place. We have seen a number of visiting delegations of American scientists, including two visits led by Bruce Alberts, President of United States National Academy of Sciences who has been promoting closer cooperation between the two Academies, and now we have in place and functioning, the Indo-US S&T Forum. So, I would say that in the last two years there has been a dramatic increase in the level and tempo of activity between scientists in the United States and scientists here in India.

*Your 'efforts to make the Indo-US S&T Forum a reality' have been acknowledged by both the co-chairs of the Forum recently at the meeting of the Governing Board. Could you elaborate on your experiences in this regard and how do you see the Forum shaping as a platform for increased cooperation between the two countries?*

First and foremost, the Forum Governing Board will bring together leading scientists and science policy makers from the two countries on a regular basis and that will in itself be beneficial. Secondly, the Forum will sponsor activities that draw together scientists. As we have already seen at the first meeting, they have desired to bring

together young scientists from both sides which I think is a very exciting initiative. The Forum as it moves forward will create a series of venues where leading scientists will get together by their interest in a particular area, for example, in nanotechnology or biotechnology. One example, from the first meeting of the Board, Maynard Olson (Professor of Medicine, University of Washington Genome Center), one of our brilliant leaders in genomics, was engaged in intensive conversation with Manju Sharma. I believe it is very likely that we will see a group of leading Americans, working in genomics, visit India and interact with a group of leading Indians in the same field. That is the way we open the door to a whole new arena for collaborative work.

*What is your perspective of the future ahead with regard to Indo-US relations broadly, and for S&T in particular?*

I have described the future relationship between the United States and India as a 24/7 relationship. Well, it is based on our experience in Information Technology which means that for 24 h a day and 7 days a week, we are in touch and working together. The belief is that, with that kind of intensity, that kind of sustained engagement will characterize the overall bilateral relationship and it will particularly characterize what is happening in science. What we are seeing today is the increased recognition in the United States that world-class science can and is being performed in India. In reality, for example, a company like General Electric not only has a lot of its business sectors in India, but it has a major R&D Center in Bangalore, which in its first year generated 50 patent applications. So I think it is enormously promising.

### On the status of sanctions on India by the United States

*Economic sanctions, are they soon to be lifted?*

We cannot say for certain but all of the indicators, all of the straws in the wind

suggest that economic sanctions will be lifted. It is only a matter of time.

*However, technology sanctions still seem to be in place. With sanctions as a backdrop, could you comment on how true S&T cooperation between the two countries and success of the Indo-US S&T Forum can be achieved in reality?*

The S&T sanctions have been targeted principally at areas which contribute to nuclear weapons or missile development. In other words, these technology sanctions are very narrowly drawn. To take an example, virtually all of the restrictions on capacity of computers have been lifted and today I have not heard from anyone that they cannot get the computers they need, of whatever capacity to do the research work they want to do. I believe the movement of science back and forth, except in these very specific areas, is completely free today. My own hope is the sanctions that we have today will be re-examined and narrowed to the minimum level required by law and the law basically is the Non-proliferation treaty, which not only affects us but affects other countries as well.

*Speaking still on technology sanctions and the restrictions they place on scientific cooperation, there is also the reality of sanctions on Indians within the US itself, in S&T areas. Could you comment on this?*

There are many stories about sanctions imposed on Indians within the US. I am not clear how many of those stories are accurate. I am not aware of situations in which Indians today are constrained from doing any research they want, other than if they wanted to work in areas that bear directly on nuclear weapons or ballistic missile technology. We have, for example, an active collaboration between NASA and ISRO and our two Meteorological Departments, in space-related research. I think there is a broad arena in which our scientists are working very freely today.

### **On the future of biomedical and biotechnological cooperation and IPR issues**

*Can you throw some light on the possibilities of biomedical and biotechno-*

*logical cooperation between the US and India?*

I believe this is going to be the next IT sector for India. I believe that this is an arena where Indian business and Indian knowledge skills can again join the world leaders and the only constraint I see is the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issue, because some companies are going to be disadvantaged in committing the very large sums to research. It requires to be successful as they can protect that research through an effective patent regime. Indian pharmaceutical companies and Indian medical research companies today, I believe, have the same interest as the other major sponsors of research. So, I predict a growing collaboration between our scientists and Indian scientists on basic and fundamental research and growing collaboration on the commercial side, trying to move the discoveries into the market place. The only missing piece or ingredient in that scenario right now, which would galvanize the system, is the Patent Bill which is pending before the Parliament.

*What is your viewpoint on Intellectual Property Rights?*

My own feeling is that IPR will always be a working kind of issue. By that I mean, in the United States for example, when a company like Merck or Ford Motor Company wants to sponsor research at a University, one of the first items it negotiates is the question about IPR. On how a patent will be handled and how the licensing fee will be shared. I think that this should be treated as a normal part of any interaction, developing skills for negotiating this wisely as well. You need the capacity to protect IPR and to justify the very large amounts of research funding. The same debate went on about 6–8 years ago around copyright issues for software, so that the software industry could meet international standards.

### **On the Bush administration policies on S&T**

*In context of the new Bush administration in Washington, what would be the S&T foreign policy towards India and its emphasis during the tenure of Presi-*

*dent George W. Bush. Are there any key pointers already in view? What can India look forward to in particular?*

I wish that I could answer that question confidently. I have not yet had a chance to talk to the people who would be carrying the responsibility in the new administration. Many of the posts have not yet been filled, so it is early to anticipate. I know from what the President said to India's Foreign Minister just recently, that "it was his intention to strengthen the relationship between our two countries in every possible dimension". I can only assume that this means S&T. I know that my successor Bob Blackwill (Robert D. Blackwill) has a very keen interest in the S&T area. So, I think he will be a promoter of continuing strengthened collaboration.

*President Bush appears to be paying more attention to defence and health issues. Health, as I know it in the US is privatized. What may I ask are the health issues he hopes to address?*

Firstly, the United States government allocates enormous source of research money in the health arena, funds the National Institutes of Health which represents one of our largest investments in basic research. I think President Bush is talking about doubling the funding in that area over the next couple of years. Secondly, while I was back I met with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson who has a keen interest in India and whose department supports an office here at the Embassy. Gardner is the Public Health and Service Officer and there is a very substantial interest in HIV AIDS research, prevention and treatment. This is going to be a major thrust of this administration. I think all of the data indicate that globally this (health issue) is a huge challenge.

*Environment is one of the areas identified for cooperation in the Indo-US S&T Forum. It however seems to have been given the backseat by President Bush, since the US has abandoned the Kyoto Protocol for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. What is the stand here by the US in this 'global human interest' environmental decision? Is this likely to be changed before international representatives meet in Bonn in July to discuss the Kyoto accord?*

I cannot say I know in detail how the administration proposes to move forward on this. The President made it clear to the Indian Foreign Minister when they met, that we continue to have a keen interest in environmental issues and on the issue of global climate change. Our concern was that the Kyoto Treaty, in the President's view, did not seem to be a balanced treaty. There is considerable work to be done to satisfy the President and his advisors that the present framework can serve our national interests along with the global interests. I think you will see an ongoing interest in environmental issues on the part of the United States, considerable work on science related to the environment, so we understand how to address environmental issues effectively. I think that will continue to be a high priority for the US.

#### On other matters

*Your reminiscences and feelings of your stay in India, both as Special Assistant to the American Ambassador to India in New Delhi for four years and now as an Ambassador yourself to India.*

When I left in 1967, I knew that India was always going to be part of my life. The four years I spent here were enormously important to me. I think for two reasons; one, the man I worked for, Chester Bowles, became the most important influence in my life. Two, I learnt a great deal here in India. I learnt about the importance of agriculture in economic development. In watching the green revolution at work, I saw this interaction of government, universities and industries in action. I also became, in a sense, part of an Indian family and that's very much my family still. So, that's been part of the joy of coming back here. In many respects, the recent tour has turned out to be beyond any expectation that I had. I never dreamed when I was here in the 1960s that I might come back as Ambassador. I suppose, if I were writing a novel, I would have said, 'Oh, of course, I dreamt about it every day and this is a fulfilment of life's dream'. I never thought about it and my wife suggested to me that what I really ought to do was to become Ambassador to India. But coming back here was an opportunity to fulfil many of the dreams that I shared

with my Ambassador back in the 60s, to see the United States and India move much more closely together, to have a sense here, and even more importantly in Washington, that we really ought to be partner countries. We really ought to work together in ways that benefit both of our citizens. In many respects S&T cooperation is a kind of symbol of that or an emblem of that. So, I have found there has been a chance to try to make some institutional contributions to our progress by the creation of the Forum and work at how we reorganize the Embassy.

*What are your own plans for the future when you leave India?*

I do not know. I am going to spend some time thinking about the future. I can tell you one thing for sure, whatever I do, India will be some part of it.

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## COMMENTARY

### Beyond mere competence\*

*Yash Pal*

Vikram Sarabhai was a humane and passionate visionary. He was an institution builder who accomplished an enormous amount in a short span of his working life. He deeply influenced the lives of all those who came in contact with him. He was a scientist who did some excellent work in the field of cosmic radiation and solar terrestrial relations.

He founded a remarkable institution, the Physical Research Laboratory that has contributed significantly to the growth of science in the country. Here

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\*Text of the Vikram Sarabhai Memorial Lecture, IETE, Shimla, India

he guided several Ph D students. But there came a time when he was so busy that some research students could meet him only during one of his frequent train trips from Ahmedabad to Mumbai. It was not infrequent for a student to accompany him in his car to the station and, if the conversation was not over by the time the train had to leave, the student would often travel with him up to Baroda and return later to Ahmedabad. I do not think any of the students resented this inconvenience, because they got an hour or two of real quality time with their guide, a period when Vikram would cut-off from a thousand other concerns and become completely im-

mersed in the problem at hand. I was personally very taken with this aspect of his character and capability. His ability to switch off and concentrate on one thing at a time was extremely impressive. All other worries were forgotten. The urgent decisions to be taken next morning, his scheduled meetings with the high and mighty, or the deadlines of an impending space launch, all of these disappeared. When you were with him he was totally yours. He remembered your problems and your worries more than his own. He was not just courteous. He was truly involved and seemed grateful that you involved him. Everyone came out refreshed and enhanced,