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'Golden' diplomat basks in *Slumdog* glory

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THERE'S a strong South Block connection to *Slumdog Millionaire* - which won four Golden Globe Awards including one for music director A R Rahman — and that's Vikas Swarup. The movie is based on Swarup's first novel, *Q and A*, and he is currently India's Deputy High Commissioner to South Africa.

Swarup, a South Block mandarin who served as director in former External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh's office, has also been director, heading the Pakistan desk, as well as the Nepal and Bhutan desks, in the past. A career diplomat since 1986, he has served in the US, the UK, Turkey and Ethiopia.

Swarup was the buzz in the corri-

dors of South Block on Monday. So much so that even Foreign Secretary Shiv Shanker Menon wanted to speak to him, as did most of his batchmates, colleagues and friends in the diplomatic community.

Speaking to *Newsline* from London, an ecstatic Swarup, on being asked about his thoughts on the film bagging the prestigious award, said: "I don't think anybody expected this (winning the Golden Globe). It was a very low-budget film, by Indian actors, shot on Indian locations, and based on a book written by an Indian. For a film like this to challenge world cinema is truly amazing."

Swarup said there is a lot of interest in Bollywood about making the movie in Hindi. "My wife got calls from some Bollywood directors who want to make the Hindi version." He couldn't give names, as

Film Four (UK), which has the rights, hasn't yet decided on giving it up.

What inspired him to write the book? Swarup was candid: "I was inspired by the hole-in-the-wall project, where a computer with an internet connection was put in a Delhi slum. When the slum was revisited after a month, the children of that slum had learnt how to use the worldwide web."

"That got me fascinated and I realised that there's an innate ability in everyone to do something extraordinary, provided they are given an opportunity. How else do you explain children with no education at all being able to learn to use the Internet. This shows knowledge is not just the preserve of the elite," Swarup said, while talking about the project, in which NIIT chief scien-



Swarup's second novel *Six Suspects* hit the stands last July

tist Dr Sugata Mitra had carved a 'hole in the wall' that separated the NIIT premises from the adjoining slum in Kalkaji in 1999. Through this 'hole', a freely accessible computer was put out for use and with

no prior experience, the children learnt to use the computer on their own.

"Moreover, the 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' quiz format was a huge global success, with Amitabh Bachchan hosting *Kaun Banega Crorepati* in India on prime time television, when streets used to be deserted in India. All these developments made write my first novel," Swarup said.

So, what's next? "First, I will have to return several calls, the first one from the Foreign Secretary, since I have been busy giving interviews since the morning. And then I will be busy with my work as Deputy High Commissioner." His office in Pretoria is managed by one Mr Parmar, who told *Newsline* that his boss had received more than 100 calls today, and the phones were still ringing.