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Sikri takes great pains in forging stronger ties

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SHE may very well be the quintessential diplomat that many aspire to be but few become. Veena Sikri is almost always the cheery and charming self that most have come to know in her three years in Malaysia.

The saree-clad Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia exhibits a bonhomie rare even in people of her ilk who have been trained to maintain their equanimity in the most dire of situations.

But beware the bespectacled and orchid-loving mother of two adult children when things are not so hunky-dory - she is quite capable of delivering a verbal coup de grace to any quarter, yet always with the grace of a lady.

Couching icy statements in the most acceptable of terms is her trick of trade, her voice cutting the air with unusual clarity if points contrary to India's interest come her way.

This is a facet of the multifarious personality of the outgoing envoy many have come to enjoy besides her ability to tackle the most thorny of issues with her business-as-usual attitude.

Malaysians saw this side of the 50-something first ever woman Indian High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur in the infamous Palm Court incident last March when she made no secret of her ire at what she deemed an unfair deal for Indian nationals involved.

Her words in summing up the incident will go down in the annals of Malaysian diplomatic history as probably the most hard-hitting uttered by an envoy in recent years.

Yet, Sikri was back to her usual affable persona shortly after following an apology from Malaysian authorities over the incident which ruffled more than a few feathers in India.

Her amelioratory tone in calling all concerned to put the regrettable episode, "a bolt out of the blue" and possibly the lowest moment in ties, behind them signalled her professionalism.

But this is her style, her modus operandi, as it were: to do whatever is necessary to further the interests of India, and yet maintain the peace.

Her softening of stance in the Palm Court encounter was probably also related to the realistic view that Malaysia is an important ally in the region and that things should, therefore, not be allowed to go overboard.

She is probably ever so aware of Malaysia's strategic importance in the Southeast Asian theatre as evidenced by the two visits of the Indian Prime Minister and another two by the Indian Foreign Minister on her watch.

There have also been numerous visits by Indian State Chief Ministers and leading personalities in the public and private sectors during her term.

Of course, she had her hands full when former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited India in October last year besides Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid's visit to New Delhi, also last year.

"I have found Malaysia very, very exciting, very interesting. Very, very busy too. In KL, 24 hours of the day are not enough as there is always so much happening," she said, unconsciously reverting to superlatives as she often did, in an hour-long interview recently at her tastefully-decorated Taman Duta home.

In a staccato verbal pace almost like that employed by International Trade Minister Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz (which make both an interviewer's nightmare), she goes on to recount how she found her three years and three months stay absolutely fascinating.

What struck her on arrival here was how little the peoples of India and Malaysia knew of contemporary developments in both nations.

"I thought that my very first effort should be to change that. That became a very important focus of my work," she says, adding that she was on the verge of implementing a project close to her heart on the eve of her departure to her next posting.

She is talking of the chair of contemporary Indian studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the reciprocal chair on contemporary Malaysian studies at the University of Madras in Chennai.

All that needs to be done is the signing of a university-to-university agreement endorsed by the two Governments which she hopes will become a reality soon.

"I hope to see this signed by December when I leave," she says, adding that another important limb of her agenda here was enhancing tourist exchange between the two nations.

On a lighter note, she says that Malaysia is cognizant of India's importance as a tourist destination given the fact that "a very senior person in Malsysia Airlines told me recently that India saved MAS during the SARS outbreak".

Sikri works on the premise that one will only interact commercially with a country that one knows and is comfortable with.

Even the ugly spectre of the Palm Court incident has served a positive purpose in helping iron out visa facilities and work permit requirements involving Indian nationals working in Malaysia.

"I see a win-win situation for both countries in that we can supply labour to Malaysia which needs workers. We have to take advantage of the synergy between our countries," she says, adding that there are 30 Indian companies with multimedia super corridor status.

The companies are prepared to establish operational bases in Malaysia for the entire Southeast Asian market, she says, describing the vast potential for Indian involvement in the Malaysian economy.

Another of her achievement is the convening of the joint Malaysia-India commission after eight years.

And why this delay? "I don't know," she says with characteristic frankness tinged with curiosity at the failure of both sides to come together to improve ties.

"The joint commission meetings in 2000 and last year were very important - to overcome all the problems that came up. A whole gamut of commercial, cultural and economic exchanges was discussed," she said, describing stronger bilateral ties as a "great flowering of relations".

She does not arrogate this to her individual efforts, "but the effort has been put in for this success which eventually saw our Prime Minister's first visit here".

What does the bilateral trade relationship look like today? Sikri says bilateral trade has hit almost RM10 billion with almost 25 per cent of Malaysian palm oil going to the subcontinent.

Malaysia is also an important player in the Indian infrastructural market with billing of at least RM10 billion at last count mostly in high-way projects.

And this is where she comes to a topic very close to her heart - the Incredible India trade exhibition to be held from Dec 2.

It is difficult not to see how passionate she is about the event which will not only crown her achievements in Malaysia, but also lead to greater Indian investment here.

This, she says, had its birth after Dr Mahathir addressed the first Asean-India Business Summit last year where he told Indian entrepreneurs to look at Malaysia as the gateway to Asean.

"They now really want to focus on this. They are of the view that Malaysia will be a very good base to do business with Asean," she says, agreeing that Malaysia was playing a pivotal role in bringing Asean and India together.

Has the large Indian minority in Malaysia made her job easier or more difficult?

"It has made my job very much more interesting. It is a matter of great joy. You have one of the largest number of people of Indian origin in the world," says the former Indian consul-general to Hong Kong.

Sikri has been a regular at numerous cultural functions which has endeared her to many who have been taken up by her informality and natural friendliness.

The former Indian Council for Cultural Relations director-general, who leaves for a new posting in December, is also a known pacifist with a love for peace which she has ably demonstrated in the past.

There is evidence of this in her home where an oil painting in mostly yellow receives pride of place. The fact that it is by a well-known Pakistani painter known as Gulji is irrelevant to its importance.

What is more important for her is the fact that the character depicted is the mystical om sound of the Hindus when the painting is horizontal and the word "Allah" when it is vertical.

"That painting was done by a Pakistani artist. I had invited him to India as part of a SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) festival," she said commenting on the unity of content and quite oblivious to the fact that she was talking of a Pakistani when India-Pakistan relations are probably at their lowest ebb.

Culture, therefore, is always at the top of her mind and there is one project she hopes to see implemented in the next two months.

"I want to establish a cultural centre at the High Commission. It is an interactive effort with the Indian Centre for Cultural Relations. I want to focus on education, literature, the whole works."

Such is her dedication to India's cause, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by her superiors in the Indian Foreign Ministry, that she is reliably said to be going on to much bigger things on the international arena soon.

Of course, being married to diplomat Rajiv Sikri, who looks after economic relations at the Ministry of External Affairs and was the former ambassador to Kazakhstan, may have honed her diplomatic skills to a razorsharp degree. After all, the demands of marital ties on diplomacy usually far exceed that of nations.

On the tailend of her diplomatic career and after more than three decades in the diplomatic circle, is she missing her family which includes daughter Gauri, a newspaper journalist in India, and son Shankar, a final-year medical student in the United Kingdom?

"Yes. I do miss the family very much but it is good to know that they are settled in their own respective areas."

There is another personal achievement she attributes to Malaysia - golf - "although I am not very good at it".

Golfers, and others who may be tempted to underestimate the lady, beware. Sikri has a history of rising to the occasion with a potent combination of resourcefulness, fortitude and pragmatism that has made her a personality that diplomats and others in Kuala Lumpur will truly miss.