

Business Standard, 8 January 2014

Stuff Happens: An Anecdotal Insight into Indian Diplomacy

Rajendra Abhyankar

Har-Anand, New Delhi, 2013

In the Preface, the author declares this book is neither an autobiography nor a memoir, but rather ‘a look at the practice of Indian diplomacy at a micro-level’. Such studies are all too rare, which makes this work especially welcome. The book’s title comes from Donald Rumsfeld, the established articulator of profundities that gave us the phrase ‘known unknowns, and unknown unknowns’, as a guide to prognostication.

The author identifies information and access as the two essentials of diplomacy, adding to that knowledge of foreign languages, which is connected with access. The value assigned to language skills is especially welcome, as is Ambassador Abhyankar’s experience in learning languages on the fly, at his varied assignments, which is what he accomplished with Italian, Arabic and Turkish – such felicity is rare. One would add to the list of professional essentials a flair for outreach, which involves people skills, and above all, personal credibility. These are the assets that lie at the core of the series of incidents and experience that are presented in the book.

‘Unusual’ is the book’s leit motif, and the experiences presented in two main parts, covering Asia and Europe and West and Central Asia, are organized under that rubric, in terms of: encounters, situations, adventures, places and people. We have thus a string of episodes, arranged in semi-chronological fashion. This makes for readability; by skipping over the personal narrative connectors, it also minimizes the ‘I-me’ element. Some parts of the book are a travelogue, ranging from a climb up Mt. Sinai to a visit to an ancient Hindu temple in Azerbaijan, which has inscriptions in Pali, lying on the banks of the Caspian Sea, along ancient trade routes that brought Indian traders to Central Asia. The author describes his travel to the historic city of Palmyra in Syria, whose ancient kingdom of the 3rd century

AD received an Indian emissary. We see in much of this the footprints of an oft-forgotten long reach of India.

In Baghdad, September 1980, the author had a providential escape from strafing aircraft when an Iranian aircraft raid, at the start of the Iran-Iraq war, interrupted tense open-air negotiations with striking Indian workers who were employed in one of the projects under execution by an Indian company. The author's narrative of events on 23 July 1983, when Sri Lanka erupted in ethnic violence with targeted attacks on Tamils in the capital Colombo is even more riveting. These episodes bring home the dangers that diplomats, and their families, confront at overseas posts, and why diplomatic immunity means what it does, as a vital, irreducible code of inter-state behavior; indirectly we see how the recent egregious outrage against the Indian Deputy Consul General in New York is so indefensible. We observe here the propensity of Rajendra Abhyankar to be present at happening places.

Some of the episodes covered are instructive and insightful. Others are vignettes that tantalize. But almost all are the stuff of real life case studies, and reveal what this profession involves, in quick response to opportunity, adaptation to circumstance and sang froid in pursuit of core objectives. The best include: the meeting with Saddam Hussein in 2002, accompanying the Indian Minister Ram Niak, and a long citation of Saddam's views on India and world affairs, as the author was the last Indian to have met the Iraq leader; the journey into Kurd areas in 2003 and meetings with Kurdish leaders; discussions with varied religious and other leaders, including the Grand Mufti of Syria, Yasser Arafat, and Hezbollah personalities. The account of oil diplomacy in Iraq, Azerbaijan and Sudan demonstrates how different oil companies have to work with their governments in turbulent and contested environments, and how India needs to use diplomacy to access energy resources, with oil diplomacy factoring into the advancement of other interstate interests.

Indirectly the book reveals how Indian envoys enjoy a fair amount of latitude in their actions, in the confidence that their headquarters will back them. Because

interstate relations cover so many different segments, be it local publication of books or scientific exchanges or outreach to varied regions in the assignment country, an envoy has to be alert to opportunities. Personal initiative counts for much of this. This is not the norm in all diplomatic services, and this capacity for initiative is a distinguishing mark of the best.

Ambassador Abhyankar is not an 'Arabist' in terms of initial language training or area focus, but he took advantage of an assignment in Syria at an early stage of his career to learn the language; this served him well subsequently when he was later posted to Arab countries. MEA needs more language and area specialists, which is an abiding lesson for all diplomatic services; the British excelled at this, until recently when they lost focus on language studies, unlike the Americans, Chinese, and Russians.

Overall, this is a fine work, engaging and novel in presenting a mix of a quasi-memoir and a punchy travelogue.

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