

Foreign Secretary comments

at book launch

**“Diplomacy Indian Style” by Ambassador K.P. Fabian**

[ICWA: 13 January 2012]

The DG, ICWA,  
My senior colleagues who have retired from service,  
Ambassador Fabian,  
Colleagues from the Ministry,  
Dear friends,

I have been asked to launch Ambassador Fabian’s book which has now been given to me. This is my first time at a book launch so I am not sure of my role beyond unwrapping the book! Many of our colleagues have written on Indian foreign policy, with a lot on their careers. A number of academics, scholars and journalists have also written on our recent history and foreign policy. Some of you have “launched” books and have more experience than I !

I would nevertheless say that a quick perusal shows that this is in a substantial way, a book with a difference. The difference is that the author does not relate the analysis, or substance of the text to his own career – of what he did or did not do.

It is meant as a reflection on diplomatic style through Indian history. My brief reading suggests it has more on policy rather than the practice of diplomacy and its style.

The attempt at explaining the origins of India’s diplomatic style taking it all the way back to Hanuman and invoking Mahabharatha, Panchatantra, Chanakya, Asoka, Akbar, the ‘non-Battle’ of Plassey as the author puts it, the Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, is a good exercise that gives some insight into historical events that involved diplomacy.

Chanakya is cited as the main exponent of diplomatic reasoning and diplomatic style. The rest of the historical record is too short for analysis beyond just the actions of some of India’s most prominent rulers. There is no analysis of whether these rulers all through history weighed up options and then chose the courses they did. By recording their actions, however, the author provides some idea of their motivation.

I think there is scope for historians to look at the record of the great empires of the past which either expanded beyond the boundaries of South Asia (Central Asia, Iran, South East Asia etc) or interacted with other powers within the South Asian region. They could try to see how these empires handled their communications with foreign empires; how they analysed reports of their envoys, and judged their performance; overall how they managed the relationships with outside powers.

Obviously, the narratives and depictions give us a better view of the most recent events relating to our relations with USA, China, Pakistan, the intervention in Sri Lanka etc.

The author was not intimately involved with the accounts discussed in these chapters. He depends on accounts in the public domain prepared by others who had been so involved. He is able to deal with these accounts objectively and pose critical questions. Some of the critique is severe. But that is the way it should be in our open society.

What is not clear is whether the policies followed after 1947 can be related to the analysis from the historic eras (Chanakaya etc) so that we emerge with a conclusion that there is such a thing as an Indian style of diplomacy. This remains an open question. I believe the subject of diplomatic style – can be viewed both as how we create and evolve policies, and how the instruments of policy – the diplomats - carry them out.

Sometime ago the list of Foreign Secretaries put up in my outer office started with Secretaries from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. Fortunately, we now begin only with 1947. The evolution of independent India's foreign policy is not a continuation from the imperial past. Curzon's ghost does not linger in South Block. What this book does is to ask us whether our policies need to be judged on the basis of ghosts of even earlier eras: - the strategic and tactical thinking of Chanakaya, for example. The author starts with Hanuman and his role in the great epic. Thereafter, we are introduced to Chanakaya. But beyond Chanakaya we need studies on the capabilities of strategic imagination and intelligence of other empires and how they used diplomatic instruments. The book highlights the constant dangers posed by internal disunity; the possibility that foreign powers can be invited in to settle domestic scores – and how this poses the greatest danger of all.

Some reflection on these conclusions would have embellished the very last two chapters titled “The Big Picture” and “The Way Forward”. There is enough here to sustain a full-fledged seminar or another book to see how our diplomatic options are viewed domestically beyond the confines of Lutyens' Delhi. I sometimes get the sense that we in South Block have not understood that the post 1991 globalization has created new stakeholders and constituencies with specific interests and growing expertise about foreign engagement.

Ambassador Fabian continues to write out of a sense of conviction which has marked his career. We know of his record in the Ministry, as Joint Secretary (Gulf) overseeing a huge relief airlift / sea lift of our countrymen from Kuwait (probably the largest in our history) and his abiding interest in the Gulf as well as other regions in which he worked. I recall hosting him in Israel when he travelled from Italy to visit an Iraq still under sanctions and attack, and his deep feelings for the people so profoundly affected by those outside who take decisions while looking only at the “big picture”.

In this and other cases his concerns are rooted with the interests of the Indian people. In looking at the way ahead he rightly points to the dangers for diplomacy of accepting predictions and forecasts. My own conclusion would be that there is no assured future; Indian diplomacy will have to work much harder than it has in the past to help our country manage the transition to a better era (better as we are finally achieving our economic potential) because this transition comes at a time of great uncertainty when the world is moving away from a particular phase of globalisation to a more dangerous world order.

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