

Hamid Ansari: Exemplary diplomat, scholar, gentleman

Diplomat, scholar extraordinaire and the quintessential gentleman, Hamid Ansari is the new Vice President of India. He is all of these but, above everything else, is a warm and engaging humanist who brings to his new position a rare blend of intellectual gravitas, sincerity and tact.

The nomination of the 70-year-old seasoned diplomat, who had earlier served as India's envoy in Afghanistan, as the unanimous choice of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and Left parties for the vice presidential post was hailed across the country and came as proof to many that ability, and not mere patronage, does get its rightful reward.

This approval of Ansari's choice brought to the fore something essential about this person — his ability to inspire respect cutting across the political spectrum that enabled him to notch up key jobs even after retirement from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).

If he became vice chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime, he was chosen to become chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities in the UPA dispensation.

Ansari, known as India's voice in the Middle East, was appointed as ambassador to Saudi Arabia by the P.V. Narasimha government and got repeated extensions from the governments of I.K. Gujral and H.D. Deve Gowda.

Although the news of his nomination for the vice presidential post came as a surprise to many who had a chance to rub shoulders with this low-profile, suave and soft-spoken diplomat and scholar, not many know that he is no stranger to the world of politics.

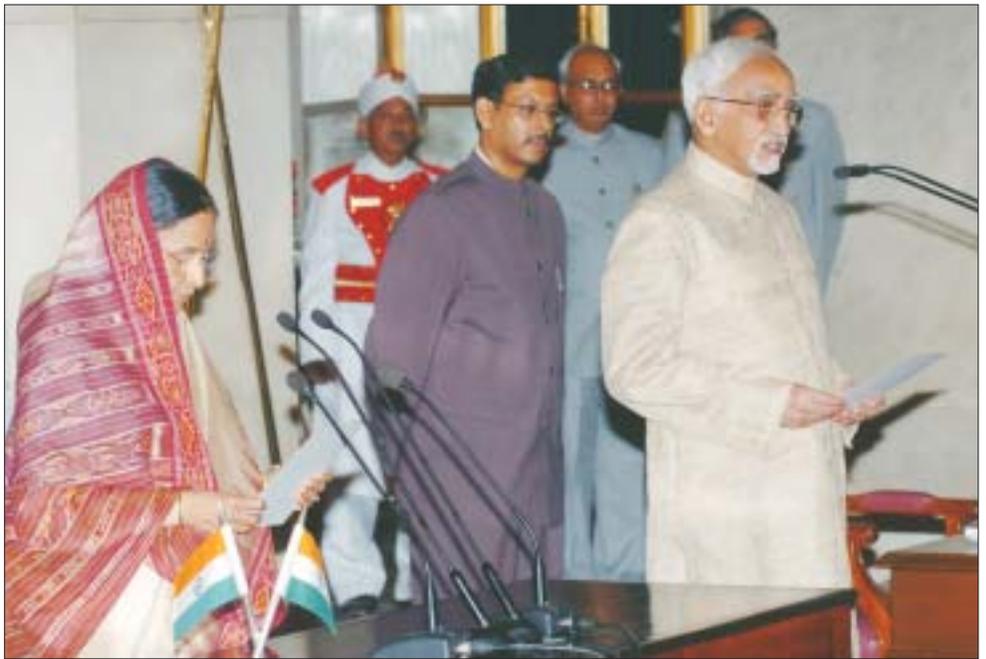
Ansari comes from a prominent political family with socialist leanings.

"I come from a family of freedom fighters. My father was in the forefront of the independence struggle. My uncle, Farid-ul-Haq, was secretary general of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and was elected to the second Lok Sabha," Ansari said after he was nominated for the vice president's post.

The PSP, which was in existence from 1952 to 1972, was founded when the Socialist Party merged with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party.

Ansari also happens to be the grand-nephew of Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, who was president of the Indian National Congress in the 1927 Madras session.

Born in Kolkata on April 1, 1937 — though



President Pratibha Patil administering the oath of office of Vice President to Hamid Ansari at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on August 11.

Ansari is 13th VP

Mohammad Hamid Ansari, a former diplomat and accomplished intellectual, was on August 11 sworn in as India's 13th Vice President in a simple but well-attended ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi.

Ansari, who had stepped down as chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), succeeded Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, who had lost the presidential election to Pratibha Patil.

Ansari, 70, was administered the oath of office by President Pratibha Patil in the function held at the Ashoka Hall of the presidential palace.

Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Leader of Opposition Lal Krishna Advani and a host of other political leaders attended the function.

Shekhawat too attended the ceremony that lasted barely three minutes.

A candidate of the ruling UPA and the Left parties, Ansari bagged 455 of the 762 votes polled in a triangular contest for the post of vice president on August 10.

He won by a margin of 233 votes against National Democratic Alliance's Najma Heptulla, pushing Rasheed Masood of the United National Progressive Alliance to a distant third spot.

his family belongs to Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh — Ansari studied at the St. Xavier's in Kolkata and AMU. He later became the AMU vice chancellor.

Having joined the IFS in 1961, Ansari was India's envoy to the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Australia, apart from Afghanistan. He won the admiration of many with his charm, grace and sophistication when he was the Chief of Protocol during the Non-Aligned Summit in New Delhi in 1983.

He was also New Delhi's Permanent Representative to the U.N. at a time when Pakistan launched a diplomatic offensive at the end of the Cold War in the U.N. on Kashmir.

"Pakistan did not succeed in getting any resolution in any forum at the end of two years of desperate struggle. India had won the battle under Ansari's leadership," recalled T.P. Sreenivisan, who was his deputy in New York at that time.

A Padma Shri winner, Ansari has been a visiting professor at the Centre for West Asian and African Studies in New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and at the Academy for Third World Studies in Jamia Millia Islamia.

Before he was appointed chairman of the Minorities Commission in March last year, Ansari was co-chairman of the India-U.K. Round Table, a member of the National Security Advisory Board and convener (and later chairperson) of the Petroleum Ministry's advisory committee on Oil Diplomacy for Energy Security. ■