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Walking with Lions: Tales from a Diplomatic Past

K Natwar Singh

(Harper Collins, New Delhi, 2013)

200 + x pages, Rs.299

How does one categorize a book that declares on the title-verso page: ‘This is a work of fiction. All situations, incidents, dialogue and characters, based on some mythological well-known figures...are products of the author’s imagination...any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental’? Yet the legend on the back-cover, just below the ISBN number and barcode reads: ‘Non-fiction’! Perhaps the caveat provides legal cover, to suit sensitive publishers (I have just encountered a similar mindset on a current book project). No matter. We know that with embellishment, and poetic license, each of the 50 episodes in this book (reprints from a column in ‘Mail Today’), has a kernel of fact, even while the full narrative is ‘a work of fiction’...

The author entertains, and sometimes captivates, the reader. The known and less famous traipse through this slim volume. Many are African leaders. Consider: it seems a paradox that those of the very first generation, like Nkrumah, Kaunda, Nyerere, Banda, Ramagoolam and others were responsible for the woeful tradition that they could not, or would not, shed power, and lingered on years after their era of effectiveness. One of the few to voluntarily demit office, albeit at least a decade too late, was Nyerere. His singular contribution, almost unique in Africa, was that he made tribal identity irrelevant in Tanzania, and opened up the interior of the country. Yet, on a farewell visit to a flax plantation, he was honest enough to declare that at independence, the country’s production of this fiber was around 250,000 tons; their accomplishment after 20 odd years was to bring this down to below 50,000 tons. Alas, such issues do not figure in this collection.

Today’s reader will wonder at some of the details, for instance that in the 1970s, Indian prime ministers traveled on regular commercial flights, the only concession for an Indira Gandhi traveling to Lusaka, the seat next to hers left vacant for her papers. When I joined the Foreign Service in 1960, Pandit Nehru’s road travel in Delhi involved a motorcycle policeman in front, with a small flag that read ‘Pilot’, and a single escort car that followed his Hindustan Ambassador. Security in those days meant simply that when the prime minister was to pass through Gate No. 6, someone would come by and say, ‘PM is coming’. You made way; a ‘good morning’ might evoke a grunt, or an occasional smile. Right up to the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi, that gate remained open to officials, and to visiting foreign diplomats. Today, our security fetish has closed down that entire section of South Block.

A newspaper column format imposes its restrictions on length, and as with most collections of this nature, it appears that the author did not edit much the individual pieces prior to inclusion in the book. This leads to a little bit of repetition, and sketchy treatment of issues that could have been pursued in greater detail. But on the other hand, a racy, even staccato, style adds to readability.

Among the best reads: ‘Nehru’s Sisters’, reflecting the personality interplay between Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Krishna Hutheesing; ‘The Peril’s of Diplomacy’, on how Queen Elizabeth was persuaded not to hold a formal investiture while visiting India in 1983; ‘Margret Thatcher Chandraswami and I’, describing the Iron Lady’s encounter with this godman. Most of us may not have known that after Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination in 1991, PV Narsimha Rao became PM only after then Vice President Shankar Dayal Sharma turned down that post.

Leaving out the author’s veneration for Nehru and Indira Gandhi, which will appear uncritical to many readers, the pen-portraits ring true. For instance the small episode with Lord Mountbatten and the placement of his portrait in Rashtrapati Bhavan, when he traveled to Nepal for King Birendra’s coronation in the 1974 is in character. On that same visit to Kathmandu, Mountbatten expressed to Indian ambassador M Rasgotra his unhappiness that the Indian ambassador was installed in the former British residency, while the British envoy lived in what had been one of the outhouses to that sprawling India House estate.

Quibbles? A few instances of sloppy editing: Indira Gandhi’s meeting with Pakistan’s Zia-ul-Haq at Harare in 1980 (p.33): ‘One of his observations elicited a shattering put down – “They call me a dictator and you are a democrat”. Zia presented an illustrated coffee-table book on Pakistan...’ One is left wondering about the put down, unless it was Natwar Singh later returning the book to the Pakistan authorities later, on finding a map that showed Kashmir as a part of Pakistan. The former maharaja of Dhangadhra becomes a ‘Raja’ – even while it is true that he affected a stilted Oxford accent (p.41). A few dates are muddled up (p.61). Fakhruddin Ahmed is summarily dismissed as ‘a rubber stamp *rashtrapati*’ (p.36).

Natwar Singh looms large in almost all the accounts. Perhaps that is part of the quasi-fiction.

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