

India: Future Tense

Peter Richards

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India: Future Tense is a must-read for anyone curious about India's evolving role on the world stage.

India: Future Tense, by Peter Richards, is a clear, compelling look at what India has been, what it is now, and what it can become. If India's present is tough for North Americans to comprehend, its past is certainly a lot to digest. But Richards's focus in this book is where the true enigma lies: India's future.

What is clear is that India is a force to be reckoned with—one in six people on earth were born there. Since the country's independence in 1947, it has made its way by trial and error, deciding what it is and what it wants to be, balancing the forces of a complex populace and political system. Richards has been watching the whole time, and shares his keen insights ("Indians are both fatalistic and hopeful") and predictions.

He begins by helping non-Indian, Western-thinking people understand how Indians view themselves, their families, and their society as a whole. Richards reaches beyond cliché images of caste systems, slums, and outsourcing to the true heart of India, its strengths and dysfunctions.

Next he envisions, and to some degree recommends, a future for India both at home and abroad. This includes good, bad, and ugly scenarios, including events unlikely to happen (national disintegration) as well as what he calls "best bets"—steps forward that are likely to happen (like national investment in its economy and strengthened trade in the Indian Ocean region). It may seem strange to discuss unlikely events, but it's a testament to Richards's thorough understanding: the reason why one thing will not happen often bolsters the reasons why another scenario is likely. In the final chapter, he unpacks his own perspective, demonstrating his self-awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of one man's perspective (well, one man who has done a lot of research).

Richards is a Canadian whose interest in India has carried him through more than half a century, including several diplomatic and professional roles in India and other Asian nations. Richards's perspective is a perfect balance of insider and outsider viewpoints. He knows what life is like in India and cares about and respects the nation, but he's culturally and experientially apart from India. As a result, he can ask open, honest, yet skeptical and uncomfortable questions. He's done deep research and given the country great attention, but he masterfully conveys it all in a way that's easy for the average educated adult reader to understand.

The volume has great production quality: the cover displays care and attention to detail. However, some of the interior photos are too small, making them appear dark and grainy.

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MELISSA WUSKE (August 9, 2015)

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