

# The Arrogance of Ignorance

BARBARA CROSSETTE



## INDIA

FACING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*Barbara Crossette, India: Facing the Twenty-First Century. Indiana University Press, 1993. \$22.95.*

Books are cherished treasures of civilization. At least that is what we used to think. In these days of fast food, quick knowledge and rapid images, that quality of reverence for books is fast disappearing. Why would someone try to write a book on India, after only a few visits, seeing the world through the eyes of a fast paced journalist, who is otherwise blinded to anything other than the rituals of her craft? Why would someone pretend to tackle the topic as complex and as vast as India in 176 pages and spread the venom with a velocity that would astonish our most cruel enemies?

Crossette has the knack of covering her tracks. She anticipates criticism from Indians who are "patriotic" to the core and react very defensively against any criticism. She has a contempt for the middle class, whose portrait she

attempts to produce in broad brushstrokes. She has a well-ploughed suspicion of any rational reaction from Indians who might dare criticize her.

The Essential Asia series editor from Indiana University Press, David I. Steinberg, raises our hopes by announcing his intentions to focus on Asian countries with books that are not riddled with academic language, books that help us understand these neglected countries. He tries to soften the blows of Crossette by introducing a concept hitherto useful in childrearing called "tough love." That is, Steinberg says, the author's approach is laced and braced with a strong critical attitude toward India, but her humanity really comes through when she exhibits wide concerns about the welfare of this fascinating country on the other side of the globe. With friends like these, who needs more publishers?

Incidentally, it is important to provide a quote that sheds more light on the series editor. In his foreword to the book, he says that reading a single book on a particular Asian society may present its problems in achieving the tasks he has in mind. "I have been hard pressed to respond, suspecting that their reading time would be relegated to the long airplane passage to Asia, punctuated by meals, movies, and mewling infants." So much for tolerance!

What are Ms. Crossette's preparations? A stint as a Fulbright Professor in Punjab and a longer tenure as the *New York Times* correspondent in India during the opportune times of Rajiv Gandhi's decline and demise. That is not enough, you may say. A whole lot many travelers since ancient times

have tried to grapple with India, or whatever is represented by that name. Few have the vitamin-strength confidence as Crossette for she is not humbled by the complexity of reading another country after having shared meals with Indians under the auspices of the Fulbright Foundation and after having met some impressive deadlines that were found fit to print in the leading mouthpiece of liberalism in the United States.

"What kind of country is this," cries the author beginning a chapter on the middle class chaos (and a quote that is bandied about in the book jacket), where the murder of yet another young wife by her in-laws may get equal space in the press with the marriage of a neem tree to a peepul tree?" (p.34)

Try this too: "The colonial experience seems to have traumatized Indians and continues to obsess them with an immediacy no longer found in Malaysia or Singapore, also ex-colonies of the British, or in Indonesia, where the Dutch had a far worse record in dealing with local people." (p. 86)

In describing Indians, Crossette continues her articulate assault: "Indians are raised on two unquestioned truths: that Indian (or Hindu) civilization is superior to most (probably all) others, and that any foreign power that begins to take on imperial shape will sooner or later threaten India. To the latter we might add a corollary; that most (if not all) of India's problems are caused by someone else." (p. 86)

On NRIs: "Publications in Delhi and Bombay regularly quote parents settled in the United States who cling to Indian neighborhoods in the hope of shutting out the new world, determined to block the

'Americanization' of their children, who sooner or later are apt to feel the tension. Emigrants like these—though certainly not all Indians who live abroad — seem to see nothing questionable about extracting professional satisfaction and large incomes from a nation to which they choose not to make a personal commitment." (p. 85)

She described *kabaddi*, a south Indian sport as a "game of team tag that looks a lot like the scramble for tickets at Delhi's train stations during peak hours." (p. 49)

She carpet-bombs the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, accusing it of "violence, gore, revenge, cunning, and trickery," which she finds out are also the "staples of the current Hindi cinema." India does not have a Bible or a Quran, she says. Hindu India, for her, does not have a sense of community. It is a selfish culture, a selfish religion, in which the self is the center of all devotion, prayers and worshipping.

Crossette quotes a number of Indian intellectuals (despite her well-bred wholesale contempt for them) from Khushwant Singh, Ashish Nandy to Romilla Thapar to make her case that this "hell in a hand basket" ride is unstoppable. Her continuous use of Romilla Thapar's analytic findings about India's history and its religious appropriation of diverse situations tells the story of how ignorance, especially when it is on assignment for the *New York Times*, can be more dangerous than an armed terrorist. She is downright numb to the fact that amongst Indian intellectuals, as amongst other Indians, there is a great awareness of the problems of bureaucratic slow-pace, rise of religious religious orthodoxy in politics, the dead weight of the caste-system and above all a general national feeling of arriving at the same problem after years of toiling to get rid of it.

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It would be foolish to listen to a "foreign" correspondent (and don't we know a lot many Indians may prefer it, too) for a critical awareness of India's problems, especially if she is not saying anything new or proposing anything radically interesting. India's strength is not that it has insurmountable problems, but that it has the capacity to comprehend them quite clearly, with brutal honesty quite respected wherever free thought has any value. India's weakness is that the perception and comprehension of the problem and its possible transition into practice is fraught with obstacles that are both uniquely native and structurally connected with many other issues, including international economics and power machinations of the superpowers.

In Crossette's world, India hasn't and cannot do anything right. It, unlike its neighbors, has ruined everything from the steady progress inaugurated by the British and their silent successors. It cannot win medals in Olympics and it cannot have politicians who work for the people without taking bribes. Admit the first problem and call her services to see where she can show politicians who shun from corruption.

Crossette's world view is what brought us in the current danger. The intransigence of the "foreigners" arises out of their arrogance that value judgements about others are as easy to make as one picks up the fancy menu in a "foreign" restaurants.

Her rage on these pages is not ordinary. It is not just another "foreigner" doing the journalistic equivalent of "drive by shooting," killing things with a blind spray of bullets. There is something quite deep about Ms. Crossette's intemperate attacks at things obvious and (already) depressing about India. She is impatient with anything that slightly violates her world view that the ordinary way of life is what is prescribed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the steady faith in the Enlightenment ideals, and in the sure success of the capitalistic way of life.

India shocked her out of her sense. She could not cope with the complexity, the hard-to-fathom morality of shifting contexts, the gritty outlook of survival against all odds and the seething murmur of thought beneath the violence and uncertainty of everyday life in India. The voice in this book is pathologically hateful.

Here's an author who could not even learn from Romilla Thapar that "India" (just like "Hinduism") is a construction, owing its origins in the motives outside of itself. Therefore, it is an experiment. Not a willing one, but one made possible by history. The wonder is that it is breathing after 47 years. The measure of its success is the reminder of its failures. It is not a clear cut world of causes and effects, of deadlines and headlines. Crossette's education may well be the hardest task and the most daunting challenge for India in the twenty-first century.

— Shekhar Deshpande