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One-of-a-kind institution builder

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MUCH has been written about Ambassador Satinder Lambah, focusing on his diplomatic career. -
File photo

Tarun Das

MUCH has been written about Ambassador Satinder Lambah, focusing on his diplomatic career. After retirement, he made a huge mark as an institution builder. For many years, till his death last week, he served as a member of the Board of Trustees of Ananta Aspen Centre and was the chairman for four years. Extremely particular about policies and processes, he set high standards, leading this institution in all its activities.

Drawing from his foreign policy background and knowledge of his colleagues, he started a series of newsletters written by former IFS officers who were experts on a country or region — Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Latin America, Middle East, Russia, East Asia, etc. These newsletters were useful for all those who wanted up-to-date information on a country/region.

He went even further with the neighbourhood countries. Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar were covered through information gleaned from their local papers. Both these activities started by him as chairman continue to this day. Another initiative was related to his long association and work with Pakistan. He put together a joint group of former High Commissioners of India and Pakistan and brought them together for in-person meetings on bilateral relations.

The leadership development programmes of the institution, using the Socratic dialogue methodology, were of special interest to him. He actively supported the programmes in different categories, from college students to executives, young women, heads of NGOs, government officials and others.

Mentoring younger people was his forte. He believed in them and encouraged them diligently and constantly. He initiated lectures on foreign policy in universities in every state.

His commitment was such that he would join virtual board meetings from his sickbed, a reflection of his determination and perseverance. Sati Lambah was always, using cricket parlance, ‘Not out’. He never gave up.

The same high level of diligence was visible in his leadership of Track II strategic dialogue with the US, China and Singapore. He was at his very best here, since these dialogues were extensions of his previous official role. He showed clarity, firmness and meticulous attention to the drafting of joint statements or letters to governments. In the case of the Singapore Dialogue, he insisted on stepping down from chairmanship because he had completed five years, and he felt — no one else did — that change in leadership must be followed in an institution. The institution’s board consisted of sitting and former MPs, academics, personalities from industry, media, NGOs etc. He commanded respect and goodwill from all. This was an amazing quality of an extraordinary leader.

Lambah was a multi-faceted personality who transited from his ambassadorial role to special envoy to institution leader and builder seamlessly.