Reviewers’ Choice

A selection of the most memorable books of 2015 and the most anticipated titles of 2016 by some of Biblio’s reviewers

2015 has been an unusually rich year for Indian non-fiction, be it biographies (Abdul by Nayanjot Lahiri), city histories (Ahmedabad: A City in the World by Ameeta Shah), or reminiscences (Israel as a Gift from the Arabs by Shail Mayaram). But what really dominated discourse was the debate over the growing intolerance in Indian society, aided in no small measure by public authorities. And nothing, for Indian society, aided in no small measure debate over the growing intolerance in really dominated discourse was the by Shail Mayaram). But what

A City in the World

As a City in the World, Nayanjot Lahiri, who is a professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, has translated the reality of Ahmedabad, India – a city where the coexistence of faiths and cultures has been celebrated for centuries. With the help of a team of local researchers, Lahiri has painstakingly reconstructed a city that has been lost to time, filled with art and architecture that reflects the city’s diversity. It is a book that celebrates the past and reminds us of the importance of tolerance.

Far too often while studying communitarianism, we have trained our lenses on the moments of spectacular violence, ignoring the silent processes at work, which culminate in this violence. Lesser studied still are the intellectual worlds in which such ideologies thrive and receive nourishment. Akshaya Mukul’s Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India is a brilliant study of the forging of a Hindu public in post-colonial India through the unlikely vehicle of an unglamorous publishing house. It is certainly my book of the year.

A book which I missed reading – a mistake I shall soon rectify – is Patrick Cockburn’s The Rise of Islamic State (Leftword), believed to be one of the most sober and clear-eyed account of the developments in the region by one of the most respected journalists today. I’m also looking forward to Tashih Khar’s book of essays The New Xenophobes (OUP).

For me the most significant book of the year was Sagari Chhabra’s In Search of Freedom: Journeys through India and South-East Asia (HarperCollins Publishers India). It fills a gendered lacuna in our understanding of the Indian Freedom movement. Chhabra’s journey is aimed at recovering the voices of women who participated in the struggle, either as Gandhians or as members of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s Rani of Jhansi regiment, combine personal anecdote with the urgency of historical recovery. Wittily and poignant this was a truly delightful and important read.

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Thomas Trauttman’s Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History (Permanent Black) was the best book I read this year. The book argues that elephants have survived in India – unlike China – because they were prized by kings, not for religious or ethical reasons but primarily because of their role in warfare. Pulling together a vast array of sources, this erudite and engaging account broadly presents the scope of environmental writing in India. I am still reading Anna Tsing’s The Mushroom at the End of the World (Princeton University Press) because it is a comprehensive account of the organisational prin-ciples of the Indian Army and employs a unique, inter-disciplinary methodology to address key concerns of civil-military relations in India. Wilkinson’s exhaustive quantitative data – on recruitment, regimental composition and its restructuring – carefully explains India’s successful record in keeping the military out of politics, unlike some of its South Asian counterparts. It is a significant addition to the scholarship on not just civil-military relations but also post-colonial ‘governance’. It highlights key policies of security management, and, command and control strategies pursued by the Indian state that have played a vital role in strengthening civilian structures of governance since 1947.

I enjoyed reading Steven Wilkinson’s Army and Nation: The military and Indian democracy since independence (Harvard University Press) because it is a comprehensive account of the Second World War. Raghavan, awarded the 2015 Infosys Prize, has injected new dynamism into the study of Second World War and diplomatic history. I’m interested in learning through his book about how the Second World War – now in the 70th anniversary of its culmination – continues to shape and inform our historical understandings of this period.

Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze refer to Anuradha’s powerful Family Story. As the next buzzword to be pulled.

Early in 2015 I was told that Elena Ferrante’s The Neapolitan Novels and Karl Ove Knausgaard’s My Struggle – both with their four volumes published in English this year – are must-reads for committed fiction readers. So, I have virtually followed two subversive women in Italy and laughed at a novel about how the Second World War – in 1945 – continues to shape and inform our historical understandings of this period.

One of the major talking points of the year has been the scandal in FIFA. And the book that has been at the centre of the storm is The Ugly Game by Heidi Blake and Jonathan Calvert (Simon and Schuster, UK). While there is much talk about whether Qatar will be able to hold on to 2022 World Cup, which it won against the United States in 2009, the way the bid was orchestrated is now the subject of intense media scrutiny, especially after the publication of The Ugly Game. FIFA executive committee members from across the world were paid sums between 50,000 USD to 2 million USD to secure their votes for the Qatar bid. Most disappointing is the way junks are arranged and lobbyists employed by bid committees from across the world. Except England, all other bidders employed middlemen and lobbyists to swing members and vote for their country. For an organisation that has fair play as one of its principal ideals, such actions by its 24 member executive and heads of football associations from around the world, who arbitrate on all the key decisions, is plain shocking. While we echo Bill Shankly’s prophetic words, ‘I don’t say football is a matter of life and death... I say it is far more serious than that’, we must also acknowledge that what we see on the field is not the entire story, from such acts of corruption.

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