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Business Standard

An anatomy of diplomacy

Kishan S Rana January 15, 2015 Last Updated at 21:25 IST

WHAT DIPLOMATS DO: THE LIFE AND WORK OF

DIPLOMATS Brian Barder Rowman & Littlefield, 2014 232 + xii pages; price not indicated

Sir Brian Barder portrays the working life of British diplomats through the experiences of a fictitious Adam, from the selection process at entry into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to his retirement. This is divided into chapters matching Adam's jobs. The narrative of Eve, his life partner, is interwoven into it. What might have been a work of realist fiction is leavened with doses of real life; the author's personal experiences presented as examples in each chapter. The style is chatty and personal, with wry humour and an absence of posturing. We obtain intimate insight into the functioning of the British diplomatic service in its professional, societal and human dimensions. This novel approach produces both an engaging narrative for the general reader, and a textbook.

Let me highlight the book's striking elements from an Indian perspective, juxtaposing the United Kingdom's methods with our own. The selection process in the United Kingdom (and in other major countries) is handled by the foreign ministry, and is rigorous. The interview in London stretches over two days, and takes each group of six candidates through individual sessions, group exercises, and problem-resolution tasks. Recently, the United Kingdom shortened this

to one day. The last hurdle is a "final interview" at which each candidate is examined by a board composed of people from different walks of life, including business and trade unions. Even Thailand conducts such interviews over three days. Contrast this with our 25-minute standard Union Public Service Commission interview, common for all our civil services, the final hurdle for those passing the two-stage written exam.

Via Adam, the book's chapters touch base with most subsets of tasks and roles of diplomats: arrival at a new post (notable for a vivid description of the diplomat's honest interlocutor role); life in an embassy and overseas; dealing with a hostile country (though the account set in a cold war context is less relevant than present-day hostility that many countries confront); dealing with foreigners; dealing with the foreign ministry from abroad (which often calls for a higher level of "diplomacy" than dealing with foreigners); the understudied techniques of entertainment; serving in the foreign ministry at home; life from the perspective of the spouse and children; and consular and commercial work (all too brief, but with an incisive account from the author's Ethiopia days on how tough competition among European Economic Community/European Union states sometimes plays out).

Perhaps the new-fangled subset, public diplomacy, could have been given more attention, though it indirectly permeates the text. What the book underscores, without making it too obvious, is that for the great part, diplomacy is an art and craft mainly deployed bilaterally, that is, between pairs of countries. It is the rapport that the home country enjoys with each partner nation that determines also the quality of its regional and global diplomacy, the more so in today's multipolar world. Insights on management of bilateral relations are scattered across the book.

The chapter on multilateral diplomacy is notable for its honest account of the way countries operate in global institutions. The quality of diplomats engaged in this work is almost uniformly high. They need to master the "tribal links and fissures between states" to operate efficiently with different regional groups; procedural technicalities sometimes determine the fate of resolutions and decisions; the politics within secretariats can be intense, when highly competent international officials rub shoulders with other staff that are the laziest, incompetent,

failed politicians or relatives of high personalities, all sent against country quotas.

Some British practices will sound unusual. Ambassadors typically approve diplomats being considered for appointment in their embassies; this simply does not happen in most other countries. Ambassadors hold daily meetings with all officers or with heads of sections in large missions; that is fairly rare in our system. Officials may be forced to retire a few years before the mandatory age "if there was no suitable job on the horizon for them" - imagine the lawsuits that would produce in India. Lately, at less important locations, British ambassadors and diplomats have been shifted to cheaper residences and apartments, and some large residences sold off.

In an "example" segment, Sir Brian gives a gripping account of his role as ambassador in Ethiopia in 1984, taking a gamble to fly in the first three Hercules aircraft from Cyprus carrying foodgrain at the height of famine; he acted without local clearance, relying only on a phone assurance from a high minister; it marked the start of a major 14-month relief effort in which other countries joined. Even more instructive, as high commissioner in Nigeria he refused to pursue sales of British tanks and fighter aircraft, as demanded by his ministry of defence, arguing that this directly countered British aid efforts. He sent to London a trenchant response that his deputy called "elegant career suicide note". That became a wake-up call for inter-ministry consultations and eventual acceptance of his stand.

For students of international relations, the book offers great value, breathing life into what they would have learnt in abstract fashion.

G R Berridge's Dictionary of Diplomacy (now in its third edition) offers the following definition: *bardogram* - an ambassadorial telegram which is at once robust and graceful. The *bardogram*, which may be pithy in expression and passionate in tone, is not always short and is usually fired in salvos. It ends typically with the following statement: "I await your homicidal riposte"

The reviewer is former ambassador, writer, teacher and honorary fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

kishanrana@gmail.com