

BOOK REVIEWS

The United States and India 1776–1996

BY M. V. KAMATH

NEW DELHI: INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS, 1998

349 PAGES

ISBN 81-85434-16-6

Since the rise of the late medieval Christian world's desire to chart a western sea route to Asia, India and what would become the United States have been linked together in a fascinating and sometimes frustratingly complex relationship. This book, one of several dealing with East-West themes by journalist and editor M. V. Kamath, attempts to shed light on the relationship between these two countries. Originally published to coincide with the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, the book captures for a general audience the story of two of "midnight's children," two nations whose divergent postcolonial destinies have revealed the enormous spectrum of blessings and curses unleashed by the forces of modernity. This second edition, released as part of modern India's Golden Jubilee celebration, offers a richly illustrated

account of Indian-American encounters from the period of European global exploration through the first decade of the post-Cold War experience.

Kamath divides the book into three sections. The first part focuses on the varieties of Indo-American contact from the American Revolution to Indian independence. Dominated by intellectual adventurers and social reformers, the narrative prominently features the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, Ram Roy, Eliot, Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, while giving less attention to figures more concerned with the relative price of cotton, tea, or ice. The middle section leaves the realm of moral absolutes, and concentrates on practical issues of foreign policy and international diplomacy during the second half of the twentieth century. Here Kamath offers a lively and incisive analysis of U.S. presidential politics. George Bush (the elder) earns high marks as the American chief executive "probably most knowledgeable of south Asian affairs" (207). Clinton's record receives only light scrutiny. The section's chapter on artistic exchange documents India's profound impact on high and popular culture in the U.S. Sport, however, remains the one area where Indians and Americans have virtually no contact. In its final section, the book explores the Indian immigrant experience in America. Charting the story from the first indentured laborers of the late eighteenth century to the most recent entrepreneurs of the computer age, Kamath shows how the Indian community in America has creatively faced a wide range of religious, ethnic, social, and economic challenges, including, of course, the ongoing struggle to define the meaning of Indian-American identity.

While the book makes a number of insightful contributions to the important field of Indo-American studies, it suffers from an overly journalistic approach. With its glossy pages, over-size format, and scores of photographs of uneven quality, *The United States and India* functions at best as an impressionistic introduction to the international relationship. The scholarship is largely derivative, the prose at times undisciplined, and the tone often uncritical, even bordering on boosterism. Inadequately documented, the book is also hobbled by editorial sloppiness. It locates South Carolina "in Tennessee" (170) and describes both Grant and Eisenhower as the "first ever American President to visit India" (162, 190). More importantly, with its almost exclusive focus on leaders and elites, it ignores decades of work in social and cultural history. Consequently, the book is not suited for an academic setting. Specialists will gain nothing from it, and students will be better served by the handful of recent, more sophisticated, publications on the topic. ■

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