

# INDIA— FROM THE GROUND UP

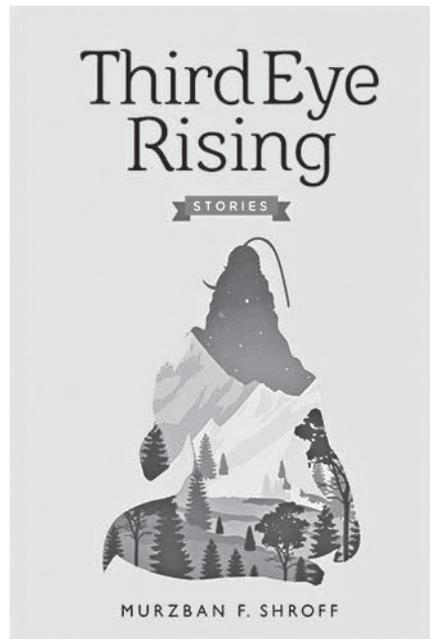
SRI CRAVEN

*Murzban F. Shroff is a fiction writer based in Mumbai, India, whose short story collections and novel have been published in the U.S., U.K., and India. Born in the city into a Parsi/Zoroastrian family, Shroff worked in advertising in a creative capacity. Always interested in literary writing, he left advertising in 2006 to pursue writing full time. Shroff's experience of the city's cosmopolitanism – in language, culture, community, and everyday life – informs his fictional explorations of individuals' actions as evidenced in his first short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay* (2008), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2009), and his novel, *Waiting for Jonathan Koshy* (2015), nominated for the Horatio Nelson Prize. His most recent work is the collection of short stories *Third Eye Rising* (2021), which featured in the *Esquire* list of Best Books of 2021.*

*In this interview, conducted after Shroff's virtual reading hosted by an independent bookstore in Portland, Oregon, Shroff speaks about TER's interest in telling a story of contemporary India that departs from globalization, technology, and consumer culture. In this interview, Shroff discusses why and how he came to tell stories of the poetics of everyday life among the 'common' folk navigating longstanding ideologies of caste, religion, and gender, rural and urban living and exchange, and philosophical rather than capitalist orientations.*



*A Conversation with*  
**MURZBAN F. SHROFF**



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*The overall theme of your latest work, the collection of short stories *Third Eye Rising*, might be summarized as the “invisible India.” TER avowedly gets away from the consumer cultural excesses of globalization and focuses on the quotidian violence of caste, gender, and class in rural and urban India. But, the focus on the quotidian also evokes the creative and poignant ways people negotiate life amidst the vast social discrepancies of Indian life. Recently, some scholars have termed the return to realism in Indian fiction as responding to globalization – both evoking the ugliness of disparities and attempting to reflect as is the uncertainties associated with rapid and mass change. Do you see your writing as participating in social critique or literary realism? What motivated the thematic focus of TER?*

*Third Eye Rising* evolved out of a deep and intense personal experience that spanned almost seventeen years. Let me share how it began, so that the motivation behind this kind of work, the kind that seeks to unravel an invisible India, becomes clear. I began writing in the year 2001. After two years of writing plot-based stories, I felt a certain disenchantment with my work, a kind of unease that I wasn't quite there; I hadn't figured out what really drove me, my subjects of abiding interest, and why I needed to be read. I have always been a disciple of serious literature, and my disenchantment rose from a realistic and growing sense of awareness that I hadn't quite understood the conundrum that was India, that I didn't know how many of my fellow-Indians thought. To cure myself of this ignorance, I started journeying to the villages of central India, to the site of a large dam, where I learned—for the first time—of this phenomenon called displacement. Traveling from village to village, I learned that, as a result of this dam, 244 villages had been submerged and 60,000 families displaced. To make way for the dam, villagers were evicted by uprooting their water pumps, demolishing

their schools, and cutting down their trees. To get compensation they had to go through brokers and middlemen, who would take their pound of flesh. The rehabilitation schemes would compensate landowners but not landless laborers, forest tribes, artisans, tradesmen, and fisherfolk. Often, farmers were compelled to give up prime, high-yield land in exchange for arid plots. Overnight, these farmers became paupers. Hearing these stories of loss and betrayal, I was deeply moved. I understood that this was nothing less than forced eviction, with little or no recourse to the law. This, despite there being clear-cut guidelines for rehabilitation as established by a water disputes tribunal. Over several such trips, I also understood why villagers poured into cities, took over pavements and public spaces, and constructed slums. Given a choice, they would rather not be here, in the city. I began to see the machinations of a development game which brazenly favored cities over villages, and which led to such terrible inequities. These inequities inevitably spilled over into the cities, making them unlivable and exploitable. I knew then that I had found my subject: the neurodiversity of India. Or, rather, the inequities of diversity. And with that realization, I shifted my writing from plot-based to thought-based, a kind of literary realism that would sensitize people to the other side of India. The India not of malls and multiplexes but one that struggles to survive, that has not a voice, loud enough, in the literary space. I began to feel a certain usefulness of purpose that began to manifest in and inform my work. This became the thematic core of *Third Eye Rising*.

*It is significant that there is absolutely no mention of globalization in the stories set in villages, almost as if that aspect of national life has not even made a presence in rural India, and only one of the three set in the city even mentions it. To what extent is this decision framed by fact? And to what extent is it the result of a creative license that wants*

*to guide readers to view India away from the dominant lens of globalization?*

The villages I visited, first in Madhya Pradesh, then in the Satpura mountain ranges of Maharashtra, and eventually in Bihar, were small agrarian communities untouched by globalization. They were either struggling to keep their lands or their integrity against a vast and unseen force (the state), or dealing with issues such as caste and female exploitation. If, as a fiction writer, I had to make this world available to my readers, I needed to present a more intimate view of their life struggles rather than bring in a macro-movement such as globalization, the impact of which they might have felt inadvertently, but not directly and consciously. And I had to do this from their point of view, keeping my authorial presence to a minimum. Our cities and satellite towns were of course seeing the immediate effects of globalization (and I had already written about this in my debut collection, *Breathless in Bombay*); but 70% of India lives in its villages, and many of these villages had been either overlooked or discriminated against by the state. There was a situation created of what I call “man-made poverty,” that is, poverty due to displacement; and it was rampant;

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it was silent; it was insidious. It was driving people out of their homes and cheating them out of their livelihoods. It was forcing them from one state to another, a state with an altogether different language, culture, and traditions. Often, displacement sends its victims to an alien environment (the city), to an alien neighborhood (the slum), and to an alien livelihood (manual labor). This man-made poverty is very different from other forms of poverty, which is to say, caste-based poverty, or literacy-based poverty, or health- and unemployment-based poverty. It bothered me that we were doing this to our own people, and that our rural infrastructure lacked two of the most basic indices of human development: good education and timely healthcare. All that our villages are craving for really is self-sufficiency. It was important for me to understand these failures and their consequences rather than analyze and capture the effects of globalization, which, I felt, could be treated more equitably through the logic of non-fiction. If globalization was to be the big leveler it claimed to be, it had not even touched the surface of these two critical sectors.

*Caste, religion, class, and gender are dominant social realities in India, and TER deals with all of those. What is interesting are the ways you elicit the horrors of caste and gender exploitation while also showing the ways people deal with and overcome these struggles in everyday life. For each instance of caste or gender violence (psychic and physical), you show the oppressed turn things around by active or silent resistance, subversion, and resourceful thinking. (In “Third Eye Rising,” the young husband commits an act of patricide to protect his wife, whom he loves, from being tortured any further; in “Bhikoo Badshah’s Poison,” the peon working in a city office cleverly gets his boss to give him loans so he can return to his village as a success story and not bear the brunt of caste oppression; in “A Rather Strange Marriage,” the village leader’s*

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wife saves a young woman from rape and also claims equality in her own marriage.) Are these stories of resilience, resistance, and agency written with a certain audience in mind whom you want viewing the "India unseen" of TER differently from the stereotypical associations of unsurmountable oppression?

Stories, I believe, are never written for a certain audience, at least not the kind that seek to inform and illuminate, the ones that don't play to popular tastes. But stories do have a certain intention; there is something deeper, a subconscious bug than drives the writer, goading him, reassuring him, that he can reveal something to himself and his readers. The whole purpose of writing a story is that the writer, gripped by his own dilemmas, lives with them, journeys with them, and is transformed at the end of it; in the bargain, he can

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transform the reader. *What was that bug for me?* Perhaps the compelling need to see rural women break with their chains of oppression and stand empowered. Speaking to groups of village women in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, I realized that there is an inherent fatalism prevalent in them, a reluctance to change their situation, an almost abject acquiescence to their fate. Fortunately, the people who were committed to changing this mindset and who led me to this reality were both powerful women activists who had committed their lives and careers to improving the lot of these women. So I had my role models before me, and their work became mine, too. Therefore, the transference of power in "Third Eye Rising" (the title story), from the dowry-oppressed wife to the weak-willed husband, and from the headman's wife to the oppressed girl-bride in "A Rather Strange Marriage," where, also, the entire female population of the village takes up against their men for being complicit in a crime against the girl-bride, Mandira. There was most certainly a revolution brewing in my head when I wrote these, an overwhelming desire to see the historic ills of female exploitation corrected. Similarly, there is a deeper understanding of migrant aspirations in "Bhikoo Badshah's Poison." Bhikoo runs the charade of hiring a professional wife because he wants to see his son educated in a private school, so that the boy can shed the burden of caste. Something that Bhikoo himself was unable to do, despite his success. This story came directly out of my travels to Bihar, understanding the caste inequities and the state of schools there, and then, equally, understanding the condition of public schools in Mumbai, which are run so badly that 50% of students drop out before reaching grade nine. In Bhikoo's craftiness, in all his game-playing, there is conviction that he can beat the odds he was born with.

*To some extent, religion, the other big divide in India, is marginal in TER. But, what is interesting is how Hinduism and Islam seem*

to coexist beautifully in several stories. (The opening story, "The Kitemaker's Dilemma," showcases this in the protagonist's awareness of compassion toward a child; in both "A Matter of Misfortune" and "The Floating Tomb," Islamic history offers rich possibilities for philosophical and personal awareness.) What is the reason for your choice to not delve deeper into religion as a point of contention, whereas you focus on caste and gender to such a great degree? Do you feel, as many say about the media today, that an inordinate focus on certain negative aspects of society in fact fuels that negativity all the more? Or, is there another reason?

But that is exactly my point about India: it is not an antagonistic civilization, but a pluralistic one. In the stories you quote, I wanted to show religion not as an overt hostile force of separation but as a subtle, almost instinctive, point of unification, a point where the differences between communities just dissolve. Pluralism is, perhaps, the greatest strength of India, a strength we need to tap into more often, and which we need to offer up to the West as our most significant contribution to world harmony and peace. This unification is endorsed amply in our religious texts. In the *Katha Upanishad*, for instance: "He who sees the variety and not the unity wanders from death to death." And in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna: "He who sees me (the Universal Self) present in all beings, and all beings existing within me, is never lost to me, nor am I ever lost to him." In "The Kitemaker's Dilemma," when all has been revealed and resolved, I raise the question: "Open door, open heart. Wasn't there something in Indian philosophy about this?" Here, the use of the word "philosophy" is intentional, so that the thought need not be proprietary to any one religion. It is man's action that is all-important and worthy of redemption. And so, having liberated the boy Akash from his bondage, his guilt, Baba Hanush, the kitemaker, is liberated from

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his own grief and he feels a strange, almost metaphysical, unity with the universe. ("And as he walked away from Akash, away from the squeaking bolt, the darkness, and the warmth that had eluded them for days . . . Baba Hanush began to feel light and happy. He hadn't felt this way since years now, ever since his wife had died.") Likewise, the protagonist in "The Floating Tomb," who is a devout Hindu, gets his life affirmation from simply looking at the beautiful glowing dome of the tomb where the Muslim saint Haji Ali is buried. He realizes that his parents had had a beautiful death, because, like the Muslim saint, they too had learned to let go attachment. I like the idea of religion being a subtle force at work, of touching unlikely lives, without difference or discrimination. The India of my dreams is a miracle of co-existence. It is a dream I share with our founding fathers, and, providentially, it finds its way into my work.

*Again, with respect to class, only a few stories deal with the middle classes, and these stories are distinguished by a more personal turn than the larger social issues mentioned previously. (For example, "A Diwali Star," "The Floating Tomb," "A Matter of Misfor-*

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*tune," "Oh Dad," and "An Invisible Truth" all have middle class protagonists turning philosophical in light of various relationship crises: parents and children, fathers and sons, friends, spouses.) What is at stake in mixing these stories of individualized crises with those of socially instituted ones? Fighting for one's life in the face of caste or gendered violence is significantly different from dealing with a marital or filial issue.*

If I were to answer this at a simplistic level, I would say it is the fiction writer's methodology of developing both, the inner and outer plot; it is man raging against his environment, his circumstances, while battling his inner demons/limitations. But, no, this goes a lot deeper than that. If *Third Eye Rising* had to be an India collection, as I had decided it would, I needed to explore another compelling aspect of Indian society, which was the Family. Family at the heart of your existence, Family as influencer and motivator, the ground on which you shape your life, your actions, is something deeply, intrinsically Indian. In stories like "Diwali Star" and "Floating Tomb," I was able to introspect on the subject of attachment. But, in doing so, I could also nuance the joys of devotion—as embodied in the love of Amarveer Rathore and Uma Rathore for their children and grandchildren ("Diwali Star"). Or the love of the elderly parents of the protagonist in "The Floating Tomb." In order to save their son's marriage, they relinquish their luxurious "home-by-the-sea" and go live in a tawdry one-bedroom apartment in an old building where "the ceiling was held up by

beams." By a single decisive act, the parents broke with their material attachment while proving their parental devotion. For all his charades and deceptions, even the roguish Bhikoo is a family man at heart. "He had built for his father a *pucca* house in the village, and he had got his sisters married, sparing nothing on the rites, nor on the jewelry." In "Oh Dad," the son sacrifices himself in order to preserve his father's integrity. And, in "An Invisible Truth," Amir Chauhan will overcome his fears and take up a job in the city only so that he can win his wife's admiration. At the heart of many of these stories is family love: thwarted, tested, or realized.

*TER also foregrounds/suggests the lessons that may be learned from history vis-à-vis the tellers of stories – fathers and sons, tour guides and tourists, the all-seeing animals, a professor of history. It is obvious that you see writers, through their storytelling, as keepers of history. Do you see the post-1947 and pre-1990 generation of writers as keepers of a colonial/postcolonial history that the millennial and younger generations seem to be further and further away from? (There are glimpses of a long ago past in stories like "Diwali Star," "A Matter of Misfortune," and "The Floating Tomb.") What kind of stories do you find Indian writers in English telling, and which ones do you personally want to continue telling, and why?*

You are correct in that the post-1947 and pre-1990 generation of writers don't have the kind of eminence or readership they once

did. Writers like G.V. Desani, Nirad Chaudhuri, Kamala Das, Mahashweta Devi, RK Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Dom Moraes, and V.S. Naipaul are our literary heritage, in as much as a Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, or Mark Twain are part of the American tradition. These writers are indispensable to understanding the making of our nation and have been prescient in their readings of Indian society and culture. Sadly, some of them, like Chaudhuri, Desani, and Dom, are not even published any more, let alone taught. I think Indian writing today is headed in a vastly different direction from its post-colonial predecessors: it is leaning more on Indian tastes and Indian aspirations; and Indian publishing is developing its own market, so to say, rather than relying on Western imports. But not all of what is happening is good and edifying; a lot of mediocrity seems to seep through, because there is a tendency to view the market strictly through the lens of popular tastes. The gatekeepers themselves are dealing with a high level of commercial anxiety and, in the bargain, are trying to woo readers with Bollywood-like themes. What

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I would really like to see is some state-level involvement in promoting Indian literature at the school and college level, through festivals and grants. This needs to be taken up as an on-going collaborative effort among the state, the education department, institutions of learning, publishers, authors, poets, and academics. I can't speak for other Indian writers, but the stories I would like to continue telling are those that demystify India and the Indian psyche, that come from a space of time, place, and purpose. This is the land where the human spirit is doggedly tested. This is the country where we are constantly called upon to accept our fellow citizens who differ from us in language, culture, tastes, and traditions. This is where we need to tell stories that enhance our understanding of each other, that build up our reserves of empathy. And if nuggets of history and spirituality can be woven in purposefully, so much the better.

*How much does your own work in advertising influence or show up in your work as a literary writer? Advertising and literature are sometimes polar opposites in that the former sells, while the latter gets you to see the selling. (The characters of Ehsaan Ali and the narrator of "A Matter of Misfortune," as well as the anthropomorphic cow in "Eyes of a Temple Cow," come to mind as examples of how literature can get you to see a different, more critical perspective.)*

Advertising is clearly and conclusively a past life. It brought me success at an early age and enabled me to meet some of my personal goals. You are right when you say they are polar opposites. With advertising you create illusions; with writing, you destroy them. I guess I am grateful to advertising because it showed me what those illusions were—the heady lure of consumerism, of hyperbolic growth. The funny thing is I never believed in those illusions myself. I was always a nomad at heart.

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*How might teaching (in India and in the West) a collection like TER transform students' understanding of India and Indian English literature?*

I would like to believe that *Third Eye Rising* gives you slices of the real India, an India keenly felt and experienced, with all its trials, tribulations, triumphs, and wisdom. Sometimes, the spiritual faith of Indians seems to border on irrationality, on superstition, on blind faith. But it is this faith that strengthens and empowers at the worst of moments. As, for instance, in the title story, where the young wife, Minolini, called upon

to prove her fidelity to her sadistic in-laws, draws on the love story of Lord Shiva and Sati, and the myth is powerful enough to see her through her ordeal. In the story "An Invisible Truth," the manservant Amir Chauhan is prepared to lose his job rather than defile the Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. By understanding Amir and the sacrifices he has made for his family, the protagonist is able to resolve something in his own life. In a country like India, where the inequities are so great, the only equality we all have is the power of self-realization. And sometimes that is enough.

Sri Craven is an associate professor in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Portland State University. She received her Ph.D. in English and Women's studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is a literary/cultural studies critic in the postcolonial and transnational feminist traditions. Her scholarly and creative writings can be found in leading feminist studies journals.