

CHAPTER-IX

Relations Between India and Malaysia: United Front Government

(Deve Gowda Era)

Foreign Policy of United Front Government:

The United Front Government, a coalition of 13 parties, which came into power in June 1996 continued the earlier foreign policy. However, it laid great emphasis on improvement of relations with the neighbouring countries. It put forth Gujaral Doctrine under which unilateral concessions were made to the neighbouring countries with regard to travel and trade, without expecting reciprocity. Efforts were also made to promote free trade among the SAARC countries and to convert it into an economic union at the earliest. Another notable feature of the Gujaral doctrine was to eliminate the basis for outside intervention in the region. This was evident from the refusal of the new government to accept the offer of mediation by USA, Britain and Iran in Kashmir dispute. In other words the new government tried to make it clear to the various powers to keep out of South Asia.¹

Relations Between the two Countries:

India and Malaysia on 19 August 1996 decided to launch a 'new partnership' to build on the increasingly warm bilateral ties and work together on various international fora of which they were members. During a two-day visit to Malaysia, the Foreign Minister, Mr. I.K. Gujral laid emphasis that a strong Indo-Malaysian relationship could contribute to further consolidate bilateral ties, particularly economic cooperation. This was the first bilateral visit outside the South Asian region for Mr. Gujral and this could make the two countries in the region to take up bilateral relations on the same note of the dialogue as with ASEAN. Mr. Gujral clearly indicated in the continuity of economic reforms and foreign policy. Mr. Gujral also sought Malaysia's participation in the infrastructure development programme launched by India, particularly in the sectors of

highways, power and ports. Mr. Badawi told in an earlier, joint briefing Mr. Gujral appreciated the fact that India and Malaysia are getting closer and a new partnership has had evolved. This initiatives taken by Mr. Gujral could make India express its interests in APEC and invited the senior official meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim in Mauritius".²

Politically, In the larger context of Indo-Pakistan relations, Malaysia tended to box the two countries and adopted an artificially balanced position vis-a-vis India irrespective of the intrinsic nature of ties. Thus on Kashmir while privately expressing "understanding" for the complicated situation. Malaysia found it politic to go along with strong OIC resolutions, and considered Kashmir a "disputed territory". At the OIC extraordinary Summit in Islamabad in March 1997, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim repeated the Malaysian call for an amicable solution to the Kashmir issue in accordance with UN resolutions and Shimla agreement, Malaysia thus could not make any concession to Pakistan on the ground of religious affiliation and perhaps also because of the intimate economic relation which Malaysia had developed over all these years. In the past also Malaysia had shown the same courage and conviction when the question of India's security was standing in the way, Malaysia had obviously sided with India.

In the year 2000 when Malaysia contested for a non permanent seat in UN Security Council the two countries promised to support each other, further issue of Fiji. India's concern was well answered by the Malaysia despite her decision to support Fiji's move to rejoin Commonwealth.

On the economic front the two countries were continuously moving closer. In November 1996 the head of the two states met in Harare during the G-15 summit. This was an agreement on the vast scope for bilateral cooperation in education, satellite communications, defence, infrastructures (road, ports, Airport) and automobiles.

India, along with Malaysia, appeared all set to play a pivotal role in the setting up of the G-15 Fund which was proposed at the Harane Summit to promote trade and investment between members of the grouping. Zimbabwe and Egypt were the two other countries perceived to be key players in this initiative. A proposal was submitted by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who was

the chairman of G-15. India's High Commissioner to Malaysia, P.S. Sahai, who was present during the discussions, felt that the meeting between the CII core group and the Malaysian Prime Minister was "a good exchange", especially in the context of the burgeoning economic ties between India and Malaysia. The CII had offered its secretariat facilities for the next meeting of the G-15 Business Group during the next submit in Kuala Lumpur.

The already strong trade and investment ties between Malaysia and India further improved with the introduction of a new dimension in Science and Technology. This was one of the issues discussed by the CII core group visiting Kuala Lumpur. A CII delegation on science and technology had already visited Malaysia in the beginning of 1996. Linkages included Indian software support for Malaysia's mega multimedia corridor project and cooperation in satellite development programme. CII had invited Malaysian businessmen to participate in the Indian Engineering Trade Fair which was held in New Delhi.³

India's exports to Malaysia in 1995 amounted to US \$ 551.6 million and included meat and meat products, machinery and instruments, oil meals, cotton yarn and fabrics, transport equipment, rice, fruits and vegetables, chemicals and pharmaceuticals and marine products. The scope for promoting and expanding two-way trade between the two countries was very promising, according to Indian businessmen operating in Malaysia. This view was endorsed by the JBCC meeting in Kuala Lumpur in April 1995, and highlighted by the Malaysian Minister for International Trade and Industry, Rafidah Aziz in New Delhi in July 1995. It was also discussed during former Prime Minister Rao's visit to Malaysia in August 1995 and reiterated during the CII-MIDA seminar in Kuala Lumpur in December 1994.

However, the promising scenario for the burgeoning of India - Malaysia economic cooperation was not being reflected in the immigration regulation operating in Malaysia. This was brought up by External Affairs Minister Gujral during his discussions with his counter part. He pointed out that unless this deterrent which prevented the free flow of business, professional and tourist travellers from India into Malaysia was

removed, the full potential for trade and investment opportunities could never be tapped. Although a directive had reportedly been issued by Kuala Lumpur to its High Commission in New Delhi to ease visa regulations for bonafide travellers, this did not appear to have been translated into practice.⁴

The Indian Government's commitment to quicken economic and structural reforms helped increase trade with Malaysia by 25 to 30 percent in 1996 from RM 3.5 billion in 1995, said acting Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Deepak Vohra. "We are confident of achieving this target as the volume had already exceeded RM 2 billion in the first six months of this year". The strong and effective legal system coupled with the visit by Indian Foreign Minister, I.K. Gujral in August as well as trade seminars would help towards this. Deepak said India's economic and structural programmes, which began in 1991 under Prime Minister, Mr. Rao, would continue as the liberalisation of the strong up turn in the nation's economic fortunes since then. The improved investment environment produced by the economic reforms had returned India into a more attractive target for international investors, he said, adding that the "New India is totally open to foreign investment and it is our national priority".⁵

Although, significantly below that of either China or Malaysia, actual direct investment into India increased more than 10 fold over the past five years to over US \$ 2 billion (about RM 5 billion). India is one of the Malaysia's largest trading partners among the countries of the South with over all trade increasing by 20 to 25% annually over the past five years. However, he lamented over the fact that the trade volume between the two countries was not very high and efforts should be taken to improve the situation. "At the sametime, the balance of trade had been traditionally in Malaysia's favour, due to India's large import of palm oil". Besides palm oil, India's other major imports from Malaysia included timber, natural rubber, petroleum and tin. India's major exports to Malaysia included meat, meat products, machinery, instruments, textiles, fruits, vegetables, pharmaceuticals, marine products and electronic equipment. "The call for expanding the bilateral trade is unlimited. We are encouraging businesses as there are opportunities for collaboration", he said.

On 1 September 1996, there were 24 Indian-Malaysian joint ventures in the country with cumulative Indian investment estimated at RM 1 billion. The ventures involved palm oil refining, the production of pharmaceuticals, textiles, chemicals, steel, furniture and information technology. Deepak also said that Indian companies had the expertise and were involved in power generation, railways and the construction of bridges. As far as Malaysian investments in India; he said 45 Malaysian projects had been approved in areas such as rubber products manufacture, shrimps, telecommunication equipment, latex, textiles, industrial machinery and cellular telephone services. About three of these projects were already in operation. Between 1991 and 1996, Malaysia was among the top 10 investors in India with total approved investment of over RM 1 billion.⁶

Malaysian companies were urged to participate in construction and infrastructure development projects amounting to RM 20 billion in the Maharashtra state in India. The Public Works Minister of the Government of Maharashtra, Shri Nitin Gadkari said his Government had approved the privatisation of highway construction and infrastructure development programmes. "We invite Malaysian companies which have the expertise and experience in the construction of highways and infrastructure development to establish joint ventures with Indian companies and participate in this project", he told reporters after calling on Works Minister Datuk S. Samy Vellu at the Ministry.

The Government of Maharashtra was very impressed with the development that had taken place in Malaysia and was convinced that Malaysian developers and contractors could successfully undertake development programme in India. The Government planned to construct four express ways connecting Bombay to other major cities in India. Bombay was the commercial capital of India and added that 40% of foreign investments in India were in Maharashtra. The Government believed that there were lots of opportunities for Malaysians to undertake development programmes in his country. Samy Vellu advised Malaysian contractors and developers to undertake joint ventures with Indian companies and bid for the privatisation project.⁷

As Malaysian Airlines wanted to increase its operations to India, New Delhi had made it clear that unless issue of visas was liberalised, there would be no passengers to fly from India. Mr. Badawi said the CTBT was also discussed and both sides explained their positions. "We understand each other's position and in terms of the final objectives of nuclear disarmament, we are together". Mr. Gujral said he raised the problem relating to Indian banks opening branches in Malaysia and this was being considered by the Government, Mr. Anwar, who was also the Finance Minister said regulations and guidelines for foreign banks were being finalised.

India had asked Malaysia to consider allowing one of its banks to operate in Kuala Lumpur. Indian Foreign Minister, I.K. Gujral made the request when he met Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. He also requested that Malaysia look into the problems of bonafide Indian business they faced some difficulty in obtaining visas. Foreign Ministry under-secretary for East and South Asia, Mrs. Nazihah when briefed the press after meeting, said the name of the Indian bank was not mentioned but added that it would be a government sponsored bank. "We will study India's request", she said, adding that the difficulty in obtaining visas was only a problem of implementation and could be overcome. She said the thrust of the meeting was to explore and find ways of expanding economic and trade relations between the two countries. Gujral also referred to the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding awarded by the Indian government to Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir. In June of the same year, a seven member Jury headed by Indian Vice-President K.R. Narayanan chose Dr. Mahathir for his outstanding contribution in promoting close cooperation among developing countries. The Jury made the decision after careful consideration of the numerous nominations received from all over the world.⁸

At a meeting with Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi later, Gujral indicated that his government would look into Malaysia Airlines request to have more flights to India. Badawi said he informed Gujral that issuing visas to Indian nationals would not be a problem so long as they were genuine travellers. Asked if they discuss the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the proposed global pact to ban nuclear testing, Badawi said he explained Malaysia's view that there should be a nuclear free world. He

said Gujral explained to him India's stand and we understand each other's position but the final objective is to see a nuclear free world. The Information Minister of Malaysia Datuk Mohd. Rahmat, met Gujral, and said the new Indian government would follow up on the agreement between Binariang Sdn Bhd's Malaysia East Asia Satellite and India's national television station Doordarshan on the establishment of a satellite television in India.⁹

India was granted three projects in the area of highway infrastructure in which Malaysia had acknowledged expertise. India was offered an invitation to participate in Malaysia's construction sector. Larsen and Turbo and the Indian Railway consortium had already expressed interest and Gujral promised to bring up the matter with Transport Minister on his return to New Delhi. Besides new projects, earlier initiatives, undertaken during former Prime Minister N. Rao's visit there last year, were followed up and areas of slippage identified. New sectors were also thrown open for economic cooperation, such as professional education where Malaysia had the demand and the capital and India the supply in terms of skills. The former spent as much as Rs.21 billion annually on sending its students overseas to pursue professional and higher studies. If India could get even a chunk of this export market it would be a great boost, both for the economy and for trained teaching personnel in the country. Another area which had begun to be liberalised by Malaysia was also touched up on, with the first Indian bank seeking to set up shop in the country.

While Malaysia was among the top 10 (ten) investors in India, the latter was the fifth largest investor in Malaysia, after the U.S., Japan, Taiwan and Singapore. The total investment at Rs.14 billion equalled that of Malaysia in India. This was a scenario that did not exist in other ASIAN countries, where Indian investment was relatively low. As of July 1996, there were 24 Indian joint ventures operating in Malaysia all of which were profitable enterprises. They were in the areas of palm oil refining, drugs and pharmaceuticals, textiles and yarn, glass containers, automobile sector, specially chemicals, steel furniture, rubber products and information technology.¹⁰

The Jawahar Lal Nehru Award for International Understanding, 1994, was conferred on Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad at a function in Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on 20th December, 1996. Presenting the award, President, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma said Mahathir was 'Symbol of Vibrant Asia' who stood for the 'principle and values illumined' by Pandit Nehru. 'The developing countries themselves need to unite and speak with one voice to secure our place in the global market'. The President said that Mahathir has 'voiced the aspirations, fears and concerns of the countries of the South' and added that Malaysia had emerged in the front ranks of the 'Asian Tigers'. The award comprising a citation, a scroll and a cheque of Rs.15 lakh, was instituted in 1965. Dr. Mahathir, who is the 29th recipient of the award, is the fourth and longest-serving Prime Minister of his country. Malaysia has expressed support for New Delhi's bid for membership of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). "We will be supportive of India through APEC has not drawn up get a criteria for its membership", Dr. Mahathir told newsmen in New Delhi.

Dr. Mahathir, who held talks with Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, said his country looked forward to a new era of cooperative relationship with India. At a dinner hosted in Mahathir's honour by Gowda, the Malaysian Premier said his discussions with the Indian leaders had been "fruitful for charting the future course of our relations". At a meeting with the Indian Industry Mahathir called for joint strategy and offered Malaysia as a 'base for penetrating the ASEAN markets'. He pointed out that India's full dialogue partnership of ASEAN and membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have opened new opportunities with countries in the region. He said, "This linkage (of India) with one of the most dynamic regional groupings will further complement our strong bilateral bond."¹¹

Malaysian Premier, Mahathir Mohammad, on 22nd December, 1996, outlines a number of initiative which would help to meet both the challenges and the opportunities in consolidating ASEAN-India relations. "Some Indians perceive the ASEAN markets as being over-competitive and on the other hand, many in ASEAN view India as being too bureaucratic and still uncomfortable with an open economy".¹²

Malaysian businessmen looking for opportunities in India invited to invest in the privatisation of 55 infrastructure project in one of the country's most industrialized states, Maharashtra. Minister of International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said among the projects up for tender were port development, public housing, hotels, public amenities and independent power generation. A list with details on each project would be distributed by the ministry to enable interested parties to evaluate the projects potential, Rafidah said in Kuala Lumpur. She spoke to the reporters after a dialogue with an Indian trade delegation led by Maharashtra Minister of Trade and Commerce Shri Sureshdada Jain, at her ministry. The 18-member trade mission had the opportunity to discuss a wide range of bilateral issues including investment potential in India, and vice versa, with Rafidah, and ministry officers. Apart from the infrastructure projects, an industry which might be of interest to Malaysians was the manufacture of sub-components for automobiles-Maharashtra, of which Bombay is the capital, had a number of established automotive component producers.

Malaysia invited Indian businessmen to consider locating their high technology operations in Malaysia, producing for the ASEAN region. From 1986 to 1996, a total of 54 investments from India, particularly in the manufacturing sector were approved. Malaysian investments in India for the same period totalled an estimated US\$ 686 million in various sectors such as manufacturing, telecommunications, ports, petroleum and gas, electrical and engineering equipment, medical education and road construction. India was Malaysia's largest trading partner in South Asia. Malaysia's top five export items were palm oil, petroleum, transport equipment, palm olein and cork wood. Topping Indian exports were meat, non-ferrous metals, iron and steel, vegetables and fruits and textiles yarn. Total trade between the two countries in 1995 was RM 3.46 billion.¹³

However the relationship got strained temporarily when due to political reasons India demanded the arrest Mr. Quattrocchi who was involved in the Bofors pay off and was in Malaysia at that time.

The Malaysian Justice office had expressed inability to arrest Mr. Quattrocchi, one of the beneficiaries in the Bofors pay-offs, either on the basis of the warrant issued by a trial court in New Delhi or on the basis of the world-wide red corner alert issued by Interpol. The Malaysian cited the fact that India did not have an extradition treaty with them and stated that Mr. Quattrocchi's arrest would not serve any purpose at the moment since there was no question of extradition proceedings. They stated that even if he was arrested the questioning could only be done by Interpol pending a valid court order since no provision existed for other proceedings. Due to legal hinderance India further failed to pursue Malaysia. Had India made the extradition treaty this could have been done without delay.¹⁴

Gujral Era:

The Prime Minister of India Mr. I.K. Gujral undertook his first major trip abroad as External Affairs Minister towards the end of July 1997 to attend the ASEAN-related meetings in Malaysia. He took part both in the discussions of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Post-ministerial meeting of the South East Asian grouping. The ARF meeting held on 25 July 1997 and the three day post-ministerial session of the ASEAN begun after one day gap. The meeting was attended as the dialogue partner of the ASEAN. The participating countries invariably represented by their Foreign Ministers but this was the first that a member-nation represented by its Prime Minister. Mr. Gujral was holding additional charge of the port-folio of External Affairs, his first love, be he had two Ministers of state, Mr. Saleem Sherwani and Mrs. Kamla Sinha to assist him. Mr. Gujral's decision to attend these meetings was reported of New Delhi's strong political commitment to strengthen ties with South East Asia.¹⁵

He had taken part in the meetings of both the ARF and the post-ministerial ASEAN conference last year around the same time in his capacity as the External Affairs Minister. That was one of his first trips abroad after assuming office in the United Front government and turned out to be highly useful, as it afforded an opportunity for interaction with his colleagues from as many as 17 countries – seven members of the ASEAN and ten dialogue partners. At that time, the Geneva discussion on the

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) was the dominant issue and Mr. Gujral utilised the opportunity to put across the view point of India which, as the deliberations at the various international fora showed, was virtually in the minority of one. The formal agenda of these meetings was, no doubt, important but for more important were the opportunities for contacts with other world leaders outside the framework of the structured discussions. The Prime Ministerial presence there was certain to convey a message – that New Delhi's decision to look eastward was a substantive move, both in the political and economic context, not a hollow slogan. It helped counter negative signals that might had been sent by India's rejection of the proposal for the Singapore Airline's participation alongwith the Tatas, in a private domestic venture here.¹⁶

The ASEAN discussions was added significance then as its three new members, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar also attended its meetings for the first time. This was not just numerical addition but a substantive geo-political change. This was evident among other factors, from the fact that ASEAN might have contiguity with China.

The Singapore Prime Minister Mr. Goh Chok Tong, who was in New Delhi in 1994, as the Chief guest at the Republic Day parade and came to Calcutta in 1996 to attend a C.I.I. function and again visited India in the month of September and attended at the competition ceremony of the technology work in Bangalore, the foundation-stone of which was laid by him over three years ago. Also under discussion were the proposals for the visits of the Foreign Ministers of Japan and Australia.¹⁷

Indian Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram urged the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in the month of July 1997, to ease entry of Indians into Malaysia by removing the anomaly in visa restrictions between the two countries, Indian nationals with valid visas and travel documents turned away at the Penang International Airport without any explanation, according to reports in the Malaysian press. The Malaysian daily tabloid Sun had reported that some of the 20 Indians who had been affected in the last two weeks, had even been placed under detention before being flown back to India

According to the newspaper, the directive to send them back came from the Immigration Department headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁸

The Indian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur had taken up the matter with the Penang immigration authorities, who was turn referred them to the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. The High Commission then followed up the matter with the Malaysian foreign office, Deputy High Commissioner, Deepak Vohra told the Financial Express. On 25th July 1997, the same day, before Chidambaram's meeting with Anwar, 11 tourists who arrived from India via Singapore on Singapore Airline SQ192 and a tourist on SQ 194 were whisked away to the airport's lockup soon after they landed in Penang, the Sun reported. They were all flown back to India on SQ 197 later that evening, according to the tabloid. The visa restrictions on Indian nationals seeking to enter Malaysia were incongruous in the context of the booming bilateral trade and investment between the two countries. During his visit to Kuala Lumpur a year ago, the then foreign minister I.K. Gujral had brought up this issue with the Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The Malaysian side claimed that steps had been taken to ensure that bonafide Indian travellers such as businessmen have no difficulty in entering Malaysia.¹⁹

However, the situation on the ground did not bear out this claim, as Chidambaram pointed out during both his bilateral meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia as also in his 9 + 1 Post Ministerial Conference meeting with the ASEAN foreign ministers in 1997. Drawing attention to some of the anomalies between the visa regime and the facilities offered by India and some ASEAN countries, he wanted all of them to work at a method by which "genuine travellers and business persons" could be granted visas expeditiously. The ASEAN - India Business Council had also drawn attention to this problem, which he said was felt only in a couple of countries. The Finance minister also asked the Indian High Commissioner P.S. Sahai, to detail to the Malaysian authorities actual instances of the anomalous treatment of genuine Indian travellers.²⁰

In its endeavour to become the leading Software Super-power of Asia, Kuala Lumpur turned to New Delhi for skilled manpower in 1997. The country, in the process

of setting up the Multi-media Super-Corridor (MSC), invested \$10 billion dollars an immense 750 square kilometre software development zone or park stretching south from Kuala Lumpur all the way to the new KL International Airport. According to Dr. Othman Yeop Abdullah, Executive Chairman of Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC), the MSC employed between 50,000 and 70,000 people by 2000. MSC needed to attract the best talent in the world, and India could better provide the skilled manpower as it is the only country that has an abundant pool of knowledge workers as well as strong historical and cultural links with Malaysia. A delegation to this effect from Malaysia came to India to create awareness about the potential that MSC held for Indian software professionals and companies to 2000. According to the charter of MSC all the companies in it are allowed unlimited recruitment of manpower from all over the world and are exempted from the regulation of having to employ a certain number of ethnic Malays, as well as placing 30 percent equity in Malay hands.²¹

It allowed 100 percent subsidiaries, as well as the possibility of no limits on the number of Indian software professional in MSC. The show-piece of the multimedia corridor is the city of Cyber Jaya, which housed the majority of the companies. The competition for the Silicon Valley of Asia between Bangalore, Subic Bay (Phillipines) and Cyber Jaya is quite encouraging for the buyers. Since the city was started from scratch, the efforts that Malaysia put in is exemplary in making Cyber Jaya the perfect city for hi-tech. It was no surprise then that MDC then enlisted all the partners it could get in its drive to attract the best and brightest, even from the competition. In India, it used the resources and good offices of the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) – the apex body for the software industry and the Manufacturer's Association of Information Technology (MAIT) – the apex body for the Information Technology (IT) hardware industry, as well as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). One of the things that the Malaysian delegation did as part of its – itinerary was to give a presentation on MSC at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi, the breeding ground for some of the world's best knowledge workers. This clearly reflected the zeal of Malaysia and also how much she expected from India in its endeavours.²²

And in the final analysis we find that the relations with Malaysia during the United Fronts Governments rule in India, was largely focused on economy. It is during the United Fronts Government regime that both the countries proposed to play a pivotal role in setting up a G-15 fund at Harare Summit. Further India's bestowal of the Jawaharlal Nehru award for International Understanding on Malaysia's Premier during United Front Government added a new chapter to the relation. As a result of this Malaysia openly supported India's membership in APEC. In the field of Science and Technology especially in Information Technology agreement between the two countries were signed. India also played a very friendly role for Malaysia as a fully endorsed the CTBT norms and acknowledged Malaysia's concern for a free nuclear zone in South East Asia.

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