Autobiographies are written to share experience with others. That is why they are read with interest, becoming a learning media for the readers. The book under review is a life story of an Indian Muslim, who because of his hard work, dedication and commitment, was selected for the Indian Foreign Service. It was a rare feat in early 1950s, as very few Muslims were able to assume such positions of responsibility. Even these days Muslims are underrepresented in all walks of Indian administration and politics.

The author, Saiyed Mazhar Hussain served at six important positions and countries; each of these experiences he describes with interest and devotion. The book is divided into four main categories. The first part of the book deals with his student days and his extended family. The second refers to his days at Aligarh Muslim University (a renowned University in India). The third chapter is about his various appointments as a diplomat, while the last mentions his life in the U.S. in general and the United Nations, in particular.

The author narrates his family background in detail, sketching a real picture of relations’ love, closeness and support that the writer received. He is proud of the congenial impressions, especially those that he received from his parents. The author also traces his genealogy and the links, relations and reputation that members of his family enjoyed with friends and acquaintances. This part of the book is important for him, because as he writes, “It is my duty to introduce my family to the
readers”. The author says, “I have written about my family, especially parents, brothers, sisters and about my immediate family because they are part of my life and the initial stages of my life are attached with them”. The author comes from a well established family of Faizabad in Uttar Pardesh (UP) Province of India. He is part of a family and tradition, where respect for the relations and, above all, values and customs are maintained and promoted. That, according to the author had an imprint over his attitudes and perceptions, which is reflected when he served as a diplomat and also later as an official at the United Nations’ headquarter in New York.

The author recalls his student days at Aligarh Muslim University. It was here that he not only received his education but also learnt the art of dealing with fellow students, friends and teachers. He admits that Aligarh exposed him to knowledge and wisdom. He writes, “The educational system of Aligarh University was designed to promote self confidence and personality of the students, thus preparing them for practical life”. His narration of the hostel life and its activities is superb. It is explained in a style that can easily be understood by even those who have not been to this place of learning. The author compares the cultural values of Aligarh University with that of the Western culture, to which he was exposed later in life. As he proceeds along, his explanations of the socio-cultural environment, in every aspects of his life is the main theme of this book.

Biography of a Diplomat is also an interesting travel account, as seen through the eyes of an enlightened diplomat. Saiyed Mazhar Hussain was designated as a Vice Consular at Jeddah in 1951. He later served as a diplomat in Singapore, Cairo, Baghdad and Washington, D.C. He also served at the United Nations as a representative of a prestigious Muslim International Organization.

His description of the places that he visited and the experiences during travel and at work makes this book an interesting reading. The author describes in detail the land and the fauna and flora of the cities and countries that he visited and resided in. The manner in which the writer describes his journey, mostly by sea, is so real that it seems as if the reader is seeing and experiencing these with him – in particular his two journeys
by sea from Bombay to Jeddah and from Calcutta to Singapore are remarkable. The experiences on the ships are written with such clarity that the reader seems to be accompanying the author on these fascinating journeys. The book also takes us to the customs and culture of the places, where the author served and lived. His keen observations about the history and background of various societies are appealing.

Even though Saiyed Mazhar Hussain was a diplomat, he refrains from commenting on the political situation of the countries he served. However, he highlights the miserable conditions of the common people and the devastating effects that the post 1990 sanctions had on the society of Iraq – a country he had resided in much before the crises began. The author states that “the sanctions made more than a million and a half Iraqis suffer, half of them were children....Now we cannot call Iraq a sovereign nation. United States and the Europeans have occupied Iraq”.

The book is a life story of a person who enjoyed his fulfilling life and work. His sensitivities towards his relations and friends are alike. This book is recommended for those who would like to visualize the functioning of a Muslim diplomat, with keen eyes and intelligence. It is also for those who take interest in the traveling accounts and places.