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Mihir S Sharma: Writing a country

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Last Updated at January 13, 2014 22:00 IST

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How does one stuff a country into a book? Those of us in the book-reading trade are frequently called on to address this question. Those in the book-writing trade - a far more confident set of individuals, something we downtrodden reviewers are continually reminded of by author photographs that grow ever more distinguished and glamorous - usually know the answer. Some follow the traditional, or Naipaulian route: travel the country, meet a few people at roadside stalls and tony dinner parties, and deduce Grand and Important Things about the Future from what they say, or in some cases what they don't say but should, in the author's opinion, have said. Others, like Mr Naipaul's biographer, Patrick French, choose instead to write careful reportage, picking a few incidents, people or places that they think are illustrative. The problem in this case is, of course, that you can endlessly quibble over a choice of incident, person or place. Or you could write the big Book of Ideas on the assumption that, in the end, all countries are ideas anyway. Thus the gold standard, Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* - so very influential in the decades after its release that it is now used as a term of abuse online for those insufficiently deferential to aggressive Hindu nationalism.

I, personally, have given up on all these, and usually turn to novels. In this, I am like many a Western news editor who, when faced with an apparently important development in a distant country with large numbers of picturesquely poor people, usually asks a novelist to comment, presumably on the assumption that the best social science is done in writerly solitude. I, however, have a slightly different take; I believe

that lightly written historical fiction - and here the benchmark is Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, which will never be matched as a description of how India got to where it is today - is the second most useful form of writing. Most useful, however, are satirical novels. Shovon Chowdhury's 2012 book, *The Competent Authority*, is set in an imagined, nuclear-devastated India in the distant future, but describes where we are today better than any three tonnes of our newspapers of record. For Pakistan, Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* does as well.

And now, there's something from Bangladesh I can recommend. K Anis Ahmed's *The World in My Hands*, just published by Random House India, is the best value for Rs 299 you'll get all year. Mr Ahmed's novel is a darkly funny story of a country going through a military-backed emergency. Of course, as Bangladesh struggles with the legitimacy of its elections - remember, in the past caretaker governments in Dhaka were precisely what led to military-backed emergencies - this is very much in the news. But what it tells us about Bangladesh and Bangladeshis, and indeed all of South Asia, means it's valuable even when this crisis, hopefully, blows over. It begins with a newspaper editor deciding between three headlines: The safe bet, "President names ten-member interim government"; the shameless boot-licking, "Nation to be put back on track, corruption root cause of derailment"; and the bombshell, "Top politicians and businessmen under watch, to be picked up any moment". It continues in this vein, despairing and funny by turn; perhaps its emotional core is a short sentence two-thirds of the way in: "What a terrible, terrible thing power was in the hands of dunces."

But, perhaps, you want something more serious - something that helps you win the arguments that, according to another Big Country Book, Amartya Sen's *Argumentative Indian*, are your patriotic duty? In that case, go out and buy Ashutosh Varshney's *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy*, just out from Penguin India. Professor Varshney's book is not the easiest of reads, but that is not because his writing is less than clear. It is because it covers a great deal of ground, and is painstaking in not only giving you all the relevant sides of an argument, but also bringing you up to date with what this fast-moving country is doing about it right now. The chapter on federalism, for instance, takes you from the conceptual bases of federalism - a "holding together" model, rather than a "coming together" model - to the various forms of competing cultural identifiers - language, caste, tribe and religion. But it also concludes with a discussion of the most recent debate between states discovering their political leverage and a beleaguered Centre - on intelligence and counter-terrorism. Professor Varshney is one of those rarest of beings in the academy: a man who deeply cares about his work informing what people actually care about.

Please do not assume that *Battles Half Won* is dry reading. Yes, there are tables. And numbers. I'm sorry, novelists, I know *The New York Times'* op-ed page loves you, but if you really want to win an argument, show me the numbers. But Professor Varshney also manages to find, frequently in these pages, phrases that immediately illuminate the entire point he wishes to make. In a discussion on secularism, for example, he points out: "Unlike the clarity entailed in church-state separation, secularism as equidistance is a nebulous concept. Equal distance can also be translated as equal proximity... under Nehru, equidistance was not turned into equi-proximity. Under Rajiv, it was." That last line tells you all you need to understand about the problem with Indian state secularism under the Congress.

There are many, many reasons to read. But, however much it may dismay authors and publishers, one large reason - common to readers and publicists alike - is to have the world explained - whether through a twisted, satirical mirror, darkly, or through the patient construction of an argument. Every year, there are perhaps half a dozen books that manage either. I'm happy that, in the last fortnight, I read two.