

Czech it out!

By Gautam Pingle The Hans India

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S K Patil, Commerce Minister of India, at an official function in Prague Castle spoke about the close relationship between Marshal Tito and Pandit Nehru, the Yugoslavia and Indian leadership of the non-aligned nations, etc.

When he sat down, the Indian Ambassador told Patil that he was in the Czechoslovak Soviet Socialist Republic, not Yugoslavia! Old story; but even now many 'well informed' Indians continue to refer to Czechoslovakia, a State that was dissolved peacefully in 1993 into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

The Embassy in Prague is located behind Prague Castle, where much of Czech history was played and re-played. It is also where the President of the Czech Republic resides and contains St Vitus Cathedral where the kings were crowned.

They moved to this more modern building when earlier the Embassy was in an historic building in Mala Strana – the Lesser Town – below the Castle. Incidentally, our sleepy Ministry of External Affairs in South Block has the old address and telephone numbers on its web site still. When will it wake up?

The Embassy is staffed by 13 persons and seems an efficient operation. They have only 500 Indians living in the country to cope with and most of the work is related to visas apart from the diplomatic and commercial activity. It costs the Indian taxpayer Rs 5 crores a year and it seems worth it.

The Ambassador, Venkatesan Ashok, is a shrewd and balanced person belonging to the Indian Foreign Service (1982 batch) having graduated out of IIT, Delhi. He has a good knowledge of Central Europe. He was Joint Secretary for Central Europe in South Block and also at Vienna liaising with the International Atomic Energy Association. He is an author – of a book on Dashavataram – and comes from a family that has served the state in the past and does so in the present.

The Indian Foreign service has been the choice of the top rankers of the Civil Service for five decades and the persons who joined are very interested in projecting India's interest abroad and also learning the language of the countries to which they were posted. Many have attended courses in their host countries and have established personal relationships at various levels.

Mr. A. P. Venkateshwaran, our former Foreign Secretary, and M.L. Sondhi had their first postings in Prague. As for the future, this continuum seems unlikely any longer, as the service of the state is no longer attractive to respectable persons. Meanwhile the top of the class tends to prefer more lucrative roles in the other branches of the civil service than the Foreign Service.

President Vaclav Klaus is very skeptical of the EU and its delusions of becoming a multi-national state; after all, the Czechs know what happened when they were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and before that of the Holy Roman Empire ('neither holy, nor Roman nor an empire' it was said).

The Czech crown – the kurona- is stable and rising against the dollar as they have wisely delayed acceptance of the Euro. The Czech government has control of interest and exchange rates, monetary and other economic policy as well as receiving EU subsidies, etc. The best of all worlds intended to be transition, but which Klaus intends to extend beyond all limits.

What can India learn or gain from the Czech Republic, which has been an old friend of the country even before our Independence? One of the first Departments of Sanskrit in Europe was established in Charles University in 1850 though interest in India and its philosophy, religion, literature and languages is 200-years old. Odoricus Boemus (1286-1331), a Franciscan monk of Bohemian origin, also traveled to India. After visiting Thanna, he sailed along the Malabar Coast, and then went inland into what is today's Tamil Nadu. He continued his journey via Andaman Islands to Sumatra, Java and South China. His travel book, *Itinerarius Orientalis* (Oriental Itinerary), records Indian customs.

Charles University has a Department of Indology with many Czech students – the Ambassadors' Secretary, for example – a very nice young lady who speaks Hindi, Tamil and English. Czech companies - Bata, Jawa, Tatra and Skoda Power - brought people of both countries face-to-face and working together. A number of Czech companies and experts have worked with Heavy Engineering Corporation. Bata, of course, is a household name in India.

Java was a popular motorcycle in India. There is an interesting story about its model Yezdi. Indian engineers working on the model were experiencing difficulties. The Czech engineers then took over, and started the motorcycle. They exclaimed "Yezdi," which means in Czech 'it runs'.

While its Indian customers may not know the Czech meaning, the model has remained popular for years. Currently, Infosys has established a center at Brno, which employs 350 persons of diverse nationalities.

The Czech Lands became the industrial hub when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Hapsburgs. Currently the Czech Republic has established a niche position for itself, evolving to become a technology workhorse in the European Union.

For India, a thrust area may be a focus on technology collaboration, especially in niche areas like robotics, nano-technology and lasers. Few countries are willing to share this cutting edge technology.

So what makes this collaboration worth a lot is the Czech willingness to synergise their efforts with the best minds from India with equity and reciprocity in the matter of Intellectual Property Rights and results of research.

The declining population in the Czech Republic, together with the declining numbers of young people keen to pursue scientific and technical research, has led them to look for bright young minds in Asia, especially India. With 26 universities (including one each of the Defence and Police), and the world-class Charles University founded in 1348, the Czechs are keen to have larger numbers of Indian students on their rolls at all levels of university education (currently we have about 150 students all over the country). The main problem is learning Czech.

The Czech language was revived and developed with great effort (saving it from being swamped by German and then Russian), which is the cultural and national heritage of 15 million Czechs and Slovaks. They thus appreciate foreigners willing to plunge into the intricacies of the Czech, a West Slavic language.

In most Slavic languages, many words (especially nouns, verbs and adjectives) have many forms or inflections. In this regard, Czech and the Slavic languages are closer to their Indo-European origins than other languages in the same family that have lost much inflection. Thus Czech shares surprising similarities with Sanskrit, including seven declensions, as opposed to eight in Sanskrit.

Indians can learn a lot from smaller developed nations rather than the obsession with the Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the USA, Britain, Canada and Australia. English spoken there makes life easier for English-educated Indians and is the main advantage. But once the language barrier is crossed, greater opportunities and learning may follow from other developed nations of Europe and from Japan, Israel and

South Korea. We in India have little idea of what these small but developed nations are doing for themselves and what they can do for us. It is time to learn.

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