

# Historical Perspectives: Illuminating Minds on Blue Waters



Author Aftab Seth

by **Pascal Alan Nazareth**  
(Konark, New Delhi, 2025)

By **Aftab Seth**

### Introduction

I had the privilege of listening to one of Ambassador Nazareth's lectures in 1963 when he was a young officer at the Indian Embassy in Tokyo. As an exchange student at Keio University, Japan's oldest, I had invited Alan Nazareth to a newly set up India Study Group at the university to deliver a lecture on India and foreign policy. I was struck then, six decades ago, by the diligent research undertaken by this scholarly diplomat and the ease with which he explained the subject to a foreign audience of young Japanese students.

This new volume brings together a series of lectures he delivered on 35 different cruise ships between the years 1995 and 2018. The lectures cover a wide range of subjects, including the history of art, religion, architecture, political movements and epic military and naval battles that have all made an indelible impact on the development of nations and the growth of civilizations.

### Understanding India

The book opens with a set of lectures on "Understanding India", "The Spiritual Heritage of India" the "Mughal Contribution to India" and "Gandhi the Non-Violent Revolutionary". These explain the kaleidoscopic variety of India; its history; the religious landscape with a focus on both the indigenous religions that were born in India – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – and those that came from other lands: Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity and the Ba'hai faith. He describes the Hindu pantheon and the spiritual significance of aspects of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

Also brilliantly explained is the glory of the Mughal emperors and their remarkable achievements in the field of architecture and painting; in welding together the myriad religious traditions through marriages and alliances; and above all in making concerted attempts, especially in the case of Akbar, to understand and appreciate the essence of all religious persuasions. In the context of present day controversies on the legacy of the Mughals this chapter takes on added relevance.

The author has written extensively on Gandhi in earlier publications, hence his chapter on this apostle of peace is imbued with his deep respect and admiration for the unique political skills of

Gandhi, which were predicated on a sound spiritual foundation of belief; the necessity for active tolerance for all religious traditions and the vital need to adhere to non-violent approaches in all endeavors. The legacy of Gandhi lived on in the lives of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Lech Walesa in Poland, Martin Luther King in the United States, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar.

### Southeast Asia & the Indian Ocean

Two other lectures are titled "Southeast Asia in the Cross-Roads of History" and "Trade and Maritime Rivalry in the Indian Ocean". The influence of Hindu religious practices and beliefs and the entry of Buddhism into the South Asian Region have left traces in all these nations which are clearly visible today. The temple town of Bagan in Myanmar, Angkor in Cambodia, Mataram, Parambanan and Borobudur in Indonesia, the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, the Champa temples in Vietnam, the five holy temples of Shanxi in China and the scores of temples in Japan, such as *Todaiji* in Nara, bear eloquent testimony to cross-cultural interaction over the centuries. The author describes the rise and fall of the Srivijaya and Chola empires, their rivalry and their battles at sea and on land.

The Indian Ocean has been the crucible for much of this cross-fertilization of civilizations. Indian, Omani, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English sailors and armies sought to dominate the seas around India and Southeast Asia at various times in history. These sea-faring nations in succession and at times in the same period controlled the sea lanes in the Southeast Asian region. For a brief period in the 15th century, the Chinese eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho laid claim to the seas around India and East Africa and was able to establish China's influence over many crucial ports in these territories, before the Chinese emperor abandoned the navy and ended the maritime dominance of China for several centuries. The Indian Ocean Rim Association in the 21st century, with its headquarters in Mauritius, brings together 18 nations which have a long history of maritime exchanges.

### Islam

A chapter titled "Fundamentals of Islam and Islamic

Fundamentalism” explains the origins of Islam and brings out clearly many verses in the Koran which enjoin tolerance and abjuring of compulsion in conversion. The rise of fundamentalism, not only in Islam but also in Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, can be seen in several countries around the world. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 and the impact it had in the world led, amongst other acts of violence, to the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the tragic destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on Sept. 11, 2001.

### China & Japan

There are two chapters on the cultural heritage of China and the “Sacred Isles of Japan”. Chinese poets such as Li Po in the eighth century, Sung art manifested in silk, bamboo, and porcelain, and painters like Wu Tao Tzu are mentioned, as are the scientific advances in astronomy, paper, gunpowder and medical treatments. The use of the Chinese *kanji* ideographs in areas which came under the influence of Chinese Confucian and Tao culture is restricted now to Japan and to an extent Korea, though like the Japanese *hiragana*, the Koreans have a derivative script drawn from them. Vietnam, which until the 19th century used Chinese characters, now has only the Roman script to express its language. The rich legacy of sculpture, the exquisite use of jade and above all the highly regarded potters of China are described in some detail.

The chapter on Japan starts with the legendary birth of the country from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and the veneration of crows in Japan, as they are believed to have guided Emperor Jimmu out of the forest. Emperor Jimmu is considered the founder of the imperial line which exists today. The author gives an overview of Japanese history from earliest times to the efflorescence of the arts in the Edo period, which ended with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, the poetry of Basho, and the splendid temples and temple paintings have drawn much admiration. Then the descent into militarism, the desire to mimic the Western colonial powers in acquiring new territories, led Japan into wars with China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, both of which Japan won. Overconfidence from these victories led ultimately to Japan’s involvement in World War II and its ultimate defeat. The chapter ends in 2019 when the father of the present emperor abdicated ending the Heisei Era. The contributions of Japan in drama, both *Kabuki* and *Noh*, Zen Buddhist practices, and temple gardening are

undoubted cultural treasures which the world admires, as indeed does the author! (My first posting as a young diplomat 65 years ago was in Japan.)

### US, India & Britain

There are several nuggets of information in some chapters which are not widely known. Thus, the chapter on India, Britain and America and the extraordinary triangular relationships between these three countries comes out quite clearly. For example, the defeated Gen. Charles Cornwallis who lost the battle of Yorktown, in the American War of Independence in 1781, ended up as Governor General of India! He was responsible for the “Permanent Settlement” which entrenched the hereditary landlord system *zamindari*.

Also, the shortage of cotton as a result of the American war and its aftermath led to the expansion of the growth of cotton by the British in India. Likewise Indian leaders, spiritual and temporal such as Vivekanda and Tagore, were well known in America and indeed in Britain. The influence of India and Mahatma Gandhi in particular on Martin Luther King is another link between the two countries. The chapter includes a reference to the ice-breaking visit of President Bill Clinton to India in March 2000 and a turning point in US-India relations, as a consequence of the civil nuclear agreement reached between President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005.

### Europe Naval Battles & Greece

The second half of this volume of lectures has a focus on Europe: the rise and fall of European empires, the flourishing and decline of leading city states, and critical naval and land battles fought in Europe in the struggle for supremacy on land and sea.

The chapter on “Great Naval Battles of the Mediterranean” covers the important ones, with a focus on Lepanto in 1571, which led to the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at the hands of Christian powers and was the last naval engagement fought between ships powered by oars. The Battle of Aboukir in 1798 and the historic Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 cover the meteoric career of Napoleon Bonaparte and the skills of Britain’s Admiral Horatio Nelson.

The “Greatness and Tragedy of Greece” covers the universal influence of Greek thought, language and art in Europe and Asia. The high point of Greek civilization was between around 500 BC and the death of Alexander in 323 BC. Democratic governance, the teachings

of Aristotle, Plato and Socrates and the architecture of Greece made the civilization the most “literate” in Europe. The conquest of Greece by Rome brought Greek influence to Egypt and all of Europe. The tragedy of Greece through the internecine wars between Sparta and Athens, the struggle against the Persian Empire and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 led to a general decline of the power of Greece, though never to its abiding influence in the world of the intellect. The chapter on the Olympic Games traces their origins to Olympia in Greece and follows the history of the Games after the establishment of the Olympic Games Committee in 1887. The intrusion of politics into the sphere of sport was exemplified at the 1936 Berlin Games when Adolf Hitler refused to recognize black athlete Jesse Owens and at Munich in 1972 when PLO gunmen killed 11 Israeli athletes.

The chapters on the “Legacy of Rome” and the “Rise and Fall of Venice” ends with this quote: “The Greek Republic did not last more than 450 years, the Roman Republic lasted 700 years. Venice lasted more than 1000 years.”

## Rome

The glory of Rome and the widespread influence of the Roman Empire, on roads, aqueducts, architecture, the Roman Law in Europe and Asia is vividly described. Similarly Venice was a crucible for art which led to its rich legacy of having the one of the world’s greatest art collections. Painters like Titian and Carpaccio, musicians such as Vivaldi and explorer Marco Polo have made the name of Venice widely known throughout the world.

“Portugal and its Three Continent Five Century Empire” is a fascinating account of the power and influence exercised by this relatively small European country. Portuguese strengths in maritime navigation, their sense of adventure and penchant for exploration, and their useful alliances with a nation like Britain enabled Portugal to establish empires in Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Ceylon, Malacca, Timor, Macao in China and Goa, Daman and Diu on the west coast of India. Their attempts to trade with Japan were less successful, because Portuguese efforts to convert people to Christianity were met with suspicion, leading to their ouster in favor of the more commercially inclined Dutch. The loss of some Portuguese territories over two centuries to the Dutch and the British led to a shrinking of the Portuguese Empire, exacerbated by the independence of territories like Brazil.

Eventually, in the 20th century the process of decolonization set in

motion by the withdrawal of the British from India, the French, after a bitter struggle, from Vietnam in 1954 and Algeria some years later, and the Dutch from Indonesia in 1949 left the Portuguese as the last European empire. The dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar and his successors in Lisbon and their stubborn refusal to adapt to changing times saw the forcible eviction of the Portuguese from India in December 1961, followed by bitter struggles in Angola, Mozambique and East Timor which lasted till the mid-1970s!

## Spain, Europe & the World

The chapter on “Spain, Europe and the World” has an account of the vast expansion of the Spanish Empire which covered almost all of South and Central America and territories like the Philippines. The author describes universities in Granada, Seville and Toledo which produced monumental works in Hebrew, Arabic, Latin and Spanish. The high levels of tolerance and the flourishing of the Jewish communities is exemplified by Maimonides and his Arabic counterpart Averroes. Other great scholars like these produced seminal works; as just one example, the Koran was translated into Latin in the university of Toledo.

The defeat of the last of the Moorish kingdoms in Granada in 1492 and the return of Christian kings had a varied record, including, on the one hand, the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of 150,000 Jews. But on the other hand, it also led to the founding of the Jesuit order by Ignatius Loyola: the Society of Jesus. This had major influences on the education systems of many countries including the Jesuit schools of India. The Hapsburgs and then the Bourbons ruled Spain and Napoleon tried to put his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne, which was never accepted. While in World War I (1914-1918), Spain remained neutral, there were stirrings within the body politic in the aftermath of the war. This led to the emergence of the Falange on the right, supported by the Catholic Church on the one hand, and the Liberal democratic elements supported by France and Britain and later by Soviet Russia on the other. The ensuing civil war was a devastating event in Spain’s modern history which had a lasting impact on many countries. The restoration of democracy in Spain after the death of Gen. Francisco Franco in 1975 brought Spain back into the mainstream of the European arena. The lasting impact of the Spanish hegemony over large parts of the world can be seen in the ubiquitous use of the language which has become the second language of choice in the United States and in other parts of the world, relegating French to second place. As much as the language,

the rich legacy of the art of Picasso, Salvador Dali, El Greco, Goya, Miro and architects like Antoni Gaudi ensures a place in history for the contributions to civilization of Spain.

### Portugal & Napoleon

Connected with Portugal and Spain, is the chapter on the “Impact of Napoleon on History”. As much as the Pax Romana of the Roman Empire, the Code of Napoleon, the set of laws introduced by him in all the countries he conquered, is still in evidence in most West European countries and in some Latin America Republics and in Quebec in Canada. The chapter also deals with his spectacular military victories, as well as the French defeats at Trafalgar and at Waterloo in 1815 and the staggering human cost of his ventures, leaving 3 million dead in France and other countries engaged in his campaigns. The chapter concludes with the assertion that the truly lasting empires are those not acquired by force but by the power of sages – Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Zoroaster and Gandhi. Napoleon reached the same realization in his exile on the island of St Helena: he wrote: “There are only two powers in the world – the sword and the spirit. In the long run, the sword will always be conquered by the spirit.”

### Ireland

“Ireland: the Emerald Isle” outlines the history, much of it underscored by suffering, of this verdant and beautiful land which has given the world the genius of some of the greatest writers: G. B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Richard Sheridan, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce and Nobel Laureate Samuel Becket.

An unusual aspect of the history of Ireland is the manner in which Latin survived and flourished in the country, even though the Roman conquest of England was never able to reach Ireland. The importance of the Roman Catholic Church in the history of the island and the constant strife with Protestantism, introduced largely by the dominant power of Britain which made Ireland a colony, is a constant theme in the chapter and indeed in the history of Ireland.

### Islam and Europe

The last chapter of this collection deals with “Islam and Europe”. Here again, as in earlier chapters, the author underlines the remarkable levels of tolerance in Islamic Spain, where Jews

flourished in every aspect of life with the exception of owning land. The universities of Moorish Spain studied Aristotle and Plato long before they were introduced in the seats of learning in the West. The levels of ethnic and religious harmony in Ottoman-ruled parts of Europe and Asia is equally underlined in this chapter.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the flight of many ecclesiastical Greeks, it was the Jews who were welcomed in Istanbul, the new name for Constantinople. The vast army of printers, goldsmiths, tailors, butchers and bakers were predominantly Jewish. The Ottomans were equally tolerant towards the Christian elements in their lands and no church properties were ever taken by the rulers. In fact the Byzantine Church was the largest land owner in the Ottoman Empire. I went to see the head of the Greek Orthodox Church 30 years ago, who still has his seat in Istanbul, the animosity and often poor relations between the nations of Greece and Turkey notwithstanding.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the subsequent history of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and its aftermath is also covered in this chapter. These cataclysmic developments dramatically changed equations between communities in the Middle East, and among Muslim populations in Europe, the US and the world at large. The 15 years between 1980 and 1995 saw 17 military operations directed against Muslim states. The scholar Samuel Huntington stated that the deep resentments generated by these conflicts exploded in the devastating attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

The message of the book is a prescient alert to humanity: that the vision of Gandhi enjoining non-violence and tolerance is the real antidote to the hatreds and animosity built up by misguided and unthinking policies. The book is a *tour d’horizon* of a vast swathe of human history. As the sub-title suggests, the book “illuminates” the minds of its readers. It actually does much more: it enriches their understanding of the mainsprings of existence on this earth. The author’s erudition, his deep and compassionate understanding of cultures and religions across the world, is enlightening for the reader and an encouragement to delve further into the myriad civilizations, displayed here in all their resplendent grandeur. **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.