

BOOK REVIEW

IN SPITE OF THE GODS

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Edward Luce (2011), "In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India", Little, Brown, Abacus, pages: 430, ISBN 978-0-349-12346-2, Rs.499

One of the earliest accounts of India through the lens of a foreigner was 'Indika' crafted by Greek ambassador Megasthenes in about 310 BCE, during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. Although the original work ceases to exist today, the quotes and references give a picturesque exposition of what ancient Mauryan India looked like. From Geography to topography, culture to caste, woods to wild, figuratively, Megasthenes had drawn the Indian map through Greek eyes. Like him, many ventured into India and expressed their world views of the land at multiple points in time. One such account is Edward Luce's 'In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India'. It is a descriptive reflection of his travels across the length and breadth of mighty India and his conversations with individuals belonging to various social groups. However, a huge chunk is the business and political elite. This nine-chaptered work is layered with a cogent analysis of India's paradoxical universe.

Luce begins his voyage with the spiritual touch of Auroville Ashram through an elderly French man, Andre, who views that the world is doomed to the perils of materialism without India and that India's unity is driven by its spiritual reality. While Luce depicts the spirituality of India, he smoothly slides into a dialogue with the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Dr Jawaharlal Nehru. One can predict Luce's inclination to Nehruvian ideas from his acknowledgement. In fact, the book's very title is

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inspired by Nehru's contention that India's strengths lie not in religious traditions but in democracy, pluralism, intellectual capital and technological prowess (Luce, 2011). He opens the book with speculation that India's emergence as an expanding economy and growing military power would add to global stability. And, with an assurance that his book grapples with India's vulnerabilities.

The theme, 'Global and Medieval' that he introduced in the book is a combination of factual and coherent deductions of the Indian economy that captures the dichotomy of modern and rural India, driven by the service sector and farmlands, respectively. This underlying idea is connected to the flaws of Nehruvian socialism, where the emphasis was placed on the heavy industry while an average Indian at that time needed agricultural inputs, education and medicine. Further, the economic events, from the devaluation of the Indian currency in 1967 to the balance of payment crisis in 1991, were spun sequentially. He also presents the rapid growth of the Indian economy in the fields of textiles, telecommunications, IT and so on in the 2000s as an after-effect of liberalisation. The dichotomy between modern and rural India I mentioned earlier can be visualised in Luce's conversations with Nandan Nilekani (Co-founder of Infosys) and Aruna Roy (IAS officer turned social activist). Regarding the social sphere, the former view villages as a prison-like trap for lower castes and argue that elites who advocate the importance of villages do not live in one. Whereas the latter, a Gandhian, lives in a village in Rajasthan and works for people there with a goal to enhance participatory democracy. By the same token, the vision of development for Mr Nilekani is rapid urbanisation as mechanisation of agriculture may not provide enough jobs for rural India. On the other hand, Aruna Roy's camp sees Multinational Companies as modern versions of The East India Company and views that rural employment can be enhanced with better farming and cottage industries.

Another theme 'Burra Sahibs' introduced by the author provides insight into the gruesome corruption in the Indian bureaucracy. The author explores this phenomenon in his dialogues with

civil servants, politicians and sufferers of failed social justice programmes. Interestingly, he observes that India is the pioneer in producing a manual of governance '*Artha shastra*' where Kautilya listed forty ways in which a bureaucrat can cheat the King. This brings forward a harsh realisation in the reader that, although the ball is in our court, we are sitting on the fence of inability to choose between 'being corrupt' or 'being correct'. He further discusses the debatable independence of Judiciary and its ever-increasing pendency of cases. Finally, Luce sheds light on the Mumbai mafia who provided services to the elite classes to loophole the redevelopment of slum-dwellers.

Many have explored and elaborated on the caste system in India, but what has been summarised under the theme 'Battles of the Righteous' is rudimentary and non-inclusive. Luce's understanding of caste in terms of division and discrimination was intelligible. The discussions on Ambedkar and the consequences of his contributions have been reflected in the episode of Luce's visit to Aurangabad. However, there were four major problems; one, was to look at caste through a political lens with the agendas of politicians like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mayawati. Due to this, he could capture the process of Sanskritization happening in the opposite direction in the political world alone. To elaborate on this, he writes that the lower castes do not seek to emulate the Brahmin role models anymore and instead use politics to avenge their lower social status. The second problem is to look at majorly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh among the north Indian states which narrows it further. Three, exploring the case of Tamilnadu alone amongst the South Indian states. Lastly, there was no analysis of north-eastern states whilst discussing affirmative action programmes.

The theme of 'Imaginary horse' underlines Hindu nationalism that emerged during the rule of Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The growing tree of Hindu nationalism that we see today had its seeds sown in the ideas of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as reflected in the book. The author compares these ideas to Benedict Anderson's concept of 'Imagined community' according to which nations are

socially constructed. The author cites illustrations which describe how Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has tried to rewrite history to suit its narrative. For instance, he mentions changes made in academic textbooks and the banning of the book 'The Myth of the Holy Cow' written by D.N Jha in 2001. Luce also highlights in the book three significant goals of the BJP; one is to bring a uniform civil code. Two, to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya and three, to abolish an article from the Indian constitution that gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir. Coincidentally, after more than a decade since the book was first published, the second and third goals have been systematically achieved by the BJP in 2019. Further, he culminates the theme by mentioning that the process of Sanskritization in the social sphere fits well in the agenda of Hindu right wing without much focus on its illustration.

The theme 'Long love the sycophants' summarises the obsession of the congress party with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. He narrates the Nehru-Gandhi family since the times of Motilal Nehru and concludes with the predictions of one day Rahul Gandhi becoming the prime minister. He further highlights the three stamps - Democracy, Secularism and Socialism that were left behind by Jawaharlal Nehru. He critically analysed these through the illustrations of irreconcilable political and economic decisions of Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. The author vividly brings out the idea that on one end, Hindu nationalism was growing and on the other end, it was dynasty politics that had become rampant.

The theme, 'Many crescents' is an insight into the communal aspect of Muslims and the divide from others and among themselves within South Asia. While shedding light on the overarching ideas of communal issues underlying Afghanistan and Pakistan; he shifts into the core of Indian communalism highlighting the three major wars between India and Pakistan. Further, he underlines three major aspects of Pakistan that India perceives as a threat. Firstly, the claim of Pakistan over Kashmir which is one of the Muslim dominated areas. Secondly, he elaborates that the creation of Pakistan has impacted the features of India geographically and

culturally and that it threatens the Hindu nationalist dream of 'Akhand Bharat'. Lastly, he explains that for India, Pakistan is a potential threat to secular identity. To summarise this, he strikingly draws an anonymous quote that the rivalry between US and Soviet Union was ideological, but that of India and Pakistan is biological.

The history of International relations of India is the core of the theme, 'A triangular dance'. While the underlying idea is to explore India's emerging relationship with the US and China, which he predicted will shape the future in the 21st century. He takes on his sequential style of narration yet again and begins the story with Nehru's foreign policy which portrayed India as 'moral superpower'. Although he thinks that the developed countries such as Japan, Russia, Germany and so on, shall continue playing an essential role in Global politics, for him, it is the trilateral relations among India, US and China, that shall determine the future. When Luce predicted this in 2006-2007, the diplomatic situations were drastically different from now. However, the balance of power politics among the US, India and China stands relevant even today. He has been a true journalist in presenting his analysis of this theme.

While the author had covered most of the domains of Modern India in the prior themes, he finally arrives at a tale of modernity which is multi-layered for him. In this theme, 'New India, Old India', he articulately covers the modern developments of the 21st century and the modern versions of old traditional values. He further attributes positive aspects such as financial security, meritocracy and gender equality to the advent of IT. Nevertheless, it fails to analyse the flipside of IT, such as job insecurity, unhealthy competition and work alienation. Further, he brushes the European idea of modernity as the triumph of the secular way of life and brings out the Indian version that views modernity as just another layer to its ancient palimpsest. He rightly puts that India's past remains visible in its present. Beyond the rooted issues of chauvinism, gender gap, and discrimination of all kinds, the author believes India is changing slowly but surely.

The 2006 version of the book concludes with the theme, 'Hers to lose' that briefs the challenges that are ahead of India: whilst also suggesting the opportunities. He highlights that, although the Green Revolution has offered a paradigm shift in India's food security, rural infrastructure is far from being developed. He further underlines the need for reforming labour laws and infrastructure in urban India. For the environmental degradation that has led to the declining quality of life in India, he warns that India should not repeat the mistakes of the west. Finally, he brings out the need of strengthening liberal democracy in India.

The final part of the latest version of the book, 'Time present and Time past', legibly portrays India in 2011 and attempts to analyse it beyond this timeline. The new addition is relatively unidirectional in analysing India mainly through its international dynamics and has got to be analysed against the title chosen. He concludes the chapter by indicating the flaws of the ruling congress party in 2011. Nevertheless, nowhere at this juncture was he able to foresee an alternative power that was about to change the Indian societal dynamics from 2014 and possibly a decade from then.

In the hope of starting a new discourse, I shall conclude by putting the entirety of the book in a nutshell that it is an ensemble of interconnected structural domains of the nation that triumphs on both ends of the spectrum, that is, Modernity and tradition, yet aiming for a position of balance. It is a paradoxical delight for an Indian to read India through an English lens yet again. But fortunately, this one is not corrupted by the Eurocentric lens. Although not picture-perfect, the work presents India's duality in accommodating Modernity in a riveting manner.

References

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