

Book Reviews*Sugar and Spice*

F G Bailey

Indians, like most people, cannot resist a glance in the mirror; and when the mirror is held up by a foreigner, there is the bonus of recognizing good points and blaming blemishes on the mirror,

I shall be surprised if this book does not become well-known in India,

TWRS ZINKIN writes about the people of India during the last ten years—about, as she says, a generation in transition'. It is a record based on 'personal observation', and, this being so, it departs at times from detached and impersonal analysis, and becomes informed with likes and dislikes (p 83 hell-holes like Calcutta'). My own impression is that Mrs Zinkin wanted not only to describe and analyse, but also to 'present' India, to justify, to make an apologia—perhaps, even, (to use the idiom of the country to which the book is addressed) to 'sell' India.

The book is in four parts. The first concerns rural India: a description of villages; a statement of why villagers like being villagers ('the warmth of belonging'); and a short chapter on Hinduism. In the second part Mrs Zinkin talks about 'personal changes': the position of women; marriage and the family; and a chapter on sex and family planning. The third part (Chapters 7-12) describes social changes, the leaders of change, how new ideas are communicated, the position of untouchables, the position of minorities, and finally, awkwardly disposed between these last two chapters, Indian and European ideas of hygiene. In the final part, on political changes, Mrs Zinkin writes about Gandhi, Bhoodan, Community Projects, those whose power has diminished in the last ten years ('the dispossessed'), and, in her peroration, the glory of India's 'silent revolution and the futility of Communism. Marxists will enjoy sharpening their teeth on these last two chapters.

Mrs Zinkin is at her best when she is describing that section of India which has already undergone 'the silent revolution'. When she is writing about the middle-classes of the big cities, the businessmen, the 'India Changes!' by Taya Zinkin. Chatto and Windus, London. 1958. Price 25 6.

politicians, the intelligentsia; when she talks of the work being done by middle-class women, or when she is assessing the part played by Gandhi, or the character and ideas of Vinoba Bhave; or when she describes and evaluates Community Projects, her writing seems to me well-balanced, reasonable, and often penetrating. She appears to like and understand people of this class, to sympathize with their work and their difficulties, and at the same time she pays them the compliment of treating them as adult and saying straightforwardly where they have failed. The one lapse here (apart from lapses of style and taste which I will discuss below) is her stout optimism and in particular her easy dismissal of Communism.

In the last two chapters she seriously underestimates the organizational ability of the Communist Party, and seems to think parliamentary democracy a much harder plant than it has in fact proved to be in warm climates. It may be true that the Communists won Kerala because people wanted to protest against Congress corruption and the personality of the ex-Chief Minister'. It may also be true that the 'Communist Party of India has an inglorious past history'; or that particular Communist campaigners have been inept. But, in the end, these things are irrelevant. The issues in Kerala will be judged at the next election. And, even then, to talk about Communists winning or losing an election is in many ways beside the point. Communist revolutions are not usually 'by consent'. And, if the Indian villager is 'old-fashioned, religious, and sentimental', he is no more so than was the Russian peasant at the beginning of this century. But, as Mrs Zinkin says, no-one can 'foresee what India will be a century from now'. Who can foresee even twenty years ahead?

When Mrs Zinkin deals with rural India, she becomes 'old-fashioned'

and 'sentimental' herself. One gets a cloying impression that all peasants are basically wise and lovable even when they were being stupid, Mrs Zinkin had only to make a telling point and they shuffled and looked down at their toes uncomfortably' (p 196) 'The men shuffled in silence and creased their weather', beaten brows in thought' (p 68), and then an elder ('his face was hewn; in time, his beard was white' (p 68) or (on p 106) the eldest of the elders, a man of great dignity with a gray beard and fiery eyes' would get the point and everyone would smile their weather-beaten smiles at Mrs Zinkin and restore her confidence in the innate wisdom of the peasants. On p 12 we are told, on 'the authority of 'many visiting sociologists', that Indian children never cry. As a visiting sociologist I have always thought Indian children quite normal: when they are hungry or ill, or neglected, as they sometimes are, they cry. On the following page we learn that no-one to cast unwanted out of a village. They may not be cast out of a village: I know several from a single villager old people, who were kicked out of their homes and told to shift for themselves.

This kind of white-wash does no one any good. The peasant can be kind or cruel, sentimental or hard-headed, religious or materialistic just like anyone else. The emotional attachment engendered by a slum-tenement is probably not so very different from that which is supposed to attach exclusively to the villages. This patronizing style of writing is first-cousin to the 'noble savage' romances and the myths of 'Merrie England', and it is unworthy of the eminently realistic and balanced discussions found in other parts of Mrs Zinkin's book,

Style is peculiarly important in a book of this kind, for it will be remembered, Mrs Zinkin is not out to give a literal and factual description of what has gone on in the last ten years. She wants to con-

vey an 'understanding' of what India is and what Indians are trying to do. This understanding depends not only on what is said, but also on how it is said. Once again, when Mrs Zinkin is dealing with the larger world and its relatively abstract questions, her style seldom falters. The short chapter on Gandhi is a model of lucid well-mannered writing. But in other places the tinsel brightness of modern journalese shines through. It quite spoils the effect Mrs Zinkin is seeking, unless, of course, I have failed to recognize intended satire. The ladies' market research team, whose noble dedication Mrs Zinkin wishes to convey (pp 47-49) sounds to me like Fred Karno's army. Take the following example: notice, by the way, the echoes of Time magazine's peculiar brand of English: notice also the pert and spurious intimacy sought by the use of proper names: 'Tiny Mrs Dixit crossed mud pools and irrigation channels and tore her sari over thorn bushes; Mrs Shah fell flat on her face across a stone; but they smiled and went on.' Brave Mrs Shah! But she is not the only lady to fall flat on her face.

Let me, at the end, raise some general questions, which may help to interest Indians in Mrs Zinkin's book. Mrs Zinkin, who presents modern India to the Americans, is herself a foreigner. So, as it happens is the writer of this review. From one point of view, we are both well-qualified: Mrs Zinkin because she sees with the sharp eye of a stranger; the reviewer, who has a much less extensive knowledge of India than Mrs Zinkin, because he is one of the audience to whom the book is addressed. How, then, does India look through Mrs Zinkin's rose-coloured (but never red) spy-glass?

Above all, I get the impression of an enlightened and dedicated minority, working hard and sensibly to achieve social reform. Some noble and outstanding persons are skillfully and sympathetically presented. Here and there one catches an unpleasant whiff of 'customs none, manners beastly'. Communism, contrary to what Americans might believe, is far far away and is mere water on the duck's back of peasant religiosity. Peasants shuttle their feet and hang their heads. 'Mrs

Zinkin is a messy eater when they do not provide her with a spoon. Behind all this is a 'silent revolution', moving inexorably and by consent towards equality.

It is a generous and optimistic book. But what do Indians think of it? Are they so optimistic? Do they think that a foreigner is the right person to 'sell' India to the Americans? Is this the picture of India which they would like to be sold? Would they prefer a slower, more finely etched, more dignified

book? Indeed, do they want any picture of India to be sold?

Where, finally, will they place Mrs Zinkin? Will they, in spite of her evident goodwill, decide that she is a distant- very distant—connection of Beverley Nicholls and the author of 'Mother India'? Or will they put her beside such novelists as E M Forster, K K Narayan, and Mrs Jhabwala all of whom, in their different ways, have made India and Indian life, intelligible to the non-Indian?

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