

Saffron and Silk by Anne Benjamin (David Lovell Publishing, 2016)

How does one go about the impossible task of capturing on paper the essence of living in India? How does one answer the question: how do you like India? A difficult question for most westerners who visit India – but for Anne Benjamin who married an Indian and went to live and work there in the 1980s, it's even more profound.

To answer this question is part of the challenge that Benjamin faces in her new book, *Saffron and Silk*. She quotes Nehru to explain the difficulty of the task: 'To endeavour to understand and describe India today would be the task of a brave man – to say anything about tomorrow's India would verge on rashness.'

Benjamin's portrayal of India, in particular Chennai and rural villages, plunges the reader into the glorious unpredictability, the bustling momentum and energy, the faces, colours, sounds, aromas, flavours, bureaucracy, dust and heat of South India. As I have had the pleasure of staying in India many times, and having a favourite Anglo-Indian great-aunt whose mother's family came from Madras (now Chennai), Benjamin's recreation of the landscape made me feel I was there.

I was fascinated by Benjamin's honest yet empathic appraisals of remote villages and the many problems faced by the residents: lack of water supply, poor quality soil, lack of roads and transport, poor health and low literacy, to name a few. To experience the extreme poverty in India first-hand is, as she warns, 'not for the faint-hearted'. Neither does she resile from revealing the danger and fear of oppression and violence that await those who attempt to make changes to improve the lives of those living in poverty, especially women.

Dr Anne Benjamin is Honorary Professor, Australian Catholic University and Honorary Fellow of the University of Western Sydney. She realises early on that her role is to listen and learn, to give support to their 'reasonable and modest requests' when required rather than to impose ideas of western-style solutions. Language is a huge barrier, not least in remote villages where people speak in regional dialects of minority languages. The *Adivasi* people in Andhra Pradesh comprise 'about thirty-three different groups, each with its own system of sub-groups. Each community has its own culture, traditions, crafts, livelihood and dialect' (146). While English and Hindi are official Indian languages, many regional Indians are not literate in these languages. She wasn't 'cued in to the Indian variant of English' in her early days there. On the topic of languages, Benjamin also discusses how she learnt to recognise differences in people's skills with spoken and written communication in various languages. For example, a person may speak a language but not be able to write it down; or may be able to write fluently but not have pronunciation skills or enough confidence to speak the language.

Benjamin is not afraid to reveal her inner thoughts and conflicts in this narrative. This insight into how she sifts through the many experiences to find meaning and purpose is illuminating. As a western woman she is often ignored by men there. Among the women, though, she finds mutual curiosity and is moved by their welcome and generosity in sharing whatever they have and in trying their best to communicate with her. The challenges local women face and the practical ways in which they slowly and painstakingly improve the daily life for those in their village – with such little support and sometimes hindrance – is admirable.

Women move in and across the pages of this book. Some are from India's rich past like the mythical Kannagi; some are her modern day counterpart, the fierce Kasiamma; others like the nameless Lambada gypsy in the remote settlement in Andhra Pradesh; others like Rosie and her ilk, who serve the smooth running of household life; there are women from

Book reviews: *Saffron and Silk* by Anne Benjamin. Sharon Rundle.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

wealth and privilege, gracious and ungracious; there are the two wives between whose words we lived for most of my time in Chennai. Women have left their fingerprints all over this story as they have imprinted the story of India. Their lives are entwined, entangled with each other and with my life there. (175)

Benjamin's time living in India occurred during some major political events, including the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which set off riots across the subcontinent, and the subsequent Sikh massacre. Waves of extreme violence and bloodshed spread throughout India. There were also corporate disasters such as the Union Carbide accident at Bhopal. 'According to the Indian Council for Medical Research, nearly all the people in the area most severely affected by the gas leak (up to 86 percent) were from the poorest class in Bhopal' (90). The site was contaminated with 'chemicals that continue to poison the groundwater'. She doesn't shy away from the fear and horror that these events unleashed nor the soul-searching that these generated.

What must it be like to go each day to a poisoned well and draw the water you need for your family – for washing, cooking, drinking? The poor know what the chemicals have done to hundreds of thousands of their family. They have no other option. That is poverty. (91)

Benjamin also experienced major personal events, such as her marriage to Susai (Benjamin) and the birth of her first child in India. Her resilience in the face of homesickness, language barriers, lack of cooking skills and often loneliness is remarkable. Nonetheless, I felt that Benjamin skirted around some of these more personal important events. I would like to know more about her relationship leading up to her marriage. In one paragraph, Benjamin writes: 'When I left India after two months, I had seen enough'. She had 'an armoury of reasons' why she shouldn't pursue her 'interest in this man any further'. By the end of this paragraph, they made 'a stunning bridal couple' (8).

Her major focus, though, is the work that she and Susai undertake in Madras through a non-government organisation 'committed to development of the poor and disadvantaged'. This grass-roots assistance directly helps remote villagers to improve their living conditions. It enables them to plan, develop and execute their programs to reach their particular goals, in their own way and on their own terms. The programs also provide training and employment for those working with them to ensure the continuity of the programs. One of Benjamin's roles has been to assess the results of these programs. She has published widely and has returned to writing following nine years as Executive Director of Schools in the Diocese of Parramatta, NSW, Australia.

The narrative could have benefitted from further editing, especially with regard to chronology, to avoid repetition and give more of a sense of continuity. However, this is a minor distraction in a very readable and elucidating book.

Sharon Rundle