BOOKS
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INDIA UNVEILED

Here's an insightful and sympathetic glimpse into India's soul - Robert Arnett's big and bold picture book, winner of three national awards

By Tara Katir, Hawaii, USA

Magical, mystical and often misunderstood--India can be a bewildering enigma. Hindus and non-Hindus alike can be comforted, and all will delight in the remarkable insight and extraordinary photos of Robert Arnett's award-winning, India Unveiled (215 pages, Atman Press, us$45). Giving us much more than a "coffee table" book of photographs, Arnett asks us to accompany him on an intimate and personal pilgrimage to confirm his spirituality and to search out India's reality. "From my first visit," he writes, "I immediately fell in love with India. It was like coming home. I decided to write a book to share the India I fell in love with, the devotional and spiritual India rarely portrayed in the West." The result is the best large format photo-rich book I've seen on Hinduism. The easy language makes this especially suitable for the youth, and it won the 1998 Top Books for Teen Age award of the New York Public Library.

Beginning in Madhya Pradesh, largest state and

geographical heartland of India, Arnett explores its spiritual centers. Journeying from Mahakaleshwar's Jyotirlinga and sacred Omkareshwar, where Adi Shankara resided as a young sadhu, to an ancient Buddhist stupa at Sanchi and Bhopal's sacred Taj-ul-Masjid, Arnett is captured by their beauty and spirituality. Reflecting upon this sacredness, he recognizes, "God's peaceful vibration makes no distinction for religious and cultural differences."

Traveling to Calcutta via overnight express from New Delhi, Arnett recounts the rhythmic clacking of wheels juxtaposed the serenity of the countryside, the frenetic activity and shouts of food vendors, and the early morning arrival at Howrah Station, teeming with people. At Dakshineswar Kali Temple, famous for its connection to Sri Ramakrishna, in a sea of early morning pilgrims Arnett waits for darshan "of eternal Mother Nature." Viewing the fearsome image of Kali, Arnett astutely observes, "One should not seek absolute values in the relative world of nature, which is both benign and ruthless. The riddle of good and evil has been challenging humankind's minds since the beginning of

recorded history."

On the way to the Siva Temple of Tarakeswar, Arnett passes a yogi with his head buried in the ground. "Witnessing such a phenomenal event was astounding. Many Westerners even refuse to consider that it is possible to live without breathing. The only thing I could not comprehend was why scientists have not investigated the yogic mastery of control over the breath. Combined with its accompanying transcendental mental states, I believe that the control of life force is one of the more important concepts ever conceived by the human mind."

Honored as a guest in many Indian homes, "I am impressed by the sincerity with which each family member accepts his or her familial responsibilities," Arnett observes. Later, a fellow bus passenger offered him a lesson on dharma. "Duty is performed from love and affection, like a mother taking care of her child. Action must be supported by feeling. Once it becomes a duty performed mechanically without feeling, the tradition ends!"

"When I am asked what impressed me most about India, my reply is the peaceful demeanor of her people and their openly expressed devotion. There is a contentment, regardless of one's material wealth, that is seldom seen in the West," said Arnett. "At the Kumbha Mela," he went on, "you have all forms of religious expression, from the lowest to the highest coexisting right next to each other. The common denominator that unifies it all is devotion. It is difficult to put into words the exhilaration I felt hearing millions of people honoring God in the way in which each knew best."

Born and raised in the United States, Arnett has embraced Hindu philosophy, practicing Kriya Yoga for thirty years in the tradition of Paramahansa Yogananda. "Because I am American," Arnett told Hinduism Today, "I am often asked to speak to American-born Hindu youth at temples and youth camps. Some parents and organization leaders feel I can speak more directly to their youth because I also was raised here." Future plans are to produce a TV documentary about Hinduism and write a children's book based on his experiences in India.

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