

# Senator Isakson Bonds With Indian Diaspora At GIACC Meet

BY VIREN MAYANI

Atlanta: It is not often that our elected officials come to us with the desire of engaging with us, giving us their undivided time to not only speak to us but listen as well. That is precisely what occurred on January 13<sup>th</sup> at the Hilton Northeast Atlanta where Senator Johnny Isakson met with Indian Diaspora leaders and media group members at a roundtable discussion hosted by the Georgia Indo American Chamber of Commerce (GIACC).

GIACC chairman Ritesh Desai initiated the roundtable discussion with his opening remarks. "Honorable Senator Isakson is not a stranger to our community," he remarked, "he has been a sincere friend and a dedicated Senator". Ritesh thanked him for taking the initiative and showing the leadership in including the Indian Diaspora in his outreach to hear people's concerns. Desai also individually thanked all the platinum members and sponsors of the event.

Senator Johnny Isakson declared it an honor to be present with the Diaspora and spoke directly to the audience present, without notes or lists to read from. His statements indicated that he was aware of the Chamber's approach to issues. "Most elected officials when they get to the podium may speak of how much they love the Indian community but I really do. I had the pleasure of going to India in 2006 when President Bush had agreed on the Civil Nuclear deal with Prime Minister Singh," he said.

The Senator spoke about his visit to the offices of Infosys in Bangalore and meeting with Narayana Murthy. He stated that he was proud to visit the world's largest democracy, as the US is a great friend of India. He spoke of the over \$27 billion in goods and services the US had procured from India last year, and added that India was the 16<sup>th</sup> largest recipient of US exports. The growing economic relationship is mutual in as much as our needs to make the world safer, the Senator affirmed.

He gave the example of his discussion with Narayana Murthy at an Infosys Board meeting when he asked Murthy what his remarks are to US citizens' concerns that India was outsourcing US tech jobs and perhaps hurting the people of the US? The Senator said: Murthy replied that when he was building his company: he rode an Indian car, banked with a local bank and drank a local soda. Now that his company is built and is international: he drives a Ford, banks with Citibank and drinks Coke! A positive result of trade between countries. So as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, I consider India as a great trade partner and understand the immigration concerns with the H1B visa status. It is a shame that we have so many wonderful students from China and India who come here to study and expand their knowledge to get their Master's and PhD's and instead of giving them a work visa we give them their diploma and a deportation document.

"President Obama has stated that he wants to tackle the immigration issue in 2010 and you can be rest assured if he does that I will be right there with him because I understand the value of what H1B visas contribute for the nation," he added.

"I have studied and agree with Thomas Fried-

man that the world is flat and that technology has made the ground a level playing field in terms of international trade for goods and services and everyone wins."

The Senator then took questions from the audience.

## Opportunities of trade between Georgia and India in the next 15 – 18 months?

The GA Ports Authority is not only a great asset to the State but a great producer of imported goods and services. It ranks as the most customer friendly Ports in the country and is strongly competing against Los Angeles. That relationship can



Senator Johnny Isakson with GIACC members. Photo by Ravi. R. Ponangi.

be further cultivated between GA and India. The second important element is our commonness of being 2 large democracies. We must capitalize on that. Lastly it is promoting investments in both countries, by businesses. Although I traveled only to Delhi and Bangalore, I saw first hand the US interests in India viz., Ford, Coke etc. I echo the sentiments of the speaker before me about the Census. The most important thing in the United States is to be counted. Everything we appropriate and everything we do is based on the count.

## During the Bush administration the focus in SE Asia was India but recently we see a shift towards China.

I am not consciously aware of any specific effort to downgrade India's importance but you are correct of your observation about the Bush Administration and their India centric focus. I have met Secretary of State Ms. Hillary Clinton as we are good friends and I know that she is a good promoter of India-US relationship. I honestly do not see a diminished emphasis of India from Washington's perspective. President hosted Prime Minister Singh at the first State dinner with an international dignitary to the Obama Whitehouse recently and that speaks a lot.

## What in your vision, is our response to the water crisis we face?

After 20 years of litigation the Judge has done GA a big favor by setting a deadline to have the deal worked out. There is no better inspiration then desperation. I am very impressed with the Governors of the 3 States and what they have accomplished thus far. A positive outcome is imminent as they have been given the privacy to

negotiate. You cannot accomplish much if you make the headlines everyday in your local papers. It is difficult as it is for 2 to negotiate but imagine a tri-party negotiation wherein we have to respect the needs of Alabama for the water for Power Generation, the needs for Florida for agriculture and the needs for Georgia for drinking water and other consumption. 96% of the times we have abundant water so it gets important when the drought occurs the 4% of the times.

## Can India play a role in the resurgence after the global financial system collapse?

India a great economy and can certainly con-

tribute but I think that the US and the rest of the world can do better by demanding more transparency in investment banking. We would have averted the current crisis if we managed investment banking the same way we manage banking. When an institution like AIG fails and the Feds place billions of dollars in its recovery you can bet most of that money went to places like India, Kazakhstan (between Russia and China) and countries around the world. We need to restore confidence in the US debt instruments for oil rich countries like Kazakhstan to invest again for their money to grow. Debt markets are currently mostly frozen. World community has to be a part of this solution. We are in a world economy.

## Climate change agreement was not reached for countries like India who are in the growth phase, and cannot do without fossil fuel?

I had dinner with the Finance Minister of India who explained the position quite simply: the US has a 200 year lead on energy exploration so for now India has to rely on fossil fuel for its dynamic growth until alternatives are found. I am not of the opinion that the world is in a catastrophic phase as far as environment is concerned but I am of the opinion that the world would do better if our reliance on oil as energy is curtailed from countries that do not appreciate democracy or freedom as we know it. It is also important to free the environment from carbon not by taxing it but reducing the use of pollutants that cause the carbon footprints.

## We'd like to see the GA Economic Development Authority to open an office in India

We ought to have one. I had contributed to the opening of the first off-shore Economic Development office and that was in Tokyo and there has to be one now in India. 1.2B consumers are a lot to not ignore and I will speak to the Governor about that.

## It ain't over till the fat lady sings – what about healthcare reform?

Healthcare reform is on life support. It has been a very painful and interesting exercise. In the US in the last 30 some years there has been a classic debate over Medicare. There is a school of thought that the Government ought to provide healthcare for all its people as entitlement. Then there was also a school of thought that albeit Healthcare is a necessity, it is the private enterprise that ought to manage the supply – demand equation by innovation. In the 1960's we created the Social Security Tax that is escrowed and given back to the contributor and later we came up with Medicare for the poorest to access healthcare. The cost of healthcare having sky rocketed, due to complex illnesses and retrospective innovation, there is a huge cry about lowering costs. This administration I believe saw an opportunity to go to a single payer format for healthcare which would be the Government. I think insurance reform law is a better option. If you feel that the interference of FDIC with the local banks have caused grief can you imagine what the Government interference in Healthcare can do. Even though the bill may be passed but it does not go into effect till 2014 assuming that a democrat keeps Mr. Kennedy's seat in MA. It is diffured by 4 years to accumulate funding that will be required but then it also gives us 4 years to repeal the law if need be. The Public Option in the plan is dead for sure. To give you an example: if you are a small business and desire to operate a health insurance plan for your employees and the cost escalates – you are better off paying the minimal \$750 fine then be forced to operate the high cost insurance plan. Most small business owners, like you are doing it as they know.

The Senator closed by requesting anyone to place a call to his office if they had other concerns.