



The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India

By Siddhartha Deb

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Siddhartha Deb grew up in a remote town in the northeastern hills of India and made his way to the United States via a fellowship at Columbia. Six years after leaving home, he returned as an undercover reporter for *The Guardian*, working at a call center in Delhi in 2004, a time when globalization was fast proceeding and Thomas L. Friedman declared the world flat. Deb's experience interviewing the call-center staff led him to undertake this book and travel throughout the subcontinent.

The Beautiful and the Damned examines India's many contradictions through various individual and extraordinary perspectives. With lyrical and commanding prose, Deb introduces the reader to an unforgettable group of Indians, including a Gatsby-like mogul in Delhi whose hobby is producing big-budget gangster films that no one sees; a wiry, dusty farmer named Gopeti whose village is plagued by suicides and was the epicenter of a riot; and a sad-eyed waitress named Esther who has set aside her dual degrees in biochemistry and botany to serve Coca-Cola to arms dealers at an upscale hotel called Shangri La.

Like no other writer, Deb humanizes the post-globalization experience?its advantages, failures, and absurdities. India is a country where you take a nap and someone has stolen your job, where you buy a BMW but still have to idle for cows crossing your path. A personal, narrative work of journalism and cultural analysis in the same vein as Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family* and V. S. Naipaul's India series, *The Beautiful and the Damned* is an important and incisive new work.

The Beautiful and the Damned is a Publishers Weekly Best Nonfiction title for 2011.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Splendid . . . Similar to F. Scott Fitzgerald . . . Deb works largely within the format of the profile, which allows him to closely inspect the dents made by modern India in his characters' lives. . . There is a nuance to even the direst of Deb's pessimisms--an acknowledgement that India's lives are newly precarious precisely because they could swing either the way of opportunity or the way of ruin.” ?*Samanth Subramanian, The New York Times*

“Siddhartha Deb is a marvelous participatory journalist, a keen observer of contemporary India. In *The Beautiful and the Damned* he dives head-first into the places where change is happening, temporarily inhabiting these evolving, often confusing sub-worlds, talking to those benefiting from (and victimized by) said changes, and explaining in prose both highly personal and sociologically insightful how India's people and culture are coping . . . Much like fellow participatory journalist George Orwell . . . Deb is a distinctly sympathetic firsthand observer of the contradictions between rich and poor . . . Anyone wanting to understand contemporary India's glaring contradictions, its juxtapositions of glittering boomtowns with horrific slums, should read Deb's wonderfully researched and elegantly written account.” ?*Chuck Leddy, Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“[An] incisive new look at life on the subcontinent . . . One of Deb's most stunning achievements is the way he deconstructs India's IT industry. With remarkable clarity, he describes a business dominated by Brahmins (India's ruling caste) in which, contrary to common perception, call center workers struggle to eke out a sustainable living, and where even for those who do succeed there lies at the end of the road little more than an ersatz version of suburbia . . . For those who have never been to India, the book will be an eye-opening read. For those more familiar with the country, it will be essential.” ?*Nitin Das Rai, The Daily*

“This brave book strikes a rare note--as a work of journalism and as an interpretation of India's maladies. *The Beautiful and the Damned* digs beneath the self-congratulatory stories India tell itself--all the better to expose the stories it seeks to repress.” ?*Parul Sehgal, Bookforum*

“This is a brilliant and sensitive book that succeeds in shifting our gaze from the dazzling glass and steel towers of the business park to the collateral damage suffered by people caught in the age-old tensions between economic mirage, constricting cultural tradition and overbearing social expectation.” ?*Stanley Stewart, The Sunday Times*

“In his subtle, sometimes startlingly intelligent narrative, Deb is drawn to the idea of pretence, and to pretenders, of which he--writer, confidant, friend, provincial, global traveller--is one himself . . . In these pages, Deb is quickened by his extraordinary feeling for the texture of lower middle-class life, as well as his unerring sensitivity to the way a country yet again transforms itself.” ?*Amit Chaudhuri, The Guardian*

“A compelling read. The author's experience as a journalist ensures that he hardly wastes a word, his local knowledge gives him depth and empathy, while his status as a novelist seems to protect him from intrusive literary flourishes . . . While computer boffins may be the new Brahmins, many of them are actually the old Brahmins. Such points are generally overlooked by those keen to promote the newness of the new India, and Deb generally offers a shrewder, more humane perspective than most travelogues.” ?*Roderick Matthews, Literary Review*

“Siddhartha Deb has gone under cover to write a hands-on account of India's vigorous capitalism . . . Deb's perception is that starkly unequal social, political and economic conditions have developed in India over the past quarter century. As a first-hand report, this is authentic, assured and absolutely engrossing, acutely pinpointing the aspirational tragic-comic ironies of modern India.” ?*Iain Finlayson, The Times (London)*

“Siddhartha Deb is one of the most distinctive writers to have emerged from South Asia in the last two decades.” ?*PANKAJ MISHRA, author of The Romantics*

About the Author

Siddhartha Deb, who teaches creative writing at the New School, is the author of two novels: *The Point of Return*, which was a 2003 *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, and *An Outline of the Republic*. His reviews and journalism have appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Guardian*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *New Statesman*, *n+1*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

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A phenomenally wealthy Indian who excites hostility and suspicion is an unusual creature, a fish that has managed to muddy the waters it swims in. The glow of admiration lighting up the rich and the successful disperses before it reaches him, hinting that things have gone wrong somewhere. It suggests that beneath the sleek coating of luxury, deep under the sheen of power, there is a failure barely sensed by the man who owns that failure along with his expensive accoutrements. This was Arindam Chaudhuri's situation when I first met him in 2007. He had achieved great wealth and prominence, partly by projecting an image of himself as wealthy and prominent. Yet somewhere along the way he had also created the opposite effect, which – in spite of his best efforts – had given him a reputation as a fraud, scamster and Johnny-come-lately.

We'll come to the question of frauds and scams later, but it is indisputable that Arindam had arrived very quickly. It had taken him just about a decade to build his business empire, but because his rise was so swift and his empire so blurry, it was possible to be quite ignorant of his existence unless one were particularly sensitive to the tremors created by new wealth in India. Indeed, throughout the years of Arindam's meteoric rise, I had been happily oblivious of him, although once I had heard of him, I began to see him everywhere: in the magazines his media division published, flashing their bright colours and inane headlines at me from little news-stands made out of bricks and plastic sheets; in buildings fronted by dark glass where I imagined earnest young men imbibing the ideas of leadership disseminated by Arindam; and on the tiny screen in front of me on a flight from Delhi to Chicago when the film I had chosen for viewing turned out to have been produced by him. A Bombay gangster film, shot on a low budget, with a cast of unknown, modestly paid actors and actresses: was it an accident that the film was called *Mithya*? The word means 'lies'.

Still, I suppose we choose our own entanglements, and when I look back at the time in Delhi that led up to my acquaintance with Arindam, I realize that my meeting with him was inevitable. It was my task that summer to find a rich man as a subject, about the making and spending of money in India. In Delhi, there existed in plain sight some evidence of what such making and spending of money amounted to. I could see it in the new road sweeping from the airport through south Delhi, turning and twisting around office complexes, billboards and a granite-and-glass shopping mall on the foothills of the Delhi Ridge that, when completed, would be the largest mall in Asia. Around this landscape and its promise of Delhi as another Dubai or Singapore, I could see the many not-rich people and aspiring-to-be rich people, masses of them, on foot and on two-wheelers, packed into decrepit buses or squeezed into darting yellow-and-black auto-rickshaws, people quite inconsequential in relation to the world rising around and above them. The beggar children who performed somersaults at traffic lights, the boys displaying menacing moustaches inked on to

their faces, made it easy to tell who the rich were amid this swirling mass. The child acrobats focused their efforts at the Toyota Innova minivans and Mahindra Scorpio SUVs waiting at the crossing, their stunted bodies straining to reach up to the high windows.

I felt that such scenes contained all that could be said about the rich in India, and the people I took out to expensive lunches offered me little more than glosses on the above. Mittal, Ambani, Dabur, Swarovski crystals, gold-plated toilets, stud farms, nightclubs, private aircraft. They sounded boring, unlike Arindam, who seemed a little different, with images and contradictions swirling around him: ponytail, controversy, management guru, bloggers, business school, magazines, Bollywood movies.

‘I’ve spoken to the boss about you,’ Sutanu said. ‘But the boss said, “Why does he want to meet me?”’

Sutanu ran the media division in Arindam’s company. We met at Flames, an ‘Asian Resto-Bar’ up a steep flight of steps with a forlorn statue of Buddha tucked away in the corner, the view from the restaurant opening out to sanitary-goods stores, franchise eating outlets and large cars being squeezed into minuscule spaces by scruffy parking attendants. Sutanu was in his forties, a dark man with thick, clumpy hair parted to one side, a bushy moustache and glasses, his raffish 1960s air complemented by a bright-blue shirt and a red tie patterned with elephants. He was accompanied by Rahul, a studious-looking young man in kurta and jeans who worked at one of the magazines published by the company. Although they couldn’t have been there long, their table gave an impression of a party that had been in progress through the morning and had peaked. It held two packs of Navy Cut cigarettes, a partly empty bottle of Kingfisher beer and a battered smartphone with a black-and-white screen that rang out in insistent drumbeats throughout our conversation. ‘The boss is a great man, and sure, his story is interesting,’ Sutanu said. ‘The question is whether he’ll talk to you.’

From what Sutanu told me that afternoon, Arindam was very much a man of the times. He had started out in 1996 with a lone business school called the Indian Institute of Planning and Management. Founded by Arindam’s father, it had been – Sutanu said dismissively – a small, run-of-the-mill place located on the outskirts of Delhi. But Arindam had expanded it into nine branches in most of the major Indian cities, and he was now going international. He had an institute in Dubai, had tied up with a management school in Belgium with campuses in Brussels and Antwerp, was opening an institute in London by the end of the year, and would have another one in the United States, in an old factory building in Pennsylvania. And that was just the management institute. Arindam’s company, Planman, had a media division that included a newsweekly, *The Sunday Indian*, ‘perhaps the only magazine in the world with thirteen editions’. There were three business magazines, a software company, a consulting division that managed the ‘HR component of multinationals’, and a small outsourcing company. The outsourcing company was small only because it was new, but it already did the entire online content of the *Guardian* as well as the proofreading and copy-editing of the *Daily Mail*.

‘There’s also a film division, and he’s produced a major Bollywood blockbuster,’ Sutanu said.

‘It was meant to be a blockbuster,’ Rahul said quietly. ‘But it flopped.’

‘Yeah, yeah, no big deal,’ Sutanu said. ‘He’s on other blockbuster projects. He’s a man of ideas. So sometimes they flop.’ He lit a cigarette and waved it around, the rings on his hand flashing. ‘What he’s doing, he’s using intellectual capital to make his money. But people don’t get that and because he’s been bad-mouthed so much, he’s become suspicious. He’s been burned by the media. You know, cynical hacks they are. They make up stories that he’s a fraud. A Johnny-come-lately. Everyone asks, “Yaar, but where does all that money come from?”’

There was a moment of silence as we contemplated this question.

‘They don’t ask these things of other businessmen,’ Sutanu continued. ‘That’s because when the mainstream media does these negative stories on him, just hatchet jobs you know, they’re serving the interests of the big industrialists. The industrialists don’t like him because our magazines have done critical stories on them. The government doesn’t like him and harasses him all the time. They say, “You can’t use the word ‘Indian’ in the name of your management school because we don’t recognize your school.” That it’s forbidden in the constitution to use “Indian” in the name of an educational institution unless it’s been approved by the government. Something like that. They send us a letter every six months about this. Then, the elite types are after him. The Doon School, St Stephen’s, Indian Institute of Management people. There were these bloggers – a *Business Today* journalist and a man who worked for IBM – who started writing silly stuff about him, saying that the institute doesn’t give every student a laptop as promised in the advertisements. You want to know how he makes money? It’s simple. There are two thousand students who pay seven lakhs¹ each. The operating costs are low – you know how much teachers get paid in India. So the money gets spun off into other businesses.’

We ate hot and sour soup and drank more beer, our conversation widening out into discussions about careers, lives and the unforgiving city of Delhi. Rahul, who had been a television journalist, told us a story about covering the war in Iraq and being arrested by Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard while crossing over the border from Jordan.

When it was time to depart, I felt reluctant to break up the drunken afternoon bonhomie. Nevertheless, I asked, ‘When do I get to meet Arindam Chaudhuri?’

‘The good thing about the boss is that he’s a yes or no sort of person,’ Sutanu replied. ‘You’ll find out in a couple of days whether he wants to meet you.’

The couple of days stretched into a week. Now that my interest in Arindam had grown, it was hard to miss his presence. Every newspaper and magazine I came across carried a full-page advertisement for the management school, with Arindam’s photograph displayed prominently in the ads. It was the face of the new India caught in close-up view. His hair was swept back in a ponytail, dark and gleaming against a pale, smooth face, his designer glasses accentuating his youthfulness. He wore a blue suit in the picture, and his teeth were exposed in the kind of bright, white smile I associated with American businessmen and evangelists. But instead of looking directly at the reader, as businessmen and evangelists tend to do to assure people of their trustworthiness, Arindam was gazing at a distant horizon, as if along with the business he was promoting, there was some other elusive goal on his mind.

Beneath the picture, there was information about the Indian Institute of Planning and Management, with nine campuses in seven cities that encircled the Indian subcontinent and left vacant only a small stretch of unconquered territory in the east. There were few details about the programme or admission requirements, but there were many small, inviting photographs of the Delhi campus: a swimming pool, a computer lab, a library, a snooker table, Indian men in suits and a blonde woman. Around these pictures, in text that exploded into a fi reworks display of italics, exclamation marks and capital letters, were the perks given to students: ‘Free Study Tour to Europe etc. for 21 Days’, ‘World Placements’ and ‘Free Laptops for All’. Stitching these disparate elements together was a slogan. ‘Dare to Think Beyond the IIMs’, it said, referring to the elite, state-subsidized business schools, and managing to sound promising, admonishing and mysterious at the same time.

I kept pestering Sutanu, calling and text-messaging him. Then it was done, an appointment made, and I

entered the wonderland to meet Arindam Chaudhuri, the man in the picture, the management guru, the media magnate, the business school entrepreneur, the film producer, the owner of IT and outsourcing companies, to which we should add his claims of being a noted economist and author of the 'all-time best-sellers' *The Great Indian Dream* and *Count Your Chickens Before They Hatch*.

Users Review

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