

The making of American diplomacy

The Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. State Department trains the largest contingent of diplomats in the world. Varghese K. George spends a day with U.S. diplomats preparing to take up positions in India, and their trainers

Over the last three months, Phuong Nguyen has learned a lot of Tamil, a thing or two about Dravidian politics and has figured out why Kattappa killed Baahubali. She has watched the multi-language blockbuster *Baahubali 2* thrice. This afternoon, she and three other U.S. Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) learning Tamil at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) before deployment to Chennai are discussing the weather there, aided by a video clip of a weather report from a Tamil news channel. "Enakku veppam pidikkum (I like the heat)," says Greg Bauer, an Iowan who had earlier worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Cambodia. "In Chennai it is 105° (Fahrenheit) today," the instructor told him, in a promising tone, last week.

The contingent is relishing their Tamil films and can't wait to be in Chennai to test their language skills and smell the filter coffee. "He has even started teaching us lessons from the *Thirukkural*," Nguyen says of Pandiyaraju Arumugan, the Tamil instructor. "I have really enjoyed learning about Dravidian language, culture, and history," adds the fresh FSO recruit who came to the U.S. from Vietnam as a five-year-old. It helps that Arumugan, from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, has shrunk his Dravidian identity to 'Raju', in a concession to the American tongue. "Raju is wonderful and very open in sharing his wisdom and culture," says Nguyen.

Readying for the role

The FSI trains the world's biggest contingent of diplomats in a sprawling 74-acre campus in the suburbs of the U.S. capital, before they are deployed to the country's 270 missions around the world. There are 14,029 FSOs under the Department of State and thousands of others are drawn from other U.S. Departments such as aviation and agriculture for postings at diplomatic missions. The deployment of defence personnel attached to U.S. missions adds to it. The State Department does not release country-wise staffing details, but an official said "the U.S. Mission to India is one of our largest diplomatic missions in the world". The four officers in the Tamil class are new recruits, and by early next year, they will start working at the U.S. consulate in Chennai.

A few rooms apart, Michael Rosenthal is polishing his Hindi skills, aided by Pushpa Patel, the most senior Hindi instructor at the FSI's language school. Rosenthal will be heading to New Delhi next month as First Secretary Political at the U.S. Embassy. He needs a proficiency level that will equip him to converse with Indian politicians and parliamentarians. "Political officers need to not merely converse, but also have to understand the cultural universe," says Sandhya Thapar, another Hindi instructor. Visa officers learn the local language with a more functional perspective. Patel has trained dozens of American diplomats in Hindi since 1992 at the institute and at least four of them have risen to become U.S. ambassadors — among them, the current U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Atul Keshap.

Rosenthal has travelled to India once to attend a friend's marriage — growing up in Los Angeles, he made several Indian-American friends — and spent time in a houseboat in Kerala backwaters, but this will be his first posting in India. A fluent Russian and Polish speaker, he is amused by the similarities he is discovering between Hindi and European languages. More amused is he by the number of people that attend an Indian marriage. And he is yet to see them at the political rallies in India.

'Digital India ke Angute Chhap' — digital India's illiterates — is a Hindi news feature clip that he is discussing with instructor Patel this morning. India has more Internet users than the entire population of the U.S. but a large majority of them are barely literate in computer usage, he explains in Hindi after watching the clip.

India 101 and more

Comprehending Indian paradoxes such as these could be a lifelong exercise for anyone, but diplomats need to pick up some soft skills quickly before they hit the Indian road. Among them, how to wrap a six-metre piece of cloth called saree around your body; how to mouth a *golgappa* without creating a diplomatic crisis of sorts by splashing it all over at a social gathering. Eating with the hand, most of them master soon enough, but breaking a tandoori *roti* using only one hand is a steep climb for most, says Neeti Ahluwalia, another Hindi instructor. "That takes some teaching and learning," she giggles.

Instructors organise a *desi* cooking session at one of their homes during the course. "They go shopping for *desi* grocery, and each one makes a dish," says Vinod Kumar, instructor. Some develop a special interest in Indian cuisines. Matt Williger, now posted in the Mumbai consulate, supplied flasks of masala *chai* every day during the course to instructors and classmates. "He made the perfect masala tea... with ginger, cardamom and all the rest," recalls Kumar, an English postgraduate from Lucknow who now teaches Hindi.

Pictures of Chola Bronzes and Indian landmarks adorn the walls in language classrooms. "Those are too hard for



Diplomacy at work: "The FSI trains the diplomats in a sprawling campus in the suburbs of Washington before they are deployed to missions around the world." ■SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



them at the beginning," Thapar says of the *Panchatantra Kahaniyan* on the shelf. "Learning begins with simple words — *kalam* (pen), *kitab* (book), etc."

Instructors warn India-bound diplomats that at times, even a minor mix-up in pronunciation could turn a polite intent into unintended addition of spice into the talk; and that for some words and phrases, English would serve better than Hindi or Tamil.

The institute has four schools — language studies, professional and area studies, applied information technology and leadership and management. Depending on a particular diplomat's forthcoming posting, they undertake a bouquet of courses picked from multiple schools. For instance, the group headed to Chennai has already spent a few weeks learning about South and Central Asia in the School of Professional and Area Studies, before they moved to the School of Language Studies. They will also undergo some training specific to their next role — for instance, those who are taking up a consular job which involves visa interviews get that training. Between two postings diplomats come back to the FSI — to learn a new language, a region or both. For someone like Rosenthal, who is prepping for his fifth tour in foreign service, and having worked on the India desk at the State Department, only language training is required. This is his third long-term stint at the FSI since 2007, learning Hindi for the last nine

months. "The concept is to provide training continuously. We try to keep a balance between high academic standards and professional training," says Kiran Pervez, South and Central Asia (SCA) Studies Course Chair. India comes in the SCA region.

Offering a 'lived experience'

"Bahut achha (Very good)," says Rosenthal of his learning progress. "Lekin shikshak nahin maanti (But the teacher does not agree)," he adds quickly, pausing for Patel's response. But she doesn't take the bait. With the non-committal Indian streak that Rosenthal will encounter at closer quarters in the coming months, Patel declares: "Next month is his exam." Yes, they do take a language test to ensure the required level of proficiency for the next role.

Stereotypes are an entry point to discussions on India and South Asia, and Pervez makes it a point to have a session with a South Asian-American stand-up comedian for each batch. "Visa jokes and wife-and-husband jokes from the region often provide insights into South Asian societal make-up," she says. "To begin with, some are very surprised to learn that all Indians are not vegetarians. The range of knowledge of those who attend these courses vary. Some know very little, some like Mr. Rosenthal know much more than us," says Ahluwalia.

Area studies and language classes both run with the objective of familiarising India and the region as a "lived experience". Strategic issues related to the region are introduced through talks by outside experts, some of them talking to the officers through Skype from the region, and also through interactions with State Department's own desk officers dealing with a particular region. Pervez

invites South Asian film-makers and writers to talk to South Asia-bound diplomats, and stories of the Partition make a lasting impact on most trainees. Pervez shows part of an Indian film during lunch break every day, finishing one over several days. Diplomats clamoured for an uninterrupted viewing of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, a poignant 2015 film set against the backdrop of India-Pakistan rivalry.

Language instructors relate learning to American cultural context. Erica Cover, the lone student at entry level, is into her fourth session of Hindi, preparing for an administrative job at the U.S. embassy in New Delhi. Her instructor Kashefa Nagameiea is excited about the strides that Cover has made already — letters, numbers up to 10 and days of the week, all in four sessions. Nagameiea, who came to the U.S. in 2004 from Mumbai, has devised unique memory techniques that are helping Cover. Budhvar (Wednesday) is associated with Buddha — the most famous Indian for many Americans, certainly before Narendra Modi. What follows is Guruvar (Thursday) — as Buddha became a guru later, and guru is very much an English word. "Shukravar is Friday. *Shukriya* means thanks. So, remember TGI Fridays," she tells Cover, who is Nagameiea's fifth student since she started teaching at the FSI last year. "Hindi letters are very similar to one another and trying to distinguish each one is not easy," says Cover. She has just returned from Azerbaijan, and is excited

Visa jokes and wife-and-husband jokes from the region often provide insights into South Asian societal make-up.

KIRAN PERVEZ, South and Central Asia (SCA) Studies Course Chair



Future face: Helena White is learning Urdu. She knows Tamil and Hindi. She will be the first full time Hindi-Urdu spokesperson of the U.S. State Department.

about being in New Delhi.

From Icelandic to Arabic, the school teaches 70 languages, among them Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bangla and Urdu. Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are the most sought-after languages. "Adult learners of a new language experience peaks and valleys. After the initial honeymoon, they hit a plateau. But then they motivate themselves," says Ann Keller-Lally, School of Language Studies Division Director. There are 700 language learners at the school currently, and the number goes up to 1,600 during February and March, the busy months.

Helena White is learning Urdu — she already knows Hindi and Tamil — before taking over as the first full-time Hindi-Urdu spokesperson of the U.S. State Department. White will be based in London, and she will give interviews in Hindi and Urdu. Her job will be to "amplify the podium of the State Department spokesperson," she says. So, she won't be speaking only on South Asia, but on American policy anywhere for a South Asian audience. "It is not that Hindi or Urdu media platforms cannot translate what we say in English. It demonstrates the value that the U.S. puts in these relationships, particularly with India," says White. She has done a posting each in New Delhi and Colombo, and lived in Rajasthan as a Hindi student.

Selection and postings

Americans diplomats are drawn from diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds. Medical doctors, military veterans, lawyers and pharmacists apply for roughly 80 posts in each batch of FSOs. The selection could take place more than once a year. Around 20,000 aspirants compete through a written exam and face-to-face interviews before making the final cut. Some like Ashlie Menard — the third Tamil student — might have already worked for the State Department before being selected an FSO. Rosenthal worked in U.S. Congress and was a Fulbright Scholar in Russia before he joined the foreign service. He

has a master's from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC.

While filling in the form, aspirants tick their preferred streams — political, economic, public diplomacy, administration and management or consular. Most part of their diplomatic life will be spent in their chosen field.

Rosenthal is a political officer, but he spent one tour in Kyrgyzstan, the first former Soviet republic where the U.S. set up a military base, as a public diplomacy officer, often talking to students who shouted slogans against "American imperialism". He also worked on the NATO desk at the State Department.

All the new recruits spend the first six weeks at the FSI doing a common programme. At the end of six weeks, on a designated day, they get to know their first posting — which involves a lot of drama and excitement. First the names of the countries will be announced, to be followed by the names of diplomats assigned there. They will be handed over a flag of the country they are headed to. At times fiancées could end up oceans apart, at times one would be trying to hide their excitement about going to Afghanistan or Iraq from a spouse or a lover. Some don't share with their loved ones the preferences they have filled in for posting, apprehending pushback. "That day is intense," says Rosenthal. "Some are always looking for adventure, some are always nervous. So on that day, you might see someone who has just got Kabul all very excited, and someone who got Mumbai all very tense," says Pervez. Those who get English-speaking countries will leave within six months, while those who require language training will take up to a year before heading to their first post.

Subsequent postings for a diplomat are based on a match between available posts and the particular diplomat's inclination. Of the nearly 500 jobs available across the world this year, Rosenthal chose New Delhi. "So you are looking at different jobs and the embassy is looking at different people. It is mostly the diplomat's choice, but the embassy has to agree," he says.

The area studies classes usually end with a presentation by each of the outgoing diplomats. "Each one chooses the topic. Someone did one on Diwali releases in Bollywood last year, someone could do one on GST for instance," says Pervez. Holi, Diwali and Id celebrations have become a part of life in FSI. They learn about South Asia's unique notion of secularism, and about the religion of cricket, and gods such as Sachin Tendulkar. South Asia-bound diplomats also play some cricket on the manicured grounds of the FSI, not much appreciated by the estate manager who acquires flower plants from all over the world and nurtures them here with a lot of passion. "A diplomat is a diplomat 24 hours a day, all day of the year. So the training is aimed to equip them negotiate with a foreign culture with ease and comfort," says Pervez.



Putting her through her paces: "Shukravar is Friday. *Shukriya* means thanks....," instructor Kashefa Nagameiea tells Erica Cover.