

# MEET THE ACTING CONSUL GENERAL OF INDIA IN NEW YORK

**Dr. Devyani Khobragade is the current acting Consul General at the Indian Consulate in New York. Between the Finance Minister's impending visit, the arrival of the next Consul General and many other obligations, she graciously took some time out to introduce herself to The Indian Panorama readers. She candidly answered questions on her personal life and on a number of issues, including the OCI cards issue that has been upsetting the Indian American community.**

**Here are a few excerpts from the interview she gave to The Indian Panorama team comprising Chief Editor Prof. Indrajit S Saluja and Principal Reporter Pooja Premchandran in the ornate office of the Consul General of India, April 3.**

**Q. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood?**

I was born in Tarapore near Mumbai. I have had my education all over India because my father was in IAS. But I studied medicine in Mumbai. While medicine was very interesting I wanted to travel and wanted to experience different cultures. Medicine did not offer that. So I decided while doing MS in Ophthalmology to shift and take up the Civil Service. My father was a bureaucrat and my uncle, Dr. Gondane, is the High Commissioner of Papua New Guinea and he was also posted here in New York as Deputy Consul General. So I knew that I would be good at Civil Service. I am a people's person; I like to be with people. So I thought it would be a good opportunity to be connected with my country and work for my country abroad at the same time. My first posting was in Germany. I also did a posting in Pakistan, which was the most challenging one in my career. After that, I came back to Delhi for a few years and now I am posted in New York.

**Q. Can you tell us a few significant highs and lows of your career?**

Well, lows are the same that is there everywhere. There is a hierarchical bureaucracy that exists where your ideas are disregarded and ignored. There have been instances where there have been a few issues with colleagues. Also there is a problem with moving to a new country and settling in a new country, especially for a woman with young children. The highs have been a quite a few too. The most



*The Acting Consul General of India in New York Devyani Khobragade speaks with The Indian Panorama Chief Editor Prof. Indrajit S Saluja, April 3, 2013*

*Photo/ TIP-Pooja*

significant one was where I could be a part of the foreign policy that commenced the Srinagar- Muzaffarabad bus service. It is wonderful to see your ideas and efforts finally coming to light. There have been many highs like this especially when such ideas are considered into foreign policy making. I also had a very good relation with the political class of Pakistan. Even today when he meets our Ambassador, Gilani asks about me. It feels nice to be remembered.

**Q. What are your ambitions and future goals?**

The highest point in our careers is the Ambassador's post. But besides that my ambition is to make some changes within our Civil Services. For example, we lack a crèche, spousal support and many other facilities that women who are in foreign services of other countries are entitled to. My other ambition is to have direct impact on a foreign policy for the underprivileged women. I would like to work as an advisory capacity in an NGO or be a Trustee or a Board Member to communicate directly with the community.

**Q. Can you tell us a bit about your family?**

I have two young daughters. They are six and three years old. My husband is a professor of Philosophy. It is difficult for him to follow wherever my career takes me. But we work something out. I come from a family where our parents always encouraged that women must be economically independent. So they always stressed on education. I have another sister. My father would say 'You are my sons and daughters' and that is exactly what made me take up the Civil Service when everyone dissuaded me from leaving a financially beneficial medical field. They also told me that a woman couldn't manage a family and children with a job like mine. But I always thought if a man can do it, so could I.

**Q. The tourism industry has suffered massively due to the recent attacks on women. A recent statistics published in a**

**newspaper in the UK has provided evidence to this. What is the government's plan to address this issue?**

Because of a few unwanted incidents, there has been an impression that the entire country is unsafe. Such incidents cannot reflect the situation of an entire country. I am not condoning the attacks on women. As you see, the government has taken extremely stringent actions to combat violence against women. I feel the whole consciousness of Indian society has awakened with one incident. It will not be relegated to the background. There will be a concerted action. Other than this, there are no reasons for tourism to drop in India. We remain a safe and secure country. And certainly we will do our bit to make sure it remains so. At the Consulate, we have been putting out information about the steps taken and ordinances issued by the Indian government since the incident. Our ambassador, Nirupama Rao wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal. So we have been making small efforts and will continue to make them in future too. We even intended to ask the Finance Minister to address the international media during his visit to the US and help clear the image we have now.

**Q. There has been a continual demand on the government to persuade the US government to extend more leniencies or provide quotas for Indians applying for work visa. Will we see more leniencies from the government's side for H1B visa applicants?**

We are talking to the government about the upcoming immigration laws. We are trying to safeguard the interests of Indians who are highly specialized and skilled by increasing the number of H1B applications that can be accepted from Indian applicants. We also want to streamline a few procedures that are to be taken while applying for the H1B visa. The embassy is taking up these issues but as you know it's

a continual process.

**Q. The recent surrogacy issue has led to an uproar as well. Recently the home ministry introduced a rule stating that foreign nationals who come for surrogacy to India must come on a medical visa. Do you think it will have an adverse effect on tourism?**

I think this decision has been taken by the Home Ministry to protect the child that has been born through surrogacy in India from becoming stateless. It also ensures that the financial, property and such rights of the woman who opts to be a surrogate of foreign nationals are protected. Earlier, people were coming on tourist visa, and leaving so we had no record of any thing here. It has also been that when the child goes to any other country, he or she is not accepted in that country as a citizen. This letter from anybody going to India for surrogate child that we demand now, will ensure that the child has a proven record of citizenship intact with the ministry. The letter is a simple and easily obtainable letter. The tourism industry should not have any issue with this. That is just the usual obfuscation of the issue. But we give medical visas easily as long as the documents provided are strong.

**Q. There have been growing complaints from the OCI cards holders who travel to India and face problems before entering the country. What is the reason for that?**

This is due to the regulation of MHA that states that if a person has an OCI card and he or she is below 12 or above 50, at that point and in these particular instances, they have to get their US passport information endorsed on their OCI cards. The rationale behind this is that a child after 12 and a man after 50 begin to change appearances. But this rule is not very well known. That is why there is such confusion about the OCI cards. So if you are above 50 and your passport details do not match with the OCI cards you will face problems at the immigration. We do have the information displayed on the website where people go to apply for the OCI card. Travisa website too has the information. There is such a rule and we have to follow it. I will be happy to clarify the rule through media.

**Q. What is your take on the Indian community in New York?**

Perhaps the Indian community in New York is the most successful one anywhere in the world. We are happy to engage with them and work together towards common goals. I always say that our position in this country is bolstered by a very powerful and enigmatic voice and Diaspora of our community. Now that the Indian community has proven that we are professionally well equipped. I suppose the next logical step is for them to be directly involved in the political system of this country.