

Review of William Sutcliffe, 'Are You Experienced?' (1997; Penguin, 1998 - paperback, 235 pp., ISBN 0-14-027265-8, 5.99 pounds)

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reviewed by Christopher Rollason, Ph.D., [rollason54@gmail.com](mailto:rollason54@gmail.com) - originally published in 198 on the Usenet group soc.culture.indian

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The 'gap year' between school and university - an increasingly common phenomenon in Britain - seems today to be taking on the role of a rite of passage into adulthood. For an enterprising 18-year-old looking for something to spice up tomorrow's CV, what could be more attractive than the idea of three months in inexpensive, exotic, fascinating India? William Sutcliffe's new novel traces the subcontinental trajectory of just such a gap-year backpacker.

The adventures and misadventures are narrated in the first person by Dave, a Londoner and future student of English at York University. He arrives at Delhi airport in the company of Liz, who is officially the girlfriend of James, his best friend who is undertaking his own gap-year travels in the USA. The relationship between Liz and Dave is, to say the least, ambiguous, and rapidly deteriorates, to the point where, for the latter part of the three months, Dave finds himself having to face the subcontinent alone. His encounters with a host of human beings, fellow-foreigners and Indians alike, provide the novel with its structure and form the pretext for all manner of comic or serio-comic incidents - a modern version of the picaresque. Sutcliffe views India through eyes which are obviously those of an outsider - he is no Kipling - but, still, an informed outsider. If he has not been to the subcontinent in person, he has certainly been very well briefed, as is evident from his evoking details such as the rickshaw-drivers sleeping in their vehicles (p. 215) or the custom of sending a 'boy' to buy transport tickets (p. 73). Dave traverses India, with the aid of the celebrated Lonely Planet (a device also used by the Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi in his 'Indian Nocturne', another novel on the foreigners-in-India theme), starting out from a state of uninitiated naivety from which he never completely emerges. After a few weeks, he has learnt the art of ignoring beggars, and begins to feel a seasoned hand; but his ignorance remains breathtaking, and is cruelly exposed in his encounter with a Western journalist, from which it emerges that Dave thinks Congress is the Indian parliament and the Harijans are the opposition party (pp. 136-137 - he obviously hasn't read the political crib thoughtfully provided in the guidebook!). The journalist berates him: 'Your kind of travel is all about low horizons dressed up as open-mindedness. You have no interest in India, and no sensitivity for the problems this country is trying to face up to', and ends up shouting: 'DON'T FORGET TO PUT YOUR BIG TRIP DOWN ON THE CV!' (pp. 140-141). This looks like a serious, cutting stab being made under the narrative's comic-picaresque surface. To be fair to Dave, however, his bust-up with Liz proves a blessing in disguise. After being rebuffed by two young woman travellers from Britain whom he tries to team up

with, he is marooned in Bangalore, falls ill, and eventually meets a Karnataka Christian who befriends him and invites him to his house. Dave muses: 'Although we hadn't really managed much of a conversation, and I'd been mostly bored out of my skull, I felt that the visit marked a significant and positive watershed. I had actually gone inside an Indian house. Gone inside, sat down and talked to a real Indian person' (p. 173). Soon after, Ranj, an Anglo-Indian on the run from an arranged marriage invites Dave to stay with him in a luxury hotel in Kovalam, where his companion's erotic adventures prove another eye-opener: "' You can't chat up Indians. " " Why not? " .... " Her brothers will come and kill you in the middle of the night. " .. " Where do you think you are? Pakistan or something? This is a civilized country. " (p. 187). Dave encounters what is known as the 'broad-minded' underside of the Indian bourgeoisie - a phenomenon which may be confirmed from such authentically Indian works of fiction as Shobha De's 'Starry Nights' or Vikram Chandra's 'Love and Longing in Bombay', and discovers that the modern subcontinental reality is rather more complex than might be supposed from the usual Western stereotypes.

Sutcliffe's narrative plays with those stereotypes, taking them up and exposing them for the half-baked half-truths they are. The two most obvious clichés are, of course, 'India, land of poverty' and 'Mother India, fount of spirituality' - ideas of the subcontinent which are not actually untrue, but which fail to take account of a whole range of other phenomena. If there is nothing to India but beggars and gurus, then what room is there for literature, the press, music or cinema, or for archaeology, retailing, banking or information technology? Early on, Dave expresses the absurd opinion that India is 'a country that's too poor to have museums' (p. 33 - once again, he hasn't read the Lonely Planet guide properly, nor can he ever have got beyond the first few lines of Kipling's 'Kim'), and there is no sign that he ever visits a museum to disabuse himself of this particular misconception. In Kerala, our naive visitor discovers to his amazement that not all Indians are mired in penury: 'Most of the people in the bar were rich Indians, which I had always thought was a contradiction in terms' (p. 185). The spiritual stereotype is mercilessly pilloried, in the glib New Age guruspeak parroted by the Western travellers ('Go where the feeling takes you' - p. 70; 'my karma is completely different (...) I've learned so much about myself ... about healing .. and stuff' - p. 108). Dave discovers that Liz, after abandoning him, has entered an ashram and become a devotee of a guru whose interpretation of Tantric yoga is, alas, all too literal. Both stereotypes - poverty and spirituality - converge hilariously in the experiences of Fee and Caz, two English woman travellers fresh from a 'girls' public school', who start out as budding Mother Teresas, washing lepers in Udaipur and wallowing in their own virtue ('You just feel like a good person' - p. 109), but end up with a double nervous breakdown from their own misadventures with the predatory guru.

The reader may ask how far, in reality, Sutcliffe himself has managed to escape the superficial view of the subcontinent which he sets out to satirise. The book does certainly reveal a decent knowledge of India, whether acquired at first or second hand. There are moments where the author's grasp on the country might be doubted - as when, in his Bangalore acquaintance's house, Dave says: 'I could hear him shouting things in Hindi' (p. 170), or, later, on a train: 'We shared our compartment with a family who were carrying even more food than Ranj ... No one in the family spoke a word of English, and Ranj couldn't communicate with them either due to some problem with dialects' (p. 180). It is more likely that a family in Bangalore would speak in Kannada, rather than Hindi (although the latter would not be impossible in a 'cosmopolitan' metropolis that attracts hi-tech professionals from the whole country). It is, more seriously, a gross solecism to call India's great regional languages 'dialects' simply because they are not Hindi (one might as reasonably label Russian a 'dialect' because it is not English). However, this is a first-person narrative, and the ignorance may be reasonably attributed to Dave and not the author. Meanwhile, if Dave has indeed made some effort to get to grips with the country towards the end of his stay, he has still missed a remarkable amount. He has managed to spend time in Bangalore without realising that the city is the heart of India's booming software industry; he has found out nothing about the world's biggest cinema industry; nor does he seem to have once opened a copy of 'The Times of India', or any other example of the country's thriving and eloquent English-language press.

Once the three months are up, Dave dutifully returns home to England. It is not the reviewer's function to give away the novel's ending: suffice it to say that Dave sincerely believes that he has emerged from his rite of passage richer in experience and maturity - 'I would be able to begin again as the new me ... Dave the traveller' (p. 235). The dispassionate reader may conclude that, yes, the traveller has learned a few things along the way, but he has done little more than scratch the surface: his initiation into adulthood may indeed have started in India, but it has a long way to go yet. Sutcliffe's tone throughout is largely comic and satiric, but the sharp observation and acid caricatures also suggest that he is making a serious point about East-West communication, seen as difficult and impeded by stereotypes, but nonetheless not impossible. There is no question here of the far more complex explorations of India's relationship with the wider world to be found in such writers as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai or Vikram Chandra: in particular, there is nothing in Sutcliffe's novel to compare with the percipient irony of the episode in Chandra's novel 'Red Earth and Pouring Rain' where an Indian studying in the US brings his American girlfriend home on vacation, only to find the relationship dissolve under the twin stresses of monsoon rains and intercultural incomprehension. 'Are You Experienced?' is not in the same league as the works of those 'Indo-Anglian' writers, but, then again, it is clearly not intended to be. Sutcliffe does, however, convincingly present the problem of

communication between cultures, in a lighter, faster, and, of course, far more Western-oriented fashion.

In conclusion, I will confess that I found this novel extremely readable and enjoyable (I finished it off in a single longish train journey). The writing is generally observant and witty, and the dialogue flows extremely well: my only reservation on this score concerns the rather high incidence of taboo words in the young people's conversations - testifying to a poverty of vocabulary which is, however, clearly the characters' problem rather than the author's, and could no doubt be defended on realist grounds as symptomatic of a generation. At all events, Sutcliffe's satire of that generation is certainly memorable, and his comic exploration of cultural difference has a hard enough edge to it to make this novel a potentially useful, interesting and pleasurable read for those readers, be they Western or Indian, who are curious and open-minded enough to follow Dave as he criss-crosses the vast subcontinent and, on the way, perhaps even begin, alongside the naive young backpacker, to question Kipling's dictum that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'.