

India's "White Tiger"

Many Indians, it appears, find it very difficult to accept that their country is still part of the third world



DINESH WAGLE

In an interview with last week's *Tehelka* magazine, leading Indian sociologist Andre Beteille mentioned the hotel that came under terrorist attack earlier this month and said: "The Taj Mahal Hotel is, of course, a symbol, but whose?"

Of the elites of India. N. Kunju, provided further explanation in a letter to *Outlook* magazine last week: "All this disproportionately loud noise on the Bombay terror attack is because the affected come chiefly from the elite. The victims were people who could afford Rs. 10,000 for room rent and a few thousand on dinner. If this were a terrorist attack in which more people were killed at a religious place like Varanasi or Ajmer, the whole incident would have been written off in a couple of columns."

These two comments in two different magazines hint at a serious debate and division in Indian society that Aravind Adiga has highlighted in his novel *The White Tiger*. Satisfactory economic growth and relative success in the information technology industry has increased the buying capacity of many city dwellers. A section of mainstream media and politics have termed that improvement as the rise of India. But India isn't completely shining as some have been claiming in the past several years. The rays of its partial shine haven't reached the poor around the country. Millions of villagers and many others from cities themselves haven't been covered by that 'rise'. Those people still live in 'darkness', a word widely used by Adiga in his book.

The White Tiger, which received the prestigious Man Booker Prize a few weeks ago, is the story of a son of the Darkness. The book chronicles the struggle of Balram Halwai, a driver who takes a journey from Darkness to the Light. Born in the heartland of poverty, our neighboring Indian state of Bihar (or Darkness), he finds a job of driving a rich man's car. He kills the owner and goes to the southern city of Bangalore (or Light), the center of Indian affluence. Halwai who escapes from the torturous environment of feudal landlords to start his own business takes out some time one night to begin a letter to Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Those letters, written in the span of seven nights, make up the book. Adiga tells from the perspective of the main character -- the servant/driver -- and that makes the book, a volume of pain and misery, very interesting to read.

The *White Tiger* is a rare animal. After being impressed by the talent of Halwai in a surprise test in the classroom of an improvised school in Darkness, a teacher gives him the name *White Tiger*. It's an irony that even though the white tiger, the animal, is rare, people like Halwai who live in indescribable poverty are in the millions in India.

The first intention of any prize is to recognize the talent and appreciate the contribution of the recipient. But prizes like the Booker, in addition to that, also help propel the sales of the book by bringing them into the limelight. I first heard about the book when the news of the announcement of this year's booker winner emerged. The book became the topic of discussion among us for several days. Based on the

reviews and interviews of the author that we read on the web, my friends and I spent several hours in *chiya-guff* in the canteen. News reports had suggested the writer once worked with *Time Magazine* so we tried to recall stories with that byline. Someone said that Adiga had interned in the *Post* in the early 90s. Journalists are particularly interested in the books written by one of them. You never know when you might write a book of your own. Several Nepali journalists have written both fiction and non-fiction in recent years and at least one book has received the highest literary prize of Nepal.

I had to come to New Delhi to do journalism in India soon after the Booker announcement. The book, naturally, became the number one in my list of books that I wanted to buy. How can I live in India, I thought, without reading the story of India written by a journalist? I bought the book within few days of my arrival in a congested book shop in Connaught Place that apparently is the centre of affluence in New Delhi.

It took me some time to finish the first chapter but that is not because the story wasn't interesting. Other things were in priority as I was trying to adjust myself to the new place. When I started reading aiming to finish the book, the pages started to turn automatically. The best thing about stories by journalists is that you get the feel of reporting in them. I felt I was not reading a novel but a *Time Magazine* cover story by Adiga.

To look for the reflection of reality in a work of fiction is a paradox. But a reader can't resist comparing real life with what is in the work of fiction. On the other hand, writers of fiction also do research of all sorts to bring their fiction as near to reality as they possibly can. I felt that Adiga has wonderfully portrayed the Indian reality. But not all were impressed. Indian writer Amitava Kumar who was born and raised in Bihar has thrashed the book in reviews in *Boston Review* and *The Hindu* saying that the story is unauthentic, some descriptions in the book are far from reality and the representation of ordinary Bihar people is 'offensive'. Surely not all can agree on the way a book is written or on the issues that are raised in it.

Indians are hungry for progress and they often take more pride than necessary in what they have achieved so far. Whenever someone tells them "Your country is in the third world" they instantly jump into defensive mode. A month ago the Australian cricketer Matthew Hayden indirectly blamed poor ground conditions and excessive delays during the matches "that happen in third world countries" for his team's 2-0 defeat in the series. Rajiv Shukla, an official with the Indian Cricket Board said: "A player of his stature should not have made the comment. If slow-over rate is your habit, why blame India for that and call India third world?"

It's a reality that India is a third world country. Just because a sportsman from Australia, a first world country, doesn't call it so won't make India part of the first world. But many Indians, it appears, find it very difficult to accept that fact. Aravind Adiga, who was born in Madras and has subsequently lived in India, Australia, the US, the UK (and currently in Mumbai) has accepted, in *The White Tiger*, this without any difficulties.

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Peace is a question of will

Excerpt from the Nobel lecture by Martti Ahtisaari, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Oslo, 10 December 2008



MARTTI AHTISAARI

I feel both humility and gratitude at receiving this year's Nobel Peace Prize. It is the greatest recognition anybody working in this field can be given.

What I am feeling now can only be compared with the joy I have felt when seeing the changes that peace has brought to the lives of people. When people, who have endured wars and crises, begin to build their lives in an atmosphere of peace - When faith in the future returns.

I too was a child affected by a war. I was only two years old when, as a result of an agreement on spheres of interest between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, war broke out, forcing my family to leave soon thereafter the town of Viipuri. Like several hundred thousand fellow Karelians, we became refugees in our own country as great power politics caused the borders of Finland to be redrawn and left my home town as part of the Soviet Union. This childhood experience contributed to my commitment to working on the resolution of conflicts.

Mediators do not choose the conflicts they became involved in but the parties to the conflict choose the mediator. Their participation as intermediaries is based on the trust of all the conflicting parties. The task of the mediator is to help the parties to open difficult issues and nudge them forward in the peace process. The mediator's role combines those of a ship's pilot, consulting medical doctor, midwife and teacher.

However, there tends to be too much focus on the mediators. With that we are disempowering the parties to the conflict and creating the wrong impression that peace comes from the outside. The only people that can make peace are the parties to the conflict, and just as they are responsible for the conflict and its consequences, so should they be given responsibility and recognition for the peace.

The process leading to Namibian independence was long and required strong commitment and determination from the Namibians. Namibia is also an excellent example of what the UN and its member states can achieve at their best. Today, looking back to those years, it feels almost unbelievable that we managed to get all the key actors, the Western five (US, UK, France, Germany and Canada), the Soviet Union, the Organisation of African Unity, (represented by the African front-line states), the South-African government and all the political parties in Namibia, including SWAPO, to work towards a shared goal. It also taught that a durable solution can only be found if one is also prepared to engage in discussions with your political opponents. I do believe that the experience from the Namibia operation encouraged the government of South Africa to begin the process of democratic change.

The peace process in Aceh showed how important it is that a country's political leadership is committed to finding a solution to an internal conflict. Joint efforts by the political leadership in Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement resulted in a peace agreement. However, it was only a

start. Social and economic reforms can only progress if both negotiating parties and the population at large are committed to them in the long term. Work remains to be done in developing a national system that protects, sustains and improves the quality of life in Aceh.

All conflicts can be resolved

Wars and conflicts are not inevitable. They are caused by human beings. There are always interests that are furthered by war. Therefore those who have power and influence can also stop them.

Peace is a question of will. All conflicts can be settled, and there are no excuses for allowing them to become eternal. It is simply intolerable that violent conflicts defy resolution for decades causing immeasurable human suffering, and preventing economic and social development. The passivity and impotence of the international community make it more difficult for us to place our faith in jointly built security structures. Despite the many challenges,

Conflict settlement requires the injection of optimism and hope born from employment and economic opportunities. Otherwise, fragile peace agreements can rarely be sustained. Over the long term, only the private sector is capable of growing new enterprises, creating investment opportunities which provide employment and enduring economic security.

even the most intractable conflicts can be resolved if the parties involved and the international community join forces and work together for a common aim. The United Nations provides the right framework for international peace efforts and solutions to global problems. However, we are all aware of the constraints of the member states and of the tendency of the member states to give it demanding assignments without providing adequate resources and political support. It is important that the UN member states work resolutely to strengthen the world organization. We cannot afford to lose the UN.

In a conflict, one party can always claim victory, but building peace must involve everybody: the weak and the powerful, the victors and the vanquished, men and women, young and old. However, peace negotiations are often conducted by a small elite. In the future we must be better able to achieve a broader participation in peace processes. Particularly, there is a need to ensure the engagement of women in all stages of a peace process.

Peace processes and the agreements resulting from them end the violence. But the real work only starts after a peace agreement has been concluded. The agreements reached have to be implemented. Social and political change does not happen overnight,

and the reconstruction and establishment of democracy demand patience. That requires a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding, and support for civil society.

Inequality breeds conflict

Growing inequality within countries and between regions deepens the existing cleavages. It is our task to create a future and hope for regions and countries in crisis where young people suffer from unemployment and have little prospects of improving their lives. Unless we can meet this challenge, new conflicts will flare up and we will lose another generation to war.

There has been a great deal of talk this year about the financial crisis. This financial crisis also highlights the importance of maintaining the commitment of the international community to development cooperation. The effects of this crisis may prove another major setback for the developing world. The very poorest people are already being hit hardest by the impact of climate change, rising food prices and lower levels of foreign trade. A reduction in foreign assistance and investment would be disastrous for badly needed economic growth. At this difficult time, I call on all governments to remain committed to their stated goals of eradicating poverty.

We must all be able to contribute to our own future and to the future of our communities. If the present trend continues, we will be faced with a situation where hundreds of millions of young people will be out of work in countries that are in early stages of development. If nothing is done, we will be creating an effective breeding ground for crime, instability and war as young people lose all hope. I believe that the fight against poverty is also the most effective measure of countering terrorism in the long term.

I returned ten days ago from Liberia. I came away with mixed feelings. First, a feeling of sadness at the scale of destruction that the war left in Liberia and the size of the challenge for the Government and the international community. Second, a degree of optimism that the people we met can begin to make a real difference -- but only if the international community can retain its commitment to Liberia over the long term.

Conflict settlement requires the injection of optimism and hope born from employment and economic opportunities. Otherwise, fragile peace agreements can rarely be sustained. Over the long term, only the private sector is capable of growing new enterprises, creating investment opportunities which provide employment and enduring economic security. Attracting private-sector investment into war-torn areas is not easy. It requires innovation. A mix of non-economic and economic incentives will have to be devised. Similarly, involvement of the private sector in the larger work of formulating strategies for post-war recovery will require innovative thinking.

Dear friends,

I hope that this distinguished prize awarded to me will encourage individuals and organizations to continue their efforts for peace. I also hope that they will receive full support for their work in the future.

If we work together, we can find solutions. We should not accept any excuses from those in power. Peace is a question of will.

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Labour trouble



I was much encouraged by your detailed coverage of the closure of industries in the Birgunj-Pathlaiya corridor, the country's industrial hub ("Over 70 industries shut," Dec. 12, Page 1). Let me also congratulate you on the general improvement in the quality of writing the last few weeks. I would particularly like to single out the choice of articles in your Op-Ed pages and City Post. But there is still a lot of room for improvement. I will like to point out a few. Your news still needs to cover a lot more issues of public concern: poor attendance and infrastructure in schools, sorry state of roads and sanitation in local neighborhoods (including Kantipur's vicinity), overcrowding and most of all, the general lawlessness that is steadily on the rise -- of traffic, lack of community policy, drunken driving, just to name a few. Nepali media in general tends to cover too much political fare and I wonder what percentage

of readers really read them. I would certainly like to see a lot more coverage of public concerns -- schools, clinics (quality of health care), public transportation, traffic management, quality of air, lack of picnic spots and playing grounds in the neighborhoods. There are host of these issues. They should also find reflection in your articles, which mostly cover, I hate to repeat, politics.

Sunea Thapa
Naxal, Kathmandu

It seems that conflict between labourers and owners of industries will never end in this country. It had finally seemed that relations between the two had improved and they would be able to work together when they reached an agreement 10 days ago. But now there is news that unions have again shut 70 industries in the Birgunj Industrial Corridor. This is a major crisis. Coupled with the government's inability to provide enough elec-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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tricity, the few industries in Nepal will soon die. To prepare for the future all Nepalis should contact manpower agents to get menial jobs in the Gulf. Or they should take a few hours each day to plant paddy in their backyards. This will be practice for them when our country does return to the status of a completely pre-modern agrarian society.

Uppendra Gurung
Kathmandu

Suicidal tendencies

I was struck by the news on suicide ("A suicide every two minutes," Pg 1, Dec. 12). Though a little relieved that it was about China, and not our country, I have a strong feeling that Nepal's suicide rate are alarmingly high too. Though I don't have any statistical data to offer, depression -- chronic and acute -- also leads to suicide. Mental health patients have always been more vulner-

able than the others due to mood swings and a general feeling of despair. Two reasons contribute to greater helplessness in Nepal: poor health care and the general sense of insecurity due to extremely volatile transition that the country is going through. While adults at least can rationalize the perils of politics, adolescents always can't. That's where parenting and community leaders come in; they can provide emotional support and the general sense of well being to the youngsters. Indeed, the media too have a crucial role to play in instilling a sound value system in a community.

Dr. Puskar Ojha
Maharajgunj

Impunity scourge

The Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission Kedar Nath Upadhyaya has indicated that the youth wings of the big



political parties are creating an atmosphere of lawlessness, impunity and terror ("HR is not what powerful define: PM", Dec. 11, Page 1). And, according to Upadhyaya, they are being protected by their mother parties.

I am of the opinion that the country should prepare a comprehensive blue-print for a non-violent, compassionate and spiritual society for the next generation. Toy guns should be banned and violent video-games should be discouraged. Any violent process by the police during investigation of crimes should be fully discouraged too.

VP Sayami
Kathmandu

Correction: The author's name of the letter titled 'Remittance' (Dec. 12, Page 5) was accidentally omitted. The letter was written by Bishnu Adhikary, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.