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In The Presence of Greatness ^[1]

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For anyone who is Indian-born, as I am, the chance to see Ravi Shankar perform is akin to an audience with the Pope for Catholics – and perhaps even harder to accomplish. This one-off show at the Disney Hall had been scheduled for October last year and postponed twice - due, the press release said, to “illness and visa complications” (a public diplomacy blunder for U.S. immigration?).

Now, at 91, India's most revered classical musician has been part of that country's cultural bedrock almost beyond living memory. I have grown up knowing that face with those intense smiling eyes, that wiry hair and frame and the general air of saintliness. So it was a great shock when a frail, stooped man with a stick walked slowly onto the stage and was helped up the single step to the dais where his accompanists awaited. Gone was the thick dark hair, replaced with wisps of white; the eyes were dimmer, the thinning face framed with a thick white beard.

‘Hello my Angelenos,’ he said in greeting to the multicultural, multi-generational audience: the diversity is evidence that Shankar is arguably India's greatest cultural diplomat. Over sixty years, he and his sitar have not only given the complicated rhythms of Indian classical music an international audience, but have also influenced successive waves of Western musicians from The Beatles to Yehudi Menuhin to Phillip Glass. And many from that Summer of Love generation sat, enrapt, around me (some, it seemed, still lost in flower power). Others chatted before the performance of how they had encountered Shankar's music while on holiday in India. Some (non-Indians) paid homage by dressing in Indian clothes. Their image was not of grinding poverty or filthy children tugging at your clothes for a few tourist rupees; nor was it of computer geniuses or efficient rows of outsourced telemarketers whose name really can't be Brian; it wasn't of glitzy, infectious Bollywood dancers, nor of platefuls of fragrant chicken tikka masala. All these images are found in that vast land (although chicken tikka masala was created for the British Raj); but Ravi Shankar's exquisite artistry is cultural diplomacy of a different order.

Those boney, supple fingers channel 5,000 years of history. The background drone of accompanying sitars invoke the epic movement of the universe; dualling tablas are the deep bass note of the solid earth; a reedy flute floats in and out like divine intervention and woven through it all Shankar's urgent sitar conjures up the frenetic Cycle of Life: thus, the sounds of Ancient Earth well up in 21st Century Los Angeles.

It may be an image of India few modern Indians recognize, and drowned-out by the roar of a fast-emerging global power, but it is an India that speaks to me on the level of DNA and it is a heady form of cultural diplomacy. The audience in Los Angeles was transported to a country of mythic history, great wisdom and oneness with nature, of Himalayan peaks, trundling oxcarts and the love story of the Taj Mahal. It made me want to go back, maybe even live

there at some point in the future, certainly to understand better my origins and (re-)connect with those far away. If it did that to me, imagine then, what effect it had on those around me. And isn't that what cultural diplomacy is all about?

Ravi Shankar may have little inkling of how his fingers generate soft power. But, India's ambitious government certainly knows. His diplomacy exists outside New Delhi's hierarchy of power and at odds with the raucous, clashing images of India that prevail in popular culture. It isn't for everyone, but it certainly finds its home in that land of astonishing contrasts and is no less potent for being so rare.

Rajesh Mirchandani is a Masters in Public Diplomacy student at USC and BBC journalist. He is also an alumnus of CPD's Summer Institute 2011. Rajesh recently went to see the legendary Indian classical musician Ravi Shankar perform at LA's Disney Hall.
