

Actors Acting & Action



Gopalkrishna Gandhi



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES
Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore - 560 012, India

Actors, Acting and Action

Second Annual Mohandas Moses Memorial Lecture

Gopalkrishna Gandhi
Governor of West Bengal, Kolkata

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Gopalkrishna Gandhi

I thank the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Dr. Kasturirangan and Smt. Achala Mohandas Moses for their gracious invitation to me.

I did not know Mohandas Moses personally. One does not have to know a man or woman of action to feel the impact of their work.

I offer his memory my tribute; I offer his example my salutation.

But I do so as chaff might, to grain. Mohandas Moses' life-work justified the choice of his first name; mine fails the chance of my surname. He brought to every office he held a vision of what he could do from it, of what he could make of that opportunity to serve the 'larger good'. The Food Corporation of India must run profitably. Mohandas Moses saw that it could also serve the cause of food security. Today, when circumstances are obliging us to import wheat,

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which we exported not too long ago, Mohandas Moses' is more than a memory to honour. It is an example to learn from.

As I pondered over a suitable subject for this talk, the word 'action' kept coming unbidden to mind – only natural in Mohandas Moses' context. As did the word 'acting' – only natural in the context of a Governor who has become adept at quick dress-changes – kurta without jacket, kurta with jacket, bandgala to dhoti, dhoti to achkan, achkan to lounge-suit depending on the stage he is on and the speech he is to make. I am reminded of what Orhavan Veli of Turkey said once : “What have we *not* done for our country! Some of us gave our lives, some of us gave speeches!” And with that let me enter straightaway the theme of this lecture – Actors, Acting and Action.

We are all, consciously or unconsciously, actors. For we do, at the very minimum have a sense of 'appearance'. If we can afford to, we often dress to make a statement. Even the most enlightened and enlightening of us.

Michael Krohnen gives an account of a lunch with the extraordinary philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti :

An Indian actor and actress came to see Krishnamurti and were invited to take lunch. She was fairly tall,

with stunning, classical Indian features and lustrous dark hair falling below her shoulders. Dressed in an exquisite sari, with gold threads running through the azure silk, she moved with elegant poise, A crimson bindi dot between her eyes embellished her exotic beauty.

During lunch the lady, a beauty queen turned movie star, said that both of them were on their way to Hollywood – she to make her US debut in a major science fiction film, he to play the hero in an adventure film for television. She went on to tell us that her role required her to shave off her luxuriant hair. Seeing it cascading down to her shoulders, it was hard for me to imagine that she would actually go through with it and for a moment I thought she was just telling a tall story.

As the conversation idly flowed around films, acting and actors, Krishnamurti remarked quite generally, “Actors are terribly vain”. At this, the actress stopped chewing her food and her dark eyes flashed, perhaps because she took his remarks as being directed against her. Composing herself, she retorted without anger but with a somewhat cool intonation, “But, Krishnaji, aren’t you also a little vain? After all, you comb your hair to conceal the bald spot on your forehead.”

Her matter-of-fact, calm delivery softened the forthright statement and resulted in a minuscule silence around the table. I, for one, was taken by surprise, both by her acute observation and by the fact that until then I simply hadn't noticed that he did have a large bald spot which was covered by an adventurous sweep of hair.

Krishnamurti didn't react at all. For a breathless second he quietly looked at her, not batting an eyelid, nor uttering a word. With a tiny smile around his lips, he brought the fork to his mouth to take food. The conversation continued amiably. After lunch, Krishnamurti took the couple on a walk through the Oak Grove, lush-green after recent rains.

Months later, I went to see the film in which the lady starred, *Star Trek One*.

At first I had some difficulty recognizing her with a shaved head. Despite baldness, or perhaps because of it, she came across as stunningly beautiful.

It would be instructive to recall that in the 1920s, Hollywood had offered Krishnamurti who was a sensationally good-looking youth, one million dollars to play the role of the Buddha for a feature film. Needless to say,

this Renouncer of Renouncers declined the offer – a loss to Hollywood but what a gain to philosophy!

So, it may be said that we are all part-time actors. But, if we are part-time actors, let us also be clear that we do not thereby become part-time hypocrites. We practice what may be called a form of natural cosmetics, not to disguise or to deceive but just to protect or enhance our dignity. There is nothing wrong in that. The wearing of clothes is of course the most basic of this form. Even the psychologically challenged, unless they suffer a total breakdown of mental controls, we know, retain the human instinct of covering the body. They are certainly not acting, not deceiving.

Before Gandhi's family joined him in South Africa he took great care about the way they should be attired. He got his wife to wear a sari in the Parsi style so as to fit in with the section of society they were to relate to in South Africa, and he got his children to wear socks and shoes even on the long humid journey across the Arabian Sea.

But in 1914, when the large Gandhi family was returning to India, he asked his nephew to arrange a totally different sartorial appearance for the various children:

...I want every child to land in India with Indian-style clothes on. The very young should have a lungi,

a shirt and a cap like the round one of velvet we have and the others should have a dhoti, a shirt and a cap. The grown-ups like you should wear a *safa* and a long coat... I see no need for the boys to have shoes. However, if they have sandals they may keep them. I think new ones should not be made....

Emma Tarlo, who has written highly regarded books on clothes and clothing says :

By the time he left South Africa in 1914, Gandhi had already learned to weave hand-loom cloth and had already made public appearances dressed in simple Indian styles of white cotton dress as a means of political protest and identification with oppressed peoples. When he arrived back in India the following year, he staged a dramatic appearance dressed in a white turban, tunic and dhoti, an adaptation of Kathiawadi peasant dress which visually challenged the well established hierarchies that elevated Western over Indian, urban over rural and elite over popular.

It is easy to underestimate just how radical Gandhi's appearance and clothing policies were. Not only did he challenge long established hierarchies through his own dress but he also proposed a complete re-clothing of the nation as well as a full scale reorganization of the textile industry.

This was not 'acting' in the ordinary sense but it was about appearing in a certain way, to make a statement and a very big one at that. Tarlo adds :

...Gandhi's decision to adopt a short dhoti or loincloth in 1921 was partly... (because) he had been preaching that it were better for people to reduce their clothing to a mere loincloth made of khadi than to wear more ample garments made from foreign cloth but he felt that his words did not hold weight as long as he himself was fully dressed. It was the plight of the poor combined with what he considered the failure of the khadi campaign that finally drove him to reduce his own clothing, initially on a temporary basis "as a sign of mourning" that swaraj was still far off and as means of "making the way clear" for those who could only afford a minimum quantity of khadi... Whilst the subtleties of what Gandhi wished to evoke were often misunderstood, his humble appearance had a profound impact on his followers both in India and abroad.

There was a distinguished political figure in India who had held high positions. But nature had made his physical height short. He compensated it with a Gandhi cap that was so tall as to pass for a ship. This was an innocent Green Room touch.

Some of course are obliged to dress in a particular way as, for instance, soldiers and priests. When they do so, are they acting? When I see a jawan or a military officer, something within me stirs to respect them. A soldier, a padre, a monk – why, even a lawyer in his black gown or a doctor in his white ‘overshirt’ with a stethoscope around his neck – behaves in a certain way in which he need not, when he is not in those role-defining clothes. There are some things which are ‘simply not done’ when you are wearing a prescribed attire. In fact you become something else when you are wearing those. You become part of an ‘Order’, with codes of behaviour which also bring or inspire respect. In fact certain Christian orders have consciously substituted the traditional attire of priests and nuns to ‘normal’ clothes so as not to receive any unfair special status. So, when we observe a code which is connected to what we wear, we are playing a role, we are acting a part. Not deceiving, not pretending, but nonetheless playing a part different from which is our ‘natural self’.

What of those who do not have a prescribed professional attire? They too play parts no less, act no less.

So, all of us are actors. Some are so more consciously than others.

Image, image-making and image-keeping are natural triggers in humans. All of you have read and been moved by George Orwell's timeless work *Animal Farm*, have read and been nightmared by *1984*. Some of you have also read his lesser-known but profound autobiographical essay 'Shooting An Elephant'. As a police officer in Burma, Orwell was called upon to 'do something' about an elephant in *musth* that had strayed into the habitation. For no reason other than that he was expected by the throng behind him to kill the elephant, Orwell did so. As he poured bullet after bullet into the pachyderm's puzzled head, he was ashamed. Orwell records the event almost with self-loathing. He ends the essay by saying the only reason he, a *sahib*, shot the animal was 'to avoid looking a fool'. He had to fool himself into acting a *sahib*.

There is a similar experience recorded by Edward J. Thompson, a young English poet who became a friend – and critic – of Tagore's from 1913. EJT's first visit to Santiniketan saw the following experience:

Three groups were playing football. I went to another, who were cricketing. I found they played really well, especially as they were small boys. After a time, I said I would show them how to bowl off-breaks. A great crowd gathered, to see the exhibition ball. A master was batting. I tossed down a dolly, which pitched a good foot outside

the off-stump. He swiped wildly, the ball broke a foot and knocked the off-stump flat. The crowd was tremendously impressed; had I been wise, I should have bowled no more. I was fool enough to be persuaded later to take the leather in hand again. The pitch was very short, so I sent down a few overpitched balls, which a master moved to considerable distances. The boys began to think the *sahib* was very small beer as a bowler, so seeing the prestige of my race at stake, I took my coat off and whopped down a few fast ones which soon leveled all the haughty fellow's sticks.

Orwell, for the prestige of his office had to shoot hard and shoot well. Thompson, for the prestige of his race, had to bowl fast, and bowl well. Both were acting and acting well.

So acting which is not easy, is part of all our lives. Persons in high office, if they are naïve 'act high and mighty'. But if they are subtle, they act humble. The supremely self-assured Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel, no example of humility, once rebuked a pretender by saying 'Oh, don't be so humble-humble; you are not that great!'

I would like to share with you one other great exposure of 'acting humble'. In this case, mine. In 1989 or 1990, Mother Teresa came to Rashtrapati Bhavan to call on President Venkataraman. I was Joint Secretary to the

President. I sought and got the President's permission to receive Mother Teresa as she alighted from the car in the grand North Court of that palace – a task which would normally have been left to the able hands of the President's AdC. My objective was simple and selfish. I wanted to use the opportunity to invoke her blessing for myself and my family. As she emerged from the car, I bent down to touch her feet and eyes closed, prayed for Grace. I imagined beams of light moving from Mother Teresa's eyes into my head as she stood there, unmoving, for several seconds. But then when I straightened myself – as I had to – I realized that during all those blessed seconds, Mother Teresa had not been looking at this feet-toucher at all. She was, instead, taking a visual measure of Rashtrapati Bhavan's dimensions and it was only when she had finished with that exercise that she looked at me to say with a glint in her eye 'This building will do nicely for a hospital!' My illusions – or what remained of them – were finally and fully dispelled when, opening a little pouch, she proceeded to say 'Let me give you my business card'. Silver beams of Grace I did not get, but I certainly got a lesson in the absurdity of my ego wanting to exploit a Great Being's public visit to gain a personal blessing. Mother Teresa is Blessed; she will soon be declared a Saint. But as for her practical role, her natural role, that day outside Rashtrapati Bhavan, was that of a Buildings Inspector and Space Manager. She had not been deceived. Not by the grandeur of the place she was visiting,

nor by the extravagant ardour of the man who was receiving her. And I, of course, stood as de-deceived as a stage-actor who has been robbed of his costly costume.

The unfortunate truth is that we choose, ever so often, to act in roles we ought not be playing. For then we are playing with others' feelings, others' chances, others' choices, others' lives. We self-deceivingly alter our natural behaviour or, in other words, we act in order to look smart before others. The Orwellian 'elephant' we destroy or the stumps we whop down can be anything from shareholders' trust, a rival's business plan (you must have seen the film *Corporate*), the consumer's interest in terms of health (*vide* pesticides in products), a human vulnerability (has anyone thought of the psychological havoc that can be caused by advertisements of creams said to make skins fair!).

Those who are required to act and react in public, have to be, in part, actors. They have to impress, if not awe; to affect if not influence. Some, luckily very few, do it to harm others in this competitive world.

The very witty and equally mischievous Oscar Wilde said, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life." I think he had a point. 'Acting' can be part of the unavoidable action of our lives, our real action which one is *obliged* to do. A bonded labourer has to act his part

though he hates it, a trafficked woman has to be something she loathes. There, acting does become more real than 'life'. Or, real action can be what one *wants* to do or is called upon from within, to do – like the Buddha who took to the robes of a monk after giving up the garments of a Prince or Gandhi when he changed from 'Plus Fours to Minus Fours'. That kind of self-presentation to the beholder is part of the action, the *karma* and the *dharma* that one has given to oneself. It facilitates what Jack Lemmon called 'Energy exchanges' and is a presentation that does not become histrionic. Lemmon said: "Energy exchanges between people are far more impacting and meaningful than word exchanges. Words often do not even matter. It is not what you say that matters, it is *who in you* is saying it – which self, or sub-personality...."

I would add that this is not just about becoming a great actor, but also a fuller human being.

It has been said that actors who have tried to play Churchill have failed abysmally because Churchill was a great actor playing himself. "True power is an individual's ability to move from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm". Churchill personified that principle and, in a sense, it was a histrionic principle – be and appear to be enthusiastic at each rung of your failure. But he could do so for he had had a moment of glory that was unsurpassable

– 1945. For a politician, a defeat in an election is what a bad review is for an actor – akin to an execution. But for one who has already become immortal, it is impossible for an electoral reverse to be an execution.

What could a bad review of a particular concert by her have done to M. S. Subbulakshmi's image?

M.S., as we all know, had acted on the silver screen. We know of *Meera* as a great film. But not so much because of her acting as because of her singing in it and, then again, not so much for her singing as much for the inner being in her that sang as she sang – with transporting effect. M.S. had a talent, which was a gift. The talent was used by the screen; the gift used the screen. “We become actors without realizing it”, Kin Hubbard has said, “and actors without wanting to”. Someone we do not know the identity of, is quoted in the Internet as saying : “You are more likely to act yourself into feeling than feel yourself into action.”

I would say M.S. and old time actors like K. L. Saigal did the opposite : they could feel themselves into the action.

I was at the book launch the other day of a new biography by Shrabani Basu of the extraordinary Noor Inayat Khan, the Europe-based descendant of Tipu Sultan whose half-Indian and half-American origins had begun

in her sufi family of great gentleness but also led her to a commitment for an inclusive world order of which Fascism was the anti-thesis. By a series of circumstances, Noor became the first woman wireless operator to be flown into occupied France by the Allies, and the only Asian secret agent in Europe in World War II. Noor changed her appearance often, dyed her hair, used the languages she knew, passed off as Norah Baker, as Madeleine, gave the Nazis the slip for an incredibly long time until she was betrayed, captured, tortured and executed at Dachau. And right up to her brutal end, she did not give out one iota of information about her unit, her contacts, her Command. The Nazis could not even get from her real name when they killed her. Noor Inayat Khan was a supreme example of a woman of action, and though never on stage, she had to employ for her great commitment, every article of an 'actor's skills. Acting and Action of the highest type combined in her.

I do not know who Sanford Meisner is but I found this quote of Meisner's most apt : "The truth of ourselves is the root of our acting". He also said to actors, "If you have the emotion, it infects you and the audience. If you don't have it don't bother; just say your lines as truthfully as you are capable of doing. You can't fake emotion." That was, as I said, addressed to actors. It can be addressed to all of us.

And this, therefore, is the point when I move from “Actors” and “Acting” to the final word in my title – “Action”. And I do so, dedicating this concluding part of my talk specifically to the memory of Mohandas Moses, who was above all a man of true action.

At an earlier point in this lecture, I had talked about the uniformed Services and Orders. Aristotle has said : “Men acquire a particular quality by constantly acting a particular way. You become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate action, brave by performing brave actions.” I believe the word “performing” can be seen as a synonym for “acting”. But, more significantly, it can be seen as a description of following one’s natural bent or hearkening to one’s inner call – the outer expression of it (in terms of dress or specific acts) being matters of detail. And when a person finds her or his field of action the form of action becomes progressively less important.

Today’s India is a forest on fire and a sea of calm. The first is seen by the flames or rage around us; the second by the ice of complacency. Both call for action.

There are five tests, I think, that must be passed by any society to be considered just or humane. These are about the way it treats five categories: its old, its children, its women, its prisoners and its animals.

Babasaheb Ambedkar said memorably ‘Goats are slaughtered, not lions’. Hindus and Muslims display an identical energy in slaughtering goats at altars of piety. That terrified creature knows no difference between the two. William Blake has the unforgettable line –

*A robin redbreast in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage.*

If I am one or more of those – old, child, woman or prisoner – and happen further, to be poor, uneducated and unbenefited by the laws of reservation, I am in difficulty. *And* if I belong to what was traditionally a ‘low’ caste, I will rage. Indeed, I *must* rage.

Newspapers and the visual media report rage extensively. Day after high-decibel day, we hear the din of agitations. The recent rage over the statue desecration was spontaneous – there were no leaders orchestrating it; indeed, there was no time for them to do so. It was action – not acting. I must salute, here, the so-called ‘ordinary’ people of India who act to help fellow-citizens in distress instinctively, intelligently and effectively. Their ‘acting’ is not ‘acting’ but ‘taking action’. In this, they should be seen as true leaders. Whether in Varanasi, Delhi, Mahim or Malegaon, they acted in the face of terror with uncommon zeal. And I must salute, too, our media which with its 24x7 capability made the country aware of this timely action of

the people. These people had every reason to fly into destructive rage. But no, they regulated their rage, they turned it to energy.

But we also know – in other situations, not this one – of professional agitation-fixers bussing-in fist-wavers and shouters, with food packets arranged, like clockwork. Rage has acquired a theatre today. I do not mean good Street Theatre – that is a fine *genre*. I mean the histrionic hypocrisy of rage-manipulators, its advertisers, wholesalers, retailers, peddlers, creating a debris of its own – broken furniture, shattered glass, burnt doors, buses. I find it deplorable that the genuine agonies of our people get co-opted by manipulators with agendaed action which is the worst form of acting. Exploiting, manipulating and inflaming grievances passes off too lightly in the guise of dissent. I regret this all the more because our civil society today has some true dissenters of heroic mould whose concerted action has led to major legislative breakthroughs. I have in mind, for instance, Aruna Roy's movement for the Right to Information. There are others of equal stature.

But if the Rage of the deprived has its theatre, the Calm of the upwardly mobile classes has its equivalent – malls and multiplexes where the 'cool' are made cooler. For calm-seeking viewers and readers, popular rage is an irritation, reflecting a waste of time and energy, an

exploitation of the democratic freedoms. They opt for crunchies, fizzy drinks and skin creams that make you look fair-and-something advertised on the telly between 'spiritual' channel shows, where calm is enacted by godmen who are expert actors, encouraging their audiences to sway to chants, breathe with one or both nostrils, pumping a collective abdomen. I speak as a practitioner and beneficiary of yogic procedures and meditative exercises. My problem is with the crass theatricality of individual yogic messages and the uncritical escapist absorption of these by people who should be seeing the need for action in India, urgent action.

Here, I cannot but mention the off-stage acting done by our great actors for commercial endorsements. Likewise, by our great sportspersons. Our cities have perhaps the largest hoardings. They are like giant walls, end to end, completely cutting the skyline. An enormous amount of money goes into that form of acting – the payment to the actors, the payment to the space-provider. I would suggest that a Board of Commercial Endorsement Control be set up which obligates the personalities to part with a reasonable share of their earnings through acting in advertisements for the redirection of urban squalor and destitution for the problem of urban management is severe.

We must remember that simple people, in one individual trauma or the other, in the course of their daily travails are asking : *Is anyone listening?* And what are they getting by way of an answer from our society? Inertness, dormancy, and a lull that precedes another lull – of stagnation, passivity and languor, the dead-calm, the deathlike calm of the doldrums of total unconcern.

Friends, unemployment in India occasions rage, misgovernance occasions rage, the reek of corruption occasions rage. But this rage is not a tsunami of one elemental surge. It is seen here now; there, next. And so, the employed, the misgoverning and the corrupt tell themselves to calm down, there is nothing to worry about.

India's accomplishments in terms of its continuously evolving technological prowess and its amazingly energetic entrepreneurship do us proud. Our prosperity grows. And not just in the cities of malls and multiplexes but in the countryside as well.

The fact that India now ranks number seven in the world's short list of 'dollar billionaires' with 36 of them named with *éclat* – a Forbes finding – is good news not just for the billionaires and the Income Tax department but for India as a whole. It is *not* good news for those who have had the experience of reading another finding – the

UNDP's – which tells us that the India which ranks a high seven in terms of dollar billionaires ranks a low 127 in the index of human development. And it is positively worrying news for those who are aware of the finding – in a recent Round of the NSS – that the average monthly per capita income for farm households across the country is Rs. 503. Referring to this figure, the pioneering biographer of rural India P Sainath asks with unconcealed rage – 'How many of our dollar billionaires would have on their persons anything, including the smallest item of clothing, that costs less than Rs 500?' Seventh at one level, one hundred and twenty seventh at another. One India, two truths. One freedom, two realities.

Sainath recently brought a brilliant photo-exhibition to Kolkata. It was on Women and Work in Rural India. Each picture was startling. I will read captions from two photographs:

1. Fetching water, fuel and fodder. Three chores that take a third of a woman's life. In parts of the country, women spend up to seven hours a day just getting water and fuel for the family. Fodder, too, takes time to collect. Millions of women in rural India walk several kilometers each day to gather those three items.

2. The loads are usually very heavy. The adivasi woman, also walking up a slope in Malkangiri, has around 30 kilograms of firewood on her head. And she still has three kilometers to go. Many women trudge similar or greater distances to bring home water.

Friends, water is going to be crisis number one in India and, indeed, the world...

...women form 32 percent of the work force that prepares the land for cultivation, 76 percent of those sowing seeds, 90 percent of people engaged in transplantation, 82 percent of those transporting the crop from field to home, 100 percent of workers processing food, and 69 percent of those in dairying.

Most of these activities mean a lot of bending and squatting. Besides, many of the tools and implements used were not designed of the comfort of women.

The work women do in the fields sees them move forward constantly while bending and squatting. So, severe pain the back and legs is very common. Often standing shin-deep in water during transplantation, they're also exposed to skin diseases.

These women are being obliged to play parts. We – you and I – are like the people who supervise their work. Action is called for. And if action does not come, rage will.

Films have been made about Gandhi, Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, Netaji. One is to be made on Noor Inayat Khan. Actors have tried to do justice to men and women of action. And if those films have had a good audience response it is because the action they showed is needed today as well.

Actors are people, with the same share of faults and sorrows, qualities and happiness as anyone else. And people who have nothing to do with the screen or the stage are also, in some part, actors. So let us look at actors as one of us be they ever so glamorous or rich, and let us know that each one of us is also acting a part, perhaps more than one.

Just as there is a Higher Rage and a True Calm there is a point where acting goes beyond histrionics to Righteous Action. This has to be taken by people everywhere, irrespective of their 'position' in society. There is, as someone said about acting, no such thing as a small part; only a small actor. Every part beckons for Right Action.

Acting is no easy task, whether on screen, on the stage or in the larger theatre of life. It is demanding of more than skill; it asks for an investment of a personal commitment, of beliefs and emotions. We cannot act our way to feelings; we have to feel our way to acting. And when that 'acting' is not histrionic, but real, when that 'acting' inspires and helps, not manipulates other people, it is Righteous Action.

I have a final word yet : And this is addressed to professional actors : Please take note of the fact that domestic violence and child labour have recently become the subject of path-breaking laws. We should be proud of those two Acts. Let no film show violence being practiced on women, even if the intention is to criticize that violence because I know and you know that many a viewer – especially the male – has a voyeur inside him that is not seeing the spectacle of a woman being slapped, kicked or raped with horror but with something else. If smoking is not 'on' for the screen, violence being practiced on women need not be 'on', either. And let no theatre or film unit unwittingly employ children on the sets or off them. For, howsoever talented histrionically, their place is in school, not on the screen or the stage – unless the stage is located in the school. You may ask : who will then play a child's role in a film? Good question. I do not have any answer for that. But I would like to say this : Very well, if a good story

has a child in it let a play or film invite a child to play that part. But must commercial ads use children to sell products that have nothing to do with childhood?

Ladies and Gentlemen, let the actor in me thank the actor in each of you and salute one whose life of action touched the mind and conscience of his times.



Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Governor of West Bengal
Raj Bhavan
Kolkata - 700 062

His Excellency Gopalkrishna Gandhi was born in New Delhi on 22 April 1945. Completing his Masters in English Literature from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1968 and served in different capacities in Tamil Nadu. He was Secretary to the Vice President of India from 1985 to 1987 and Joint Secretary to the President of India from 1987 to 1992.

Taking voluntary retirement from the IAS in 1992, he took up the position of Minister (Culture) in the High Commission of India, U.K., and Director, The Nehru Centre, London. He was appointed as High Commissioner for India in South Africa in 1996 and concurrently accredited as High Commissioner for India in Lesotho. He took up the position of the Secretary to the President of India in 1997. He was appointed High Commissioner for India in Sri Lanka in 2000 and Ambassador of India in Norway in 2002, concurrently accredited as the Ambassador of India in Iceland. Shri Gandhi took office as the Governor of West Bengal on 14 December, 2004. He has authored one novel and one play. Shri Gandhi and Smt. Tara Gandhi have two married daughters.

The National Institute of Advanced Studies was conceived and started by the late Shri J. R. D. Tata. Shri Tata was desirous of starting an Institute which would not only conduct high quality research in interdisciplinary areas but also serve as a medium which would bring together administrators in government and private sector with members of the academic community. He believed that such an interaction could be of great help to executives in their decision making capabilities.

NIAS is situated in the picturesque Indian Institute of Science Campus in Bangalore. Its faculty is drawn from different fields representing various disciplines in the natural and social sciences. The institute carries out interdisciplinary research and is unique in its integrated approach to the study of the interfaces between science and technology and societal issues.

Dr. M. S. Swaminathan is the Chairman of the Council of Management of Institute. Dr. Raja Ramanna was the Director since its inception till his retirement on July 31, 1997. Prof. R. Narasimha was the Director from 1997 to March 2004. Dr. K. Kasturirangan, (Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha), Former Chairman, ISRO, is currently the Director of the Institute.