



MR. MOHAMMAD ANSARI

Former Administrator and Diplomat

Interview taken by
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YT: Your diplomatic career spanned over 38 years before shifting to an administrative role as the Vice President of India from 2007. Was there a particular reason for this shift and how did the responsibilities in the two roles feel different?

MHA: No; the reason for the shift, as you call it, is very simple. I joined the Indian Foreign Service and like all the Central and State Government services, there is a fixed period during which you serve, age-wise. I reached the age of 55 in 1995 after which I was asked to continue for almost three and a half years. My tenure finished in 1999. It was a perfectly natural parting of ways because when I was on leave from December 1999, I was on the list of retired diplomats or retired bureaucrats, depending on what you call it. After that, I was a free man. I wanted to think and do something else. I had an offer from Jawaharlal Nehru University to serve as a visiting professor. I readily accepted it. However, after a few months, I received another offer to become the vice-chancellor of Aligarh University. I had

been to that university as a student and the idea of going there was irresistible. So, that was the beginning of what you might call a career that was partly academic and partly administrative.

YT: Your family was part of the freedom struggle as you inherited the legacy of the former president of the INC and a freedom fighter. What influence did it have on you growing up and what made you not follow the path, shifting towards a diplomatic role?

MHA: In 1947, my siblings and I were small kids of age 8 years, 10 years and 12 years. Thus, everybody was familiar with the freedom struggle; everybody was familiar with the great leaders of the freedom struggle and it had a great impact on us. So my family's influence was a part of the impact on my mind while growing up, which attracted me to shift towards a diplomatic role.

YT: You have had an eventful tenure of serving as the Ambassador of countries like the United Arab Emirates, witnessing a drastic change in

the world's geopolitical situation. How do you feel the dynamics of the world have changed since your tenure?

MHA: Well, I feel that it hasn't changed. It has perhaps become a little more complicated. Since the turn of the century, there have been violent conflicts in the Middle-Eastern region. The war in Iraq, the on-going conflict in Syria and the conflict in Yemen - all of these are resulting in political fights which end up causing great harm to the public at large. The dynamics are not pleasant, but there is no end to it in the immediate future.

YT: You are the first Indian Vice President to serve during the terms of three presidents, seeing the internal dynamics evolve greatly. How do you think the state of the country evolved during this time period?

MHA: No, the relationship between the Vice President and the President of the Republic is of a formal nature with separate functions. Nowhere did my functions overlap with that of the President, or vice-versa. My formal job was to be the Vice President of the Republic and, by the virtue of it, to be the Chairman of the Upper House of the Parliament called the Rajya Sabha. So, I had my duties cut out clearly. As the Vice President, I was number two in the pecking order of the Republic so I did all the things that are expected of the post- to shoulder certain responsibilities including the responsibility of traveling abroad on behalf of the government.

YT: Serving as the Permanent Representative of India to the UN, you made great strides to establish India on an International Forum. Do you feel that the UN has lost its relevance as a democratic platform for discourse and what importance does India play in the global scenario? In your opinion, should regional organizations be the focus of India in order to put forth her interests closer to home?

MHA: No, I did not do anything unusual. India has, since its independence in 1947, taken interest in international affairs and has always put forward its own unique view while playing its role in the United Nations. The United Nations is a body where you do several things at the same time. Firstly, you participate in discussing various issues that are of relevance to the world today. Secondly, you articulate India's viewpoint. Thirdly, you safeguard the extent of India's interest in each one of them. India before me and India after me in the United Nations has always played an active role and will continue to do so.

Yes, regional organizations are important; in fact, they have greater relevance because the global agenda has shifted and evolved. It is not just an agenda of peace and stability. It is now an agenda which has a great deal of commercial and environmental interest in it as we see at the moment, with the COVID-19 pandemic. People didn't pay attention to pandemics a few years ago. Today, everyone's attention is grasped by the crisis. So, the global agenda has become very relevant - more relevant than it was before and I must say that our own region, that is the South Asian region is not as active for a variety of reasons as compared to other regions. For example, take South East Asia - the ASEAN countries. They are very closely involved with each other politically, commercially and in other manners. Countries in Western Europe are integrated, and even countries in Africa - East Africa, West Africa and North Africa are very integrated.

The same holds for North America. Thus, we in South Asia are lagging behind for political reasons. The sooner we address the issues, the better it is for us.

YT: You have often opposed the foreign policy of India, especially on its stance on Iran and Iraq and India's vote in the IAEA. Do you believe

that India stayed true to the Non-Alignment policy it adopted post-independence and what problems currently persist in its stance on international affairs?

MHA: No, let's not say I opposed the policies of the country; because, after all for 40 odd years, I was the channel through which the policies were articulated. But for specific issues that I have, and for that particular reason, I feel that given the totality of India's interest with that country, it would have been better for us to not have voted against it. I think it would have been better if we had abstained. After all, the three options are always available in any International forum. You can support, you can oppose, or you can abstain. If you are not comfortable with supporting something nor have good reasons for opposing it, then it is advisable to abstain from voting.

YT: You have served as a visiting professor in various prominent universities and served as the vice chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University. With corporates complaining that universities are churning out unhireable graduates and graduates complaining that corporates have unreasonable hiring requirements, do you have any thoughts as to how this dynamic could be changed?

MHA: We go to a place of higher learning called a university or a college because we want to widen our horizons and our understanding of the world. We also want to acquire a certain skillset. We don't go to a university only to be trained for a corporate job. We go to universities to expand our mental horizons. I may study philosophy, for example, which is a different world; I may study economics, which is a different world; or I may study accountancy for a professional job which requires me to acquire certain special skills. So from the point of view of the corporates, they are looking for a workforce with different sets of expertise. If you have studied and acquired

those skills then by all means it is excellent. But the corporates are right in saying that they want a certain degree of proficiency. If you are an accountant, can you afford to be an indifferent accountant and cause enormous problems for your employers? The same goes for when you are an engineer; can you afford to be indifferent in your performance? Thus, to join corporates, you are required to have some skills through which you can change yourself. So, both are right in the sense that the universities aren't only there to train people for corporates. However, there are excellent examples for when someone has no formal education but still does well in life. The city of Calcutta is full of such people. A balance has to be struck between the requirements of a university education because, if the only job of a university is to train people to get into big five star commercial companies, then they are not doing their job.

YT: As you held various positions and also as the Vice President of India, did you ever feel that you had to compromise on your personal dreams?

MHA: No, I did not. The point is, you must have the confidence to say what you believe to be true and what you believe to be correct. Simply because somebody who is superior to me in ranking says that this is the correct way, you are not obligated to do so. You have a mind - you have a trained mind to reason and understand, and therefore, any participation in the framing of an agenda or articulation of a viewpoint must be done freely on the basis of being well informed. I did not face any such problem, either as a professional diplomat or later in life in other professions including the Vice President of the Republic of India, where I felt that I was being constrained in any manner. I articulated whatever I felt was proper.

YT: Having held the position of the chairman of India's National Commission for Minorities,

you've fought a long battle to uplift the Dalits of the nations and gained recognition because of your role in aiding the victims of communal riots. What motivated you to work towards this social issue amidst your diplomatic and academic career?

MHA: The National Commission for Minorities is a constitutional body. It has a specified set of duties with regard to the minorities in the country. Everything that the commission does, emanates from the principles of the constitution of India and the laws of India are made pursuant to those principles. It is a difficult job because out of the total population of the country, only 20% consists of religious minorities, and each minority has its own individual interest, its own individual requirements and problems. They have to be accommodated in terms of the constitution and law of the country. But they constitute 20% of the population of the country, which means that every fifth Indian belongs to a different religious faith no matter which part of the country they come from. His faith may be different but he is still a citizen of the country, and because he is a citizen of the country, he is entitled to all the benefits, all the rights as well as the duties which a citizen is required to undergo.

YT: For years India has been trying to implement a Uniform Civil Code to establish a common set of rules to govern each citizen. Do you feel that this goes against the principles of sovereignty and equality as not all groups face similar issues in the modern society?

MHA: First, we have to understand what we mean by a civil code. Broadly speaking, the law in any country of the world is the set of laws of two kinds: one is called the criminal code which consists of offenses of criminal nature; and the other, known as the Civil code, basically covers four things: marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption. Now in our country, where the population is so huge, the marriage, divorce,

inheritance and adoption practices are different. The principle of a uniform law can apply under criminal law for if you indulge in an act of violence, you will be governed by the same set of criminal law rules. However, when it comes to marriage, inheritance, divorce and adoption, each person, under the secular laws of the country is entitled to his or her own rules of their community and their belief. So a Hindu gets married under Hindu customs and a Christian gets married under Christian customs. Muslims, Sikhs and other religious groups do likewise. So when we talk about a uniform civil code it means that everyone will have to observe the same rules and that there will be no more Hindu, Muslim or Christian marriage. Our public is not ready to accept this as of yet. Many years ago, a distinguished professor of law participating in a discussion on the matter of a Uniform Civil Code, asked for a draft of what might be the Uniform Civil Code. Would the laws of inheritance of the Hindu community be the same as that of Muslim community or Christian community? Furthermore, even within the communities there are some divisions. So, one day, the laws of inheritance of this section of the population may be the same as another, but we can't rush it. Someday thinking and practices will evolve in a certain manner in which marriages, divorces, adoptions and inheritance will follow the same norms. However, today we don't have it in the country and I don't see it happening tomorrow or the day after.

YT: Your passion towards the country and your unparalleled ambition to resolve the various issues we face today has been a source of inspiration for lacs; the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata are no different. What message would you like to give to them?

MHA: Well I can only speak about what I did in college. I studied hard and I got very good grades. My

extracurricular interest was particularly in playing cricket. I played for the college and most afternoons after finishing my classes, I would walk down Park Street to the Maidan area in one of the clubs and practice cricket. Thus, college is an institution that inspires you. The teachers of those days and the teachers of today have a commitment to the cause and therefore, the same is transferred from the teachers to the students, who are actually fortunate enough to get into the college. I recall, in my days, most of the teachers belonged to the Society of Jesuits who were from Belgium. I couldn't really understand why these people from a far off land came to India and spent over 20 years just dedicated to teaching here. It was great to see them here and I admire their dedication. Many years ago when I was a diplomat, I went to

attend a ceremony in a village in Belgium, from where all of these teachers came. The village was holding a special celebration because one of their sons had gone to India and was returning after 25 years. So as a representative of the Indian embassy, I was also there. After the ceremony, I was given the honour of meeting the family of that particular teacher. The family consisted of an old mother of about 90 years. I had only one question for her - "Did you miss your son for these 25 years?". She said, "Of course I did; but I knew that he was doing god's work". That one sentence made me understand why the dedication was there in the teachers of those days and I am certain that that dedication is there in your teachers today. That is what makes college life unique.