

# Pascal Alan Nazareth's *A Ringside Seat to History*



Author Aftab Seth

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### Japan SPOTLIGHT Introduction

Former Indian Ambassador to Japan Aftab Seth contributes a book review on the autobiography of his colleague, Indian diplomat Pascal Alan Nazareth, titled *A Ringside Seat to History* (Konarck Publishers, 2020). During his long career Nazareth also worked at the Indian Embassy in Tokyo.

### Early Career

Reading through his lucid prose interspersed with lively touches of humor would lead a reader who does not know the author to believe that an energetic young man has written this book. In fact, Alan started writing the story of his fascinating life when he turned 80!

Alan writes about his childhood in Mangalore, and later at Loyola College in Madras. He tells of his father's inspiration derived from the example of two former colleagues, Eric and Alfred Gonzalves, which impelled him to send Alan to Loyola College. Alan's first attempt to join the civil service ended in disappointment and failure, but far from giving up he persisted and was given sage advice by a former colleague, Peter Sinai, who had scored well in the examinations and interview. On the second try Alan was successful and though his

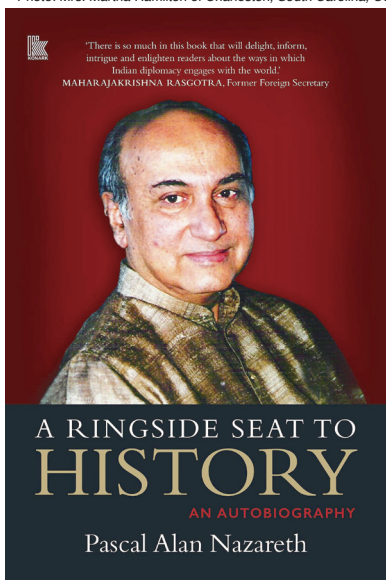
father would have preferred him to join the home service, the IAS as it is called, Alan opted for the Foreign Service.

He writes amusingly about his training at Metcalfe House which was luxurious and also his time training at the Charleville Hotel in the hill resort of Mussorie, which is still the training center for young civil servants. His district training in snake-infested bungalows in the state of Bihar gave him his first taste of danger, as poisonous snakes such as the cobra and viper often lay lurking under toilet seats! Alan also tells of his first meeting with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during which the Foreign Service trainees learned that the young Dalai Lama had escaped from Tibet and sought refuge in India. Alan had subsequent meetings with the Dalai Lama which are described later in the book.

Having been allotted Japanese as his official language, Alan began a long journey by ship to Yokohama, accompanied in the first instance by his mother. However, he had already met his bride-to-be Isobel and had been smitten by her! As events turned out, Alan returned to India after a year in Japan, married Isobel and brought her back as his wife to Tokyo. He was first put up at the Imperial Hotel and then at the Azabu Prince Hotel, while he looked for a place to live. He found a charming Japanese house and was able to recruit a Japanese *jochu-san* (housemaid), Masako, to help him look after the new home. There are interesting episodes about his attempts to learn Japanese at the Naganuma School and his struggles with *kanji* and *hiragana* and *katakana*. During his tenure he witnessed the tragic death of India's Air Marshal Subroto Mukerjee who died at a restaurant while attempting to eat a piece of sushi.

After passing his Japanese exams, Alan was put in charge of the commercial section where he met for the first time with Dharma Teja, a shipping magnate who later acquired much notoriety from his involvement in various cases of corruption. Alan's tenure coincided with the one year I myself spent at Keio University. He was most useful in helping my Japanese friends set up a study group on India at the university. Alan was also fortunate to have been able to accompany Indian Ambassador Lalji Mehrotra on the first test run of

Photo: Mrs. Martha Hamilton of Charleston, South Carolina, US



Front cover of "A Ringside Seat to History" by Pascal Alan Nazareth

the Shinkansen bullet train from Tokyo to Nagoya.

From Tokyo, Alan went to Rangoon, where Ne Win had seized power. He tells of the troubles and travails of the Indian community in Burma who were being persecuted by the government and the abortive efforts of the Indian Embassy to help the community by storing their gold and jewels. The fascinating story of the visit to Rangoon by a young Indira Gandhi and her swim in the sea at Ngapali Bay, secretly watched by the security guards of Ne Win, gives a glimpse of a slightly vulnerable, soft-spoken woman who had a sense of humor. It gives no inkling of the steely lady who later became prime minister and the victor of the 1971 war with Pakistan.

Alan's tenure in New York at the Consulate General from 1967 to 1969 saw the momentous assassination of Martin Luther King, and the peak of the student unrest and agitation at many universities in protest at the brutalities of the Vietnam War. His cloak-and-dagger escapades trying to nail down Dharma Teja and his wife in Costa Rica are told with much panache! The birth of a son, Andy, in the midst of all this excitement was a blessing the family enjoyed.

The author's stint in Peru saw a devastating earthquake graphically described, including his wife Isobel's heroic efforts to provide succour and relief to the victims. Alan's attempts to pursue the fugitive Teja continued. During Alan's tenure as *charge d'affaires* a great breakthrough was made in trade with Peru, with India agreeing to buy copper. He talks of his exciting visit to Machu Picchu, the land of the ancient Inca civilization. For Alan, however, the most rewarding event was his meeting with Mother Teresa on a flight out of Venezuela. Some years later she helped the family by praying at the bedside of Alan's sick child who lay gravely ill in a hospital in New York. While in Peru, Alan was able to keep his promise to Mother Teresa and helped to open a branch of a home for the incurably sick and aged in Lima.

There was a brief interlude for Alan in the Foreign Ministry from 1974 to 1975 when he worked at the Economic Division and had commercial successes in Bangladesh.

### Personal Tragedy Overcome

Alan spent the next three years in London at the Indian High Commission. But the 1977 elections in India led to the defeat of Indira Gandhi and the advent of Morarji Desai as prime minister. As

the Deputy High Commissioner Natwar Singh had been closely associated with Gandhi, Desai removed him and sent him to Zambia as High Commissioner. Alan moved into Natwar's place and took up residence in the official home of the Deputy High Commissioner, "Sun House". Described in detail is Desai's visit to London and the scare created by a fire which broke out during a meeting at the office.

Another embarrassing crisis in London arose on account of "virginity tests" being carried out on Indian women attempting to enter the United Kingdom, a situation that was deftly handled by Alan.

The years 1979 to 1982 were spent in Ghana, from where Alan was concurrently accredited to Liberia, Togo, and Burkina Faso. His time in West Africa saw dramatic coups, executions, robberies at his home and the temporary arrest of his wife Isobel! He says this posting was the most dangerous in many ways, but despite all these tribulations Alan made a breakthrough in arranging for the import from India of buses made by the Tata company in Ghana and in Liberia.

The next three years from 1982 to 1985 were most rewarding for Alan. He headed the Indian Council for Cultural Relations with much aplomb, and had the good fortune of working with doyennes of Indian culture such as Pupul Jayakar and Kapila Vatsayan. He also worked closely with dancers Mrinalini Sarabhai, the talented architect Charles Correa, and L. P. Sihare and Saryu Doshi, heads of the galleries of modern art in Delhi and Bombay respectively.

With their help and inspiration Alan mounted major festivals of India in the UK and United States. These events were extravaganzas of Indian dance music and displays of the best of Indian crafts and hand-woven and embroidered fabrics from all parts of India, which were often accompanied by erudite lectures by distinguished experts in these fields.

In the reverse direction he was able to organize the best of foreign dance, music and poetry in India. Rudolf Nureyev was a leading member of the Paris Opera Ballet; Turkish whirling dervishes performed in India and the New York Philharmonic orchestra, under the baton of Zubin Mehta, gave memorable performances in India.

One interesting story told is the "hard ball" played with the British High Commissioner Sir Robert Wade Gary over the question of the use of corporate sponsors by the British Embassy for the visit of a

leading theatre company. During this period Alan narrowly escaped death in 1985 because of flight schedule problems which prevented him from being on the ill-fated *Kanishka* plane of Air India which was brought down by a bomb blast over the Irish Sea on a flight from Toronto in the worst terrorist attack in Canadian history.

The discovery that his son Andy was seriously ill at the end of his tenure in Delhi was a terrible shock, alleviated to a small extent by the prompt and kind decision of Foreign Secretary Maharaja Krishna Rasgotra to post Alan as consul general in Chicago in order to pursue treatment for his son at the Sloane Kettering hospital in New York. This entailed quarterly visits from Chicago to New York. Fortunately for Alan he was able to get a transfer as Consul General New York to enable regular treatment for his son's cancer.

Alan continued his interest in cultural work and arranged performances by the noted Orissi dancer Sanyukta Panigrahi and concerts by violinists Yehudi Menuhin and L. Subramaniam. It was in New York that Mother Teresa by a providential coincidence learned that Alan's son was ill at Sloane Kettering; she remembered Alan from Venezuela and promptly came to Andy's bedside to pray. Miraculously, Andy's illness got progressively better!

### Last Years in Service

From 1989 to 1992 Alan worked in Cairo, staying at the charming ambassadorial residence on the banks of the Nile located in the quiet suburb of Zamalek, an island separating two arms of the massive river. He had interesting interactions with the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar University, a 1,000-year-old seat of learning, arranging for help in Arabic language teaching in India and for Indian professors to teach at Al Azhar. From Cairo, Alan and Isobel also made a road trip to Israel to attend a service at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, visit the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock.

Alan's last posting was in Mexico where he spent over two years from 1992 to 1994. He was also accredited concurrently to Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize. He describes his time in Mexico and in each of the countries of his concurrent accreditation with his customary eye for detail and his acute powers of observation. The best part of the end of his career was his return to India via San Francisco, Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, Bangkok, Delhi and finally to his home in Bangalore. Staying with colleagues en route

Alan and Isobel brought their 35 years in the Foreign Service to a happy and enriching close.

Not one to sit on his laurels Alan remained active, writing a definitive book on Gandhi's leadership, promoting opera in Bangalore and leading goodwill missions to Pakistan. His book on Gandhi was translated into several languages including Japanese. He visited Japan again after several decades for the launch of the book by Princess Takamado.

Alan and Isobel also suffered the terrible tragedy of the loss of their daughter in the prime of her life. The tribute paid at the funeral of Seema by Isobel is the most moving part of this admirable memoir. The book is accompanied by some appendices with letters by famous world leaders addressed to the author. There are also many photographs in the book of some of the famous men and women described in the narrative. Mother Teresa, Henry Kissinger, the Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri, prime ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Indira Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, President Jimmy Carter and Princess Takamado of Japan are among the people whose images reflect the many-faceted life led by Alan Nazareth.

The most interesting photograph is one taken at the Indian High Commissioner's house in London in June 1977, at a banquet in honour of Desai who was visiting the UK. Seated on the carpet are Lord Louis Mountbatten, High Commissioner B. K. Nehru and Foreign Secretary Jagat Mehta. Standing near the author are former prime ministers Edward Heath, Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home and leader of the Opposition Michael Foot – a galaxy of stars under one roof!

This perceptive, lively narrative is penned by a storyteller par excellence. Scholars and lay readers will find much enjoyment and profit in reading this book.

**JS**

Aftab Seth is a former Indian ambassador to Japan, and has served in nine other countries around the world. Educated at St. Stephen's College and as a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, he has also been both a student and professor at Keio University, and is a leader of several educational and cultural organizations in Japan. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to bilateral relations for more than half a century, he received Japan's highest decoration, The Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun, from the emperor in November 2015.