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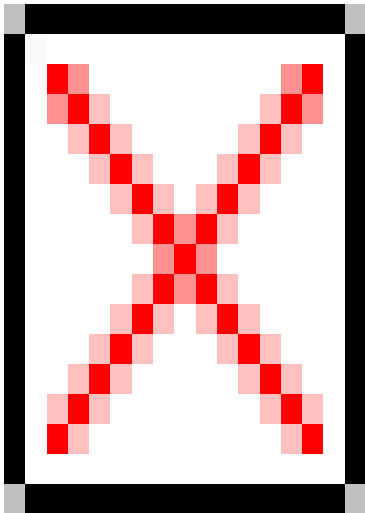
**Beyond the office window**

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**Reviewed By Swarnendu Biswas**

## **BEYOND**

the Office Window is that rare kind of book which has a soul. The soul reflects the enchanting diversity of the Indian ethos. The writer, a retired senior bureaucrat named AK Pande, whose earlier book titled Grit That Defied Odds focused on his highly interesting 'official' experiences and impressions as a senior Revenue Officer with the Government of India, further heightens his credibility as an insightful writer with his second book.

In this book the author explores varied topics, which though apparently look distinct and unrelated, do manage to weave together a fascinating tapestry that embodies the composite culture of India; a legacy which is presently under continual threat from religious bigots and secessionist forces. These vignettes include the author's meeting with the legend of Carnatic music, M.S. Subbulakshmi; his travels through the ancient city of Varanasi while exploring its legacy that dates back to millennia, along with its very topical pluralistic heritage, that like the Ganges, flows on perennially despite the threat of pollution.

In this book, the author also successfully unravels the relatively lesser known and sensitive side of Babur - the founder of Mughal dynasty in India- whom the majority know only as a relentless conqueror; and many others know as the destroyer of the Ram Mandir, thanks largely to the ceaseless politically motivated propaganda by the Hindu fundamentalists. The author however, did not find any mention of the decimation of that religious structure, whose historic shadow has regained a hallowed stature in the modern India and stirred political unrest, and the consequent construction of Babri Masjid, in Babur's otherwise detailed memoir. This makes Babur's iconoclastic image, which has assumed monstrous proportions in the recent times, quite suspect. Instead, from author's research, we come to the realization that Babur was indeed a latent poet within a brave warrior.

The book has a wealth of many other interesting observations about history, politics and culture. His account of a direct brush with the electoral process in Assam makes for fascinating reading, and highlights the inherent democratic culture in India; rising right from the grassroots, and also the forthright and uncompromising vision of the then Election Commissioner, TN Seshan. The book also presents as a short and interesting travelogue of some of the relatively less explored but mesmerizing geographies of India, which, as you have guessed correctly, happen to be in the North-East.

The author seems to be particularly fascinated by Kolkata, both of its colonial history and its contemporary cultural mosaic, which he explores in some detail in the pages. From a quaint tram (a typical remnant of colonial legacy) ride with his young granddaughter, where besides the observations about the architectural decay of Kolkata we also get glimpses into the city's collective fondness for kids, to the description of Durga Puja celebrations in Kolkata,

when the atmosphere in the City of Joy reaches a joyous frenzy, to the probing of one of the dark chapters of British jurisprudence, that is the hanging of Maharaja Nandkumar in the mid eighteenth century, the author lucidly meanders through the vibrant past and present of Kolkata and Calcutta and manages to bring them alive on the pages.

Among the noted visionaries of the twentieth century, Tagore seem to have an enduring influence on the author, and despite the language barrier, the universal appeal of the songs of Tagore permeated his sensibilities.

Besides exploring the varied traits of Tagore, the book also affords wonderful glimpses into Tagore's erstwhile, ancestral and regal residence –the Thakur Bari at Jorasanko - located in north Kolkata, which was the hub of cultural and intellectual confluence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The three-storied red brick building of palatial proportions reflecting an understated charm in its décor and ambience, happened to be the meeting place of some of the greatest minds of Bengal Renaissance including Raja Rammohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen among others. That resonance was felt by the sensitive mind of the author, which he managed to reproduce in the pages through evocative prose. The depictions of the architecture and the religious aura of the Dakshineswar Temple and about the undying magnificence of the old buildings of Kolkata also come across as engrossing read.

Overall, the book unravels many ageless and as well as contemporary facets of India, and this multi-hued spectrum perhaps represent the ethos of India; India which is a concept and a reality, and also happens to be a modern nation with an ancient civilization.