

# The Indian Heartbeat



Arthur Bonner, *Averting the Apocalypse: Social Movements in India Today* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990)

Arthur Bonner's *Averting the Apocalypse* has been around for a while. Formerly a *New York Times* staff member in India, he is a saving grace to the reputation of Western journalists in India. The book is brilliant, immensely useful to anyone who wants to understand what makes India and by implication the downtrodden "third world" tick in face of power and domination.

Bonner has written a book in a pleasant, engaging style often as a travelogue. When he takes breaks from his excursions and visits in the heartland of India, with numerous activists, he pauses to remind the reader of the relevance of all of this in terms of political theory and history. He relies on the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian socialist who languished in Fascist prisons during the World War II. Gramsci wrote of a new form of domination, which he called hegemony. Hegemony works by consent of the dominated rather than coercion. Power works by transforming all relations into a somewhat singular mode of relation-

ship by easily sugarcoating everything with a stamp of inevitability or legitimization. Gramsci called this a "passive revolution."

Bonner spent numerous hours and days with activists in India, who in Gramsci's sense are learned intellectuals, university graduates from India and abroad, or professionals of high promise. They have decided to use their resources to turn the tide of this "passive revolution" by bringing about another one with indigenous means. In this process of resistance, they are using Gandhian techniques of non-violent direct action and satyagraha. The emerging record, perhaps familiar to some of us who are tuned into that side of India, but not so known to the outsiders and other Indians, is an encouraging document of social change.

The issue of "averting the apocalypse" (a term attributed to the former editor of *The Times of India*, Sham Lal) shows a possibility of a different life for millions who are oppressed in everything from rape by policemen to self-help for the tribes-people. This possibility comes from "grass-roots" democratic social movements which are gaining strengths in all parts of India.

Stories in this book will fascinate everyone. For Indians with means and/or sensitivity, it should give inspiration to lend support, either material or philosophical. That is not the programmatic intention of Bonner's, but we could benefit by looking at the situation that way.

When you take away the characterizations of India by impatient and ignorant outsiders, when you get over the depressing feeling of seeing the country through the eyes

of a temporary "foreigner," and when you realize that reality in India goes beyond pretty postcards or one's family, there is a whole new India surviving and making a record for posterity to learn from. Bonner's book is an essential ingredient in understanding those processes.

Here you will find stories of Annapurna, an organization that turns around the limiting role of women as "kitchen slaves" into a program of social employment and self-reliance. You will discover the stories of priests who fight against rape, doctors who fight against female feticide, nuns who struggle against women's imprisonment in prostitution markets, dancer/artists who are presenting alternative perspectives on human and social relationships, feminists who see their goals in terms of collective freedom without compromising women's identity, social workers educated in the best schools in the country and abroad striving to achieve the goals of community health and non formal education. It is a rich tapestry, a meaningful collage and a map for anyone wishing to contribute or understand the face of "post-colonial" struggles.

Bonner returns to Gramsci again and again, showing how a blue-print for social reform can turn around the passive revolution which started before the British got there and before we knew what "freedom" was. For those theoretical heavyweights, this combination of Gramsci and Gandhi, of goals and means, of revolution and reform will prove delightful. For the rest of us, this is a book that will serve as a model for what and how it represents.

—Shekhar Deshpande