**Books & Arts**

**Imagining a New India**

**Robin Jeffrey**

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Robin Jeffrey reviews Anand Giridharadas's vivid new account of a nation in transition

Right:

Shop sign in Mumbai. Meena Kadri/Flickr

India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking

By Anand Giridharadas | *Black Inc.* | $32.95

I THOUGHT I wouldn’t like this book. “Another piece of Indo-Anglian writing,” I thought, “in which a middle-class, higher-caste author describes the agonies of being diasporic.” I was wrong.

Anand Giridharadas does agonise over being an American with Indian roots and connections. But he does it with art and insight. You feel he has bled to write this book. There’s a revealing tribute to his agent, who took on the author “when this was a book about democracy.” The manuscript must have changed a lot; it isn’t about democracy now, not in the way that a political scientist would understand it. It is about people, including the author, and the way in which he and we might try to understand a dramatically changing India through scrutiny of some very different lives.

Giridharadas uses a clever stylistic device to turn his journalistic experience to account. He builds the book around six chapters – Dreams, Ambition, Pride, Anger, Love and Freedom. Focusing on personal stories, each chapter helps us visualise the monumental changes that are eating holes in the social straitjackets that bound old India.

The best chapter is “Ambition.” Giridharadas goes to Umred, a town located slap-bang in the middle of India. He goes there to write about a riot, but he meets a young man called Ravindra who is organising Umred’s Mr and Miss Personality Contest. To Giridharadas, this seems bizarre – like someone organising Back of Bourke Idol or Woop Woop Talent Quest. But Ravindra brings off an event, modelled on television programs, that proves immensely popular with young people in and around the small town. Giridharadas is fascinated because this is not the way rural India worked in
the old days when villagers, even high-caste ones, did not travel much, know much about the outside world or mingle freely on public platforms.

Ravindra comes from a low-caste family of farm labourers – oil-pressers once upon a time – ranking only a little above untouchables. He went barefoot till he reached Year 9 in school. Giridharadas tells the story of Ravindra’s exposure to television – “on TV you see the things of world-class standard” – his enrolment in English classes, his love of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, his commitment to self-improvement and entrepreneurship, and his unsuccessful romance. When the book leaves him, he has become manager of the Indian national rollerskating team. (Did you know India had a national rollerskating team? Neither did I. But, as they say, check out the website.)

Ravindra’s story makes the changes of the last twenty years real and vivid, and shows us how remarkable they’ve been. Giridharadas juxtaposes Ravindra’s story with the life of his maternal grandfather – a cosmopolitan from a merchant caste in Punjab who became a top executive with Hindustan Lever, one of India’s grand old companies. This grandfather, who reads the newspapers every morning, writes letters to politicians and knows how to dine with a fish knife, carries a lot of the book. His story is also set against that of the Ambani family, India’s ultimate nouveau riche family – ruthless, rule-less, vulgar and immensely wealthy and successful. Ravindra aspires to it; Giridharadas’s grandfather loathes it.

Giridharadas writes of Ravindra with delicacy, respect and curiosity. The people who populate the other outstanding chapter get a rougher ride. In ”Freedom,” the protagonists are a joint family (we’d called it an extended family) of Punjabi merchants in Ludhiana. It’s a town that has already given the world some cruel and witty portraits of petit bourgeois life in Pankaj Mishra’s *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* (1995). (What is it about Punjab state’s largest city that produces such Dickensian characters? Could it be its commitment to commerce? Wikipedia carries a long, “incomplete” list of Ludhiana’s shopping malls.)

The family whom Giridharadas visits lives in a large house as a joint family should. But it has an upstairs portion (clean, furnished, modern and in good repair) and a downstairs portion (none of the above). Upstairs Chacha (uncle) is trying to get ahead as a go-go twenty-first-century businessman with all the material goods that go with it. Downstairs Chacha is disorganised, old-fashioned – and constantly entreating Giridharadas to join him for “whiskeychickenmutton,” three big no-noes for a good caste Hindu and therefore all the more deliciously naughty.

Giridharadas does a fine job making me interested in Downstairs Chacha; but you have to wonder how Downstairs Chacha will feel when somebody points out to him – as surely they will – that someone to whom he opened his house portrayed him as a clown.

This raises another aspect of the book. In spite of his name, Giridharadas is an American, raised in Cleveland (what did they call him at school?). He certainly visited India regularly during his childhood, and went to Mumbai to work after university. Later, he became a correspondent for the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

Some Indian reviewers have given the book a snippy reception, so snippy that Giridharadas devoted his 26–27 February 2011 *IHT* column to the criticism – “Who is this foreigner to tell us about India?” –
he received on a recent Indian book tour. To me, the answer to that question is that a book must be judged on what it says, not whom it’s by, and what Giridharadas says, he says well. He writes cleanly and thoughtfully, and the reader shares his struggle to make sense of what India was for his parents and grandparents and what it is becoming today.

The book’s other chapters are “Pride” (the Ambani family and Giridharadas’s maternal grandfather), “Anger” (a Maoist leader of southeastern India) and “Love” (the divorce courts of Mumbai and Giridharadas’s paternal grandmother). All three chapters grow out of Giridharadas’s fox-terrier, shoe-leather reporting. The first two tell stories that are fairly well known, but the last is enterprising, original and insightful. It revolves around his grandmother’s account of her marriage in 1942, played off against Giridharadas’s experiences with people at the Mumbai divorce courts.

This neatly executed book is artful, entertaining, insightful and humble. It concludes with Ravindra, the entertainment and rollerskating impresario, who stands for so much of the social upheaval that Giridharadas tries to understand. For Ravindra, unlike any of his forebears, “destiny is in the mind,” Giridharadas concludes – “you must imagine, not know, your place.” It’s not your dharma or your karma but your drive that determines your destiny. Tens of millions of young Indians now share such attitudes, attitudes that would have seemed strange, perhaps unthinkable, to their grandparents.

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