



Book Reviews

Indian in sight

|Joseph Wilson

THE ELEPHANT, THE TIGER, AND THE CELL PHONE: REFLECTIONS ON INDIA: THE EMERGING 21ST CENTURY POWER by Shashi Tharoor (Arcade Publishing), 498 pages, \$20 paper.

Rating: NNN

This sweeping survey of Indian culture, by 2006 UN secretary-general candidate Shashi Tharoor, is both impressive and frustrating.

The book, a collection of essays Tharoor wrote for the Times of India and other publications, has no clearly defined thesis or narrative, yet is packed full of insightful commentary on India's rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Tharoor's articles are often written for an Indian audience, and are peppered with references lost on the average Western reader. That said, it is refreshing to read the thoughts of an Indian writer on his home country with none of the Orientalist generalizations found in much Western writing on Asia.

The articles range from descriptions of cricket as a parable of modern Indian life to book reviews of contemporary Indian books and eulogies for friends, many of whom were high-level politicians or writers. The narrative of Indian independence in 1947 leaves out the familiar references to Gandhi to focus on the backroom finagling by politicians like Sardar Patel and Maulana Azad.

Canadian readers will recognize Tharoor's description of India as a country "unified through its diversity," continually struggling to accommodate a diverse range of languages and religious traditions. He writes eloquently on India's booming economy, its efforts to alleviate the crushing poverty in the northern states, and on Indian contributions to the world of science and technology.

The best essay is the last one: An A To Z Of Being Indian, a massive cultural and political glossary of modern Indian life. What Tharoor lacks in focus, he makes up for in breadth.

