

In Spite of the Gods – The Strange Rise of Modern India, by Edward Luce



Review by: JP Kloninger

Mr. Luce is very well-qualified to write a book such as this about India, having been the *Financial Times*' South Asia bureau chief based in New Delhi, between 2001 and 2006. Additionally his wife and her family are from India.

In Spite of the Gods takes an ambitious stab at explaining Indian society, politics, and economics in a relatively short volume. One of the overarching depictions he successfully makes is the myriad of apparent contradictions there are in modern India, in its efforts to modernize and become a global leader, vis-à-vis deeply entrenched counteracting forces such as caste system hierarchies and antiquated, restrictive public systems such as the "license raj", finally eliminated in India in the early '90s.

I personally enjoyed Luce's accounts of his travels and experiences in places as contrasting as the relatively affluent, tech-oriented south; and the less developed, mismanaged and poor north of India. There is a very telling story about visiting an unusual official in Kerala by the name of V.J. Kurian, who has caused a stir in his region because of being *non-corrupt*... and this is in Southern India, which is generally considered the better-governed part of the country!

The book is rich in anecdotes and well backed-up with relevant statistics. Some figures to note are that India has only 35 million taxpayers in a country with a population of well over 1 Billion, 93% of the people have no job security, and well over 300 million live in absolute poverty. This is in spite of explosive growth rates in technology (cell phone ownership went from 3 million in 2000 to 100 million in 2005) and infrastructure in the past few decades.

At one point Mr. Luce compares India to a swarm of bees, reflecting chaos and randomness from the inside, but a certain order and cohesiveness when seen as a whole from the outside. While in this way he seems generally optimistic about the overall prospects for India and its people in light of the huge development strides it has made, he is not without wise caution that its success going forward is by no means guaranteed.

This was an entertaining and informative read that provides a very useful backdrop from which to interpret future observations of India's "strange rise" on the global stage.