

Spectres of India

Competing visions of a complicated country

In “The Other Side of the Looking Glass: Retelling Mizo folktales”, from the anthology *Centrepiece: Women’s writing and art from Northeast India*, Jacqueline Zote has us picture a woman telling traditional stories to her teenage daughter and niece. The teller introduces some of the mythical beings to come: “They say that the khuavang are a group of magical creatures. They’re like humans but they can turn themselves invisible so they live all around us, possibly in a different realm. We can’t see them but they can see us”. Their presence is unsettling. “You know how sometimes there’s pin-drop silence even when you’re in a group? That moment is called khuavang kal lai . . . a moment during which the khuavang walk among us.”

Like the *khuavang*, spectral ideas of India populate and unsettle the astral plane of this already populous nation. Perhaps the most abiding – until 2014, when the present government, Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came in with a striking majority – lay in a fusion of the ideals of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi: this was an India that still saw itself as a poor country, devoted to bettering the lot of the rural majority; a country that valued simplicity and a certain moral austerity (Gandhi’s maxim, “Simple living and high thinking”); and a country that, even while asserting its right to autonomy, had a cultural relationship with its former colonizer. This idea of India, even though only imperfectly realized, retained a great deal of charge for many generations of Indians. Mine – I am forty – is probably the last of them. That early spectre of independent India was allied with a notion of the country as secular and hospitable to all religions, as the constitution mandates. It was also, however, usually and unfortunately identified with the Indian National Congress, a political party that in recent years seems to have turned into an employment scheme for the Gandhi–Nehru family (Indira Gandhi’s descendants, no relation to the Mahatma).

But the old myth has had its day. Mr Modi and his many fans would like to replace it with a new one, which, a little in the manner of a fantasy novel, has its own roots and justifications in myth and legend, especially from India’s Hindu traditions. Mahatma Gandhi – now recast principally as a Luddite – is out, and the athletic yogi Swami Vivekananda, who preached Hinduism to the West in the early twentieth century, is in.

In her diligent, comprehensive survey of Indian foreign policy since independence, *Our Time Has Come: How India is making its place in the world*, Alyssa Ayres registers the shift made by the Modi administration towards a retrospective story of Hindu nationalism. Ayres interviews many subjects, among them current and former politicians, the right-wing political commentator Swapan Dasgupta, and the news anchor Arnab Goswami, famous in India for screaming at his

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Alyssa Ayres
OUR TIME HAS COME How India is making its place in the world 360pp. Oxford University Press. £18.99 (US \$27.95). 978 0 19 049452 0
Snigdha Poonam
DREAMERS How young Indians are changing the world 224pp. Hurst. Paperback, £14.99. 978 1 84904 907 8
Parismita Singh, editor
CENTREPIECE Women’s writing and art from Northeast India 240pp. Zubaan Books. \$35. 978 93 85932 41 0
Tenzin Dickie, editor
OLD DEMONS, NEW DEITIES Twenty-one short stories from Tibet 296pp. OR Books. Paperback, £16. 978 1 68219 100 2
Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey
WASTE OF A NATION Garbage and growth in India 416pp. Harvard University Press. £21.95 (US \$29.95). 978 0 674 98060 0

interviewees. She seems to accept fairly uncritically the present Indian government’s conflation of “Indian” with “Hindu” – she writes about “Indian spiritual teachings”, “Indian wisdom” and “Indic culture” when it is principally Hindu traditions she is talking about – mirroring the way the BJP tries to ignore the Indian constitution. She also cites Chanakya’s *Arthashastra*, a treatise on governance from the fourth century BC, as a direct precursor to Indian politics, a lineage already staked out by the BJP. Around 172 million Indians are Muslims – more than 10 per cent of the world’s Islamic population. But if one accepts Ayres’s definition of “Indian”, they might as well not exist.

At times I wondered for whom this book was intended. Ayres does a thorough job of summing up the foreign policy of the past few decades, but her tone is sometimes bizarrely condescending. She notes, for example, a debate over whether India should focus on economic growth or public investment in social services as a means of reducing poverty: “in India everything is hotly contested”. Is that surprising in a large democracy? (It’s worth considering whether the same sentence, so banal but patronizing, would survive the edit in a book about France.) Elsewhere, Ayres mentions India’s “reputation for prickliness” because of a long-standing policy of non-alignment. But this refusal to toe a line set by



“Reassurance”, 2006, by Nandini Valli Muthiah, from *India: Contemporary photographic and new media art* (300pp. FotoFest & Schilt Publishing. £45. 978 90 5330 900 1)

other countries, notably the United States, is not necessarily only laughably wilful – what if a country were motivated, for example, by goals other than economic growth alone? Only towards the end of the book does it become apparent that it is a primer intended for American students, and Ayres ends with a touching argument about how the US should endeavour to understand Indian interests better – she notes that a survey from 2016 showed that “Americans are mildly favourable towards India, but they don’t see it as mattering very much”. Perhaps that lack of interest partly accounts for the simplified picture she at times presents.

Snigdha Poonam’s *Dreamers: How young Indians are changing the world* returns us to the Indians themselves, focusing on the aspirations of those in their twenties and thirties. Inescapably, it is also a story of the youthful constituent of Modi’s voters. One group of people she follows are evangelical teachers of English, who market their teaching as essential to anyone looking for employment in outsourcing. “After he told me his story I felt I could have made it up”, Poonam observes of one teacher, Santosh Dev Thakur, who is based in Ranchi, the capital of the fairly new state of Jharkhand. As well as drawing students with the possibility of a job in a call centre, the sales pitch of such teachers presents English as able to transform a life: “English is like magic . . . English mantra, magic mantra”, Poonam summarizes the promise, in a strange inversion of the Sanskrit “mantra”,

an invocation whose very sounds contain transformative power. It is indeed a nineteenth-century story: for the teachers Poonam meets, English has had a transformative power, by providing a source of income, but it has also endowed them with the ability to transform others, like urban shamans, halfway between glib salespeople and wise monks. All of them talk in homilies: “I don’t want to be successful, I want to be significant”; “Taking no risk is the biggest risk in life”.

Poonam is good on the aggressive nationalism of this generation. Vivek Thakur, a young man in charge of the social media output of Modi’s BJP, tells her how his commitment to the nation came partly from reading the works of Swami Vivekananda. Thakur, Poonam notes wryly, “has a book to recommend for everything you need to know about the country’s fall from glory: how Jawaharlal Nehru destroyed India, how the Congress party destroyed the Indian economy, how Western secularism is destroying Hinduism. Thakur’s politics is the politics of anger”. One of the bugbears of Thakur and others like him is the policy of reservations (for university places and government jobs, among others) for certain historically disadvantaged groups, including the members of what are known as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (meaning those whose existence is listed in the constitution). Although the policy aims to redress perhaps thousands of years of