



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



REMEMBERING K. SHANKAR BAJPAI



(1928-2020)



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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

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Cover Photograph:

K. Shankar Bajpai, photo courtesy his family.

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Remembering K. Shankar Bajpai



(1928-2020)

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K. S. Bajpai (1928-2020)

Katyayani Shankar Bajpai, former diplomat and Founding Chairperson of the Delhi Policy Group, died of Covid-19 related complications on August 30, 2020. Shankar, as he was widely known, was a consummate representative for India, held a series of academic positions in the United States after his retirement from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), continued to be consulted by the Indian government even in his later years, and through his newspaper writings became a public intellectual as well. In the course of an eventful and high-profile career, Shankar served as ambassador to Pakistan, China and the United States. He was also the last Political Officer in Sikkim before it was integrated into India.

Shankar was in the US when Indira Gandhi was assassinated and, months later, laid the groundwork and was present for Rajiv Gandhi's breakthrough visit. Arguably, this was Shankar's favourite diplomatic assignment – he had studied at St. Albans School in Washington, D.C., in the early 1940s when his father, Girja Shankar Bajpai, was India's Agent General there; he was also Consul General in San Francisco in the late 1960s; and he had a range of personal and professional friends in America that few Indian envoys could match.

However, almost any extended conversation with Shankar about his career featured his stint in Sikkim, from 1970-1974. He has written on his time there, and one day his reflections may be made public. Clearly, though, it took all his diplomatic skills, his knowledge of Delhi's workings at the highest levels, and the confidence that the Prime Minister and her advisors reposed in him to pave the way for Sikkim's integration with the Indian Union. If he were pressed, he would almost certainly say that his greatest accomplishment was this.

Shankar's Pakistan ambassadorship too came at a challenging time. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was President and then Prime Minister after the break-up of Pakistan in 1972. By 1976, he was both at the apogee of his power and at the cusp of his political collapse. Shankar had served in Pakistan during the 1965 war. His knowledge of the country and the fact that Bhutto and he had overlapped at Oxford University in the 1950s and in Pakistan in the 1960s led to his being sent to Islamabad. Bhutto was deposed by Zia-ul Haq in 1977 and was subsequently hanged by Pakistani authorities in April 1979. Shankar had to deal with post-Simla Pakistan at the diplomatic level but also apprise Delhi of fast-moving events in Pakistani politics.

Shankar spoke least about his China days from 1980-82. Yet, it was a crucial moment in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping had by 1980 assumed control as China's supremo and had begun the economic reforms process that would lead to the country's astonishing rise. It was also a time of change in India-China relations, with Deng offering a border settlement based on the "swap" that Zhou Enlai had envisaged in 1960. When India rejected the offer, Delhi and Beijing agreed instead to begin border negotiations for the first time since 1960-61. Shankar therefore saw the beginnings of China's massive internal change as well as a new dynamic in India-China relations.

As a diplomat, it is fair to say that he combined a hard-nosed Realism with the bon vivant style that was his trademark. He insisted that India was deficient in its thinking about the role and use of power in international relations and bemoaned its fuzzy strategic thinking. Not everyone might agree with this, but he held to a consistent position. Nor was he a mechanical diplomat: to be diplomatically effective, he was convinced, meant being socially effective. His love of art, music, poetry, interior décor, and above all, food was an intrinsic enjoyment. But he also deployed his knowledge of things aesthetic with finesse in the service of India's diplomacy.

In 1994, Shankar founded the Delhi Policy Group in the memory of his friend, Lovraj Kumar, the Indian economist and technocrat, with the generous support of Siddharth Shriram. He counted the establishment of DPG as one of his proudest legacies and was alive to see its growth and impact as a think tank. While there were many policy institutes in Delhi dealing with domestic issues, he was convinced that the public square on foreign policy issues must be expanded as well.

Shankar will be missed in Delhi circles for his acuteness and affability. Around the seminar table, both were so often on display – his insightful questions and comments delivered in the gentlest and politest interjections or rebukes. In an era of charged debate in India, his measured and probing interventions were always a valued counterpoint.

R.I.P, Shankar Bajpai.

Kanti Bajpai, nephew, on behalf of the family.

Ambassador K. Shankar Bajpai

With the passing away of Ambassador K. Shankar Bajpai, India lost one of its most distinguished diplomats of the post-independence era. As an Ambassador to the United States, China, Pakistan and The Netherlands, his diplomatic record would surely rank among the most impressive in the Indian Foreign Service. He also played a critical role as the Political Officer during the accession of Sikkim to India. In the Ministry of External Affairs, he held notable positions including that of Secretary (East).

As someone who dealt extensively with the neighbouring countries in various positions, Shankar Bajpai consistently argued for a combination of realism and pragmatism on the part of India. He felt that we should be forthcoming on matters that could help build a more substantive relationship with them. At the same time, it was both his conviction and experience that India should be firm when its core security interests were challenged. He consistently argued for hard-headed assessments in that domain, rather than be swayed by the sentiments of the day.

More than any other relationship, Shankar Bajpai would be remembered for the seminal service that he rendered in regard to shaping ties with the United States. Despite forming his views in a particularly challenging era, he was free from prejudices and complexes when it came to this particular account. Much earlier than many others, he foresaw the real potential of this relationship without being oblivious to its problems. He always had a clear sense of our national interest being better served through a broader engagement. I had the privilege of working closely with him during his tenure in Washington D.C. and appreciate how much he personally did to take the relationship to a different level. His networking even in those days when the Cold War counted against India in that capital was legendary. My generation of foreign service officers learnt the skills of navigating Washington to a great extent under his guidance.

Fortunately for us, Shankar Bajpai had a long and productive 'after-life' following his formal retirement from the diplomatic profession. He was particularly active in the think-tank world and led many of the Track-II initiatives that catalysed the policy shifts which India made to respond to a changing world. His contribution was naturally the strongest when it came to the re-shaping of Indo-US ties.

In a realm that was so replete with its talent and stars, Shankar Bajpai also stood out for the interest – indeed care – that he showed in his younger colleagues. Many of us profited from the doors that he opened for us and the encouragement that he so generously extended. He will always be remembered as one of the pillars of modern Indian diplomacy.

S. Jaishankar

K. Shankar Bajpai

In 1993, Shankar Bajpai, and his life long friend Luvraj Kumar, induced me to set up the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) as a Trust with Shankar as the Chairman and Gopi Arora, Mantosh Sondhi, Luvraj Kumar and K. P. Singh as the first Trustees and with me as the Managing Trustee, with the intention of independently advising the Government on advancing India's interests worldwide through strategy and diplomacy. I already knew Shankar as I had met him several times at my father's house and always held him in awe; he was advancing India's interests in various parts of the world and also consolidating the boundary of India, while I was merely doing business.

Prior to the formation of the DPG, he invited me to the famous but relatively unknown Bohemian Grove which is set within 3000 acres of Redwood Forest on the banks of the Russian River in California. It started out as a hangout for artists, dancers and musicians but now was at the centre of Republican political and financial power. There, through Shankar, I met numerous greats such as Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller, Alexander Haig and various other politicians and business leaders.

Despite the obvious wealth and power emanating from the Bohemian Grove, everyone stayed there in one of about 40 cabins distributed around the estate; they shared bedrooms, shared door less bathrooms and, free of the societal restraints that ladies can put on men were boisterous boys once again, but serious business was discussed!

The camaraderie that grew among these powerful men while relishing the excellent food, the wine, live music and storytelling enhanced the ability of diplomats to advance one's nation's interests when back in real life situations. This the Secretary of State, George Shultz, informed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in his meeting with President Ronald Reagan in June, 1985, and slowly the nasty ghosts of the events surrounding 1971 began to vanish and normalisation of relations with the USA began.

Shankar never stopped promoting the diplomatic and strategic interests of India and thus was DPG formed a few years after his retirement. He kept up all his relevant international connections, served on the National Security Advisory Board, wrote cogent articles and papers to better inform the Government and the public and guided the DPG operations through various interactions. The importance of our independent think tank is now much appreciated and years of toil have positioned DPG prominently.

In his honour, the DPG will create and hold an annual function on International and Strategic Affairs concerning India.

Thank you, Shankar.

Siddharth Shriram

My association with Shankar Bajpai

My association with Shankar Bajpai spans three decades and at the news of his passing, I was flooded with memories of this exemplary individual who served his country with aplomb and connected with people across all walks of life with equanimity and poise. I still vividly remember the first time I met him at a dinner at my mother's residence. I was immediately struck by the warmth and dignity of his demeanour, his soft-spoken manner and innate decorum.

Over the years, at many different occasions, often over delectable meals and engaging conversations, this first impression was more than amply reinforced. I was privileged to witness the many aspects of his multi-faceted personality, all of which were truly inspirational. As an eloquent speaker, his conversations stemmed not just from his sagacity and vast political acumen, garnered over the years as a distinguished career diplomat, but also from the fact that he was a voracious reader and an informed, empathetic listener. His gentle but firm and persuasive manner made him an invaluable asset at forums where his advice was actively sought. I was fortunate to witness this at close quarters at several meetings that he graciously graced, as a Board member of TVS Motor Company.

He was a consummate host and he entertained frequently and with great elan, treating his guests to gourmet food and the choicest of wines, his selection always impeccable because of his in-depth knowledge of and genuine passion for all things repast, as an accomplished chef in his own right. He could quote classical poetry with ease, was a connoisseur of the arts and he wrote with a judicious and endearing turn of phrase. Here indeed was a man for all seasons, a gentle Colossus worthy of respect and emulation.

If Shankar was such a much-loved personality, his wife Meera was undoubtedly his pillar of strength - a perfect foil in grace and refinement. Together, they made such an indelible mark on all who had occasion to interact with them. Mallika and I would like to convey our heartfelt sympathies to Meera and the family and pray for God to give her the strength to accept and bear this irreparable loss.

With his passing, we have lost a great statesman but also, a dear, respected friend. We are the poorer for this irreparable loss but remain blessed in the knowledge that I was fortunate that our paths crossed and that I benefitted from his wisdom and the life he led with quiet dignity and infinite refinement.

Venu Srinivasan

A Tribute to DPG's Guiding Spirit

India's diplomatic tradition has been nurtured by many stalwarts, but perhaps none as accomplished as Katyayani Shankar Bajpai (KSB) whose legacy stands apart, bridging the worlds of statecraft, diplomacy, strategy and academia with his characteristic aplomb.

I had the providential good fortune to work with KSB as his staff aide-cum-political officer when he was at the height of his career in the 1980s. Arriving in Washington D.C. as India's envoy at a time when the U.S. establishment was decidedly indifferent, KSB drew on his remarkable familiarity with and unparalleled connections among American policy elites to create meaningful strategic space for India, which has since stood the test of time. There was much that I learnt from his example regarding the practice, skills and tools of diplomacy, but if there is one indelible element I can recall from my close association with him, it is the enormously consequential nature of American power for India and the world at large.

KSB's peerless erudition and keen intellect went hand in hand with his innate elegance and charm, his unmatched capacity for sophisticated articulation, his fondness for dispassionate and reasoned discourse, his fair and magnanimous temperament, the consummate graciousness of his hospitality and his inimitable zest for life. Together, these attributes were simply inspirational and will remain legendary among the annals of Indian diplomacy.

During his extended turn to academic life post retirement, KSB played a key role in establishing the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) as an independent and non-partisan think tank in 1994, becoming its first Chairman and guiding its progress through DPG's first 25 years. The foundational principle of DPG carries his unmistakable stamp: "An institution which will organise and produce studies of relevance to the future security, prosperity and international effectiveness of the country". To this day, DPG's primary focus remains on strategic and international issues of critical national interest and the alignment of India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities.

Over the years, KSB remained deeply engaged with issues related to India's foreign policy and governance. He wanted to see India "stable and prosperous at home, respected and influential abroad, a major force in the shaping of a new, equitable world order". One of his lifelong preoccupations was raising practical awareness of India's national security needs, and instilling such awareness "in our wider national consciousness, above all in various parts of the government itself".

KSB was prescient about India's emerging security challenges and deeply concerned about preserving "our international interests, especially in face of China's power and purposes". In 2016, KSB publicly cautioned Indian policy makers about "China's current ambitions – and continuing disregard of, if not hostility to, our interests". Most tellingly, he observed: "How so many Indians happily devise excuses for China's most adverse actions, even blaming ourselves, is a baffling peculiarity". The stark reality is today staring us in the face in Ladakh.

In his later years, KSB also grew increasingly preoccupied about India's ability to overcome its myriad challenges and problems, as well as the decline of mutual civility and reasoned democratic discourse. He strongly believed that as a nation, we must "function efficiently - and think modernly", inculcate greater civic sense, shun the tendency to be "obsessively inward looking", strengthen our institutions of governance, and commit ourselves more deeply to national purposes. These ideas and exhortations have an abiding relevance for India's progress, future success and global standing.

KSB brought together extraordinary diplomatic skills with a vast knowledge of world affairs, extensive international connections and exceptional insights into India's strategic imperatives. He will always be remembered with affection, respect and admiration as the guiding spirit of DPG, doyen of Indian diplomacy and mentor-at-large of the Indian strategic community.

His departure leaves behind an irreplaceable void, but his legacy will not only endure but also grow stronger in DPG. That is a promise to him which I will unfailingly keep.

Hemant Krishan Singh



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