

Indian envoy takes it all in her stride

Building confidence with past experiences

Nst - 4 FEB 2001

The distinction of being the first lady High Commissioner of India to Malaysia goes to Veena Sikri, a career diplomat. She gave an indication of what she's like when she talked to P.C. SHIVADAS about herself, the job, life, her hopes and aspirations.

ANYONE can be forgiven for thinking, in the beginning, that her job demands she not be the shy and retiring type. As a fully accredited representative of her country the expectation is of one able to articulate her country's interests confidently, with intensity even, in order to further good relations.

Success of the impending official visit to Malaysia of her Prime Minister will hinge heavily on her, niceties of gender not entering the picture at all.

But her biodata gives ample indication that this sari-clad, bespectacled 52-year-old diplomat is no pushover or just a pretty face and that her ability to assert herself had early beginnings.

She excelled in school and university. After a First Class Honours degree in statistics from Poona University, she went on to a Master's degree in economics (again First Class) from the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

She capped it all by coming out first in the once-a-year All India Competitive Examination of the Union Public Service

go back to family." She is grateful that up till the last four or five years she and her husband had been posted everywhere together.

"We have been able to work together as a team.

"That kind of understanding you get, the confidence that you are able to work together, even in bringing up a family with full support that is very important."

It is a point she was constantly making to youngsters, young girls, young women because it was essential to be determined to do something in life, to have one's own objectives.

"It can be anything, you can do social work, anything, but you have to have your objective, know what is your strength, focus and do it.

"And in doing it, also think of your family. To be a complete person you also have to have family. Give equal importance to family and the next generation.

"That is part of everyone's role in life, isn't it? Because you cannot only take, take, take and not give. It has to be give and take, you take from your parents and they give to you

Where does she see the world going? Her voice had an air of resignation as she spoke about tolerance being increasingly in short supply.

ONLY with tolerance and compassion could the world be a better place — at the individual level first, then family, society, nation and between nations.

Tolerance was necessary because there was never a perfect solution, no one person or group was 100 per cent right. There was

Commission (1971), where those sitting ran into hundreds of thousands.

That qualified her for a top-of-the-list career, foreign service, to which she brought an additional asset — fluency in French and Russian.

She puts her scholastic abilities squarely on her parents. There was no discrimination in the least. "My (army officer) father was very committed to educating me, a girl-child, developing me as a person, which left me to choose my own direction."

With such orientation it was really development towards a certain path in life, not so much a career which meant mostly about earning money.

She sees parental influence at that stage in her life as "very important", helping mould her values.

Her opting for foreign service as first choice (although her mother was keen she do medicine) thus came naturally, fitting her comfortably in that slot. No flip-flopping or pangs of regret.

Looking back on her career, she counts among her "exciting moments" the Indo-Pakistan Shimla summit in 1972. She was put on liaison duty with Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Other experiences have been varied and she sees in them building blocks for confidence as every new experience was able to draw on past ones.

Apart from several home assignments, she has held posts in Hong Kong as Consul-General (1996-2000), Minister (Economic) in the Embassy of India in Paris (1992-96), First Secretary and Head of Chancery in Kathmandu (Nepal), First Secretary, Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations (1975-77) and Second Secretary, Embassy of India in Moscow (1973-75).

She found her UN stint most valuable in the context of multi-lateral experience coming from important issues dealt with — de-colonisation, apartheid, North-South, development and the Non-Aligned Movement.

In all of this, her focus rested on being able to do two things — project India's foreign policy and do so convincingly.

Placing this as a measure of success gave her opportunity to bring her husband, also a career Indian diplomat, into the picture.

"When I talk about these things I always

and you in turn have to give to family, society.

"Only when you are doing your duty can you look at your rights. You cannot demand this, that and the other and not look at your duty because rights and duties are two sides of the same coin.

"Also, do your best. Don't look for reward because it will come."

Yes, she has had to contend with male chauvinism, but her response to it is disarming. Not for her militant feminism.

She preferred to tackle it at micro level, whenever an issue cropped up and work towards a solution. In the past were issues such as terms and conditions of service but they were addressed in a "friendly, across the board way".

In a largely male preserve did she play golf as her male counterparts invariably did? If not, did she see it as a handicap?

Laughing she answered no on both counts but added quickly: "I do plan to start", now that she was here on her own, what with husband in New Delhi, daughter, 25, economist in Singapore and son, 19, studying medicine in England. As long as they were with her, tennis was a much better proposition for time management and exercise.

AFTER her arrival and with six other lady ambassadors (Thailand, Canada, New Zealand, Fiji, Cuba, South Africa) currently serving in the country, a weekly get together has been initiated. They exchange experiences, discuss the lot of women among other issues in different parts of the world and learn from one another.

Given her own example she spoke effusively about the rights of women in India as being well defined, for in India's freedom struggle women had played an active role.

"We have had no problem after independence with the right to work, equality of work, right to vote."

Women were in every field, they had reached the highest positions (Indira Gandhi) but there was still a lot to be done in the villages where many were not enjoying the rights that should be theirs.

Where does she see herself headed career-wise? She was non-committal, saying she had had a "very fulfilling" career thus far and hoped to continue that way.

"I'll go anywhere I am assigned. I have no problems with that."

always the other point of view. "It is very important to reverse the coin and see the other side."

Most of the conflicts or potential conflicts today came from lack of tolerance. Compassion was needed everywhere because of the widening gap between haves and have nots.

Would she have done anything differently? "Not really." She has done her best and was accepting of all outcomes, good or not so good. So, no regrets.

Spirituality? "It is very personal. I am religious but I will not impose it on anybody, not even within the family."

Does she have time for reflection? Yes, but again with subdued, contemplative voice: "I wish the world would move away from violence ... sad because violence begets more violence."

Relief would have to come by way of education. These were issues that ought to be given due importance even at school level, love for the environment, love for your neighbours.

Understanding between religions was also vital. The various religions, after all, were philosophies and could be taught as such in schools.

Malaysia-India ties: "Tremendous scope but I would like to see them at people to people level first. This is most important because everything else follows."

Both countries have had similar experiences, both with pluralistic societies and it was important to exchange, learn, benefit from each other.

"We can look to culture, education, tourism and, building on these, we can have business, government to government, media."

With the Indian Prime Minister visiting, reinforcement and new beginnings were on the cards.

On Malaysia, in the four months she's been here: "Very good. Everyone is so welcoming and I can understand what is going on because everything is so similar in India."

Anything else she would like to touch on? No, because busy preparations for her Prime Minister's arrival beckoned. Her desk, which she chose not to sit at for the interview, bore testimony.

Note: The Indian PM's visit has been cancelled, it was announced yesterday.