

## BOOK REVIEW

## From the eastern front

The author says India's far-east will remain in churn

KISHALAY BHATTACHARJEE

"I ma, as everyone called her, was calmly efficient. She measured heroin — No. 4 in parlance — from a hollowed-out bamboo bowl into a *kokta*, a tiny metal container usually used to measure ground tobacco and spices."

For someone who has spent a long-time reporting and studying what is commonly known as India's northeast, I can tell you Sudeep Chakravarti's latest book *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East*, has been written to the last detail. For some it may well be too granular to process. For the uninitiated, "India's eastern elixir" may be overwhelming. In the author's own words, it is a "...seductive, stunningly complex cocktail".

For years I have been troubled by the generous usage of "northeast" to refer to eight States with strikingly different history and anthropology. This book makes a case of changing that erroneous term because it is indeed India's east. Thus, the name 'The Eastern Gate'.

It also sets the geopolitical context of the region that should have been India's highest priority in terms of development.

The book begins with gun running and narcotic smuggling while documenting the underbelly of my favourite border town

nomic." The quaint border town is bridled to the north and south with liberated zones of poppy and cannabis cultivation. Moreh, as the author points out, "is the first hub of denial."

It is from this point that the stories travel between Nagaland and Manipur at a frenetic pace. The use of copious field-notes throughout the book is an interesting design in the structure but it distracts from the storytelling. The notes are nevertheless important; they are the inner working of a journalist laid bare and could serve as a great toolkit of how to research and report.

## A million mutinies

One of the few chapters without field notes is the one on migration that is at the heart of a million mutinies in the region that the book traverses. We are provided with a historical overview to arrive at the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act. But I would like to know more about the migrant conundrum that has been weaponised to fuel every little fire; internal and external, historical, and forced.

The preface to the book ends with a prophecy, "For many in this far-eastern region of India, geographically as well as intellectually 'Mainland India' lies to the west, beyond the western gates that can so easily be shut. Unless Indian's entire far-east enables it — and India in turn enables and em-



**Title:** The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East  
**Author:** Sudeep Chakravarti  
**Publisher:** Simon & Schuster India

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## Juggling many roles with aplomb

Vividly told, Arundhati Bhattacharya's journey flows like a happy river to find its way to its purpose

SHINJINI KUMAR

I am a reluctant reader of business books. There is way too much on my reading shelves that take precedence over this genre. But it was different with *Indomitable: A Working Woman's Notes on Work, Life and Leadership*, by Arundhati Bhattacharya. Admiration is a force. I confess I have felt a strong connect with her because she and I are the only two women I know who studied English Literature and ended up as bankers. I chuckled while reading the book because it turned out that both of us also grew up in small towns in Jharkhand, married professors and dealt with union leaders and treasury chest keys as young officers.

Frankly, I started reading the book with mild trepidation. Raghuram Rajan, the much-admired former Governor of RBI, killed my enthusiasm with his blurb: "A book about how women can, and will, succeed in India." It seemed like a backhanded compliment, too restrained for a man known for his eloquence.

But as I finished reading, I became uncomfortable with some of my deeply held beliefs on workplace, leadership and diversity. One can use a sledgehammer to break barriers and glass ceilings, but one can also just choose to flow like water, with quiet power, persistence and grace, overcoming barriers and being the change. Vividly told, Bhattacharya's journey flows like a happy river, skipping over pebbles

lege to attend that would not strain the family financially, to balancing her transfers and family, getting her daughter to navigate the broken education system, creating special programmes for women, servicemen or physically challenged, to signing up joint ventures and to finally running the largest bank in the country at a time of much turmoil and crazy action, including demonetisation.

## Indomitable spirit

It is extraordinary how Bhattacharya makes it seem so ordinary. The woman at the pinnacle of India's financial services tells it precisely how she sees it — as a 'working woman'; living, working and leading as only she can. It is her indomitable spirit as it pushes through from one hard task to another that helps the reader turn page after page and comfortably look over her shoulders; humming a random tune, rehearsing Shakespeare, riding rickshaws, looking up Picasso at Christie's in New York, choosing a red saree amidst the blue suits, speaking up to get bankruptcy law enacted or reflectively looking at the desk of the 'chairman' of SBI.

And you wonder if what makes it all happen is indeed just that — the indomitable spirit. The unfaltering commitment and desire to keep going. She never makes it seem like the pro move, the brag about the big deal, the power play. Even when she makes the big decisions or snubs that errant billionaire with



**Title:** Indomitable: A Working Woman's Notes on Work, Life and Leadership  
**Author:** Arundhati Bhattacharya  
**Publisher:** Harper Business  
**Price:** ₹565

cines, the exam must be written, the role must get filled, policies must get written, the job must get done!

And yet, none of the things she describes are easy in any way. Coming up with ideas and execution plans for spiralling NPAs and their resolution, the role of SBI in expanding financial access through Banking Correspondents and digital technology would each be a book in itself. There are many books in this book indeed. But in her zoomed-out style, she will deliver it all at once, suddenly zooming in to the colour of the sofa or a side glance at a colleague's expression

favourite would still be the book about her growing up. That backward gaze that she applies to young Arundhati, her pithy description coming of age within circumstances that are unique and yet relatable have their own poetry like a dash of *Pather Panchali*. The trials and tribulations of her parents' families add that human angle to this book, but most importantly, they do help trace the distinctive leadership style that the girl Arundhati became known for.

How she manages to keep the spotlight away from her and yet come across so vividly is the charm of her writing. There is everyone in here, every staff member who was there to celebrate, mourn, keep the vigil, return favours, create and resolve crises, everyone at home who was part of this journey — the aunt, parents, Sukrita, Pritimoy, the maids, cooks, doctors, teachers, tutors, helpers, MDs, colleagues' wives, everyone who makes life happen gets their due description and gratitude.

But the strongest thing that jumps at you is her common sense and immense reserve of good humour. Her charismatic leadership is all about her interest in people. Characters in a play — as a student of English Lit learns to interpret them. She can get that motive and thus, get the deal. It made me reflect on how we underestimate the psychological aspects of leadership in organisational behaviour and something I have always felt

## NEW READS



**Title:** Planning Democracy: How a Professor, an Institute and An Idea Shaped India  
**Author:** Nikhil Menon  
**Publisher:** India Viking  
The book recasts our understanding of the Indian republic, uncovering how planning came to define the nation and revealing the ways in which it continues to shape our world today.



**Title:** Little BIG Things in Operational Excellence  
**Author:** Debashis Sarkar  
**Publisher:** SAGE Publications

The book is a guide for companies wishing to transform their organisations through strategy and culture, and through the application of operational excellence methodologies.

