

WEIRD ADVENTURES UNCOMMON LESSONS

The diary of an unplugged CXO



VIRUPAKSHAN KUMARASWAMY

Kumaraswamy's tales about his journeys to exotic places, his meetings with dignitaries and special events are enticing and appealing. The vignettes presented by him stem from the heart and carry his unique stamp as a person with a tremendous sense of national pride, managerial acumen, personal zeal and empathy. A must read!

– Raghav Chandra, author of *Kali's Daughter*,
Former Secretary, GOI & Director, Bhopal Literature Festival

Kumar's pen is like an intelligent camera lens, it sees the unseen and skillfully captures the nuances in a captivating prose. His style is endearing as it blends journalistic quest with the genius of a story teller.

– Sujit Mukherjee, Internationally acclaimed Author, Poet,
Photographer and Culinary Expert

The corpus of what can be called 'executive literature' has not yet found much place in travel writing, something that can inspire the hidden writer in perhaps the biggest volume of travellers worldwide... a delightful collection of small essays and vignettes, from exotic locales recorded with feeling and humour, wit and sensibility. What comes through is a great curiosity of other cultures, a spontaneous attempt to peer behind the wall of differences and vocations, to cut through stereotypes and images, to understand what makes each culture, encounter or person. Highly readable and very engaging!

– Gautam Mukhopadhyay, Former Ambassador to Syria, Afghanistan,
Myanmar & currently Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

Kumar takes us on an exotic journey through some of the most interesting places on the planet. He combines his financial instincts with his high intellect to give us a feast of feelings and ideas! Kudos to his maiden effort!

– Sailesh Haribakthi, leading financial and corporate consultant

A great collection of anecdotes and stories reflecting life experiences, penned in a witty, humorous manner, that seeps through your consciousness.

– Harsh Pati Singhanian, Director JK Organisation and VC/MD JKPL

Weird adventures, Uncommon Lessons

Virupakshan Kumaraswamy never lets go of his curiosity or surrenders his insight. The consequence is a work of literary art, studded with vignettes that reveal and sometimes revel in the human condition.

– Prof Madhav Das Nalapat, Unesco Peace Chair, Manipal University

Keen observation, creative interpretation and uncomplicated inferences, this book is a window to the world around us – a cheerful presentation that holds your attention continuously.

– Abraham Koshy, Prof (retd), IIM Ahmedabad

His musings range from the mundane to the esoteric. He connects with the diaspora like very few writers manage to. Oh! if you find the app that ensures spouses listen to each other with even 50% accuracy, I am first in line :)

– Monica Chander, an international banker deeply passionate about sustainable living, good food and travel

To put forward one's views clearly and forthrightly without antagonising anyone is a rarity these days. I am sure this will delight the readers.

– K R Bharat, MD of Advent Advisory & Former MD Peregrine and Credit Suisse

Witty and insightful in equal parts. He shares charming stories with a unique and often thought-provoking perspective.

– VS Parthasarathy, President Mobility Services Sector & Chairman, Mahindra Logistics, Porter and Meru

Kumar has a knack for setting what many of us miss out during our travels. His narratives provide us with a completely different and interesting perspective.

– Salil Agarwal, author, mentor, coach and President, IIMAGES

A collection of most fascinating experiences with a spectrum of people from statesmen to paupers, and sophisticated to uncouth, portraying wide-ranging contexts, thoughts and emotions.

– Charu Sabnavis, Leading Corporate Trainer and Management Coach

I am particularly fascinated and delighted at the gripping narratives about his adventures in South Africa.

– HE France Morule, Former High Commissioner of South Africa in
India

A quiver full of stories, each one walking you through different people or places, emotions and experiences.

– SK Mishra, Chairman Utkal Alumina (sub of Hindalco)

Kumar's travel escapades capture his funny to philosophical experiences that transcend numbers. Who said CFOs are dull bean counters!

– D Rajappa, Founder & Managing Partner, Aamraas Digimarc LLP
and ex-President (India and Sri Lanka) Rediffusion Y & R

He is a naturalist, environmentalist, humourist and above all a humanist. Soul-stirring encounters; riveting narration.

– Alok Mishra, Former MD, Johnson and Johnson
(Medical), South Asia and ASEAN

Kumaraswamy's honest introspection of his travels and life experiences make not just for entertaining reading but also hold a mirror to our souls by making us reconsider our prejudices.

– Saurabh Mukherjea, author of *The Victory Project* and *Coffee Can Investing*

I congratulate him for putting down his vast and extraordinary experiences in such a lucid manner. I am sure all readers will thoroughly enjoy and live through the situations as explained.

– Devan Kampani, MD, JM Financial - Investment Banking

Contents

Preface	9
At Ground Zero, Truth has a Different Colour	
Commonwealth Games that made my chest swell with pride	11
A visit to Amma's canteen: A liberating experience	16
Belly dancing: From carnal thoughts to complete respect	22
Rambhai ki Chai: The soul of IIM Ahmedabad	26
How do they do simultaneous interpretation/translation	31
Life's Lessons from Getting Mugged	33
Panic and Peace in Mid-air	
If you are not scared of flights... try landing at Paro, Bhutan	41
Singing bhajans on landing safe in Bangkok	43
Confident South African pilots and their reassuring communication	45
Dalliance with Water and Ice	
Back from the brink: A scary ride to Seal Island	47
The ship that sailed with arrogance across the frozen Baltic	51
Stripped and thrown into the frozen Arctic lake ...	54
Some Clues to the Gujarat Model at Last	55
God has Only Robbed them of their Eyesight, Not their Happiness or Confidence	60
Because of Him (Dr Mandela), We are Free	66
The Varanasi Diary	70
'You can Afford to Smile Also, Sir!' – Some Embarrassing Experiences in East Asia	
Lady who did not have assets in the right place	82
Sir, you can afford to smile also: A gentle reminder	83
A request and a rejection, but no animosity	84
A botched up conversation with a bar maid	85
A Dash of Humour – A Dash of Realism	
The restaurateur who was unsure of his origins	87
A taste of Dutch humour	88
At least take my card, na! Why blame the cricketers?	90

Digital India: Two funny extremes	92
My embarrassment with bullet trains	96
Trying to get frightened in Prague and failing	99
Trysts with the Kingdom of Animals in South Africa	
Believe it or not – Hippos can't swim in the Kruger National Park	101
Even the lions can be bribed in South Africa	105
No, not a lion trainer, I am an Investment Banker	109
History that Eclipses Physics – Glimpses of World's History	
Gigantic monuments of Egypt	110
The Aleppo Citadel in Syria: Very old yet very new	116
St Simeon Church: Novel ways to avoid persistent suitors	117
Golden Rock in Myanmar: A cock-a-snook at physics	119
River of Thousand Lingas, intricate miniatures of Banteay Srei	120
Lies, Damned Lies and the Media – The Truth about Political Meltdowns	
What do the Egyptian guides care for the revolution, they want their tourists back	121
'Happy to have quit terrorism' – In conversation with an ex-terrorist in Syria	123
The nasty philosophy behind landmines	126
Nothing wrong with Mubarak's wealth by stealth	127
Ease of Doing Business Starts with the Leader	
Vietnam's President – hands on my shoulders and advice in my ears	129
Friendly yet confident security under Myanmar military rule	132
Would I mind using Myanmar, the new name of Burma?	134
Business and bureaucracy – surprised to have an Ambassador call upon you, unannounced	137
Cutting through immigration in Bali to buy a memento	139
Effective bureaucracy – some Examples	140
Swaziland's bureaucracy – something to imitate	142
The Sikkim Odyssey	144
Live Life Stories	
Life of a lifeguard	147

Weird adventures, Uncommon Lessons

Happy to be living with phosgene gas, poisonous snakes and weird philosophizing	154
A Peel of Our National Skin: So Compassionate, yet so Insensitive	160
Air India: The wonderfully adorable rogue	169
A Taste of National Character	
Burma: Where every penny of yours is intact	172
Vietnam: Experiencing the warmth	180
Muscat: If Heaven had an alternative name, Muscat would be it ..	191
Egypt: The Nile and the humbling experience	193
Estonia: From the crime capital to one of the safest in 15 years ..	197
Istanbul: Main course in Asia, dessert in Europe	202
Syria: I would any day exchange Syrian 'Civil' War for Delhi's crime-prone peace	205
Swaziland: Where cows are still a currency	214
Cambodia: The land of Apsaras	220
The Czech Republic: A land of no vowels	224
Macau: There is nothing unorganized in this gambling den	231
Guides Make Great Tourism Ambassadors	235
Epilogue	239

At Ground Zero, Truth has a Different Colour

Commonwealth Games that made my chest swell with pride

New Delhi, 2010

Just a couple of days before the Commonwealth Games (CWG) were to begin, my employer's office checked with me if I needed two complimentary tickets for the opening ceremony. I was given two tickets after strict assurances that I would not waste them. Later, I learnt the reason for the insistence – the enclosure where we were seated would have cost ₹50K per ticket, and the tickets, perhaps, came in exchange for donations or contributions to the organizers.

The run-up to the games' opening and various news of corruption, lackadaisical preparation, inadequate infrastructure, supposedly shoddy facilities, infighting within the various agencies involved, did not exactly make one feel proud to be an Indian. At a time (in 2010) when India was growing fast and trying to attract investments and tourists, this was hardly the right publicity. India had been doing well in the previous few years on the tourism front and a right push through the games would have added a lot of publicity. I felt extremely nervous and anxious about the whole thing with vicarious worries (if a concept like that exists).

There was a mile-long queue for passing through security. The

car had to be parked almost 4km away and complimentary buses dropped us at the start of the queue. The security gates were narrow and there were just two or three of them to cover the entire crowd getting into what I thought was the premium section, since I saw in our midst some prominent industrialists, software czars and some well-known personalities. They were also being made to go through the same routine – a clear sign that our democracy is effective and functional: it spared none from its harassment, legendary delays or inadequate facilities.

We were waiting with bated breath and there was plenty of light or loose comments floating around and first-hand stories of scams, scandals, inside news, etc. accompanied by a copious supply of self-deprecating (about our country) banter, humour – some bearable and many cheeky.

As it happened, our very own Doordarshan was the official broadcaster. They opened their telecast about an hour before the function was to begin officially. I got an SMS saying that I was on the TV screen, as soon as it opened, from a colleague who was in the know of my coming to the opening ceremony and was involved in reaching the tickets to me. I dismissed it as a hoax. But then within a few seconds, there were more SMSs from others and non-colleagues. The messages claimed that the games telecast opened with me and another senior colleague from one of the group company on the screen. Some banter again saying that they could not get enough of us and focussed on us for nearly 25–30 seconds. As I was to learn later, the TV cameras had started with panning the audience first and got stuck or ‘hanged’ as they say, when they were on us. And there we were, hanging as stills on the screens till the camera regained consciousness and moved on. For the reader that would probably explain my charitable heading and write-up about the CWG, which was otherwise drowning in an ocean of bad publicity.

A few minutes before the appointed time – 7pm – some drums and drummers clad in rural outfit or a *dhoti* worn in the traditional Indian style with matching head gear and loose upper outfit, started trouping in. The drums were perhaps about 4ft wide and appeared

easily to dwarf the drummers who must have all been in their mid-teens and only half grown. And then there were the singers, dancers, and supporting artists, etc. I guess, in all there must have been at least five or six hundred of them in the central stadium ground, which we learnt was on a raised wooden platform.

With the approach of the scheduled time, my anxiety was increasing and I was not able to hear or respond to anything happening around me. My tension peaked and the fear of possible national shame consumed me totally. I could not bear the wait – going through my marriage or many job interviews or television interviews seemed nowhere near as dreadful. That, it was not me but someone else who was responsible, did not seem to douse my fears and reduce the tension. It was worse than being on a flight through cyclonic weather.

At the stroke of 7pm, the helium balloon platform went perfectly up and docked itself exactly as it was supposed to. It was spectacular and done perhaps for the first time. A similar attempt had failed, not so long ago, in another major international event in China. I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I seemed to be breathing again.

Almost on cue, the music and drum started. The seventy or so drums beat as one – no exaggerations here – they beat as one. Not a sound ahead or trailing. If there was a statistician calculating standard deviation of time, he could have come up only with ‘zero second’ as the value. It was just breath-taking. Suddenly the rustic, rural-looking kids looked well-rehearsed experts. All my anxieties melted away and I must have started pumping my hands through air, for my neighbour – don’t remember if it was my wife or my colleague – caught hold of it and restrained me. All the fear and anxiety disappeared in a matter of seconds. I would retain my mental Indian citizenship – the subtle unstated sense of belonging and affinity that you have for your country over others – after all. I have a headful of sensational stuff to unload or download on others for the next two-three weeks, I thought. If it wasn’t for the presence of senior colleagues, I would have screamed my head off in utter delight – a privilege or pleasure I denied myself. I was almost in tears of joy and that strange spasm that seizes you when you feel

ecstatic or feeling mortally relieved – it came in cascades that day, one after the other. We could not see the spectacular fireworks outside the stadium from the bowl of the stadium properly. I later saw it on TV replays and it was a fitting synchronized encore to the show inside – spectacular and colourful.

The country contingents started pouring into the stadium. There were nearly seventy of them. As they were filing past us, I remarked to my colleague, ‘What an irony. Look at Britain. It was ruling these many countries not so long ago and today it is trying to save itself from splitting up (I was referring to the Northern Ireland issue).’ My colleague shot back, ‘Like in business, if you don’t change with the times, this is what will happen.’

President Pratibha Patil’s speech to declare the games open was ‘intonation gone awry’ – one of the voice notes, and enthusiasm, peaking prematurely, sounded funny and provided a comic relief. Delhi’s Chief Minister, Lt Governor, and Mr (Suresh) Kalmadi, the Organizing Committee Head and a few others spoke. Mrs Shiela Dikshit, the CM of Delhi, got a rousing ovation; there was some booing for Mr Kalmadi; the Lt Governor, Mr Khanna, got some sympathies. There were signs of some cracks between them in their speeches. Kalmadi was known to be a sports enthusiast and a consummate organizer of sports events, but by the beginning of the games it was in tatters.

The rest of the evening whirred past me and my memories so fast that I did not properly hear or register A R Rahman’s theme song rendition all that well.

As I was driving back, there was only one thought on my mind. I wanted to say to all those TV and press reporters who were running down the CWG, and India with it, ‘To hell with you (all capitals, in bold letters and perhaps in 432 font size). Please don’t run down the country for the sake of pulling down half a dozen politicians and/or improving your TRPs.’ India could have harvested much more mileage from the games without the unnecessary bad publicity. The media, which cried hoarse perhaps caused more damage to the

Commonwealth Games that made my chest swell with pride

country than the few rogue organizers by the value of foregone positive mileage.

As it happened, the foreign media gave excellent and favourable coverage the next morning. The organizers were also able to dismantle the wooden platforms that were put up for the opening ceremony and, within just 36 hours, leave the ground in perfect shape for track and field events, and athletics.



Lady who did not have assets in the right place

2011

I had arrived a few minutes ahead of the scheduled 9am for a meeting with a local company in Vietnam. It must have been about 8.50am or so. My host had not arrived yet. I gave my visiting card to the receptionist, and she started conversing. Soon, may be in a couple of minutes, she started talking about her personal life, her family circumstances, her boyfriend, and several other matters in quick succession, which I would have found difficult to discuss even with someone I had known for a decade. I wonder if any lady or girl in India will open up to a stranger in such a short time. Soon it was a lament about her single status and her not being able to find a steady boyfriend to marry and have children, etc.

I thought I should break my silence and offer some words of solace. 'You have a great job with a multinational company and they must be paying you a good salary, so what's your problem? You would surely be able to land a great husband,' I said.

The girl replied with a sense of resignation, 'But I don't have assets in the right place you see,' and pointed to her not so well-endowed bosom. I was taken aback in utter surprise and my cheeks must have gone beetroot red. I did not know how exactly to react to such a situation. I have not been trained by my school or family nor any other institution I have attended on how to react to such a situation. Luckily, the mobile in my hand came to my rescue. I put it to my ears and started mumbling something, as if someone was on the other side, and started walking away from her, towards the visitor's sofa. The girl may have sensed my unease, but remained completely nonplussed. I prayed silently that my host reaches the office soon and rescues me from myself and from the lady receptionist's pleasant assault.

Truth be told, even a decade later, I am yet to figure out an appropriate response that would let me feel comfortable in my skin.

A Taste of Dutch Humour

One has heard so much about the Dutch painters – Vincent van Gogh, Rembrandt, Vermeer – amongst the several distinguished ones down the ages, and its windmills, and its main airport, Schiphol, which is below the sea level and not far from the sea. It is also known for the dykes, waterways, *Anne Frank's Diary*, and *Beyond Sleep*. It is also known for its liberal attitude to same sex marriages, legalized tax-paying prostitution and drugs. What I did not know till I visited The Hague and Amsterdam, was their sense of humour, amiable nature, helpful and tourist-friendly approach, and the intense rivalry between cities.

If the Louvre in Paris houses the most famous painting in the World, *Mona Lisa*, the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague houses arguably the second most valuable – *Girl with the Pearl Earring* - by Vermeer. I do not know what it is with artists that several of them go unrecognized till after their death and during their lifetime don't see much money and die in penury. Vermeer is also a distinguished member of that brigade. The museum has a fine collection of paintings by several renowned artists, beautifully exhibited and preserved.

I wanted to see the 360 degree painting recommended by various books and tourist guides. I took a tram towards the museum housing the 360 degree painting. I requested the tram driver to guide me where I should get down. He agreed and asked me to stay close by. After some time he turned towards me at one of the crossings, where he had to wait, and asked me how long I was here and what all was I going to see. I told him that I was there for three days only and rattled out some names of places that I intended to see.

'Where are you from?'

'India,' I said.

'A big country,' he said.

'A country of 1.2 billion people,' I reminded him of our might.

‘But that must be when you left your country two days ago,’ said the tram driver wryly.

In the evening my host took me to a seaside restaurant. It had set menus and the cards on the tables briefly described each dish and recipe, and how they were prepared. Since I must have been a rarity of sorts asking for strict vegetarian food in a seafood restaurant, my host summoned the manager to come up with a special menu for me. Moments later, the chef came along with a neat print out of my special menu. He started briefing me on the recipe and the method of preparation. There seemed one too many items in his list. He was going on and on.

I interrupted him and said that even if I ate half of what he had read out by then, my stomach would burst.

The chef retorted, ‘Don’t worry, Sir! Throughout The Hague we are well-known for our large bills but very small portions.’

The nasty philosophy behind landmines

We landed up in Vietnam and I had to keep an appointment with a local business group, which was lined up just in time. The main host had been called away for some urgent meeting by the local Mayor and he had left hurriedly leaving me to be tackled/baby sat by one of his deputies. Casually, the Deputy asked me, why my team wasn't there, accompanying me. I shared with him that I was on a vacation and that I was told about the meeting just a day or two ago, when we were in Cambodia. 'So, you have been to Cambodia?' he quizzed. I said, 'Yes,' and asked him, 'You keep going there?'

It was rather strange. I had met a number of Vietnamese till then but no one ever talked about Cambodia. He said, 'I used to lay landmines for about two years in the late 1970s, when there was the war with them. Later after 1979-80, I helped the government clear the landmines for about three years. I got injured in an explosion while I was trying to clear some mines. I was brought back and have been rehabilitated in commercial activities since then.'

I said, 'Lucky you did not die. I hear that many people get killed in explosions.' 'Yes, they do. But that is not what landmines are all about. More often than not it causes grievous injuries and maims the victim or makes them lose their limbs. A dead soldier is less of a burden to the host army. They simply bury them at the nearest spot and move on. But an injured soldier requires the help of a couple of other soldiers or may be more to carry him to the nearest camp, people to care for the affected, besides consuming the meagre resources – money, logistics, etc. That helps the enemy greatly, and that is the whole plan behind mines.'

The bitter logic behind one of the biggest existential threats currently facing select areas around the world slowly sunk into me. Painful truth!

Nothing wrong with Mubarak's wealth by stealth

Cairo, 2010-11

One of the main reasons cited for the revolt against the then President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, was that he had amassed too much wealth by stealth. There were speculations galore about the accumulated wealth – anything between \$40 to 70 billion and by one account, about \$700 billion. Just to put things in perspective, Egypt's GDP in 2011, according to the World Bank, was \$236 billion. Most of such estimates proved preposterous in the light of comprehensive denials by the counter party wealth managers and banks, where such wealth was supposed to have been stashed.

The US authorities, as reported by ABC News on 11 February, 2011, put the estimates at \$1 billion to \$5 billion. Officials mocked the \$40-70 billion numbers quoted by others, saying they may have been counting it in Dinars. The Egyptian authorities, by 2013, had come up with a figure of \$1.2 billion as the wealth of the family.

Let us assume for a moment that the figure indeed was \$1.2 billion. Mubarak had ruled Egypt for a period of nearly thirty years. A saving of \$6.7 million deposited every year for thirty years and earning an interest of 10% would have accumulated to \$1.2 billion. That is to say that Mr Mubarak seems to have salted away an average of \$6.7 million every year till his rule lasted. To put this in perspective, the average salary of the top 10 CEOs in the US as per Forbes list in 2012, was \$62 million, the highest was \$131 million, 10th highest was \$43 million and 100th highest was \$15 million. If Mubarak had been an American CEO, his 'compensation by stealth' would have qualified him to be 255th highest paid CEO of the world.

Let us compare the responsibilities. When he assumed office, his boss had been assassinated for striking a compromise pact with Israel. The country was in internal turmoil and had earned the

animus of Arab states. For nearly 2,300 years, Egypt had been ruled by outsiders like Alexander, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, the French and finally, the British. He had successfully managed to hold it from internal pressures and had a fairly peaceful time with its neighbours. Compare it with a CEO's job – investment banks, commercial banks, and manufacturing companies, and their sphere of influence. Most often the actions of a few CEOs, especially investment banks, come apart within a few weeks or months after their departure and most of their actions are confined within a narrow range and involve mostly paper trades. They are largely protected from internal revolts and need have no fear of physical danger. Mubarak had delivered an average 4.8 per cent GDP growth from 1982 to 2011 – not spectacularly high, but in the middle ranges.

As *ABC News* proclaimed at the time of his ouster, 'He is a thief; but not that big a thief.' His compensation even if it is wealth by stealth does not seem overly bloated. World over politicians, especially of third world countries and volatile countries, carry a great personal risk and are under constant scrutiny of the press (where it exists), outsiders, military, internal pressure groups, and militants. The expectations are also enormous compared to CEOs – in fact to any CEO in comparison. Their every move, salaries, business deals, outstation trips, a few additional ACs and gadgets installed in their house, come to be scrutinized with a fine-tooth comb. The compensation just does not seem to be anywhere close to the compensation structure of CEOs, who get joining bonuses and separation bonuses to boot. Politicians get neither and the society can't do away with them. They have to fend for themselves. There is no professional responsibility risk insurance for them. They have to bear the expenses to see them through the office. *Poor politicians! Either our society is over compensating our corporate chieftains or grossly underpaying the politicians. In any case, the cacophonous arguments need to attain a better sense of balance.*



Friendly yet confident security under Myanmar military rule

May, 2012

Our negotiations for a JV with the government of Myanmar to run one of their largest factory was proceeding along well when our PM's visit to Myanmar was announced. We hoped to reach a conclusion and sign the agreement, but our efforts failed to fructify on time. In the end what they offered as an MOU was all of 1-1/4 page long and other than state the names of parties and intentions and a promise to enter into a formal arrangement by a specified date, it said nothing more. But I had heard that that is the way things are done in Myanmar – mostly verbal. Negotiate when the need arises in the future.

Myanmar follows the equivalent of English or Indian Companies Act 1913 largely with no modification whatsoever since the last hundred years. There is no concept of debt or debenture and hence a vast variety of structures that we concoct here in India and the financial markets the world over is out of bounds. The JV partners also pay for losses or take out profits each year – again something unusual elsewhere. (On a later visit I happened to meet the official designing their stock exchange regulations, who confirmed that they were working on those aspects).

I went a day later than the rest of the group, which had accompanied our PM. We (myself with an interpreter, consultant and his assistant and the lawyer) arrived on our own at the convention centre in their capital where the ceremonies and summit meetings were to happen. We had no accreditation or identity badges with us. We went to the gate and explained our predicament and the security guard spoke to someone on the intercom. We waited with bated breath, thinking about what our course of action

will be, in case we were not allowed into the venue. Luckily he came back and told us that the others will arrive after thirty minutes and we, in the meantime, could get dropped at the reception but the vehicle would have to be parked outside. *With the kind of papers and identity cards we had, I wonder if we could have even entered a railway platform in India. But here we were, in a so-called tightly controlled (by military) regime which supposedly abhors and denies freedom. We had entered the venue where two heads of government were meeting with a host of other dignitaries and officials from both sides with not even identity badges.*

If such confidence, speed or efficiency is due to military rather than democratic form of government, then it may be worth trying out the military form of government for a short while in India.



Testimonials

The narrative transports us to the scene of action and makes us soak in the experience ourselves. Great articulation of small things in life which actually makes life.

– **Sandesh Kirkire**, Former CEO of Kotak Mahindra Asset Management

He makes you happy, he makes you sad. When he recounts the CW Games, he makes you feel proud. You are terrified at times and pensive, thoughtful or lonely at other times.

– **Karwa**, MD of Emkay Global Financial Services Ltd, a premier financial services company

From the choppy boat ride in Cape Town's Seal Island to staying near Mubarak's Summer Palace with no inclination of the simmering revolution just days ahead... the book guarantees adventures, anecdotes, humour, lessons in leadership and much more. It is a vivid vignette on the author's take on life.

– **Adit Jain**, Chairman, India Management Association, Corporate Director and Wildlife Photographer

It brings alive the magic of pure, passionate and pioneering discovery of people and places by a vivid traveller. While the messages are deep, the platter is served with a sense of humour.

– **Dr G P Rao**, Former Secretary, National HRD Network and Founder, Good People Relations

A collection of writings that will shift focus and attention to ground-level perspectives of subject matter that provide a real time understanding of niches, sectors, nations and humankind.

Mudar Patherya, Activist and Corporate Communications Consultant

A myriad melange of life snippets shared with refreshing candour and unique Indian perspicacity.

– **Rahul Bhasin**, Senior Partner and Board Member, Baring International

The vignettes presented by him stem from the heart and carry his unique stamp as a person with a tremendous sense of national pride, managerial acumen, personal zeal and empathy. A must read!

Raghav Chandra,
author of Kali's Daughter,
& Director, Bhopal
Literature Festival

This book guarantees adventure, anecdotes, humour, lessons in leadership and much more. It is a vivid vignette on the author's take on life.

Adit Jain, Chairman, India
Management Association,
Corporate Director and
Wildlife Photographer

*Kumar's pen is like an intelligent camera lens, it sees the unseen and skillfully captures the nuances in a captivating prose. **Sujit Mukherjee,** Internationally acclaimed Author, Poet, Photographer and Culinary Expert*

I could not put down this gem of a book – I was not just a reader; I was a participant in the narrative!

Raghu, Former HR
Director, GE Worldwide

...a delightful collection of small essays and vignettes, from exotic locales recorded with feeling and humour, wit and sensibility.

Gautam Mukhopadhyay,
Former Ambassador to Syria,
Afghanistan, Myanmar & currently
Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for
Policy Research

...never lets go of his curiosity or surrenders his insight. The consequence is a work of literary art studded with vignettes.

**Prof Madhav Das
Nalapat,** Unesco
Peace Chair, Manipal
University

...refreshing candour and unique Indian perspicacity.

Rahul Bhasin,
Senior Partner and
Board Member, Baring
International

A great collection of anecdotes and stories reflecting life experiences, penned in a witty, humorous manner, that seeps through your consciousness.

Harsh Pati Singhania,
Director JK Organisation
and VC/MD JKPL

Weird Adventures, Uncommon Lessons – Diary of an unplugged CXO is a collection of unconventional, extraordinary and incredible experiences. Replete with life-changing insights from conversations with both common and distinguished people, and ironies of life, this book breaks the stereotype of notions about the 'other'. Full of wit and brilliant observations, these articles challenge the norms and ideas one has learnt to accept without questioning. With a twist at every turn of the page, and discovery of human sensibilities across cultures and boundaries of geography, this is a must read for those who dream of a better tomorrow.

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