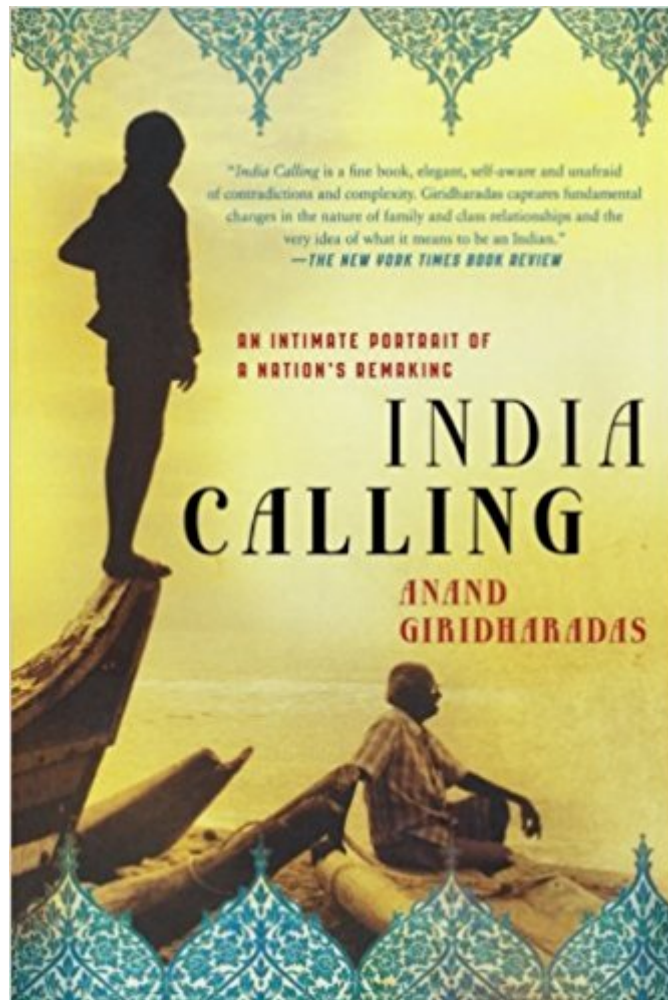




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India Calling: An Intimate Portrait Of A Nation's Remaking



Synopsis

"[A] smart, evocative and sharply observed memoir . . . Giridharadas's narrative gusto makes the familiar fresh." *The Wall Street Journal* Anand Giridharadas sensed something was afoot as his plane from America prepared to land in Bombay. An elderly passenger looked at him and said, "We're all trying to go that way," pointing to the rear. "You, you're going this way?" Giridharadas was returning to the land of his ancestors, amid an unlikely economic boom. But he was more interested in its cultural upheaval, as a new generation has sought to reconcile old traditions and customs with new ambitions and dreams. In *India Calling*, he brings to life the people and the dilemmas of India today, through the prism of his family history and his childhood memories of India. He introduces us to entrepreneurs, radicals, industrialists, and religious seekers, but, most of all, to Indian families. Through their stories, and his own, he paints an intimate portrait of a country becoming modern while striving to remain itself.

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Customer Reviews

"India Calling is a fine book, elegant, self-aware and unafraid of contradictions and complexity. Giridharadas captures fundamental changes in the nature of family and class relationships and the very idea of what it means to be an Indian." *The New York Times Book Review* "[A] smart, evocative and sharply observed memoir . . . Giridharadas's narrative gusto makes the familiar fresh." *The Wall Street Journal* "[A] readable, intriguing book . . . [Giridharadas is] a marvelous journalist--intrepid, easy to like, curious .

. . India Calling connects us to a new India, and an engaging new voice. [The Plain Dealer \(Cleveland\)](#) “A beautifully written, intelligent look at the cultural history and changes of India . . . The book [is] worth reading because of [Giridharadas’s] skill as a writer . . . Giridharadas publishes sentences and paragraphs that are exquisitely worded, to the point of becoming downright memorable, and certainly quotable. [Star Tribune \(Minneapolis\)](#) “The moving story of an unexpected romance between a young American and a country he never knew was his to love. [San Jose Mercury News](#) “Capturing the monumental changes sweeping India is a feat many attempt but few manage . . . In India Calling, Giridharadas has written the best of this now established genre . . . A finely observed portrait of the modern nation. [Financial Times](#) “Eloquent . . . [Giridharadas’s] gritty and witty pen portraits of a host of Indian characters and places make a great read. [Sunday Herald Sun \(Melbourne, Australia\)](#) “Warm, witty and highly perceptive . . . Where Naipaul’s gaze was excoriating, almost half a century later, Giridharadas’s scrutiny, though no less penetrating, is kinder and gentler. In this return of the native genre, India Calling is an honorable successor to Naipaul’s classic [An Area of Darkness]. [The Canberra Times](#) “Giridharadas successfully uses his first-hand account of self-discovery to illustrate a larger picture of empowering change. [The Christian Science Monitor](#) “I doubt that there’s any writer today who is a more acute observer of [the new India.](#) [The Christian Century](#) “An eminently readable, closely observed book on a fascinating subject . . . [Giridharadas is] the perfect intermediary between Western readers and the world he introduces. [Readings.com.au \(Australia\)](#) “Giridharadas offers a fine-grained portrait of what seismic changes mean at the ground level . . . [and] captures in sharply observed portraits how people react to the gale force of a major change. [Curledup.com](#) “Rarely has an author deciphered the Indian enigma the way Anand Giridharadas does in India Calling. By lucidly portraying the country’s real locomotive--its vast and populous youth--he provides the most timely and elegant guide to perhaps the most important next generation in the world. [Parag Khanna, author of The Second World and How to Run the World](#) “Anand Giridharadas is more than just a widely admired journalist; with India Calling he has transformed into a fluent, witty, and intelligent writer. His very personal and perceptive look at the new India is a memorable debut, full of insight and diversion. [William Dalrymple, author of Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India](#) “Anand Giridharadas has become one of the finest analysts of contemporary India. In India Calling, he has produced an engrossing and acutely observed appreciation of a

country that is at once old and new--an enormously readable book in which everyone, at home in India or abroad, will find something distinctive and altogether challenging.~*~

Anand Giridharadas writes the "Currents" column for the International Herald Tribune and The New York Times online. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, and a graduate of the University of Michigan, he worked in Bombay as a management consultant until 2005, when he began reporting from that city for the Herald Tribune and the Times. He now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Giridharadas presents us with several "case studies" and describes the life stories of people drawn from a wide slice of Indian society. There's the poor boy in a small village who was born into a lower caste and decides to remake his identity by pioneering English language and "personality development" classes in his village and organizing a personality pageant. There's the "rat-catcher" whose job is to kill dozens of rats in the slums of Mumbai. Then there's the Maoist, a member of the divisive Communist insurgency in India, who resents India's rise to wealth and fame but who has a complex relationship with the country he criticizes. The Maoist interestingly sees parallels between the old caste system and the new globalized order, with labor specialization replacing the role of labor-based caste. And in stark contrast, there's the Ambani family, India's richest business family whose clout extends over the entire Indian economic and political landscape. Giridharadas especially has an insightful portrait of Mukesh Ambani, one of the two Ambani brothers and one of the world's richest men whose empire stretches from petrochemicals to biotechnology. Giridharadas stresses how the Ambanis rose to prominence by cultivating relationships, a strategy that has helped them bribe slothful bureaucrats and journalists in creative ways that include paying for their children's education in Ivy League universities in the US. In an India where bribery is hardly an exception to the rule, the Ambanis' behavior is nothing novel. But one of the signs of a changing India is that while old-timers look with disgust upon the culture of bribery and corruption that the Ambanis have perpetuated, many young people see them as heroes who are cutting India's Gordian knot to an entrenched bureaucracy and socialist ethic and who are inspiring young Indians to dream big. Further on, it is in describing the changing nature of the Indian family and relationships within it that Giridharadas really excels. Perhaps the two biggest changes in the Indian family during the last few decades have been the declining influence of parents on their children's lives and the empowerment of Indian women in middle-class families. This has led to new challenges and opportunities in the traditional Indian conception of marriage. Women are now regarded as men's equals in marriages and men are no longer supposed to be the sole bread-winners on whom their spouses precariously depend. Changing social mores have also awarded women an independence that was inconceivable for the older generation. Young men and women are now much more comfortable with casual sex and relationships. Indian women are now free to choose who they may or may not marry, or so it may seem. Yet as Giridharadas adeptly demonstrates, reality is more complex. Indian women and even men are still grappling with reconciling the modern with the orthodox. This has led to many of them living strange double lives where they have a wild time outside their homes but can instantly transform themselves into meek and dutiful sons and daughters in the presence of their parents. Ties to parents and family traditions are still too strong

for many of India's young people to assert total independence. Thus an Indian woman who otherwise has a boyfriend and dictates the terms of her own life may still end up marrying a boy picked by her parents and sacrificing her freedom. The line between old and new is still not blurry enough for the young to casually transgress it, and it would be interesting to see how the changing dynamic between young people and traditions is played out in 21st century India. Along with newfound independence come newfound problems. As young people are increasingly defying their parents and marrying for love, they are also increasingly become more intolerant of compromises and sacrifices. This has led to a spiraling divorce rate among young Indian families even as the taboos surrounding the word divorce have been as hard to abolish as that surrounding premarital sex. Giridharadas has a perceptive account of sitting in in an Indian court and watching divorce proceedings. Interestingly, contrary to popular belief, Indian divorces are no longer limited to the wealthy class and Giridharadas watches as a wide economic cross section of husbands and wives airs its woes in court. The reasons why these people are seeking divorce are varied and range from the unsurprising (marital infidelity, plain boredom) to the revealing (the husband becomes jealous when his wife starts making more money and living a more affluent lifestyle). Divorce in India promises to challenge traditional male-female hierarchies in marriage and social customs as acutely as any other modern liberating tendency. As insightful as Giridharadas's book is, I have some minor complaints. Firstly, he says nothing about the negative repercussions of lowering standards in the educational system to accommodate the previously underprivileged. Liberation from the shackles of caste has been a wonderful thing for India, but on the flip side it has led politicians with vested interests to lower the standards of public education rather than to raise the standards of the lower castes through improvements in primary education. This is engendering divisive sentiments which the author does not discuss. Secondly, while Giridharadas eloquently describes changing perceptions of caste and class, he says almost nothing about how the changing dynamic has impacted religion and religious relationships which have always been a key part of the Indian identity. Thirdly, while he makes sincere attempts to be objective, Giridharadas cannot completely escape the biases of an Indian who did not grow up in India and who is coming back after a long time to inspect his former country much as an anthropologist would inspect a tribe. On one hand this has led him to offer us some fresh, out of the box perspectives, but on the other hand it has led him to quickly generalize from his own limited experiences. Indian is a complex and vast country, and even an observation that might apply to seventy percent of its citizens would still exclude a very significant portion of the population. Thus Giridharadas's observations should always be accepted as containing a significant element of truth but not the whole truth. Lastly, I found Giridharadas to be

slightly verbose and rambling. Sometimes he seems to be too much in love with his words and phrases and belabors a point in too many different ways. This would have been fine for a work of fiction but it can tend to bore the reader and obscure clarity in a work of non-fiction. Notwithstanding these minor gripes, I would strongly recommend the book. In a stream of books that have told us about India's economic and political rise, Giridharadas makes a valuable and rare contribution by focusing on the most important aspect of any country- its people and their changing relationships with themselves, their nation and the world.

For Americans looking for insights into Indian culture, this interesting and well-written book can be helpful. Its value is limited, however, because its insights are for the most part applicable only to a distinct minority of the Indian population: the rapidly growing, modernizing "middle class." The author is a young man of Indian parentage who was born and raised in the United States.

Apparently feeling that in America he could never escape the "foreignness" of his heritage, in young adulthood he decided to move to India and seek his fortune there. His observations of the cultural differences he encountered are perceptive and worthwhile, but his ideological limitations lower their value. He portrays the young, tech-savvy, upwardly mobile urban professionals he encounters as the wave of the future of India. The kernel of truth here is that in recent years a large number of Indians have indeed experienced economic prosperity. But unfortunately that "large number" is but a drop in the bucket of the immense Indian population. If one or two hundred million people have risen out of abject poverty in India to become "middle class," that is certainly a good thing, but it does not negate the much more important fact that more than a billion people remain mired in economic degradation there. It is not that the author is unconcerned with the fate of the still-impoverished billion, but his innocent faith in free-market economics leads him to assume that the trend of rising prosperity will continue until the "middle class" encompasses the entire population. His optimism in that regard leads him to focus on the culture of India's privileged gilded youth and to pay little attention to the billion who still live outside the gated communities.

Such a fantastic book which eloquently puts into words what many Indian-Americans feel and what some Indians may be feeling as the country modernizes. The push and pull between traditional and modern; the conflict both within oneself and taking place in the wider society is beautifully illustrated by Giridharadas in this book.

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