

Observations of  
His Excellency Shri M. K. Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal  
At the  
Annual K. Subrahmanyam Memorial Lecture  
Organised by  
Global India Foundation  
New Delhi

2 August, 2011

It is indeed a great honor to be called upon to preside over the first K Subrahmanyam Memorial Lecture organised by the Global India Foundation. I would like to commend the initiative of Global India Foundation of having an annual lecture to honour the memory of one of India's greatest strategic thinkers. I am happy that GIF is either the first, or among the first, to organize a lecture in his memory. I also thank the organizers for remembering me as I no longer reside in Delhi. I shared a close relationship with Mr. Subrahmanyam and family, spanning more than five decades. This is, hence, a very special moment for me. If a man is known by the company he keeps, then quite clearly this audience would endorse my credentials.

It is some years since I have spoken before an audience at the IIC. I have always found speaking at the IIC, the Mecca of India's strategic culture, a very daunting task. Luckily, I only have to reminisce on Mr. Subrahmanyam's legacy and his memory.

Fifty years is a long time in any kind of relationship and I am taking advantage of this. I shared a distinction with Mr. Subrahmanyam in that we

belonged to the same cadre, though to different services. There is always a bond among people who belong to the same cadre. I think that apart from Sulochana, some of the things that I am going to say today, probably no one else in this audience would be aware of. I shall, hence, a couple of anecdotes this evening, which would be appropriate to the occasion.

The first anecdote is about this brilliant young boy who came from a very humble background, studied under a lamppost in the streets of Madras, and then went on to top the list of IAS candidates in 1951, the same batch to which Mr. Brajesh Mishra belongs. All of us aspiring for the civil services, at least from the south, were told this story over and over again, and some of us hated being reminded of this again and again.

The second anecdote, also dating back to the early 1960s, when I had just come to Delhi as a young officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau, was of this Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Defence working under V. K. Krishna Menon, the redoubtable Defence Minister. The story doing the rounds in official circles at that time was that during the entire period of Mr. Krishna Menon's stewardship of the Defence Ministry, there were only three occasions during which Mr. Krishna Menon ever accepted someone else's advice. On two occasions, the person involved was Mr. Subrahmanyam. This story may sound apocryphal, but I have it on reliable authority that this is true. It may be more than two occasions that he accepted advice, but Mr. Krishna Menon accepting advice was in itself an achievement.

What was the reason that Mr. Subrahmanyam played such a key role in shaping the strategic culture of our country? A look at Mr.

Subrahmanyam's career profile in service and out of it, reflects what an eclectic mind he possessed. His interests ranged from Development, Law and Order administration, to Defense Policy to Strategic Policy to academic research. In later years he proved to be one of the most prolific writers on the strategic matters, contributing to host of newspapers, magazines and journals. Each one of them was read with interest and care by members of the strategic community, including myself. For the strategic community, it provided ample scope to think about developments taking place within the country and abroad.

It is impossible to list Mr. Subrahmanyam's many achievements in a short time, and this audience is well aware of most of them. I will touch upon only a few.

- In much the same manner as the former US Defence Secretary, Mr. McNamara, Mr. Subrahmanyam, with his encyclopedic understanding of Defence matters, did seek to reshape India's Defence Ministry, though he did not spend enough time at the helm of the Ministry to complete this task.
- He was an early votary, and one of the most vocal advocates, of India going Nuclear. This, at a time, when it was extremely unfashionable to adopt such a line. He argued that if India evolved as a Nuclear power, the world would look at it with greater respect and this has amply proved true today. India's Nuclear doctrine carries Mr. Subrahmanyam's stamp, for the draft Nuclear Doctrine was prepared

by a Sub-Group of the National Security Advisory Board in 1999 under his Chairmanship.

- He chaired the Kargil Review Committee set up after Pakistan's ill-advised incursion into the Kargil Sector of J & K. Among the main recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee, was a call for an overhaul of India's National Security apparatus – possibly the first major review conducted after the Himmatsingka Committee Report in the early 1950s.
- Perhaps the most significant contribution, and achievement, of Mr. Subrahmanyam was to lay a strong foundation for a strategic culture in the country – George Tanham notwithstanding. He did not merely preach, but played an active role in building the strategic edifice, brick by brick. The last time I had a discussion with him, he seemed dissatisfied that not enough progress had been made, but that was Mr. Subrahmanyam – never satisfied, because he was a perfectionist.

My enduring recollection of Mr. Subrahmanyam is his vision. I vividly recall his tutorial to me, almost immediately after I had been appointed as the National Security Advisor in January 2005, on the shifts and changes taking place in the India-US relationship which was hardly obvious to most at the time. He told me that this was a moment which seldom comes in the history of nations, when a fundamental change was occurring in US attitude towards India. With the wisdom of the ages, India should grasp the opportunity. This was on the eve of the visit to India of the then US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, but most of us were not sure that such a sea-change was in the offing or about to occur. I even remember a discussion in the Prime Minister's house, where most of us were of the

view that Mr. Subrahmanyam's perception was flawed. Four years later, with the signing of the path-breaking India-US Civil Nuclear Initiative, it was evident that Mr. Subrahmanyam had anticipated what few of us could see.

What was it that made him so prescient, and how did he manage to be more correct than others? Some attribute it to his prodigious memory. Others to his vast experience. Several talk of his powers of logical analysis. I have a somewhat different explanation. This is based on my several discussions with him, specially in the later years. One, was his refusal to accept that you could find answers to security predicaments, solely based on a linear extrapolation of past historical experiences. Another, his firm belief, that mechanisms for prediction and assessment had to constantly evolve. They could not afford to be static. A third, was his remarkable attribute to 'surf across disciplines', accompanied by a 'certain level of intellectual promiscuity', as well as insights derived from years of dedicated experience. I believe that this last quality is what made him stand out from the vast crowd of strategic analysts and thinkers. This quality is generally attributed to great scientists and philosophers, but I like to believe that Mr. Subrahmanyam had crossed this rubicon as well.

How would one sum up Mr. Subrahmanyam's personality? All of us agree that he was an accomplished bureaucrat. Everyone acknowledges that he was an outstanding strategic thinker; most people accept that he was a great institution builder. To me, he was the gentlest of human beings; always kind, thoughtful and caring. He was one who straddled the bureaucratic and strategic domain with principle and integrity.

One final anecdote. There was one aspect on which I dared differ with Mr. Subrahmanyam. This was regarding the science of intelligence prediction, more specifically in respect of asymmetric warfare. Both of us agreed that Intelligence agencies had not been able to suitably metamorphose: from an early warning system alerting policy makers to potential threats, to a scientific system providing specific, precise and pinpointed intelligence about an imminent threat to a specific target. Mr. Subrahmanyam's view was that this lacuna could be overcome if intelligence agencies would only rely more on computational analysis, and utilize inductive logic more extensively. I used to argue on the other hand, that estimating the likelihood and the possible risk of certain developments taking place just over the horizon of available knowledge, required something more. There were far too many variables at play. Seeing with 'the mind's eye' - something written about in classical Indian texts on philosophy - was important. A good intelligence analyst needed to be also contemplative, apart from being a computational wizard. We never resolved the argument, but I have little doubt that he was the master, and I a mere mortal would always bow down to his wisdom.

Mr. Subrahmanyam's demise is a grievous loss to the strategic community. It is even more poignant that this should have happened when the world is going through a tumultuous phase. The world today confronts an uncertain future, as I am sure Mr. Brajesh Mishra, who we shall soon hear, will confirm, which increases our vulnerability. Today we need a Mr. Subrahmanyam more than ever before. I shall conclude by mentioning that I share a bond with Mr. Subrahmanyam beyond the official, which his wife,

who is present here would endorse. Long before I met Mr. Subrahmanyam, my wife, sister and brother-in-law knew him and admired him and this relationship endures to this day. As I said, it is unfortunate that Mr. Subrahmanyam is no longer amongst us, but his memory will never fade from our minds.

Thank you.