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Kaushik Basu on Pranab Mukherjee, Woody Allen

Seven months into his job as India's chief economic adviser, Kaushik Basu has had a steep learning curve.

A career academic and poster-boy economist, he is learning the ways of Lutyens' Delhi.



Kaushik Basu

In one of his first days in his new job, Mr. Basu was getting into the front seat of his white Ambassador car – the symbol of government and power in New Delhi. Instinctively, he reached for the seat belt. The driver, seasoned in ferrying senior bureaucrats and politicians and aware that Mr. Basu was a greenhorn, turned to him and said firmly, "Sir, you are a VIP; there is no need for you to use a seatbelt. No policeman will stop you," Mr. Basu recalls. Not wanting to rebuff the advice, he says he clutched his seat instead.

A top-notch economist, Mr. Basu is used to placing ideas and new theories in some accessible space such as a refereed journal or website, and then sitting back with a take-it-or-leave-it offer to allcomers. In India's bureaucracy, he says he is learning that a more pro-active approach is required. You not only have to create ideas and design policies but campaign for their implementation.

"I have, however, been told that, in government, I have to learn to be more aggressive. I must not give people the 'or leave it' option. I don't know if I will ever be able to pick up this trait," Mr. Basu told India Real Time in a recent interview.

In his first few weeks in the job, Mr. Basu had his moments of self doubt about what he had landed himself in. He is on a sabbatical from Cornell University in New York state, where he is a professor in economics and international studies.

"In those moments I told myself that if Malinowski could spend months at a stretch in the wilderness of the Trobriand Islands, surely I could do two years in the North Block," he said, referring to Bronislaw Malinowski, the famous Polish anthropologist.

Mr. Basu comforted himself with the thought that if nothing came of it all, he could be an observer and chronicler of the Indian bureaucracy like an anthropologist and call it "Tristes North Block." That would be his ode to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, ethnologist and author of "Tristes Tropiques," who passed away in 2009. So, for the first time in his life, Mr. Basu now maintains a diary.

As he settled to his job, Mr. Basu says he has been surprised by the wealth of talent in the top echelons of the Indian bureaucracy, even if it not always put to best use.

"It is also a place of much ritual pageantry and foibles," said Mr Basu, 58 years old.

Still, he is all praise for his boss, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

Prior to taking up his assignment, Mr. Basu wasn't acquainted with Mr. Mukherjee, an old Congress party hand with over four decades in political life.

“Just as he must have made enquiries about me to find out who he was inviting into his manor, I also made enquiries about the lord of the manor,” Mr. Basu said.

He says he decided to go with the wisdom of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose judgement he trusts, in accepting the role reporting to Mr. Mukherjee. Both Mr. Singh and Mr. Basu have been on the faculty of the Delhi School of Economics, the red-bricked Delhi institution which has spawned many a bureaucrat and policymaker.

“Unlike some small-time politicians or bureaucrats, Pranab Mukherjee has no insecurities about confronting contrary opinions. He gives me the space to develop new ideas, and is open to them even when they may not be consonant with his own,” said Mr Basu.

Mr. Basu likely played a sizeable hand in the government’s budget this year, which was lauded for its efforts to put the government’s finances in order.

Mr. Basu says his boss is North Block’s historian-in-residence and has a great sense of humor, which few people realize.

The only regret that this St. Stephens College graduate has is that his current job leaves him with no time for academic pursuits. Solving Sudoku puzzles is currently his only shot at that. In fact, Wikipedia lists him as the inventor of the two-player board game, Dui-doku.

“Economic policymaking takes up literally all my time, including weekends,” he said. “But I can’t complain. This is of my choosing.”

Mr. Basu’s Woody Allen-esque looks often draw comment in media. He says he is an unabashed admirer of the quirky Hollywood actor-director.

“He is one of the greatest film-makers of our time; and in my view he is also a philosopher. His jokes are not just funny, they have a Socratic quality to them that makes you pause and think,” said Mr Basu.

As to the similarity in looks, Mr. Basu has this line to offer, one that would make Mr. Allen proud: “I have to admit that I have heard that, from some angles, I look like him. All I can say is that I try to hold my head at other angles.”

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