
ILO Century Project

Oral history

Interview with Mr S.K. Jain, former ILO Deputy Director-General

by Gerry Rodgers

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GR – This is the interview with Mr S.K. Jain, who retired as Deputy Director-General of the ILO in December 1987.

Mr Jain, thank you very much for this interview. You certainly don't remember, but I met you first in 1973 when you were Regional Director in Bangkok and I was a very junior staff member of ARTEP, working under your general direction. Since then, I have been in touch with you on a number of occasions and am very happy to have the occasion to discuss with you today the contribution you have made to the ILO's work.

Mr Jain, I would like to start with the time when you joined the ILO. Could you tell me something about how you joined the ILO and the early posts that you occupied?

Mr JAIN – The ILO had decided to diversify its staffing because its own work was being expanded, both in the sense geographically to other countries and especially Asian countries, but also in substantive terms, going beyond the adoption of standards and their application into providing direct assistance to governments, through labour ministries, or ministries of industries, in areas especially like vocational training, training of labour inspectors and the training of, especially, instructors, as I said. This work brought about a kind of new appreciation about the ILO in the ministries of labour and industry and external affairs, as well as among employers and trade union leaders because previously everyone thought that the ILO was only about standards and their implementation. This

gave an entirely new picture of the ILO and its contribution to economic growth and social justice.

GR – When you were appointed, when you were hired by the ILO, it was to work on these new programmes?

Mr JAIN – Well the ILO decided to recruit two Indians as part of the process of diversifying the geographical origin of the staff, and in the case of India, they asked the New Delhi Office to arrange for an impartial selection of two young officials, who would not necessarily be nominees of high-ups in Government or in employer-worker circles, so they asked the New Delhi Office to entrust the task to the Indian Public Service Commission, which was in charge of recruiting officials to the Indian Public Civil Service. But it was arranged that the Commission would co-opt Dr P.P. Pillai, who was the Director of the New Delhi Office, as a member of the Commission. An advertisement had appeared in the newspapers about this competition. So I had applied because my original intention of working as an advocate in India was frustrated because I could not find suitable office and residential accommodation in the small town of Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh, where I was supposed to practice under the overall jurisdiction of the High Court, which was located in Allahabad. So since I had nothing much to do, my law professor from Lucknow University, where I had gone for an interview for my LLM examination, he saw me in Delhi and he said “Listen, Jain, you are not entering the legal profession. Come then, be a member of my newly established Law Faculty and we have lots of persons, not only young people, but grown-up people who are interested in law for various reasons”. So I was appointed Lecturer at the university. Of course, I was very young at the time but most of the students were much older people, who wanted to do some practice in law. I did this work, probably, fairly satisfactorily.

GR – So after having taught law in Lucknow for some time, you then applied for the posts at the ILO and you actually were one of the two winners of the competition.

Mr JAIN – The other one being Aamir Ali.

So I had to travel to Geneva and in those days there was no night flying so I took a plane in New Delhi and flew to Karachi. By then it was evening so I had to make a night stop in Karachi. It was still part of India at the time. The next morning I took the British Overseas Airways, as it used to be called at that time, flight from Karachi across Saudi Arabia to Cairo. On the plane, in the morning, breakfast was being served and as part of the service, eggs were being served. All of my life until then, I had been a strict vegetarian but I had made up my mind that it would not be possible to remain a vegetarian in Europe so I decided that I would start taking eggs. So when the steward came in the morning on the plane he asked me “Boiled or scrambled?”. I did not have the foggiest of notions of what a boiled egg was, or what a scrambled egg was! so I just said “Scrambled”. He brought me those scrambled eggs and then I didn’t know whether to put sugar on it or salt and I think I finally put salt on it but I found it very difficult to swallow the eggs because I had never had eggs before.

Anyway, the plane then took off from Karachi to Cairo and we made a night stop in Cairo. The following morning we took the flight to London because there was no direct flight to Geneva because Geneva only had a very small airport. So I took the plane from Cairo. We flew across North Africa towards Libya and then crossed over the Mediterranean to go to London. Couldn’t go to Geneva. So I went to London where a cousin of mine was already there and he was a medical doctor and had gone for some postgraduate studies. So I went there and stayed a few days but I also visited the London Office of the ILO and then it was my first contact with the ILO outside India. But there was nothing very much to talk about.

So from London I took a plane to Geneva. The plane landed there and I received a message from the ILO Office that accommodation for me had been booked at a place which I read as Mon Repos [*pronounced reposs*], later I learned that the correct way was “Mon Repos”.

GR – So even at that time the ILO was using the same hotel that it uses today.

Mr JAIN – So I went to “Mon Repos” and the next morning, being anxious to report to the ILO Office, which was just opposite across the street on Rue de Lausanne. I went there and rang the bell and an Englishman, a tall Englishman, opened the door and I thought he must be a senior official of the ILO so I sort of bowed to him, introduced myself, and he asked me to come the following day because I had forgotten that it was a Sunday! So I went back. I found it difficult to adjust myself to a place where the sun did not shine because there was a fog ...

GR – This was in the winter?

Mr JAIN – ... and the trees did not have any leaves. Anyway, I went on the Monday and was directed to a certain room number. I was very surprised that all the doors of the offices were shut because I was used to offices in India with only curtains where you could always open and peek in and say hello to the people sitting there. Anyway, I reached my office and met the chief of the Cooperative Service, a Frenchman called Maurice Colombain. He was very good to me and he entrusted me with the task of translating into English the Bulletin which was issued by the Office and I started translating these short notes.

GR – Translating from French into English?

MR JAIN – From French into English.

GR – Because you had studied French beforehand?

Mr JAIN – During that time I met a young Turk, who was already in that service. I had great difficulty in pronouncing his name, which was Uşaklıgil, but he proved to be a very good friend and he suggested that we go for a holiday to the south of France, which he knew very well. So I didn't know how to drive, so he drove me and we went all the way to the south of France and had a very good time and then came back to Geneva. But I have

always been very grateful to him for having introduced me to French culture, the French language and southern Europe.

But in view of my commitment with my in-laws, I wanted to be transferred to the Delhi Office, and I negotiated with the Assistant Director-General in charge of personnel, G.A. Johnson, and he agreed to my getting a salary of 800 rupees a month which, by today's standards, of course, is nothing, but in those days it was still a fair amount.

For residence, Dr. Pillai, who was occupying Cochin House and living there, he offered to me an outhouse at the back of the Cochin House where I could stay and I accepted that offer and stayed in that place until my next transfer to Geneva.

GR – How long did you stay in Delhi at that time?

Mr JAIN – I do not remember, not very long. But that was the time that the ILO was beginning to think about expanding its activities in Asia, and Geneva asked me, as part of the preparatory work, to collect labour laws of Asian countries, including notifications, etc., issued under those laws. And in order to help me to do this work, I recruited a local person who had a legal background and eventually a book called *Asian labour laws* was published by the New Delhi Office. Meanwhile, the Governing Body itself had appointed an Asian Advisory Committee which included all Asian members of the Governing Body on the Government, Worker and Employer side, plus a few additional persons, and the first meeting of the Asian Advisory Committee was held in Indonesia in a hilly resort town of Bandung and so I went to Bandung and when the item came up for discussion I presented it and Mr Rens was apparently quite impressed by my presentation and that is the reason why when I came back to Delhi I received a call to come to Geneva. By then I had managed to persuade my in-laws that this was a good opportunity for their daughter, my wife, to go to Europe and very reluctantly they agreed.

GR – After you came to Geneva, you continued to work on labour law in Geneva?

Mr JAIN – First of all, I was a vegetarian and I was looking for a place in Geneva where I could get vegetarian food and as I was wandering around in a place which I subsequently learned was called Chantepoulet, there was a notice which said “Restaurant végétarien” so I was delighted and I went up to the place and this was the sort of place where they served carrot juice, so I went there and I looked at the menu and it was all in French and I sort of didn’t understand much, but there was one item which had the word “pommes” in it which I knew meant apples. So I asked the waitress to bring me that item and instead of bringing me an apple she brought me an unpeeled boiled potato – “pommes de terre en robe de champs”. I was very disappointed of course! So this was my first experience of Geneva, its weather, its food, etc., etc.

GR – And in the ILO itself, did you find it difficult to adapt to the culture of the ILO?

Mr JAIN – Oh yes, very much so. The ILO had its own ways and I certainly was not used to these ways, but gradually I began to understand.

GR – Now, in Geneva, this is in the 1950s, I think, and you worked in Geneva for a number of years but you obviously kept in touch with India and Asia because afterwards you returned to the region. What was your trajectory then? What posts did you occupy in Geneva in the 1950s and in the early 1960s?

Mr JAIN – At one point, David Morse transferred me to his own executive office, which in French was called “Cabinet”, which of course which I read as cabinet. So when he invited me to join his cabinet I felt very flattered and I thought “My God, I am going to be a minister in his cabinet”! Anyway, I joined the Cabinet and stayed there for quite some time.

So I was transferred to Istanbul. It had been decided to locate the Office in Istanbul because its coverage extended from Afghanistan all the way to Cairo and Libya.

GR – This was when the ILO had decided on a new policy of decentralization?

Mr JAIN – Yes, indeed. But since the Istanbul Office was also to serve Israel, the Office could not be located in Beirut. ... So from Istanbul I had a long beat from Afghanistan all the way to Libya, and included Cairo, of course, and Israel. So I travelled all over the place, especially in connection with the development of technical cooperation which, at that time, was emphasizing vocational training and especially what was called “accelerated vocational training”. The “formation professionnelle accélérée”, as it was called in French, was developed soon after the war, in order to especially help in the building industry, because of the lot of destruction that had taken place. I introduced this notion of formation professionnelle accélérée to my constituency in the Middle East.

But soon we discovered that while this was probably a very useful tool to develop training, it was not good enough because you were training people only in a very limited area of skill and not converting trainees into properly trained craftsmen.

GR – So after your work in Istanbul, you were transferred to open a new regional office for Asia in Bangalore.

Mr JAIN – Yes. So I went to the Delhi Office and of course the logical location for an ILO office for Asia would be New Delhi but the Director of the New Delhi Office was firmly entrenched and not at all anxious that there should be a so-called regional office at the same place where he was very influential and powerful. So he suggested that since the Office was primarily to be concerned with technical training, that the office should be located at a place where there was some industry, because in Delhi there was no industry. That is why the first ILO office was located in Bangalore and it provided advisory assistance to industry on questions of training.

GR – What was the name of the Director of the Delhi Office at that time?

Mr JAIN – The Delhi Office Director was Mr V.K.R. Menon, who was a former Secretary to the Government of India.

GR – So the office in Bangalore, you opened it? You started that office in Bangalore?

It was already there?

Mr JAIN – No, the office was already there. But since the location was not very convenient, the ILO had decided to shift the office to Colombo and Mr John Riches, who was then the Treasurer, had gone to Colombo and had spoken to the Chief Minister there about suitable premises. The Prime Minister who had, of course, shifted to her official residence, offered that her own private residence be taken for rent by the ILO. But when I reached Colombo, I thought it was not a very good idea to be dependent on the Prime Minister, because you could never refer to her about any minor affairs or whatever else was required so I decided to rent a house other than the Prime Minister's house. But then for the official opening of the office, I went to the Prime Minister but she was very reluctant to come to the office and I was in a fix about whom to invite. Eventually I decided to invite the Governor-General to open the office and he came and he opened the office and we started to function from there.

GR – You stayed for some time in Colombo? Because the office moved to Bangkok after a while.

Mr JAIN – Yes. So we were in Colombo and I had to travel long distances to go anywhere because Colombo was not much more central than Bangalore for travel purposes. I had to go from Colombo to Singapore or Jakarta or somewhere to catch international flights. The best location, of course, was Bangkok but the Thais apparently were rather suspicious of an organization which had "labour" in its title. They felt that if the office was located in Bangkok there might be Communist trade union leaders who might visit Bangkok. That was not acceptable to them.

Meanwhile, Mr Jenks had met the Thai Foreign Minister in New York and he had explained that the ILO was not a Communist organization and persuaded him that the ILO could be located there.

So we had to get rid of the local staff in Colombo and take the international staff, just only a very few officials, to Bangkok. We had some difficulty in finding a suitable premises but eventually we were able to go to the same place as the Economic Commission for Asia (ECAFE) was located. The first floor was available and we established our office in Bangkok.

GR – Mr Jain, during this period, when you were heading offices in Colombo and Bangkok, and even before in Istanbul, you were responsible for the ILO's technical cooperation in those regions. Now the ILO has activities in many fields, in employment, in training, in labour inspection, in social security, child labour, etc., etc. Which of those fields, in your experience during your time, in which of those fields was the ILO most successful?

Mr JAIN – I think, very clearly, the area where the ILO was most successful was vocational training. The ILO was able to provide assistance to Asian countries in the establishment of vocational training institutes, where, of course, the emphasis was on trainers and the ILO recruited experts from Europe and they were sent to Asian countries and developed very successful instructor training programmes.

GR – So would it be fair to say that the Asian countries were much more interested in technical cooperation than they were in international labour standards?

Mr JAIN – Yes, of course, the technical cooperation was something which brought immediate benefit to the Asian countries and while of course they valued the ILO's working standards, they nevertheless preferred the help of the ILO in the area of vocational training and subsequently, as work in other fields like social security and industrial relations also started, they wanted assistance in those fields as well. This was, sort of, accepted in Geneva and they felt that, in order to provide assistance effectively, it would best to have technical staff located in the field because they would be very easily accessible.

GR – And what about tripartism? You have the impression, especially in east Asia, that you had strong States and weak unions and weak employer associations. So how well did tripartism function in Asia in that period?

Mr JAIN – Tripartism was, despite the existence of the ILO, something of a novelty at the domestic level. But the existence of the ILO promoted the growth of tripartism in Asian countries and the fact that today there are very strong organizations of employers and trade unions is a tribute to the ILO for having promoted this whole concept.

GR – So could we come to your appointment as DDG at the ILO? What is the story of your appointment?

Mr JAIN – When the ILO had decided to strengthen at the management level by appointing an Asian I had developed an institution, but of course it was not a permanent institution but an arrangement, by which labour ministers of Asia would meet together before the International Labour Conference in Geneva so that they could try and agree on certain common approaches to items which were on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in Geneva. This arrangement for the Asian labour ministers to meet was a convenient place where the ministers could also talk about the appointment of Asians at headquarters. So, at a meeting of Asian labour ministers in Australia the question came up for discussion and the Japanese labour minister proposed the name of a Japanese to be in the directorate of the ILO. But the Asian labour ministers were not so keen to have a Japanese soon after the war to occupy that position. So they made a compromise under which they agreed to propose my name for the position of Deputy Director-General and a Japanese as Assistant Director-General. So that is what happened.

GR – When you were appointed, Mr Jain, Phelan was still Director of the ILO but I guess you did not see much of Phelan at the time. But afterwards you worked quite closely with three Directors-General, with Morse, with Jenks and with Blanchard. How was it to work with them? Were they very different? What was your experience?

Mr JAIN – It certainly was different, partly because the focus of the ILO’s own work was diversifying and from standards it had gone to technical cooperation and the establishment of the ILO’s regional offices and structures. First of all, when I was appointed executive assistant to Mr Morse, this was for a fairly short period but it was a very valuable experience to see how decisions were made at the highest level within the ILO.

GR – And with Mr Jenks, as a lawyer, probably you had a fair bit of contact with Mr Jenks as he was the Legal Adviser. People have said of Jenks that he was brilliant but quite difficult to work with. Would that be a fair judgement?

Mr JAIN – No, I do not think that would be a fair judgement. I think Mr Jenks was certainly a very good jurist but he had good relations with the staff and his own colleagues and certainly I had no problem at all working with him.

GR – And then afterwards you must have had close to 15 years working closely with Francis Blanchard in different capacities. That must have been a very different style again.

Mr JAIN – Yes, working with Mr Blanchard was an entirely new experience. He was the first, well the second, Frenchman after Maurice Colombain and I had to work but he was always extremely nice and treated me extremely well in working with him.

GR – Well in the course of almost 40 years working with the ILO, you have worked with many, many different people, striking people. Are there any particular colleagues that you think had interesting things to say, their contributions have been important, you had an interesting story to tell?

Mr JAIN – Not really, because we were so involved with the ILO’s current activities, we did not have much time to gossip about private affairs. Altogether it was a very pleasant experience to work with different nationalities. The fact that I was able to speak French helped a great deal, although my inability to speak Spanish was a handicap.

GR – How do you feel today, Mr Jain, about the ILO’s contribution in Asia in general and in India in particular? How far do you think policies in India, development policy and the development path in India, has reflected the ILO’s goals and values?

Mr JAIN – In the beginning, departments and ministries other than those in charge of labour questions were a little bit hesitant about the impact of the ILO-promoted standards on the development of industry. Sometimes they felt that ILO standards might impede the development of industry, but this impression or suspicion was quickly removed when they realized that the ILO standards were in fact a necessary accompaniment for the industrial progress in conditions of harmony and not of strife, so I think the stature of the ILO among Asian governments, including at the highest levels of the prime ministers and heads of state, has been recognized as a very important contribution to development activities.

GR – Do you think the ILO has been seen as a major contributor? How far do you think policy-makers in India, beyond the labour ministry, have drawn on the ILO and its ideas?

Mr JAIN – Well, in India especially and in other countries as well, there is a long tradition of consultation between ministers on important questions of labour and social policy, and the fact that the labour ministry’s views themselves were the result of prior consultation with industrial leaders and trade union leaders provided a very strong base for the ministry of labour and the other ministries in the development of their thinking and the adoption of relevant policies.

GR – Thank you very much, Mr Jain. It has been very interesting to hear your views and to pick up some of the inside information that you provided on what happened in the work of the ILO and the way in which you contributed to it.

Thank you very much.