

Press release

Prof. M.L. Sondhi Prize for International Politics, 2018

Madhuri Santanam Sondhi, Trustee, in her welcome address spoke of Prof. Sondhi's foresight and insights into foreign policy, which he aired publicly after his resignation from the Ministry of External Affairs, during his term in Parliament and his long academic stint at JNU. He is known, among other things, for having predicted from the sixties onwards, the collapse of the Soviet system, for advocating India's opening up with Israel and the need to pay attention to South-eastern and Far Eastern countries.

Shri Lalit Man Singh, Trustee and former Foreign Secretary, paid generous tributes to Shri Rasgotra, for his polished diplomacy, humour and conduct of the Ministry – and also for his Hindi poetry.

The Prof ML Sondhi Prize for International Politics was awarded to Shri Maharaj Krishna Rasgotra, former Foreign Secretary, at a ceremony held at the India International Centre on 30 November 2019.

Chief Guest Shri Ashwani Kumar, former Minister for Law & Justice, drew attention to Rasgotra's role in the conduct of foreign policy during Indira Gandhi's tenure, enhanced by his ability to communicate in chaste Punjabi with the Prime Minister's PPS, RK Dhavan. He paid fulsome tributes to the flawless functioning of the Foreign Ministry in its dealings with foreign heads of state and visitors.

The first part of Shri Maharaj Krishna Rasgotra's address was taken up with an appraisal of the current Prime Minister's economic policies, the Goods & Services Tax (GST) along with grass roots improvements to usher in a 'clean economy in a clean India aspiring for high global status.' He approved measures to improve the lives of the common people through the Swachh Bharat campaign, 'the construction of millions of toilets, healthcare insurance programme covering 100 million families every year, the Ayushman and Indradhanush immunization programmes, the provision of cooking gas in every household, a vast house-building project, provision of electricity in every hamlet in the remotest areas in this vast land.

He also approved drastic tax cuts for the corporates, recapitalising the banks, and labour reforms to energise the economy.

On foreign affairs he reviewed India's Nepal policy – a country with which he was closely associated during his time in the Foreign Ministry, and suggested ways to meet the challenge of China in Nepal. He suggested improving relations with Pakistan despite the current stalemate, through cricket and health diplomacy!

He claimed that China's most serious challenge to India's security is in the Indian Ocean, where it seeks to become a dominant power, but there is also an unsettled northern border, where Chinese forces continue to nibble at territories on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control and Chinese patrols often penetrate deep into Indian territory. He expressed himself strongly against India joining China's BRI which has "a strong hint of imperial-colonial odour". However "India might be persuaded to consider a China-India Friendship Railway Corridor, the best way to convert China's adverseriality into an attitude of cooperative friendliness".

- i) His suggestions for implementation include:
- ii) China's railway line from Lhasa to Kathmandu be extended to Raxaul on the India-Nepal border and from there to places of pilgrimage of interest to Chinese Buddhists – Sarnath and Gaya.
- iii) The railway line could then head to areas of developmental / commercial interest viz. Raipur (Chhattisgarh), Hyderabad (Telangana), Bengaluru (Karnataka) and Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Alternatively, access from Hyderabad / Bengaluru to a port on India's West Coast might be considered.
- iv) For transit of Chinese trade with third countries, designated wagons would be sealed at Raxaul and at the designated port by Indian customs.
- v) China should provide the funds on easy negotiated terms and use Indian labour to the maximum extent possible, also machinery and equipment available in India, otherwise imported from China.