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## Book Review

# A Ringside Seat to History, an Autobiography by Ambassador Alan Pascal Nazareth

*Published by Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, Seattle  
In the eyes of a Business Manager*

- Reviewer: Sudhindra Gargesa

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*It was only after two years' work that it occurred to me that I was a writer. I had no particular expectation that the novel would ever be published, because it was sort of a mess. It was only when I found myself writing things, I didn't realise I knew that I said, 'I'm a writer now.' The novel had become an incentive to deeper thinking. That's really what writing is—an intense form of thought..."* **Don DeLillo, American novelist,**

American writer Eric Waugh says 'Don't give your opinions about Art and the Purpose of Life..... Give the relevant facts and let your readers make their own judgments. Stick to your story. It is not the most important subject in history but it is one about which you are uniquely qualified to speak'. I feel Sri Pascal Alan Nazareth does just that in his autobiography 'A Ringside Seat to History'. While reading the book many historic events came to my mind back and forth. Be it His holiness The Dalai Lama, the formation of Bangladesh or a criminal fugitive Jayanti Dharma Teja, these were the instances I read as a schoolgoer. Begging to differ from Eric Waugh, all the musings in the book are a part of history we saw as youngsters.

Executives seldom see themselves as politicians or diplomats. Yet they have much in common. They have to negotiate and deal with diverse people, maintain good relationships with the media, build healthy interpersonal relationships and possess strong communication skills. To succeed they need to acquire skills and knowledge that go beyond technical know-how. Successful managers communicate effectively, understand power and lead their organizations successfully in the good and the bad times.

The learnings from reading books by diplomats or business managers can be summarized as seeking to equip one with skills, knowledge and values so that he/she can use the languages of 'feeling', 'meaning' and 'action' effectively.

Art Petty an executive and emerging-leader coach, author, speaker and workshop presenter in his article '**The New Model for Managers—Old School Diplomacy**' draws lessons from history to suggest a fresh model and set of skills based on old-school nation-state diplomacy. All these skills help today's business managers and organizational leaders find solutions for the challenges posed by different constituent groups in fast-changing business paradigms. He feels that in practice, great diplomats design solutions that recognise hard truths and strive to deliver what the constituents need. Both diplomats and business managers face tough contradictions. Strategic compromise is one of the tools, but there is no compromise in the objective.

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Alan Petty draws attention to The National Museum of American Diplomacy which identifies nine skill sets of effective diplomats:

1. Analysis (critical thinking)
2. Awareness (social, emotional, cultural intelligence)
3. Communication (from listening effectively to articulating with clarity)
4. Leadership (the ability to make tough decisions to move situations forward)
5. Collaboration (ability to create engagement and involvement)
6. Composure (self-management)
7. Management (bring ideas to life with and through others)
8. Innovation (generate creative alternatives)
9. Advocacy (represent their constituents)

While all experienced managers use these skills at varying levels, I believe that diplomats probably use the complete toolset in every engagement. They work tirelessly to hone these skill sets and the tools, in a right balance, for the situation.

Raj Bharti Founder and General Manager at Lastmile Leaders, an Amazon Logistics, in one of the articles shares the wisdom he got from Sri Shiv Rastogi on lessons from that talks of the 13 dimensions of foreign service officers like composure, cultural adaptability, experience and motivation. Information integration and analysis, initiative and leadership, objectivity and integrity, oral communication, planning and organising, quantitative analysis, reposedness, working with others and written communication, can help business leaders in identifying a potential employee. These very qualities help the employee to deliver a stellar performance in the business arena. In my interaction with the author, I was able to identify probably all of these him and also in this book.

On the other hand, I was reading one of the sayings of Warren Buffet who says: *'If you lose dollars for the firm by bad decisions, I will be very understanding. If you lose the reputation for the firm, I will be ruthless.* So true for IFS officers! The author remembers Sri A N Jha ICS, who mentioned the quote of Winston Churchill who says on the tact required of a foreign officer ***'The art of telling a person to go to hell in such a way that he asks for directions to it'***. In my own career, I have felt the importance of this tact many times.

Working in adverse conditions makes a diplomat and a business manager both tough and flexible. When he recollects the day on which China invaded India, I remembered my childhood as a school-going kid reading all the information made available in newspapers, who could not comprehend the realities of war, though I had heard of the aftermath of war from my father who was then serving in the Indian Army.

Jayanti Dharma Teja episode is one of the most interesting and classic cases of how persistent a diplomat needs to be to ensure the criminals however big they are and whatever their contacts be, a diplomat has to be tough and not lose sight so that they can be nabbed. Those were my high school days and we used to read in newspapers and periodicals. That he was a nuclear scientist, trained by Enrico Fermi and had also worked at CERN was what I learned from this book. I am also reminded of the instance, mentioned in this book, during the OIC meet of 1990, when the author foiled Pakistan's attempt to raise the Kashmir issue at the event and also countered the Saudi Foreign Minister on his remark on plebiscite Kashmir issue.

Being a diplomat is like the life of a wanderer. One could find himself or herself in an unenviable position like a business manager who is posted in new territory which he/she has to explore for opportunities. All the wisdom under '13 Dimensions' would be necessary. The author's experience in Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) and also in Ghana speak volumes on the travail a diplomat has to undergo. The author also recalls Admiral Katari, the then Indian Ambassador to Burma who brought in promptness, discipline, hard work and team spirit and believed that the *'strength of every*

*chain lies in its weakest link*'. The author also mentions that he realised the importance of Morale and teamwork in efficient functioning which is true of any organisation.

From wherever we may hail from, beliefs which we assimilate become a part of us. It is this cultural adaptation that makes one an effective diplomat or a business manager, who has to work in a multicultural environment catering to people of different continents. One has to work and communicate effectively and harmoniously with persons of other cultures, value systems, political beliefs, and economic circumstances; to recognize and respect differences in new and different cultural environments. The author's ringside experience of tree spirits who avenge themselves on those who disturb their abodes in old stately trees is akin to our belief in not cutting coconut trees. But the power of belief is unimaginable. We get a glimpse of this in Author's son miraculously recovering from a serious ailment and the role of his family's belief in the Almighty and faith in Saint Mother Teresa.

In Chapter 14, the author talks about Gandhian ideals and religious tolerance, which are of utmost importance to business managers more so in today's globalised work environment. Author's observation that religious tolerance advocated in India through age-old maxims *Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti* or *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and resolution to spend retirement years to promote Gandhian ideals are noteworthy.

The author recalls Prime Minister Shastri's visit to Rangoon, where while proposing a toast he says 'Your Excellency, India is the only country where water flows like Champagne' !!!! The author ensures the book has its own place for humour. Another instance that comes to mind here is the visit of Indian MPs, who were part of Indian delegates to UNCTAD, Santiago (Chile) during 1972, demanding '*idli vadas and poori bhaji*' for breakfast.

In recent times we have read about tracking economic offenders like Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksey, but over five decades ago the author had done such a persistent investigation on Dr. Dharma Teja's case right from 1967 to 1970 when he was again arrested in London. He finally landed in Tihar Jail in 1972. The author recollects that Ambassador B K Nehru rightly called the author '**Our James Bond**'.

Efforts for right communication to cull international press like New York Times which carried the article 'Ballots in India, Bullets in Pakistan' during December 1971, thereby clarifying India's position in the crisis in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, were noteworthy. The tireless work of the author and his staff in Lima in upholding the reputation of the country in the face of the not-so-friendly International Press rightly deserves a salute.

The globalization of business compels negotiators to work harder at creating and sustaining long-term relationships with other companies. To do so, they must understand and manage the forces that diplomats, as international negotiators, have coped up with for centuries. The book gives us the author's contribution to promoting trade and commerce wherever he was deputed. Significant as I saw them were his efforts in 1972 in securing direct imports of Peruvian Copper to India (rather than via London) and import by Ghana in 1980 of 400 Tata buses despite stiff competition from Leyland/Neoplan buses of UK / Germany.

In his recall of his visit to Yugoslavia in 1975 as a member of a delegation led by Foreign Minister Sri. Y B Chavan, I pleasantly noticed this dynamic diplomat's humility where he says '*Never have I undergone such a radical image transformation from an indisciplined and wayward officer into a creative and dynamic one on this trip to Yugoslavia in January 1975, as a member of Foreign Minister Y. B. Chavan's delegation!*'

I had goosebumps reading his days during the coup in Ghana, in 1979, when Flt. Lt. Rawlings took over and subsequent events. My own experience of visiting Ghana in 1986 as an official of HMT International Ltd., was quite pleasant when I overstayed for one week after the expiry of my visa!

I could see that he had a very eventful stint at ICCR though initially, he voiced his displeasure to the Foreign Secretary He narrates many interesting events and a fascinating account of renowned artist M F Hussain's ICCR-sponsored

14-day visit to China from which he returned after just 24 hours bringing with him only a pocket book of sketches of China from which, in the next four months he produced forty paintings, with which ICCR organized an exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi, which was widely acclaimed.

As a diplomat, one has to confront many people in positions in the country and overseas but has to ensure that the image of the country never gets tarnished on any account. The book is full of such a struggle and we see that the country's prestige was never compromised and he as a diplomat in the centre stage of events comes out unscathed.

The author weaves the events of history with his personal life effectively that, I was moved on quite a few occasions, be it the birth of his first daughter in Rangoon, his son in New York, his son Anand's sickness or of his personal tragedies which is the hallmark of a good author.

Another interesting episode author recollects is of Jawaharlal Nehru when the author met with, along with his batchmates, after selection for IFS said *'My young officers, you will often be told that diplomacy is all about going abroad to lie on behalf of your country. I want to assure you that India does not expect you to lie on its behalf. Don't ever tell a lie but always remember you have no obligation to reveal the truth!'* Good learning for the young IFS officer !!! and also for us Business Managers

Respect and deference are fundamental norms of international diplomacy. This trait of this diplomat author can be seen throughout the book. When a value-based right stand is taken, naturally everyone, irrespective of position, would support it. There are quite a few instances in the book to prove the point. I have experienced this and can vouch for this opinion.

This thoroughly enjoyable book makes a smooth reading with eye-friendly font and the author's simple but effective narration appeals to the reader's heart. With a lucid flow of narration, it was a ringside seat for me too as a co-traveller in this journey of Ambassador Alan Pascal Nazareth.