

Charm and muddle

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Sam Miller

A STRANGE KIND OF PARADISE

India through foreign eyes

421pp. Cape. £18.99.

978 0 224 09341 5

Published: 30 July 2014



Sam Miller describes *A Strange Kind of Paradise*, his story of foreign reactions to India from the ancient Greeks to the present day, as an “intermittent history and memoir”. He is certainly qualified to write both of those things, having studied history at Cambridge and politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, worked on South Asian affairs for the BBC as a journalist on and off since the 1980s, lived and travelled widely in India for more than a decade and a half, married a Parsi from Bombay and learned to speak Hindi. Moreover, he is already the author of a historically informed travel book on Delhi, his current home, *Adventures in a Megacity* (2009). He even discovers to his surprise while going through family papers in London that an ancestor was the Indophile Sophia Dobson Collet, a Victorian feminist captivated by the life and work of the reformer Rammohun Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj.

However, the challenge of his subject is formidable, given its two and a half millennia-long timespan, and the exceptional diversity of India’s religions and cultures, invaders and visitors, from Alexander the Great, Babur and Robert Clive to

the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, the orientalist Sir William Jones and the Beatles. Despite the paucity of sources for the earlier period, the first half of the book, until the British colonial period, works better than the second.

In the first half, Miller takes the reader on an entertaining trip to Patna, the site of Pataliputra, the great capital city of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka in the third century BC, which he calls “arguably the country’s least impressive major archaeological site”: a mosquito-ridden swamp through which he paddles, feeling the stumps of Mauryan columns with his toes. This he contrasts with the awestruck impressions of Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador of the Seleucid empire to the Mauryan empire, whose reports established India’s worldwide reputation for astonishing wealth. From the Mughal period, he quotes some famously scathing criticism of India in the memoirs of the first Mughal emperor, Babur, and notes that these words were once recited to him by a former Indian foreign secretary at a Delhi party “with obvious pain”. But he also notes how Babur’s vivid memoirs contain passages appreciative of Indian landscapes, traditions and learning, which foreshadow the love of India shown by Babur’s grandson, Akbar. And from the Portuguese period, he corrects the common impression that Vasco da Gama, on arrival near Calicut in 1498, proclaimed to a crowd of Indians on the beach: “We seek Christians and spices”. In fact, the words were spoken by a Portuguese convict sent ashore by a nervous da Gama to two Muslim traders from Tunis, who knew some Italian and Spanish. Arab merchants of course traded with India long before European colonialists; the earliest Indian mosque was supposedly established on the Kerala coast at Cranganore in 629.

In the second half, it is unclear whether *A Strange Kind of Paradise* is really about foreigners who visited India,

or is intended to include foreigners who never travelled to the subcontinent. Miller discusses the nineteenth-century discovery of Sanskrit literature by German writers and thinkers including Goethe, and the twentieth-century admiration of Rabindranath Tagore by W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound – none of whom visited India. Yet the more sustained response of Graham Greene (who also never travelled in India) to the classic novelist R. K. Narayan is not analysed. Narayan “has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian”, wrote Greene in 1978. Cinema, too, receives attention, covering the foreign reactions to Indian-directed films such as *Awaara* and *Sholay* and foreign-directed films set in India such as *The River*, *Gandhi* and *Slumdog Millionaire*. But Satyajit Ray’s world-famous *Apu Trilogy*, which defined India for European and American cinema audiences in the 1950s and 60s, is completely ignored, as are Ray’s insightful writings on Western cinematic reactions to India.

Other striking omissions come to mind. For instance, the impact on the West of India’s epics, especially the *Mahabharata*, and its folk tales has been considerable; the *Panchatantra* formed the basis of La Fontaine’s *Fables*, published in 1678. In mathematics, India originated our Arabic numerals (as well as games like chess and Snakes and Ladders). The sybaritic and artistic culture of nawabi Lucknow earned it the nickname of the “Paris of the East”. Complete coverage is neither possible nor desirable in such an avowedly personal book. But surely a number of the lengthy footnotes – some informative and fascinating; others self-indulgent, with ephemeral quotations from websites – could have been pruned to make space for more essential main text. Captions for the decidedly idiosyncratic illustrations, by no means all of which are explained in the text, would also have been helpful. *A Strange Kind of Paradise* is a charming, often intriguing, experience, but something of an organizational muddle – much like India itself.