



Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India

Pankaj Mishra

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Based on the author's recent travel experiences in some small towns in India.

Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India Details

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From Reader Review Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India for online ebook

Pallavi Kamat says

Could have done without the 'Hungry India, Poor India' narrative. But there are some poignant & interesting moments in the book as well. Small-town India had huge aspirations 20 years back! It will be interesting to revisit these towns now & see the progress there.

Need to put up a detailed review later!

Nikhil says

This book is an exploration of a rising middle class in 1990s India by a young man insecure in his intellectual and cultural beliefs. The people he meets, nearly all fascists who yearn to prove they are no longer poor or 'backwards' by brutalizing more marginalized populations, are reprehensible. Reviewers who fault him for condemning them should examine why they find these figures sympathetic. Mishra's condemnatory portrait of these people is only more prescient today, where the self-same individuals have delivered a pseudo-religious fascist party to power that condones mob violence against SC, ST, and Muslim populations. In the afterword, Mishra links his work to Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class and comments that the new petit bourgeoisie/middle-classes created by the Second Industrial Revolution were similarly fascistic in tendency (I agree). I am curious as to why this rising class repeatedly turns to authoritarianism and fascism in their political views. It is more than simply an aversion to economic redistribution --- the 15 year old Jain youth (with no idea of Jainism) who is materially secure in life and faces no economic competition from Muslims nonetheless wishes their extermination --- as desiring less redistributive taxes does not require an embrace of genocide.

The book is irritating when the narrator acts to prove his intellectual superiority to the people around him (to be fair, Mishra acknowledges this in the afterword). For example, the narrator's repeated disbelief that people would ask him if Iris Murdoch was married to Rupert Murdoch. Yes, this is an ignorant question; no this does not convey a lack of culture on the part of the questioner. Instead, Mishra should have interrogated how the individuals asking the question were incapable of imagining women as something other than their roles in relation to men. Similarly, his condemnation of romance novels, pulp novels, and Bollywood movies/songs grow wearisome. He fails to understand how even within popular genres it is possible to create subversive and challenging narratives. Indeed, this is artistically more challenging than creating the Platonic ideal of a Marxist novel that no one reads.

Finally, his discussion of sexual harassment in Benares is bizarre and incorrect. His amazement that women face sexual violence in South Asia reflects a deliberate act of ignorance by men to avoid confronting structures of power they are complicit in. Equally bizarre is his decision to center white European/American women at the center of his discussion of this violence, women who articulate several incorrect myths about sexual violence. For example, their idea that they, as white blonde women, face worse sexual violence in South Asia than South Asian women. We know this is false; survey evidence confirms that well-over 75% of married Indian women aged 15--49 have been raped at least once in their lifetime. As is true of sexual violence everywhere, this violence is most-often within household, either by intimate partners or by other male family members. While specific Indian women these women know (i.e., wealthy, educated ones, who

only go in public with a male escort) may face less harassment than them, this is certainly not true of the Indian women who are household help or landless agricultural workers. He then engages in a discussion of sexual violence by strangers in the US vs India. Again, the vast majority of sexual violence in both countries occurs within household or by perpetrators that are known by survivors. The fixation societies have with sexual violence as performed by strangers, or members outside the community, frequently "Others", obscures what sexual violence actually is and allows the society to absolve itself of its own responsibility and complicity in this phenomenon. Mishra's discussion provides no insight into sexual violence in India; he either needed to do more research or remove this from the text.

Manu says

If one were to go by the title, Pankaj Mishra is hardly the person who can be trusted to write about the "national bird of khalistan", after all he's a complete vegetarian, but then this book is about 'travels in small town India'. From Kanyakumari and Kottayam to Ambala and Murshidabad and Gaya to Mandi and Udaipur and many many more small towns across the length and breadth of India, this is quite a wonderful account of a transforming India..and Indians.

While there is an unmistakable cynicism that runs through many accounts, it does not really take away much from the conversations with a wide array of people - their fears, their hopes and aspirations, and how they cope with the changes around them. Television viewing habits, consumerism, big dreams, all figure as a framework for the author to show the 'progress' that Indians seem to be making as far as lifestyles go.

'Progress', because the author doesn't seem to be entirely pleased with these changes, and the effects on existing ways of life, but since we also see them through the eyes of the people the author meets, the book manages to retain some objectivity.

While some would say there is an aimlessness to the travels, I'd say that despite the differences in locales and attitudes, there is a common thread that runs through the book - of humans, their reactions to change, and how in many ways, a lot of things remain unchanged, despite what the superficial would indicate.

The book worked for me in many ways - I could find glimpses of 'The Romantics' (a work of fiction from the same author, which happens to be a favourite) as his travels take him to Banaras. It also brought about some nostalgia, as it is set in the early 90s, and the changes that the author talks about are something that anyone in their teens (or even older) during that time, can identify with. These, and the wry humour - especially the part where he's mistaken for a potential groom by Mr.Sharma in Ambala - that surfaces occasionally, took it many notches above a general travel book..

Aravind P says

A decent book. Pankaj Mishra is a very hygiene conscious middle class chap, so as expected, it had all those commentary on overflowing gutters, unclean surroundings and stuffs like that. It was fine but started annoying when he kept repeating the same stuff as he moved around the country.

Keeping that out, the book was a nice travelogue. It was not about places to visit or sights to see. But his own experiences while traveling around the country and meeting people with various ideologies, frustrations and ambitions. Those were the unique things that attracted me in this book. His writings were also very smooth and easy, with sufficient dose of cynicism, humor and awe.

Radhika says

The book is set in the 1990s India, which is very different from 2013 when I read it. It made me nostalgic...not to mention thankful about the things that have changed for the better in India in the past 20 years. Overall, an entertaining read, but not the best from this author. Read this book after I read Pankaj Mishra's 'From the ruins of Empire'- which I absolutely loved!.

Anders says

Imagine Temptations of the West except devoid of any sort of deeper observations. In this disappointing first novel, Mishra travels around small-town India making sardonic observations behind the backs of everyone he meets. I thought it was a boon to find this out-of-print novel for \$2 in a tiny used book-store in Dhaka but now I don't consider myself so lucky. It's just so easy to pass judgments on the stagnant upper classes and humorously backwards lower classes in India, a book like this makes you realize that it's too easy. Still, Mishra had to start somewhere. There's always Temptations of the West.

Vineeth Kartha says

When I first saw this book it appeared to be just another Indian novel. But then the description on the back cover termed it as a travelogue. The author takes us on an all India tour, showing the realities that exists in the country, this is not a book on the tourist destinations of India but about the harsh, bitter and some times the sweet side of modern India. The author has travelled the breadth and depth of the country, sometimes throwing in pieces of history and culture about a place, a person or about an incident.

Hardeep says

This was a great read... The author travels "off the beaten path" with everyday people and writes about his conversations with them. Marvellous portrayal of traveling in India, the way the locals do!

Dayanand Prabhu says

This is not a travel book, This is a book where Mishraji goes to various places and expresses disgust at the local people and passes condescending judgment. In the entire book never even for once has the author expressed any curiosity for the places he is visiting, instead the attitude is as if he is punished. He either eavesdrops on people or befriends only to shamelessly bad mouth them.

Yigal Zur says

funny and full with color

S.Ach says

Many authors have written about their experiences and recounted their weird encounters while travelling through the potholed-road and narrow lanes of India. To some, India provides a culture shock. To some others, it provides a kaleidoscopic enriching view of life. Some find traces of India's spiritual heritage in people's lifestyle. Others discover in them sheer hypocrisy and yearning for modern luxuries despite adhering to the medieval mindset. Some of Mark Tully, VS Naipul, William Dalrymple's books would be best-in-class in this category. Most of these travelogues are bit satirical, or at least those seem so as it's for us like checking your caricatured-self in the mirror and laughing at it.

But never have I read something so demeaning to everything that is associated with our multi-lingual, multi-cultural multi-faceted country. Being critical is one thing, but being condescendingly disdainful is just asking from the reader nothing other than disgust. Of course, the face of 'the wounded civilization' after 'a million mutinies' is mutilated and ugly. But does it deserve so much scorn and scoff? What is completely missing from this narrative is empathy. This book reads more like a incessant rant of 20-something arrogant fellow who places himself above everyone else on the virtue of having read some more books and possessing the ability to throw in western philosophers and thinkers' names every now and then. Clearly, Pankaj Mishra's 20-something self had that holier-than-thou attitude that begot so much contempt for his compatriots.

I would have written Pankaj Mishra off, had I not read his later books 'The Romantics' and 'Temptations of the West'. Though these two books are not masterpieces in themselves, but have definite signs of a good critical mind and deep observation qualities.

I am glad that the realization creeps in and Mishra admits it in the afterward he wrote after 10 years of 'success' of the book. ('success' is definitely not the measure of literary quality of a book, right?)

"But I always felt slightly embarrassed by the book. For, as I continued to write, I began to find my own voice, and to see the need for intellectual and existential self-reckoning in much of what I wrote. *Butter Chicken* reminded me too much of my younger, callow, unresolved self which had assumed position of intellectual and moral authority without quite earning the always provisional right to them."

I sincerely hope this is Mishra's worst book, as I am keen to read his other books.

Preeti says

I picked up Pankaj Mishra's 'Butter Chicken in Ludhiana' again which I had earlier tossed aside after reading just 10 pages. Read 5 more pages and disgusted to see how author hates every single thing about India. Paid by a publisher to write a travel book when he was in his early 20s, he is supposedly writing about his travels through small town India but all he is doing is pissing on anything and everything Indian and seems to be in

awe of anything/everything foreign! What a waste...I want my money back!!

Anurag says

Mishra's first book is filled with sardonic humor and is mordantly critical of India of the time but it is also filled with a subtle humor - not all of which was probably intended. Reading his first book after having seen him evolved into a rather academically savvy writer gives you a hint of his own struggles in the changing India. He certainly has some anger and a lot of scoffery to offer to the neo-rich money-grabbing classes of India but he is also found admitting, rather inadvertently, a sort of hypocrisy in his own unwarranted love for the West. This adds that subtle humor to the book - a kind that he is somewhat embarrassed about in the afterword (written in 2006).

The book is deeply informative, beautifully written and makes a great travelogue of the small town India of the 80s. Deconstructing the perceived Indian obsession with sex, Mishra goes on to record the way small town India had reacted to the new temptations of globalization- often changing itself for the worse. Having lived a rather content life surrounded by books in the pre-globalization India, Mishra witnesses a fundamental change at the hour of globalization. Any of those who had lived in that time know of that simple, content and quiet life which existed before globalization - a life which Mishra laments for and writes beautifully about.

However, he also possesses a persistent scorn for the bad English spoken by everyday Indians. His Dickensian accounts of small town poverty are touching but they also exhibit a an Anglophilic elitism of the past generations. His worry for lower economic classes is thus often rendered hollow by such contempt.

Instead of taking a side however, Mishra sets himself to explore this conflict. On one hand he feels a deep sense of ignorance in the wider world due to his small town upbringing but on the other he finds his small-town values at war with the commercial expansionism of the more civilized world. His romance with the left makes him see all symbols of prosperity as encroaching into the simple life of India's ancient order. He finds modern temples hideous and takes pleasure in the quiet of the colonial architecture and vast spaces of nature. Yet somehow the elitist distance from India that he maintains throughout the book has only helped him in commenting on the changes he witnessed. The conflict has indeed been an essential component of the Indian experience - his writing often focusing on the worst of both worlds and making the book a great case-study for countries whose ancient social orders hadn't been ready for the libertarian ideas of globalization.

Mishra goes on to conclude that through a colonial experience, the contempt for one's own people has been institutionalized in India. Education or "westernization" in general, seems a way to overcome one's circumstances often by realizing this contempt for one's own kind. Mishra is seen embracing this depressing view of the world - a sort of withdrawal caused by fall of socialist ideals and a descent into overpopulated poverty, into mindless aggression, revengeful politics and one's own helplessness to all of it. This is indeed a depressing and unsettling view of modern India - the reason why some find his book unfairly critical. But it is through realizing and overcoming such problems that Mishra has become a better writer - and probably deserves to be forgiven for the few immaturities in his early 20s.

Jyothykumar says

Superb stuff! Mishra's 'nook & cranny' detail amazes me. I wish I could rival his eye for detailed observation & be able to translate it to prose!! Excellent English!!

Mahak says

Could easily be the only unpretentious Indian writer I've ever read.
I strongly recommend this book to everyone from my generation.
