



Journal of Contemporary Politics

Book Review

Pascal Alan Nazareth, *A Ringside Seat to History*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2020

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 06.07.2022

Accepted 18.07.2022

Published 19.09.2022

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[https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v1i1.4)

10.53989/jcp.v1i1.4



INTRODUCTION

For a book which almost did not get published for its absence of “spicy political narratives and back-stabbings in history and diplomacy”, *A Ringside Seat to History* has received very appreciative and laudatory reviews.

According to Lord Bhikhu Parekh, the book “reveals an honest, self-critical and intrepid person prepared to stand up for principles that define his moral identity.” In the words of Gita Dharampal-Frick, “Ambassador Nazareth’s riveting narrative, extending over eight decades and spanning five continents, presents the reader with a deeply insightful tour d’horizon of tumultuous events in the second half of the twentieth century. Exercising the craft of diplomacy in masterly fashion, he is a ‘man of all seasons’, at home and in the world.”

T. P. Sreenivasan writes: “Ambassador Nazareth modestly calls his autobiographical masterpiece ‘A Ringside Seat to

History’, but his narrative clearly indicates he was not merely a witness to history, but often its maker. He was very much the mover, a summiteer not a Sherpa, and also a soft power warrior. His post-retirement evangelism of Mahatma Gandhi is a continuation of his diplomacy which stressed India’s heritage of non-violence and universal brotherhood.”

In the words of Vivek Katju, “Pascal Alan Nazareth’s autobiography bears testimony to his qualities of head and heart which have enabled him to navigate life’s journey with equanimity, humanism and deep faith. Above all what comes through is his firm commitment to the nation and its traditional culture of inclusivity... Above all Nazareth captures the atmosphere of a diplomat’s life in different assignments in different corners of the world and how opportunities can be positively utilised in the highly competitive field of inter-state relations. This involves imagination and initiative and grinding work, not champagne and caviar as Nazareth shows.”



Gaurav Saini states that the book *“captures the author’s humanism, unbending commitment to honest conduct in public service, perceptible ingenuity at problem solving and undying regard for Gandhian ideals...There are many facets to this book, but perhaps the most important one is the author himself. His life and the way he lived it, has lessons for all. It will soothe those who today are dismayed by a slow erosion of Gandhian values from Indian society and India’s foreign policy. It will educate those who wish to one day become a part of the Indian Foreign Service. Finally, it will inspire others who wish to know what it means to serve a nation, without being constrained by myopic views of nationalism.”*

As the above reviews point out, Mr. Nazareth’s autobiography contains a plethora of lessons and take-aways for civil servants. In each of his postings in different corners of the world, and in the midst of enormous challenges and daunting situations, the diplomat reveals intrepid qualities of head and heart. As well as that of impeccable integrity. Some of these anecdotes are worth recalling:

A notable highlight of Mr. Nazareth’s tenure as India’s Consul-General in New York was his very unusual instruction to consular section officers that *“whenever any person was greatly upset because of a visa or passport delayed or denied, he/she should be sent to me. This had a salutary effect. The upset person was pleasantly surprised to be dealt with by the CG himself and the latter learnt the root cause of his/her problem and could rectify it.”* (p.177)

Another notable incident was when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited New York in June 1988 to address the UN General Assembly’s Special Session on Disarmament. Prior to his visit, his Principal Security Officer who was reviewing the security arrangements, took strong objection to the designation of a Sikh officer as the Chief Security Officer of the PM, and wished him to be removed. Mr. Nazareth’s response here is worth quoting: *“Please give this to me in*

writing. If and when you do so, I will go on leave, for if an able and upright Sikh Deputy Consul-General cannot be trusted, a Christian Consul-General might also be a grave security risk.” (Pp.180-81).

On another occasion, this time as the Indian Ambassador in Egypt, at a conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation at Cairo in July-August 1990, Mr. Nazareth was able to prevent Pakistan from bringing up Kashmir as a Human Rights issue. To the Saudi Foreign Minister’s question, *“If India has such a strong case on Kashmir, why does it not hold a plebiscite there?”*, Mr. Nazareth’s riposte which appeared in the local press was described as ‘a perfectly-timed ballistic strike’: *“The Saudi Foreign Minister should practice what he preaches and ensure an election is held in his own country!”* (p.187)

The impeccable integrity of this diplomat also needs to be highlighted. Towards the fag end of his career, Mr. Nazareth wished to make changes in his travel itinerary to India from Mexico. Rather than take the approved route via New York and London, he chose a different route to New Delhi and Bangalore. He writes: *“I sought and secured prior approval of MEA and paid the additional cost of this itinerary over that of the approved route.”* (p.217). I am not sure how many civil servants would have done that!

Mr. Nazareth’s post-retirement years have been devoted to reviving and diffusing Gandhian ideals of *satya, ahimsa, sarva dharma sama bhava* and *sarvodaya*. The formation of Sarvodaya International Trust, with its Regional Chapters, and his two books on Gandhi, namely, *Gandhi’s Outstanding Leadership* (2006) and *Gandhi: The Soul Force Warrior* (2018) have won national and international acclaim. Mr. Nazareth’s life and mission stand testimony to a famous exhortation of Mahatma Gandhi: *“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”*

