

Five intellectuals discuss problems that do not detract from the extraordinary progress India has achieved, but make the Western perception of India a more dialectic and realistic one: problems such

# India in the words of its writers

INDIA 1

by Francesca Lancini

as Hindu fundamentalism, the inferiority of women, corruption in public life, the urban-rural divide and the enduring caste system, despite new laws



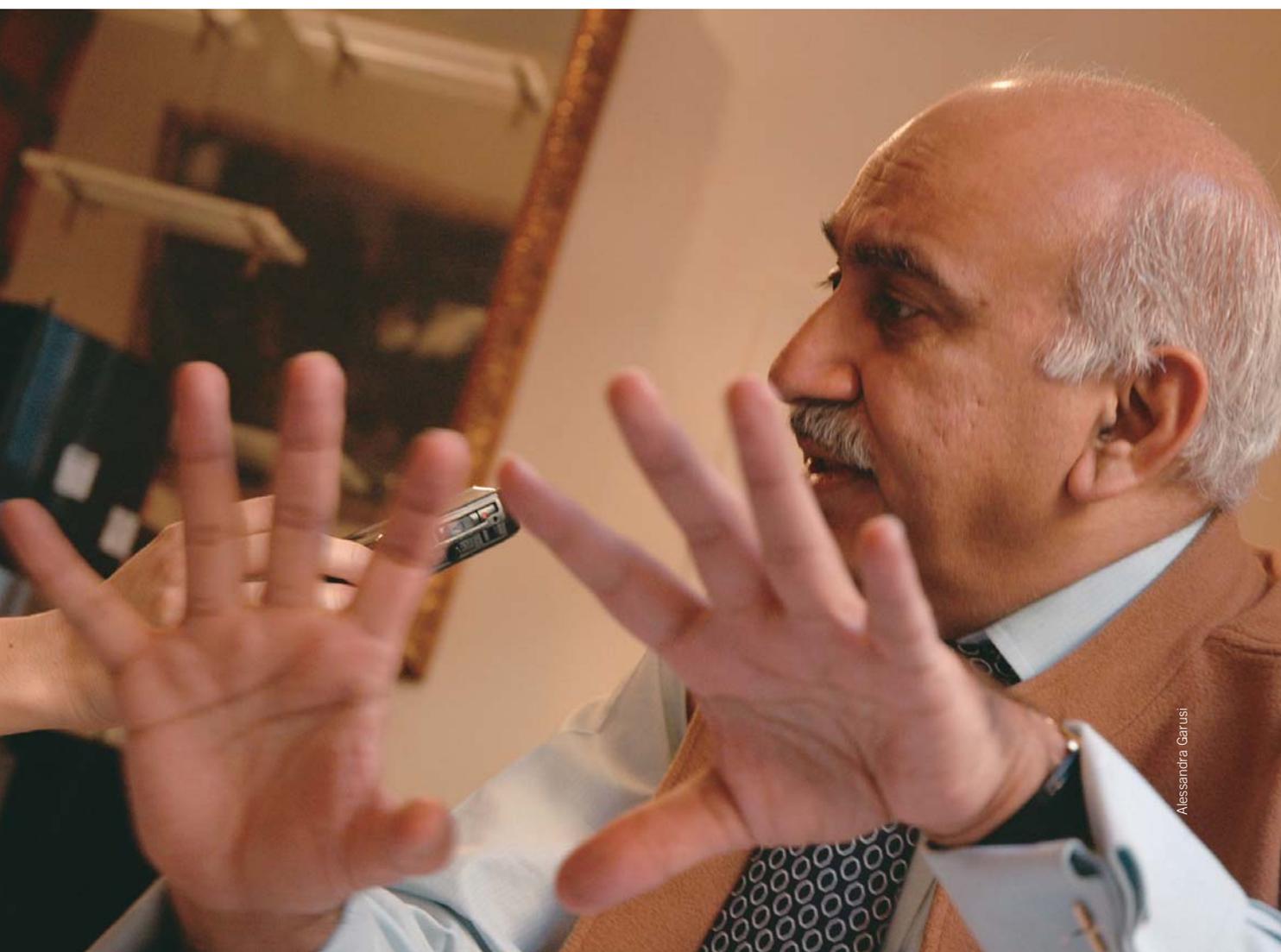
“Shining India”, “Chindia” and “Indian hope” are some of the many terms used to describe India’s economic and social growth, which has accelerated since the end of the 1990s. How true are these optimistic descriptions? Is India really changing? We asked five writers and journalists from different parts of India, who attended the Grinzane Cavour literary awards ceremony in Turin, to answer this question. Going beyond widespread Western stereotypes, these intellectuals talked to east about unresolved issues: religious conflict, corruption, poverty, modernisation, the condition of women and the hierarchical caste system.

Mubashar Jawed Akbar is a native of Indian Kashmir, the most highly militarized zone in

the world and the theatre, since 1989, of insurgency by Islamic rebels. A practising Muslim, the 57-year-old writer tells the story of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India in his novel *Blood Brothers*. “Muslims are the world’s biggest minority”, says Akbar. In India alone, Muslims form 13.4% of a population of over a billion. “Being a minority is not merely a question of demography; it also depends on the way the minority is perceived and handled by the ruling power. In my country, Muslims are still struggling to be granted the same rights as Hindus”.

Observers believe that Hindu fundamentalism is one of the most worrying problems of the world’s most populous democracy. Lal Advani and Narendra Modi, two rightwing extremists, are increasingly powerful within the BJP, the opposition party to the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress. Advani spearheaded the movement that destroyed a mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 to replace it with a Hindu temple. According to various media sources, Modi, who won local

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elections in Gujarat, the most highly industrialised State in India, in January 2008 aided and abetted the anti-Muslim pogrom that resulted in more than 1,000 deaths in 2002. For religions to co-exist, says Akbar, “what is required is not to eradicate religion from people’s lives, as Voltaire used to say, but rather create room for each faith, with mutual respect” – while keeping a careful eye on the borderline with fundamentalism. “Muslims have not experienced a women’s emancipation movement. The *hijab*, the veil, is part of our tradition, but the burqa, which covers the whole body, is barbaric. Not even in the 1800s were women so penalised with respect to men. Girl children must to be educated so that they can join the labour market and become independent. Things are changing in this sense, but very slowly”.

In India’s patriarchal society, however, Muslim and Hindu women alike are often victims of serious abuse: women murdered because of insufficient dowry; selective abortion of female foetuses, female infanticide, and acid attacks on women who bring dishonour upon their families. “There are many tough laws against these crimes today, but many women do not report them and keep suffering in silence”, says Anita Nair, who has written several bestsellers including *Ladies Coupé*, a series of interwoven tales told by the occupants of the sleeper compartment on a train. “Despite being an independent and fulfilled woman, even I feel frustrated. Let me give you an example. I have hired a driver, but he never speaks directly to me. If he needs to discuss his salary or his working hours, he talks to my husband. In Indian society, my husband always has to speak on my behalf”.

Despite these problems, Nair, a practising Hindu from Kerala, would never leave her country. “I belong to India. My history and my family are here. I hope that change will come about from within. To improve the condition of women, we have to focus on education, which raises their expectations and makes them aware of their rights”. However, she warns against falling into the trap of stereotypes. “Not all Indian women are submissive and meek”, the writer emphasises. “An increasing number of women work and prefer jeans to saris, as they are more practical. The problem is that some things are changing for the better while others remain the same or actually get worse. The laws I mentioned earlier, for example, are often



Alessandra Garusi

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not applied because of the great scourge of corruption, which can encroach on any sector”. India ranks 70th out of 163 countries in Transparency International’s report on global corruption. Tarun Tejpal, the editor of the Delhi weekly “*Tehelka*”, has made investigative journalism his life’s mission. “*Tehelka*” used to be a website, which brought the most serious corruption scandal in the Indian government since independence to light with its



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investigation. "We were a team of 25 and we found ourselves reduced to four people. 'Tehelka' was closed down and some of my colleagues were arrested. We were subjected to intimidation for three years and I lived under escort for seven". But Tejpal did not throw in the towel. He managed to turn "Tehelka" into a weekly magazine and continues his work. "We report scandals practically every week. Corruption is very widespread in my country,

but it is not the main problem. It is a demonstration of inequality. As long as India has the poorest and the richest people in the world, corruption will be inevitable". One hundred million people in India are experiencing rapid growth, but 836 million live on less than a dollar a day, according to a 2007 report by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector. "There are two main reasons for this", says Tejpal, "overpopulation and an inadequate economic policy". The much talked-about change may need to be downsized. "India is a complex and paradoxical country", says Tejpal. "It is liberal and conservative, modern and ancient. You can say anything and its exact opposite about India".

Lavanya Sankaran, an economist and writer from Bangalore, the Indian high-tech capital, also points out strong contradictions. "Growth has been so rapid in my city that the infrastructure remains inadequate for a metropolis of 7 million inhabitants. There is a lack of roads, access to water, electricity supply and public transport. Office employees have air conditioning and other comforts, but when they go out they walk through garbage, have a hard time getting on a bus and go home to houses without water and electricity. But people work very hard and believe in progress. They feel they have more opportunities than before. In general, one breathes in great energy".

There is still a huge difference between the cities, where work opportunities are on the rise, and the countryside, where the neo-liberal policies of the last few governments continues to produce devastating effects such as the displacement of people for the construction of dams and other public works, suicides of indebted farmers and the destruction of the ecosystem. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had promised a new deal for rural areas, which has however failed to give results so far.

Services are the most important element of GDP growth, while agriculture, which employs no less than three-fourths of the labour force, is growing by a mere 4 percent. There is a need for more investments and welfare in the countryside, i.e. a health and education system that works. "If education were taken to the countryside", says Sankaran, "there would be jobs there too and people would not be forced to migrate to the cities. I don't want our countryside to disappear".

40% of the Indian population remains illiterate. However, according to Dass Morwal, a writer attentive to social issues, education also is the best weapon against gender and caste-related discrimination. "I was lucky enough to go to school, but my sister, being a girl, did not. My family belongs to one of the lowest castes and could not offer all the children the same opportunities". Morwal emphasises that the hierarchical caste system produces a state of genuine apartheid, especially for those who are excluded from it, i.e. the so-called dalits or untouchables. "India is only changing in terms of economic growth. The Indian social system has remained unchanged, especially in the countryside, even though the caste system is a handicap for cultural, economic and political progress. There have been no positive changes in the villages from independence to date. Real change is possible, but it requires a long process. The caste system has existed for thousands of years, even though it has been abolished by law. My dream is to see the children of the villages become doctors like the others one day".

\_Tarjun Tejpal (below) says that corruption, which is very widespread in India, is merely a demonstration of the inequality that continues to exist in the country. Dass Morwal (facing photo) believes that education is the best weapon against gender and caste-related discrimination

## Writer profiles

**MUBASHAR JAWED AKBAR:** A journalist and writer from an old Kashmiri family who now lives in New Delhi. In 1982 he founded the "Telegraph", considered the first modern Indian daily newspaper, and in 1994 he started the "Asian Age", the first international Indian daily. His books include *The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict between Islam and Christianity*; *Nehru: The Making of a Nation and Kashmir: Behind the Vale*. *Blood Brothers* is the first of his books to be translated into Italian (publisher: Neri Pozza).

**ANITA NAIR:** The Kerala-born writer now lives in Bangalore. She has written two major bestsellers: *The Better Man*, which the "New York Times" described as "a genial and moving tale", and *Ladies Coupé*, which has been translated into 28 languages and brought her worldwide renown.

**TARUN TEJPAL:** Publisher, journalist and writer. As founder of the publishing house India Ink, he was the first to publish Arundhati Roy. In 2000 he started the *tehelka.com* website, which has since become one of India's best selling weeklies. *The Alchemy of Desire*, his first novel, is being published in various European countries.

**LAVANYA SANKARAN:** A writer from Bangalore. After studying Economics in the United States, she returned to India to devote herself to writing. Her book *The Red Carpet* has been translated in 15 countries and was published in Italy in 2006. She is currently working with a literacy and urban development programme.

**BHAGWAN DASS MORWAL:** Holds a degree in Journalism and has been writing since he was 20. His books, written in Hindi, describe the social and economic problems of Mewat, his native region. They include *Kala Pahar* (The Black Mountain), *Babal Tera Des Mein* (O Father, in Thy Land) and *Ret* (Sand), which is to be translated into Italian shortly.

