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Indian diplomacy from the inside

Kishan S Rana / Jun 22, 2012, 00:08 IST

This book is an outstanding addition to the all-too-slim range of studies on Indian diplomacy, all the more so since it is a collaborative effort by 16 retired ambassadors. Each essay focuses on a particular location or set of experiences. Read together, they tell the story of how India pursues relationships with individual countries, handles regional and thematic issues in the global dialogue, and deals with crises. The best accounts furnish vivid colour, as well as context and insight.

G J Malik, the IFS doyen who retired 33 years ago, has detailed his remarkable experience in Chile during the election and subsequent overthrow of President Salvador Allende, including his personal friendship with the charismatic leader. His first-hand account of the coup that ended with Allende's death is vivid. Malik also educates us on the Latin American practice of political victims taking asylum in foreign embassies, and shares his experience as the custodian of the Soviet and Swedish embassies following these harrowing events.

K L Dalal provides a charming, un-egoistic account of how he accomplished the three special tasks entrusted to him by Indira Gandhi at Vienna in 1980: to look after Gandhiji's disciple Miraben (formerly Mary Slade of the UK), re-establish connections with Netaji Subas Chandra Bose's spouse Emilie Schenkl, and win back friendship with Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who had been disenchanted by the Emergency.

And Haksar has written about a little-known episode: the long, unscripted conversation between Prime Minister Morarji Desai and General Zia-ul-Haq in Nairobi at Jomo Kenyatta's funeral in September 1978. Evidently, no official record was made because the two leaders met alone. Subsequently, Zia-ul-Haq told the Pakistan Parliament that this 45-minute meeting was held "in a very friendly atmosphere". That act of "funeral diplomacy" broke the ice between the two sides at the time.

A Madhavan's account of the unification of Germany in 1989-90 would have been richer if he had included personal experiences. Madhavan mentions in passing four major summits witnessed during his three years in Bonn — reciprocal visits by the two presidents, and the journeys to Germany by Rajiv Gandhi and P V Narasimha Rao.

K N Bakshi has written about the run-up to the Shimla summit of July 1972, though the key question of why Indira Gandhi decided to trust Bhutto's oral

promise to convert the Kashmir Line of Control into a border is not answered. P N Dhar is the only surviving member of that inner circle that might shed some light. C S Dasgupta has detailed the negotiations that culminated in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, while N Desai's essay covers his travails in Idi Amin's Uganda in the wake of that leader's 1972 decision to expel the "Asian" community. A N Ram depicts the evolution of Bhutan from an unknown mountain recluse to a confident practitioner of international diplomacy and inventor of the "Gross Happiness Index" — he played a role at each transition stage.

K V Rajan's account of his five years in Nepal details the political jostling between the Himalayan state's political parties (what Menon's essay delightfully calls a "farrago of local interests") and the complexity this poses for India. B S Das lifts the curtain, just a little, on the largely untold events in Sikkim during his time as chief executive, on the eve of its 1974-75 merger with India. P Shah's essay on his year-long post-retirement assignment as UN Special Envoy to Iraq in 1998 is equally insightful. T P Sreenivasan gives a ringside view of the 1987 coup in Fiji and its aftermath.

K K Bhargava's essay draws on his years of dealing with Saarc, including that organisation's secretary generalship, sketching India's distrust of regional cooperation. An example: as secretary general, he proposed in October 1979 that Saarc establish contact with the secretariats of Asean, the European Commission and other regional entities. Indian officials complained to the foreign secretary that he was acting against India's interests; it took India two-and-a-half years to bring itself to support that simple proposal.

J S Mehta has sketched the evolution of India-China relations, in which he has played a key role. His conclusion: an India that "always practised equity in international relations might prove stronger than the one which practised isolation and superiority".

P Menon's essay is invaluable for its close look at the foreign policy and diplomacy of Narasimha Rao. Little attention has been given to the extraordinary suppleness with which Rao crafted India's response to the end of the Cold War, moving almost seamlessly to profit from regional and global opportunities created by India's economic reforms.

Tighter editing would have helped. For instance, L N Mehrotra, while writing about his short Sri Lanka assignment, which coincided with the pullout of the Indian Peacekeeping Force, mentions both April 24, 1989, and June 21, 1989, as the date of his arrival in Colombo. A similar error mars the first page of P Shah's essay on his Iraq assignment.

But overall, this is a fine collection of contributions by dedicated individuals towards the advancement of India's external interests.
