

## Many Eyesores and Few Eye Candies: Wandering in the ‘Real’ India

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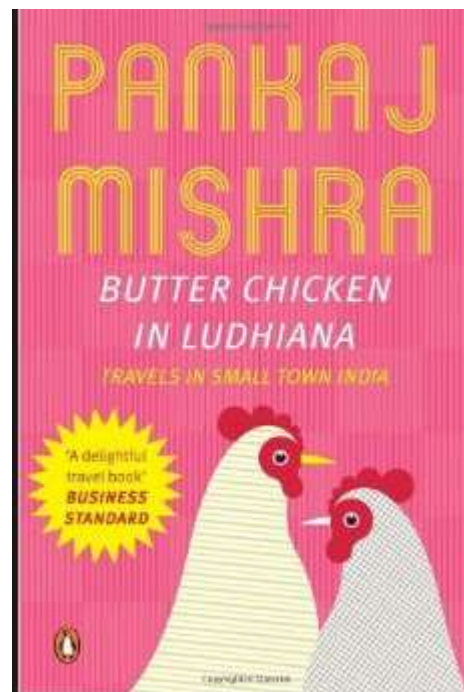
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In 1794, when William Blake was in full bloom, first ever book in English was out by an Indian from Bihar. *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* not only inaugurated Indian literature in English but also, in guise of letters to a fictional friend, the much-ignored genre of travel literature. What Dean Mahomet began was carried forward haltingly — mostly by outsiders wooed by India’s legendary and time-worn diversity. Many were the British Empire’s foot-soldiers and many were curious explorers; but the luminous stars of this genre were more than a century away.

V. S. Naipaul wrote three intense books on India and they renewed and elevated the interest in India. For any student of literature these three books might prove an experience that refuses to fade from memory: In fact, one can say that these books are ‘must-reads’. To see India as Naipaul did — a dark place under layers after layers of wretchedness in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), a history of subjugations that made it *A Wounded Civilization* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) with hints of hopes, is a jolting education. The grimness of the experience may be relieved by reading another classic of travel literature, i.e. *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975) which is a rambunctious account of Paul Theroux on many trains through Asia—much of which is on India’s wide-bogeyed (a quality Theroux liked much) trains.

As knowledge about a country is a prerequisite for its exploitation, one feature of colonialism was an almost perverse interest of these outsiders in India. Cartography and census of people as well as of flora and fauna are handed down to us from them. Some of distinguished personae such as Max Weber, Mark Twain, E.M. Forster and Claude Lévi-Strauss, had a stint in India. Our own writers in English were mostly trained into a western way of reading India. They were pioneers, if not all elites, talking with a small indigenous population and a natural bent towards western readers and their approvals. This is understandable because these writers’ fate was dependent upon their reception in English speaking world. This precarious



position of initial Indian writers in English somehow reduced their will to enter into nuanced and unbounded complexities of Indian hinterlands.

Pankaj Mishra's *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* is a home-bred minor classic and an exception because it not only contributed to the small shelf of travel literature but also entered barely explored territories. It was published in 1995 when Mishra was merely 26, and for this reason alone the book may endear and amaze many readers. The book's subtitle declares that it is about *Travels in Small Town India*. Starting from Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, Mishra travels through nearly twenty places across India. He is like an eager apprentice, always on his mental toes, with pen and notebook at hand. His master is the ongoing scene and situation. "To see what is in front of one's nose," George Orwell once wrote, "needs a constant struggle." The challenge is against memory which is a scarce resource. What is lodged ahead of us has to be noted, registered—and this is the challenge that Mishra takes up in this book.

The achievement of the book partly lies in its camera-eye that is constantly at work—neither at a monotonous pace, nor filled with mushy nature descriptions, but at the nub of the panorama with dogged attention to details. That is why this is an energetic and restless but never boring book. Consider this extract which is part of a conversation between Mr. Mehrotra (a captain in the army), a computer engineer from Bangalore, and a contractor from Warangal. They are discussing Kashmir in a railway compartment and Mishra, a fellow traveller, doesn't miss his beat and captures all:

'We can be more tough but there is too much political pressure. It is always there, otherwise the army can set Kashmir right in one month if politicians give us free hand,' he [Mr. Mehrotra] said.

This brought him to the problem of human rights.

'I am very religious, I go to temple very regularly and I think human rights is fine. But when it comes to the unity and integrity of the country, human rights are no consideration. I don't care. The country is more important than human rights,' he declared.

The contractor from Warangal agreed with him. 'Human rights, human rights, people are talking bloody nonsense! What is human rights when there is terrorism from Pakistan side?!

He went on to say that Hindus should migrate in large numbers to Kashmir so as to turn the Muslims there into a minority.

Mr. Mehrotra called upon the computer engineer, who had merely listened so far, to express his views on the subject.

The computer engineer thought for some time, and then softly suggested that perhaps the Kashmiris should be allowed to decide their future.

Dismay appeared on Mr. Mehrotra's face. But it was the contractor from Warangal who spoke first.

'Sir, may I know your good name?' He abruptly demanded of the computer engineer, bringing his face forward, his mouth drawn into an expectant snarl. (183-84)

This and many similar encounters of Mishra with complete strangers lend this book a thought-provoking edge. But its entertainment value is also unwavering through many anecdotes that people share with Mishra. Here is a favourite and delectable one: a well known doctor's car was

stolen at gunpoint in Patna in Bihar. He reported the case to a senior police officer but nothing came out of it. Rather the officer, who was a friend of the doctor, directed him to an influential minister. The doctor went to meet the minister, and the latter lamented the state of affairs and then took him to a yard full of cars asked the doctor if his was there. It was, of course, there. The minister, ignoring the visibly thankful doctor, said, "*Ab aisa hai doctor sahib, kuch compromise-vompromise kar lijiye*. Now look here, doctor sahib, the best solution would be a compromise" (7). The doctor was clueless, so must be the reader as Mishra himself was. The minister and the doctor finally *vompromised* at 1.5 lakh rupees. There was no other way for the doctor even he if he had chosen to ignore and buy another car in almost same amount as it would be stolen again and he will be back in this yard only to deal with the amount upped in each sojourn.

There is a lot like this in *Butter Chicken*: Mishra being sized up as a groom by the Sharmas of Ambala where the bride-in-waiting and her sister (who watch, with family, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and use imported Camay soap) are compared with two tubs of Processed Amul Cheese; Osho-reading Rajendra of Hapur arduously coming to terms with his homosexuality and getting settled as a married farmer; Mr. Bhatt of Shimoga voluntarily donating 195 of his 200 acres to the peasant movement started by Gopal Gowda of the socialist party; Munna escaping from school because he was brutally beaten by his teacher for reasons that lie beyond Munna and the classroom.

There are unsentimental and unmitigated portraits of people, places and situations that we encounter commonly enough to overlook their significance. Chic entropy of Bangalore is as well captured as the metamorphosis of Benares into a molester's paradise. Caste figures here in its gory rot, but so does the love for art and learning as brought out in a delightful discussion that the author has with an unlikely fan of Thomas Mann in Trichur. There are moments of subdued horror as when a young teenager reveals his murderous intent; but there are also loud unseemly guffaws on the 'f-words' that Mishra hears and conversations he overhears and shares them with us without being coy. And then there is acute resignation bordering on pity when a lean revolutionary man in Bihar gorges on the offered food.

Mostly Mishra is a mere observer but at times, he enters the scene and participates. For instance, when Mr. Chenny, Head of the Department of English at Kuvempu University near Shimoga, asked Mishra to address the students of English. Mishra chose to speak on "the problems of teaching English in a post-colonial setting" (195). The zones of ease for shy students leaned more towards *Mills and Boon* and Barbara Cartland (who wrote 700 books), but it surprised Mishra that the library in the university housed many works of Balzac and Zola. At the end of that brief hour, and just before when Mishra was rescued by Mr. Chenny from further embarrassing moments in front of a silent crowd, Mishra "pretended to find something of great interest in a tiny wedge on the table" (197).

What works of literature do is to bring us back to an important form of self-awareness as readers and as members of identity groups. This awareness is about necessary distancing from our commonly-held opinions pickled from media, fellow friends and our own narrow experiences. *Butter Chicken* does that successfully and entertainingly.

But it has its share of flaws too. Mishra does not look nice when he introduces himself as hailing from Delhi where he spent merely a transit phase of student days. His claim of Indian food as over-cooked also seems inauthentic as he has never been out of India at the time of writing this book. His tone in the book which he identifies as of "mordant irony" is inspired from an American sociological work *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1891) by Thorstein Veblen ("Afterword" 271); but this claim by Mishra is hard to defend. Some times the translations seem obtrusive to the pace of

the book because most Indian readers do not need those translations. It also shows that a distant reader hovered in the mind of Mishra when he wrote the book.

However, the book captures attitudes that have become bloated mid-market fruits (religious bigotry) or have shrunk from the public spaces (a penchant for serious ideas or literature). It also registers some of the energies, aspirations and continuing successes and failures of politically fragmented peoples that were unleashed by opened economy of early nineties in India. No single work of literature can do justice to the immensity of India but *Butter Chicken*, despite ignoring many parts of the magically myriad country like north-east and west coast, is a fairly laudable attempt. And hence, deserves to come out of the closet—often, more often.

Mishra, Pankaj. *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*. London: Picador, 2006. Print.

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