

upon the history of South Asia over the two and a half centuries covered by Aziz would find something in this two-volume handbook helpful. Most academics have a dictionary sitting on their desk or bookshelf. Ask yourself how often you use it. Probably not very often, but when you do you are thankful that you have it. The same logic applies to this handbook. No South Asia scholars' bookshelf can be complete without it.

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The Crooked Line

Ismat Chughtai (Translated by Tahira Naqvi)
Oxford: Heinemann, 1995
\$11.95, ISBN 0435-950-894

In this unexpectedly fine novel from the Urdu, the author writes of her young heroine, 'Girls generally nurse desire to get married, but of late Shamman had been experiencing a desire to hit people' (p. 8). Why this should happen in an Indian Muslim family of the 1920s is explained in three hundred pages by Ismat Chughtai—one of South Asia's most important women writers—with a polish and sensibility normally associated with Jane Austen or the late Victorians.

Written in 1944, the work revolves about Shamman, an unwanted female child whose rebellious nature grows in proportion to the sexual, cultural and political oppression she experiences growing up in a traditional middle class family of the period. Detailing the innermost dimensions of feminine consciousness in coming of age during an Indian history of unprecedented upheaval, Shamman's evolving sense of self matures sharply while attending boarding school and then college. Sexual identity in particular is incisively redefined in terms of self-awareness, empowerment, even political identity. Set against the Indian nationalist currents of the times, Shamman's close personal relationships veer crookedly from early naïveté to uncritical romance, alarmed disengagement, self-deprecation and, eventually, an astringent but necessary self-reliance.

A richly textured arrival from South Asia, this sobering feast of a book in apparently seamless translation merits widespread attention.

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India: Facing the Twenty-First Century

Barbara Crossette
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993
\$20.00, ISBN 0-253-31577-8

In her wide-ranging survey, Barbara Crossette, a former *New York Times* correspondent for South Asia, manages to touch upon most of the major issues facing contemporary India, and it would be unfair to demand too much analytical depth from such a brief book. Indeed, the series editor's Foreword makes it clear that this volume is meant to be more accessible than the average academic account. But the Foreword also alerts one's critical antennae by stating

that it 'is an example of what some in contemporary America might call "tough love", a sometimes biting but on the whole sympathetic overview...[which] serves as an antidote to much of the "New Age" treacle currently in circulation' (p. xii). What we in fact find is a mixture of banal observation and sometimes provocative but generally poorly formulated analysis.

Part I of the book is an introduction to themes in the study of Indian society, particularly the complex and shifting nature of identity politics. Part II takes us through the main issues in contemporary India. Part III deals with the Indian view of the world and its reflection in official foreign policy. Either the first two parts are markedly less 'tough' on India than the third or, by this point, what had initially appeared to this reader as merely muddled now had begun to seem severely misguided.

Despite interviewing some of the leading thinkers in India, Crossette's understanding of events sometimes gives one the sense of having missed the main point. For instance, when discussing the attempt of 'India's political establishment ... to hold back the communications revolution', she cites 'the near-religious dislike for computerisation [that] rages in some intellectual circles' (p. xvii). Crossette sees no need to mention materialist explanations for the slow speed of computerisation, such as resistance from public-sector clerical and banking unions fearful of productivity-related job losses. This kind of blinkered vision appears in other forms as well, such as when the complex tradition of Hindu sacred architecture is dismissed with a wave of the pen. We are informed that, 'lacking the arch and the dome', Hindu architects 'built dark, massive towers often distinguished only by their sculpture and friezes' (p. 20). This is, to say the least, an uninformed and unhelpful observation.

The exposition of key events is often interlaced with Crossette's personal anecdotes. These are frequently well-rendered, though it is debatable whether the reader needs to be told three times that Crossette was the only foreign journalist on the scene when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. It is in their omissions that Crossette's personal commentaries can be particularly irritating. For instance, she quotes a former government minister saying that 'India has not produced a single world-class historian' and complaining that there is a serious disregard for 'historical authenticity' in the country (p. 4). Crossette comments only on the latter opinion, remarking that '[a]ny journalist dealing with national religious organizations or government officials knows what he means' (p. 4). She leaves unchallenged the assertion that India has produced no world-class historians, which is simply untrue. In fact, she quotes one of them—Romila Thapar—later in the book. To take a second example, Crossette identifies Arun Shourie as 'one of India's preeminent journalists' (p. xviii) when, by most reckonings, he has taken a marked turn away from the secular mainstream. A more sensitive author would have at least mentioned this Ideological tendency and registered a suspicion that Shourie's quote—that India has 'become irrelevant to the world' (p. xviii)—might stem from a belief that a more explicitly Hindu national identity would yield greater respect from the international community.

Curious logical lapses creep in just often enough to raise doubts about Crossette's grasp on the material. Is it sensible to describe finance minister Manmohan Singh's stewardship of India's market-oriented economic reform programme as 'visionary' when earlier in the same sentence she says that reform had been 'thrust on India in 1991 as much by world events as by a bold government' (p. xiv)? Pragmatic and politically shrewd Singh may be, but certainly not visionary. Vision implies a script. India's reformers are improvising, and none more than Singh himself.

But such shortcomings appear minor when compared to Crossette's analysis of Indian foreign policy. Though rightly pointing out the excessive tendency towards conspiracy theories, she appears to believe that any effort to confront the power of advanced capitalist

nations stems from a childlike obstructionism. India's 'refusals to join nuclear nonproliferation regimes' (p. 83) and its questioning of the implications of international environmental agreements for developing nations are dismissed as disruptive. There is little serious effort to probe the complexities surrounding these global issues.

Crossette claims to be exploring her vast topic 'in the spirit of Myrdal's pioneering intellectual journey through Asia' (p. xviii). The series editor wanted the book to 'combine the accuracy of social science research with the charm of literature' (p. xii), invoking the need for an Indian equivalent of Barzini's *The Italians*. Unfortunately, the traces of neither of these muses are to be found in the pages of this uninspiring and unoriginal book.

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Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal

Tai ul-Islam Hashmi

Boulder: Westview Press, 1992

£45.50, ISBN 0-8133-7826-5

In the post-nationalist phase of South Asian historiography, the diversification as well as the multiplication of interpretative studies on the pre-1947 era have deeply enriched the ongoing historical debate. New research also has challenged hitherto reductionist, single-factor explanations of Pakistan which simplistically ascribed the formation of the Muslim state to religion-based separatism. Socio-economic factors, the clash of personalities, tensions between regional ambitions and extraterritorial ideals, the role of various classes, the breakdown of the imperial tradition, changing demography and, most of all, utopianism, intensified the quest for a collective self-definition by all the South Asian communities—themselves criss-crossed by multiple contestations.

Whether Pakistan was envisioned as a bedrock for the reconstruction of *ummah* or was merely a trans-regional arrangement over and above ambitious and mutually conflictive regional identities, it was presented in the 1940s as a superordinate identity exactly the way nationalists like Nehru and Gandhi visualised a co-optive, overarching and absorptive national Indian identity. Pakistan—a new name yet an enduring ideal in the intellectual traditions of South Asian Islam—was similarly meant to be a non-partisan, consensual and synthesising meeting ground for competing localised identities. Its programmatic ambiguity could have been its major asset in carving out a forward-looking, tolerant and co-optive nationalism. Instead, the country has been incessantly bruised by an unending stream of dictators, populous demagogues and rent-seeking detractors.

Depending upon one's own perception, the creation of Pakistan could also be viewed as a partition of the South Asian Muslim community itself, and not just a geographic division of British India, which duly assisted the ultimate communal-cum-territorial consolidation of the Hindu and Sikh communities. Pakistan can also be seen as sovereignty for a major section of the Muslim community—at least in Muslim majority areas—unlike the ultimate choice of being a permanent minority in the perennially charged communalization of a diverse subcontinent. It might not have been the best course available to Indian Muslims, especially those in the 'interior' of the subcontinent yet, retrospectively, Pakistanis or, for that matter, Bangladeshis, cannot be taken as scapegoats for the predicament faced by the former. However, despite Maulana Azad's posthumous lamentations, even Patel, Nehru and Mountbatten, by pushing on Jinnah his 'moth-eaten' Pakistan, could not get rid of the Muslim factor