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Memoires of an Indian Diplomat
by BS Das
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Since 2007, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has been implementing a much-needed plan to double the size of the Indian Foreign Service, from its woefully small number of about 620, when this decision was taken. No country in with over 100 diplomatic missions around the world functions with less than 1000 executive or diplomatic rank officials. Mexico, with 80 missions (and 70-odd consulates) has around 1030, and it is seen as a small service. India has over 120 missions – and more are added each year – besides over 40 consulates.

One expansion method is to step up induction via UPSC exams, and this is underway. From an average annual recruitment of less than 14 in 2000-05, 30 are now being taken and the number will rise to 35 in 2012. Too big a recruitment surge will produce a ‘bulge’, which will be hard to handle as soon as the first set of promotions come up. The other method, tried only rarely, is to take in some at mid-career levels. Understandably, the IFS views this with serious reserve, both as dilution of standards, and as a threat to promotions for those that entered via the traditional UPSC route.

This book by BS Das, despite its title, is relevant to this discussion, given that initially many saw him as ‘interloper’ from the Police Service, but he made a singular success of his diplomatic career. If such quality of talent is available at mid-career levels, the IFS need not fear. Alas, individuals of the competence, plus the integrity and modesty of BS Das are all too few. Das belongs to the very first batch of the IPS, recruited in 1948; he spent the first 12 years of his career as a

fast rising police official. But from the outset, his heart was set on a diplomatic career.

He joined MEA in 1960, handling initially what amounted to personnel security, before setting off on a 3-year posting to the Indian Embassy in Moscow. He writes graphically of initial cool reception by embassy officials, including his Ambassador, the legendary Subimal Dutt, and how he gradually won their confidence. His observations on the transformation in Indo-Soviet relations in the context of the India-China conflict of 1962 are revealing; in those early years, ‘...some IAF officials would walk out of negotiations, citing poor quality of Soviet aircraft’. He adds: all those military supply and industrial deals were more political than economic.

Das then moved to the High Commission in London, and served there during the Indo-Pak war of 1965, when ‘the British showed great animus against India’, and Prime Minister Harold Wilson ‘almost accused India of starting the war’. Subsequently, one of his knowledgeable interlocutors called this ‘a tragic mistake ...based on wrong information by anti-India lobbies’. These pages offer revealing glimpses of Indian dignitaries during their visits to the UK and other countries.

In 1967 came the high point of Das’s career when he was posted as the country’s first resident ‘Special Officer’ in Bhutan, working nominally under the supervision of the Political Officer, based in Gangtok. In effect that was the start of evolution in Bhutan’s external personality. The first days were not easy, given that the Bhutanese were uneasy at the role that a resident envoy might play in their country. In the course of four momentous years, when Bhutan gradually moved forward in its international personality, becoming a member of the UN in 1971. Those 50 pages are the core of this short work, providing rich material for scholars and lay readers. They testify to the friendship Das won in that country, while remaining steadfast in his pursuit of Indian objectives.

In 1972, Das was shifted out of MEA and became the Municipal Commissioner of Delhi, evidently a reward for an minor incident involving the Indian military training command in Bhutan. That short 10-month exile ended when in April 1973 he was reassigned to MEA, as the ‘chief executive’ in Sikkim, at a time when the political dispensation in Sikkim was under evolution. This section of the narrative is disappointing on two counts: Das does not provide new information on Sikkim events, choosing discretion over candor for a period that culminated in its’ integration with India in mid-1975. He is also silent on the why of his move out of Sikkim about a year later.

Das then shifted to the International Airport Authority of India, and became the Managing Director and then Chairman of Air India in mid-1979, where he served for some months, till he fell foul of a shady aircraft deal and was shunted out, and left in a limbo for a long 14 months, until he joined a private business group. The succinct description he provides of his personal experience in the heyday of Sanjay Gandhi’s power days makes compelling reading. He is unemotional in narrating the limits to which personal despondency pushed him in those days, and he does this with a rare economy of expression.

Indian officials who do not write memoirs to rehash past battles or project their ego are rather few in number. Das is very clearly in this small category, but old habits of discretion are presumably hard to shed. But we should be thankful that that Das gave in to the persuasion of his friends in producing this slender volume.
