

BOOK REVIEW

Barbara Crossette, INDIA: FACING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1993.

As the new century approaches, India is going through a critical and highly complex phase of transition. The experience of the past four-plus decades of nation-building efforts by India, its tremendous successes and monumental failures coupled with the radical changes that are taking place in international arena made it imperative for the nation to embark upon a path of reshaping the society at large in the light of new realities in the domestic as well as international arena. In such a period, it is necessary to understand India in all spheres of its life — socio-economic, politico-cultural as well as moral-spiritual. It is in this context that Barbara Crossette's recent book **INDIA: FACING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY** is a timely addition to the literature on Indian studies and a useful guide to the multifarious problems faced by Indian society. As she herself mentioned, "This book is about India and Indians at a terrifying yet exhilarating moment of their history, a time of daunting problems and tremendous possibilities, a time to throw old burdens and seize new opportunities in a community of nations being remade geopolitically and economically". (p.xviii)

In an attempt to understand India's present and visualize its future, while analyzing 'three Indian worlds' — the inner, spiritual world rooted in Hinduism; the real world Indians inhabit; and the outside world as seen through Indian eyes — Barbara Crossette could hardly avoid disappointment, though the prospects for a brighter future was not dismissed by her

altogether. Along with her experience as a journalist living for a quite long time in India, the study draws heavily on the opinion and words of a variety of academicians, journalists, social workers, politicians and other concerned people on the subject. Despite frequent quotations from various sources, the author is virtually omnipresent in the book.

To delve into the inner self of India, Crossette concentrates her attention in the part I of the book on religion and myth, as well as minorities and women. Her discussions on these and other issues to be discussed later are thoughtful, provocative and likely to generate lot of controversy. Unlike other ancient societies, in India, traditions and myths are the foundation which a living religion is based on. "So powerful are the touchstone myths and legends, so pervasive the thought processes rooted in Hinduism, a culture as much as a religion for more than 80 percent of Indians, that from anthropology to political science, in medicine, psychiatry, and the arts, the Hindu context cannot be ignored." (p.4) She makes a critical evaluation of myths and realities. Along with the vague, amorphous, many-sided, contradictory and loose nature of Hinduism, and its lack of ecclesiastical organization and concept of heresy, the rigidity of caste system and its impact on contemporary India are discussed quite candidly.

The plight of minorities particularly, that of the Muslims and the Sikhs are discussed in some detail. The discussion in this part of the book concludes with a meaningful quotation from S.K. Singh, a renowned Indian diplomat, who said, "Even today, in the last decade of the twentieth century, we are carrying our Stone Age with us". (p.21) Nothing could be so revealing.

The critical evaluation of Indian society in most of its ramifications by Crossette gains even more vigour in the part II of her book dealing with daily realities. It begins with a penetrating discussion on the phenomenal growth of violence in Indian society and politics, particularly on the part of the state organs. In contemporary India, intra-state conflicts along ethno-linguistic, religious, caste, regional and other parochial lines and resultant crises became more often, more violent and more sustained. Violence in

Kashmir and Punjab, caste war over job quota and communal riot over the Babri Masjid-Ramjanamabhumi issue come under scrutiny. As Crossette observes, "India tumbled into the last decade of the twentieth century tripping unexpectedly over fallen monuments to itself". (p.26) Paradoxes and diversities received special attention in the book. "There are many Indias, separated from each other not only by language, religion, ethnicity, or geography, but also by historical time". (p.34) Pockets of medieval life survive in a country with microwave kitchens.

India's poor performance in poverty alleviation, family planning, in increasing literacy and overall standard of living as manifested in the country's rank as 123rd among 160 Third World countries in the Human Development Report published by the UNDP in 1991 comes under sharp focus. So does the plight of poor women and children. The author asserts in this context that it is "inconceivable that India will not pay a heavy price for its neglect of its poor women and children" (p.45) Quoting Myron Weiner she explains that "India's low per capita income and economic situation is less relevant as an explanation than the belief systems of the state bureaucracy". (p.24) Undue power, influence and authority enjoyed by Indian bureaucracy and political elite, abuse of all these by them, widespread corruption among them, their professional schism and conflict of interest were another subject of sharp criticism in the book.

A substantial part of the book is dedicated to the study of Indian middle class, "an Asian phenomenon of gigantic proportions and innumerable contradictions". (p.60) She observes that middle class Indians are often (but not always) unashamedly materialistic in their pursuit and flaunting of affluence in a country where rumpled Gandhian asceticism was the hallmark of an older generation. (p.59) The author welcomes and praises rather lavishly the emerging energetic, materialistic, practical and dynamic young middle class which she considers to be pro-American in orientation i.e., in thought processes, life-style and working ethics. On the other hand, she appears to be rather too unkind in her criticism addressed to the traditional middle class educated in and/or influenced by British traditions who were

blamed for most of the things that went wrong in India. She cannot conceal her satisfaction over the fact that now more Indians study in the US than in Britain, and as a result, she claims, "there are more refreshingly open youthful minds among the under-forties". (p.66) This new internationalized or may be Americanized, but in no way anglicized, middle class, according to Crossette is likely to play the leading role in reshaping Indian economy, society and the polity in the century to come. Such an assertion would certainly be controversial and could very well prove to be a mere wishful thinking.

Her discussions on the increase in the "barbaric practices of bride-burning" among Indian middle class was revealing and was also indicative of how terrible the life could be for the women belonging to the lower strata. She, however, remains far from objectivity to have taken in this context the Delhi-based Bangali community as her focus of attention as she herself states that "Bangalis do not have a reputation for domestic violence or the systematic denigration of women". (p.71)

The last part of the book is dedicated to the Indian view of and her relations with the outside world, including the neighbours. In this regard, she discusses a number of key issues like, a strong Indian sense of cultural superiority *vis-a-vis* other civilizations, paranoia about hostile designs of extra-regional great powers towards India and a strong desire to play the role of an unchallenged regional power in South Asia. Crossette's assertion that India's suspicion of and apathy towards the outside world, particularly the great powers would continue to prevail may be true. But her suspicion that it may result in any kind of isolationist policy on the the part of India is an unlikely possibility. While India's suspicion of and apathy towards the outside powers would continue to prevail, it is almost inconceivable that India would follow any version of isolationism as suspected by Crossette.

India's penchant for "micromanaging regional affairs" i.e. attempts to deal with the neighbours exclusively on the basis of bilateralism even when the problem is of regional nature has received particular attention on the part of the author. Bangladesh-India dispute over the sharing of the water of

common rivers, the crisis in Indo-Nepalese relations over the trade and transit issue and Indian intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987 are discussed in some details. While evaluating Indian policy towards South Asia during the second half of the 1980s when India made vigorous attempts to emerge as a gendarme in the region, she puts the onus primarily on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, and particularly on Rajiv Gandhi. In reality, however, the policy was the outcome of a long-nourished ambition of the Indian elite and Rajiv Gandhi was rather an instrument, probably a not very convenient one, for fulfilling this ambition. Contrary to her assertion, positive changes in Indian policy towards the region has little to do with the change of government in New Delhi. It was caused by the fact that the price paid by India in terms of human and material resources to sustain this policy was too high to be cost effective.

The author discusses in detail the atrocities committed by Indian forces in Kashmir and Sri Lanka. It would be difficult for a neutral observer to question her objectivity. On the other hand, while discussing the events of 1971, she maintains a rather cynic silence on the worst post-World War II genocide committed by Pakistan army in Bangladesh. Her attempts to justify the US policy towards Bangladesh's War of Liberation are tantamount to the same sins as she was all along accusing the Indians of committing — defending one's own country when it is clearly on the wrong side. The same implies to her criticism of India's anti-Western position on environmental issues in international arena and a number of other issues.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the book remains an important contribution to the study of India, particularly its society and polity at a time of radical transformation. The book, despite being a journalist's account of events and phenomena, and personalities and social forces, would be of considerable interest to not only the general readers but also to the academicians and policy makers.

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