

Friends of India

Inaugural meeting - 26 July 2008, London

*Welcome address by
Dr Seshagiri Rao Nimmagadda*

Good afternoon everybody. At the onset let me introduce myself to you all. I am Seshagiri Rao Nimmagadda, a consultant psychiatrist. I have been living and working in the UK for the past 12 years. I am a member of FOI team. On behalf of FOI, I extend my warm welcome to you all to this inaugural meeting of this organisation.

I see many young people in the audience and also some very experienced and eminent people who have achieved so much in their lives and also have contributed immensely to various walks of life in this country. It is very encouraging for any new organisation to attract this range of audience. Some of you might have picked up from the Friends of India web site and the pamphlets were circulated that this is an organisation aimed at making a positive contribution for the all round development of India in general and Andhra Pradesh in particular. It has its basis in our shared desire to do something and give something back to our country and our state.

Before I proceed any further to elucidate on the aims and objectives of this organisation, as the current team views it, let me briefly explain to you the origins of FOI and the basis for today's meeting.

More than a year ago, I participated in a television programme in London, Mana Telugu Shankaravam on Mana Telugu TV, hosted by our friend Mahesh Kumar with Ramanaidu garu and Dr Bhupesh Kumar garu as co-participants. While we were walking back to the tube station from the television studio, it transpired between us why should we not start an informal

network of like-minded people with progressive ideas so that it can be developed to some kind of think tank. Later on, a few of us got together, to form this informal network and named it as FOI. The members of the FOI team include, besides me, Raheed Khan, Srisail Reddy Panjugula, Mahesh Kumar, Mallesh Kota, and Ramanaidu Boyalla.

Before I try to define what FOI is and what it stands for let me categorically state what it is not and what it does not stand for. We, in FOI, are not starting from the basic premise that everything that is happening in India is necessarily wrong and we are here to change it. We are also not starting with some form of grandiose ideas that we are here to bring some kind of revolutionary change in India, which others have not been able to achieve so far. What we submit to you all today, is that we are here to make a slow but steady and positive start towards contributing to the advancement of our state and country in our own small way. And how we progress from there in to the future, depends on our commitment, capacity and vision. The contribution we envisage to make is mainly in terms of helping to develop the right ideas, contribute and stimulate to the development of productive policies, and act as a catalyst for positive changes that are actually already taking place in our country.

We shall try and pose some critical questions to ourselves - Why do we need an organisation like this? Is there any dearth for intellectuals in India? Can not they do this themselves in India? To answer these questions we should understand two aspects here.

Firstly, we have a right to be patriotic; it is the innate nature of many of us to carry a strong desire to contribute back something to our motherland in some way. So this, in a way, becomes our right to organise and actively think on the

ways in which we NRIs can contribute to the advancement of our state and country.

Secondly, we the Non Resident Indians are in a unique position where we have seen two systems at close quarters - the Indian system and the Western system. One main advantage of working in the West is that it will inculcate scientific and rational thinking and helps to solve problems in innovative and imaginative ways. The praiseworthy aspect about these countries is that they provide an environment to think freely and objectively and thus nourish one's thought process and allow it to flourish. We, the NRIs, could use this method of thinking to generate some ideas for Indian problems from a different point of view. Again we are not claiming that the Western way of thinking and analysing is a solution for India's problems. What we can say though is that by adopting such a way we can offer a different point of view to help the politicians, the bureaucrats, the key decision makers and the general public to look at the problem and the possible solutions from a different perspective, which they may consider along with various other perspectives available to them. Because we have a foot in both camps, the solutions we offer will not be like those of a kind given by a Western consultancy to an Indian problem, but by Indians themselves who have good grounding in the Western way of thinking.

On the other hand, we may need some Indian ways of thinking to solve our own problems and predicaments we face here as NRIs. For example the social and generational problems families face with the second and third generation Indians here, who are relatively more westernised. Ideas and solutions for these kinds of issues may lie in the Indian family values and societal values with greater reliance on social and family networks, rather than on impersonal support from the state. I envisage our organisation to be a nodal point to work both ways in terms of cross fertilisation of some of the

best Indian and Western values and ideas for the betterment of people of our state and country and the Indians living abroad.

Now let me share some of the principles we have set out for Friends of India. One of the key principles of FOI is that it must remain *non-partisan*, which means it must not be affiliated to any political party, caste, region, religion and any specific ideology. We may still have people working in and with Friends of India who are affiliated to political parties, or other legitimate organisations and ideologies. However these individuals have to make sure that the work they do with Friends of India should be objective and based on sound facts and figures, rather than opinions influenced by their own affiliations. Of course, the Friends of India team has to make sure it implements the second check, so that if there is any conflict of interest in a piece of work done by any member or members affiliated to any of the above bodies on behalf of FOI, it should be made very clear and openly declared. How it is done is an operational issue, but as a matter of principle, if FOI loses the non-partisanship, its effectiveness will be critically compromised.

Second principle of FOI is being objective and rational in our opinions. The only way we can do this is by explaining the basis and reasons for our views, opinions and conclusions and back them up with appropriate facts and figures. This essentially means we have to adopt nothing else but a scientific methodology in analysing issues, in conducting research and arriving at evidence based conclusions. We should also show a balance by giving due appreciation and credit to opposing and competing points of view.

What should be the nature of contributions from FOI to AP and India? - We believe FOI should not have direct involvement or resort to any direct actions such as participating or supporting agitations or movements. Our goals are to influence the process and content of policy making positively; to inform public

by objective analysis of the issues and offer innovative and imaginative solutions to their problems and thus influence the public opinion. Any projects, surveys and any kind of work we undertake will be put in the public domain, so that members of the general public and also the decision makers can have access to that information. Thus FOI aims to influence public opinion and the decision making by key decision makers. However, how much influence our work will have on the public and the key decision makers will depend on the quality of our work, its objectivity and its ability to withstand logical analysis. There may be times where we may have to enlist the support or hire experts to achieve the above goals; however this is an issue that could be reserved for the future.

Our vision of FOI not only encompasses political issues in its fold but also, economic, social, environmental and educational issues. So please do not take home the message that this is a political think tank. Let me also reiterate that FOI is not a body that competes or has anything in common with the cultural organisations like Telugu Association of London and European Telugu Association, which have an important but very different role to play. There maybe several members who are members of both FOI and TAL or ETA, but their roles and responsibilities will be very different in FOI.

Now let me briefly mention about the progress we have made so far. During October last year FOI released a pamphlet titled, 'Annamayya - a Social Perspective' on the eve of the sixth centenary celebrations of Annamacharya in Birmingham. This was done with a view to bring out and highlight hitherto unrecognised aspects of Annamayya's contribution as a social reformer. I see some of you sitting in the audience, who are signatories to this document.

Recently, FOI conducted an on-line scientific survey on Telangana issue to assess the views of the internet users. We received an overwhelming

response with 1925 respondents from 35 countries. Our friend Srisail Reddy Panjugula, who led this survey, is going to present the preliminary results during the course of this programme.

We are still at the stage of developing the organisational policy and refining principles we have set out. The next major challenge is to work out the organisational structure and the operational procedures. The idea is to develop this organisation on robust principles and policies so that at any point in time, they take precedence over the preferences and idiosyncrasies of any individual or group of individuals.

A few months ago we thought we should reach out for like-minded individuals who are willing to join us to contribute their time and efforts for the development of this organisation and hence we organised this meeting. When I say 'like minded people', I do not mean those people who agree with us on everything. By the term 'like minded people', I mean those people who have progressive ideas and views based on sound reasoning backed up by facts and figures and who have a vision to contribute something back to their country through those ideas.

One question that might arise in some of your minds is – why should I get involved with this organisation? What advantages will I have if I join it? Before welcoming you all to join Friends of India, I want to clarify one thing in no uncertain terms. We believe that being an active member of Friends of India is certainly not a glamorous job, it may not bring you a lot of kudos, which you hope to expect; because the way the organisation is developing is based on teamwork and unless it is absolutely necessary, individual names would not come forward. Of course, Friends of India will always show a proportionate amount of acknowledgement to those who have contributed and acknowledge the people who have developed and successfully completed

any projects they have undertaken on behalf of Friends of India. Involvement in this organisation needs a commitment to devote a proportion of their valuable time, it involves in spending a lot of time in studying and analysing issues from time to time, writing up, preparing presentations, liaising with with people and organising events like this. Unless one enjoys this kind of work, it would certainly be a very unfulfilling. However, for those who like this kind of work, who enjoy the intellectual stimulus and derive satisfaction that they are instrumental in changing things in a positive way, even if it is a small change, through their ideas, their projects and their hard work, it will certainly give them enormous satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment.

I conclude my address by inviting you to join us and together we shall develop this organisation into an effective instrument in channelling our energies to contribute towards the progress and development of our state and the country. I invite you to come forward with your ideas, with your projects, if not anything just with your spare time, so that we can pull all these things together and build this organisation. There are a few forms outside on which you can register your interest so that we can establish communication to you.

I thank you for your interest and I hope you find our programme stimulating.