



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

*Siddhartha Deb*

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*A Globe and Mail* Best Books of the Year 2011 Title

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.

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

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## From Reader Review The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India for online ebook

### Elaine Tama says

Siddhartha Deb gives us an excellent, well-written portrait of different sectors of the current, "new" India, through his interviews of people from all walks of society and also his analysis and research of the business world as well as society and governmental impacts on these Indian. He attempts to describe both the glitter of the new high rises, malls, call centers, and the various business schools that produce the tech employees to work in these places. But in tracking down individuals who are striving to make it in this new world, we learn about the extreme difficulties and challenges faced by this young generation who are trying to succeed or at least become secure in the economy. I cannot forget one of the last people he interviews, Esther, who is an optimistic, high achiever, but working in "Food and Beverage" in a luxury hotel, has a shift that begins at noon and ends at 2 a.m. She lives in a small apartment where she supports her sister and brother, and has a long commute to get to work by noon. Of course in India a "commute" means taking several different buses and other forms of public transportation. To me this book must also represent a description of so many other Asian and Middle Eastern countries right now, to a greater or lesser extent. I had an almost surreal experience reading this book, because I am also reading Paul Theroux's book "The Elephanta Suite," a novel about modern-day India. I must say, the two books complement each other.

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### Neil says

For those of us that live outside of India and take trips there, it is easy for us to wax eloquent about how much "fun" India is, or how affectionate people are or how glamorous things can be or how much easier life in India is with the help of servants and drivers and relatively inexpensive labor. What lies just beneath the surface, however, is something we mostly miss out on not living there. And for those of us that live there, we are doing what is necessary to survive in what is essentially a brutal place.

This book is a stark reminder of the constant brutality that lies just beneath the surface but is all pervasive in Indian society. Helplessness for just about anyone is a real fear. Even those who are privileged and seemingly above it all are affected by the brutality. One is either being brutalized, on the brink of being brutalized, conducting brutality upon others, or simply complicit by buying into the system. And for the remaining few who are not complicit, well, they're usually living in self-created bubble of ignorance, borne almost always out of privilege.

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### Rudrangshu Das says

As the name suggests in this book the author has tried to capture several facets of life in modern India in its contrasting shades. How on the one hand Indian economy is booming with lots of outsourced jobs and foreign investment pouring in, and on the other hand millions of Indians are still living without the basic amenities, thousands of farmers are committing suicide every year and a lot of Indians are struggling to come to terms with the changing and confused environment. The idea is good, but I am not entirely happy with the execution. The author, Siddhartha Deb, himself an Indian, left India in the early 2000s to study in America, and he wrote this book on his return.

Let me give a brief overview of the chapters. The book consists of 5 chapters -

1. The opening chapter is about Arindam Chaudhari, the self proclaimed management guru and the chairman of IIPM and Planman media. In this chapter Deb tells us how Mr Chaudhari is making a living on the dreams and aspirations of the youth of India, who want to fit in and be a part of the corporate culture. He gives us a close look of Arindam Chaudhari the man, his background and business. And much of it is critical if not derisive. No wonder he got a court injunction on the publication of this chapter, hence in the latest copies of the book being sold in India this chapter has been omitted. But due to the negative publicity the chapter is easily available on the internet on various blogs.
2. This chapter is about the flag bearers of the booming economy, the Indian engineer. I found this chapter kind of confusing I couldn't really make out what point the author was trying to make, except for the fact that there is a great divide between the dreams and achievements of the engineers of today.
3. This chapter is about the plight of the farmers of India. Deb has focused on farmers from the telangana region of Andhra Pradesh who used to grow a crop called Red Sorghum. This chapter again, highlights some issues like - how industrial development has adversely affected Indian farmers, but lacks proper analysis.
4. The 4th chapter is about the huge mass of temporary workers in India. This chapter was much better than its predecessors, the author interviewed some workers from a steel factory in Andhra Pradesh, and gave us an account of their lives and their reasons for doing what they were doing.
5. The final chapter is about a girl from the North Eastern state of Manipur who works in New Delhi. This was the best chapter in the whole book. Although this chapter didn't deal with one single issue, but through the the protagonist's account of her life, the author pointed out the alienation that people from the North East feel from the mainland. The account was personal and very heartfelt, and in a way the protagonist Esther was as much the hero of this book as she was for her state and North East India.

Apart from the 5 chapters the book also carried an introduction where the author spoke of several things, most notable among them was about a man Named Abdul Jabbar who runs an NGO for the women widowed in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The book is a nice read, it brought forth a lot of things that I didn't know about my country, although the issues in general lacked in depth analysis, but then I don't think analysis of issues was the point of this book. What I disliked about the book and the author in particular was his mostly sardonic tone throughout the book, the kind of tone one finds (atleast I have experienced first hand) in Indians who have lived in the West for quite a few years and somehow feel themselves to be superior from the rest of us. Also the fact that I am prejudiced against these kind of people, may have led me to being too critical of the author.

All in all I would say The Beautiful And The Damned is a good fast paced read, with less of the beautiful and more of the damned. But the author can hardly be blamed for that, that's how our country is shaping up.

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## Shawn says

I liked this book. Have you noticed how many books are entitled the beautiful and the damned? There are quite a few pop up if you try to enter this title in Goodreads.

I think about this global situation a lot, and (I love your name) Siddhartha Deb paints a picture of working in the lucrative F&B or Food and Beverage (being a waitress) supporting your siblings who all have degrees but who can't find appropriate jobs, supporting them on your tips. Or working in the call center or as a software engineer. Those seem to be all the options. Customer Service in Bangalore, F&B, computer software, then straight down jump to scavenging smoldering dumps stepping over corpses. This world we are creating is f\*cking bananas.

I'm a communist--not as it has ever been practiced by Chairman Mao and Stalin committing genocide on their own people, but I think every family in America should adopt a family in India. I think I'd give them

like 25% of my wages if they'd agree to stop having babies. Try to slow down our 7 billion on earth from becoming the 9 billion saturation point where we'll be machine-gunning each other for a bottle of water. I assume no one would actually have to practice safe sex, my adopted family would be allowed to just take the money and cheat on the other part of the agreement. I wouldn't allow it to be a female beat-down, though. The woman in the family would be in charge of disbursement of funds and if the men don't treat the women fairly, their ass is kicked out. I know I'll just have to write my world; there's zero chance of it existing in reality.

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### **Rajat Ubhaykar says**

A hugely incomplete book.

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### **Sandeep says**

Siddhartha Deb's "The Beautiful and the Damned" is a book which provides sketches of various lives of people living in Modern India. Management gurus (?), engineers, farmers, daily wage laborers, migrants living in a city are all part of the tales Deb expertly tells in a fluid prose.

My edition of the book didn't contain the first chapter (about the stained management guru "Arindam Chaudhuri") due to a court injunction. It tells about the appeal of a dubious Chaudhuri to the educated youth who couldn't make it to the elite management institutes and also the making and unmaking of his IIPM institutes. The next four chapters deal with the stories of engineers in Bangalore (effects of globalization), farmers in Telangana, laborers working in appalling conditions in a factory in Kothur and finally concludes with the story of Esther, a North-Eastern woman working as a waitress in restaurants Delhi. All the stories made me a bit melancholic after completion. There is very little beauty in the lives of these souls who are trying to make a life for themselves in modern India. The most hard-hitting of all the tales was that of the workers in factories. It's gut wrenching to learn about the lives these people lead for a pittance in extremely appalling working conditions with no light at the end of the tunnel to look forward to. The corruption of the government officials, the nonchalance of the employers truly breaks one's heart. The aspirations, dreams and life of Esther, a North-Eastern female in her mid 20's, who works and lives in Delhi is sad. The treatment meted out to the people from North- East India makes one ashamed as an Indian.

In the end, the sketches of the lives doesn't provide terribly new insights but are good enough for meriting a read. The book felt more like a collection of well written articles which might feel more at home in a magazine than in the form of a book. The lives of the people portrayed here are more damned than beautiful.

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### **Umesh Kesavan says**

A nuanced portrait of contemporary India -with no sweeping generalizations- told through profiles of five representative Indians. The Indian edition does not have the chapter on Arindham Chaudhury but ironically, this chapter must be the most read one online as it went viral a year or so back. My favorite chapter is the one on Esther, the waitress from North-East India.

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### **Fiona says**

Flashes of brilliance and insight about the new India and the impact of its "progress" on various different groups of people, interspersed with long passages which meandered without point or structure. At times I felt like I was skirting round the edges of something interesting without ever actually getting there. When the writing was good it had something very important to tell us about what it means to be human in the 21st century - looking at how India is developing has serious things to tell us too about how we live in the west - and when it was not so good it just missed the mark. The chapter on the experiences of women in modern India managed to miss almost everything I would have thought was important to address about women's lives in India today.

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### **Talia says**

I wanted to learn more about contemporary India but this book was disappointing. Deb follows 5 main stories...but each one feels a bit more like a voyeur's view or surface-level take than a deep dive into a subject (with Deb maybe more interested in the process of interviewing and the idea of himself as a writer who has transcended all this than in the people themselves). Perhaps it should have been 5 separate books, but even as it was each chapter seemed a little too long for what it offered. The chapter on price fixing in agriculture (Red Sorghum) was the most interesting. Only the final chapter focused on a woman's story, and that felt stuck-on as a requirement at the end.

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### **Sylvia Arthur says**

An intriguing journey through the India you don't see. Deb goes behind the veneer of life in the New India and lays bare the contradictions that exist between the image and the reality. Told through the lives of five main characters, these well researched and well told stories together make up a narrative that tells you more about 21st century India than anything I've read to date and in such a subtle and darkly comic way. Deftly constructed and thoroughly engaging. Highly recommended.

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### **Roberta says**

Questa nuova India sembra già vecchia e i personaggi qui presentati non sono particolarmente simpatici. Tutto ruota attorno al denaro, di tutto viene ostentato il prezzo.

Siddhartha Deb ci presenta 5 situazioni: l'indiano ricco (o arricchito); l'ingegnere; il contadino e la campagna; la fabbrica ed i lavoratori precari; sole, per ultime, le donne.

Nonostante un livello di scolarizzazione elevata (molte lauree in materie scientifiche, molti master) le ambizioni sono basse e si concentrano sul mero stipendio piuttosto che sull'astratta idea di carriera. Certo, quando si pensa che spesso alle spalle c'è un'intera famiglia da mantenere la scelta è possibile, ma trovo in parte sconcertante che una donna con master in biologia desideri fare la cameriera, per quanto in un ristorante di lusso, prettamente per via delle mance.

C'è anche molta attualità tra le pagine, pur con questa sensazione di notizie già sentite. L'edizione italiana è del 2012 e parla dell'outsourcing a call center indiani, della bolla delle dotcom, della consuetudine allo stupro di donne non tutelate. La verità è che, escludendo pochi quartieri delle grandi città, l'India non sembra ancora adatta a tutte queste persone che si muovono e si incrociano, interagendo loro malgrado.

Mi aspettavo in effetti un reportage più leggero, forse più patinato, che si concentrasse su storie di successo di persone che si sono affrancate da vecchie tradizioni. Invece gli schemi resistono e per la mia mentalità risultano spiacevoli. Tuttavia bisogna dire che come reportage è ben scritto e le vicende sembrano narrate senza aggiunte o bias da parte dell'autore

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### **Ritwik says**

Tells it like it is.

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### **Vivek Vikram Singh says**

The book was fairly informative, thought provoking and does address several important issues being faced by the new India; however the grouse I have with the author and the book is the lack of balance. There is too little beauty, and far too much damnation.

Like several Indians who live in the west, and are always eager to please their western masters (audience, editors, employers - take your pick), Deb comes across as far too sanctimonious when talking about India. The self-congratulatory prose, in which he barely restrains himself from out-rightly condemning people for the slightest "flaws" - the engineer who writes poems on microchips is essayed as insecure, out of touch and a cartoonish caricature of the Indian IT engineer stereotype; the senior management IT professional is rebuked for being too materialistic, while simultaneously being mocked for being wrongly spiritual. The farmers are painted as miserable wretched creatures, who must be reviled for having children who, like the author, live in America.

No one and nothing in this India seems to be good enough for Deb, and I am sure that the audience this book was primarily intended for, would love to read this book and feel good about how much better they are sitting far away from this India.

All the good that the book had, has largely been negated by the sense that the author is smirking through this entire narration.

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### **Priyanka Kanse says**

There were a few reasons that I wanted to read this book. One, because the title is homage to one of my favourite books, and secondly - and probably the main reason - last time I was in India, there was a lot of fuss about the book as it had to be reprinted without a chapter. So maybe my expectations were unnaturally high, leading me to be disappointed.

Disappointed because the stories aren't crafted in a way that pulls you in. For example, Naipaul's writing on India is rich and evocative, an emotional rollercoaster.

That said, the subject matter is interesting, and is a peek behind the veneer of economic development. The corruption that is so obvious to those who have ever spent time in India is given a name and a face, and is quite chilling to see documented.

## Sunaina says

What was the point of this book?

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