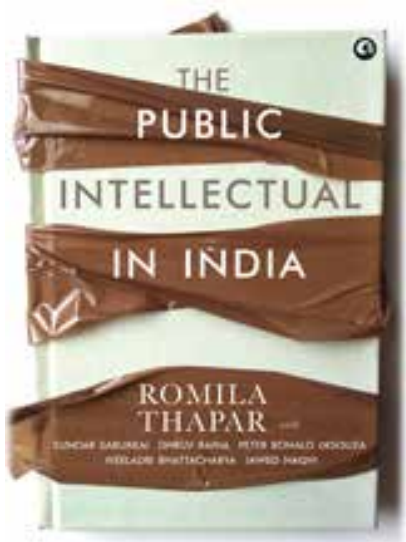


Reviewers' Choice

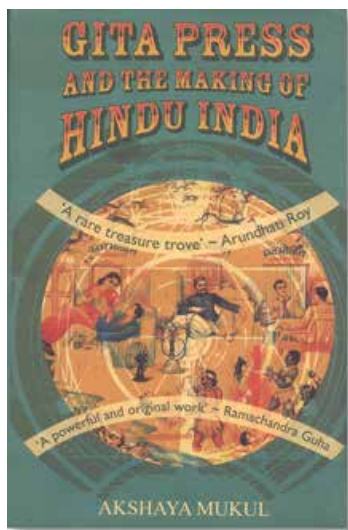
A selection of the most memorable books of 2015 and the most anticipated titles of 2016 by some of *Biblio's* reviewers



The Public Intellectual in India, emerged in October as a coda of sorts to a season of protests by writers, social scientists and artistes against a mood of rising public intolerance. The book presents an address by historian Romila Thapar, alongside five responses curated by the organisers. Its timing made the volume a significant addition to the year's literary corpus.

As economies worldwide continued to flounder, Mark Weisbrot's *Failed: What the Experts Got Wrong About the Global Economy* offered a clinical take-down of the rampant mood of escapism within the economics discipline, which allows discredited old theories to hold the stage solely on ideological grounds. *Failed* advances a critique of orthodoxy that Thomas Piketty's 2014 work *Capital* failed to offer. It has elements in common with Mark Blyth's 2013 work on the history of austerity as a "dangerous idea".

— SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN
Biblio Editorial Board member.



2015 has been an unusually rich year for Indian non-fiction, be it biographies (*Ashoka* by Nayanjot Lahiri), city histories (*Ahmedabad: A City in the World* by Amrita Shah), or reminiscences (*Israel as a Gift from the Arabs* by Shail Mayaram). But what really dominated discourse was the debate over the growing intolerance in Indian society, aided in no small measure by public authorities. And nothing, for me, explains the growth of majoritarian consciousness with its chosen symbols over which to classify people as desirable or otherwise than Akshaya Mukul's remarkably informative and sobering account, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (Harper Collins Publishers India). The book stands out not only because it is the first attempt at exploring the Gita Press archives, but also because it drives home the



Photograph by Deepak Nayyar, from his book 'Faces and Places' (Roli Books)

remarkable energy and tenacity with which Hindu ideologues have pushed their social project of making an India of their imagination. It is also a sobering reminder to many 'secular' activists who mistakenly believe that merely by isolating ideologically incompatible individuals and denying them space in official bodies of education and culture, India can be converted to a secular, democratic republic. Above all it drives home the lesson that making a new society and people is a continuing work in progress.

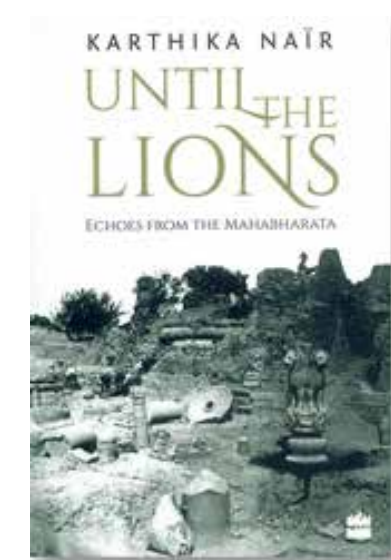
— HARSH SETHI
Consulting Editor of *Seminar*.

Far too often while studying communalism, we have trained our lenses on the moments of spectacular violence, ignoring the silent processes at work, which culminate in this violence. Lesser studied still are the intellectual worlds in which such ideologies thrive and receive nourishment. Akshaya Mukul's *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* is a brilliant study of the forging of a Hindu public in post-colonial India through the unlikely vehicle of an unglamorous publishing house. It is certainly my book of the year.

A book which I missed reading – a mistake I shall soon rectify – is Patrick Cockburn's *The Rise of Islamic State* (Leftword), believed to be one of the most sober and clear-eyed account of the developments in the region by one of the most respected journalists today. I'm also looking forward to Tabish Khair's book of essays *The New Xenophobia* (OUP).

— MANISHA SETHI
Consulting Associate Editor of *Biblio* and author of *KafkaLand: Prejudice, Law and Counterterrorism in India*.

Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (HarperCollins Publishers India) is a beautiful, difficult,

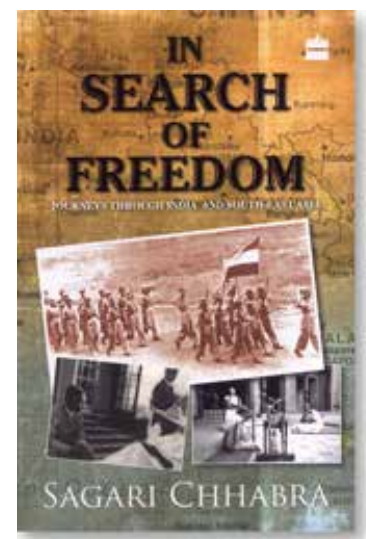


discomfiting and physically stirring book of intricately connected dramatic monologues performed by marginal characters from the *Mahabharata* who are mostly female. These voices explore not only a range of sexual, political, affective and domestic situations, but they also enact an astonishing variety of poetic, formal, linguistic and metrical experiments derived from Anglophone, European and Eastern lyric traditions. These experiments are perfectly integrated with the personalities and predicaments they articulate, and never feel like empty displays of virtuosity. Apart from being a poet, Nair is also a producer and curator of contemporary European dance, which profoundly informs her poetry. Her great predecessors are creators of performance like Peter Brook and Patrice Chéreau, and the notes and references to her marvellous poems are full of dance, cinema and music, together with works of other poets and writers.

— AVEEK SEN
Senior Assistant Editor (editorial pages) at *The Telegraph*, Calcutta and *Biblio* Editorial Board member.

Until the Lions by Karthika Nair is an exceptional book. Personally, I am seldom impressed by mere technical bravura or scale (the *Mahabharata*, on which this book is based, offers a ready supply of that in any case), but I am always struck by subtlety, depth and integrity of form. The women characters of this epic – from Hidimbi to Uttara and many shadowy presences in between – come alive in compelling dramatic monologues that segue between diverse poetic forms, swiveling dramatically from cameo to centre-stage. The result is not a series of grand rhetorical flourishes. Instead, these monologues make room for the overlooked, the marginal, the quirky, combining direct and oblique interrogations of the status quo with a tender wealth of detail.

— ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM
poet and author of *When God is a Traveller* (HarperCollins).



For me the most significant book of the year was Sagari Chhabra's *In Search of Freedom: Journeys through India and South-East Asia* (HarperCollins Publishers India). It fills a gendered lacuna in our understanding of the Indian Freedom movement. Chhabra's journeys to recover the voices of women who took part in the struggle, either as Gandhians or as members of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Rani of Jhansi regiment, combine personal anecdote with the urgency of historical recovery. Witty and poignant this was a truly delightful and important read.

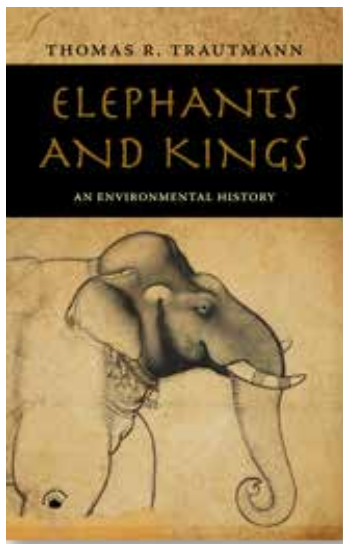
As for the most anticipated book of 2016, I am actually looking forward to an entire series. The Hogarth Shakespeare initiative is set to launch next year to mark the bard's 400th death anniversary, promising to bring together novels based on his plays by writers such as Anne Tyler, Margaret Atwood and Howard Jacobson. Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* based on *The Taming of the Shrew* should be out around next June.

— AMRITA SEN
Associate Professor of English,
Oklahoma State University.

No country in the world has been so self-consciously intellectual, so proud of its sophisticated tastes, so enamoured of clarity, rigour and elegance of its language and so convinced of its role as the torch-bearer of universal values, especially since its 1789 Revolution, than France. That explains why the world held the French in thrall for more than two centuries. And then, from the 1960s onwards, as their economic and military power began to wane, as did their cultural and intellectual influence, pride gave way to relentless pessimism.

Sudhir Hazarasingh, a Mauritian-born professor of politics at Oxford, provides an excellent, if incomplete, account of the highs and lows of French thought in his book *How The French Think* (Allen Lane, London). Nothing I have read this year comes anywhere near its erudition, lucidity, wit and, not least, its exquisite prose. The author's conclusion – that despite the tragedies that periodically befall them the French still have what it takes to astound the world – comes as a relief, particularly to a vintage Francophile like myself.

— DILEEP PADGAONKAR
Founder Editor of *Biblio*.



Thomas Trautmann's *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Permanent Black) was the best book I read this year. The book argues that elephants have survived in India – unlike China – because they were prized by kings, not for religious or ethical reasons but primarily because of their role in warfare. Pulling together a vast array of sources, this erudite and engaging account greatly broadens the scope of environmental writing in India. I am still reading Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton University Press) because almost every page of it provokes thought. It is as a story about the matsutake mushroom, which grows in disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere and fetches fabulous prices in Japan. The book traces this commodity chain to show how fungal ecologies and forest histories enter capitalism and promises to show the possibilities of living with nature in an era of human depredation.

— AMITA BAVISKAR
Associate Professor, Institute of Economic Growth and *Biblio* Editorial Board member.

The Emperor Far Away: Travels at the Edge of China (Bloomsbury) is a book about the borderlands of China, the regions where China shares its borders with its neighbours. This book gets its title from the Chinese proverb, "The mountains are high and the Emperor far away" (*Shan gao Huangdi yuan*). David Eimer is the *Daily Telegraph*'s Beijing correspondent and does us here in India a great service by re-introducing us to our immediate neighbours in the north with one of the best travelogues in recent times.

A good travelogue is a good piece of writing, which is not only enjoyed by the readers, but also offers valuable guidance. The most important rule of travel writing is to show, not tell, wherever possible. One should feel as if

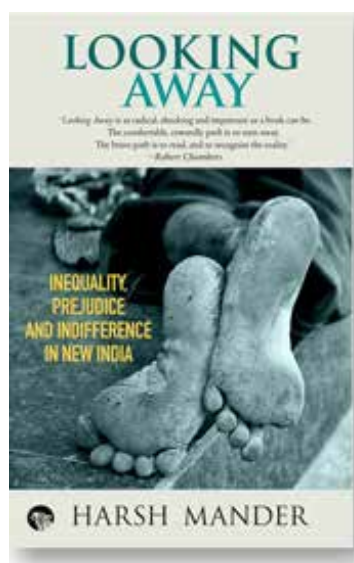
eavesdropping on a conversation about a magical and mysterious world. This skill is evident in every page of the 308-page book. The snap shots of Tibet and Xinjiang it provides you tell entirely different stories of two of the most troubled regions in China. No punches are pulled.

— MOHAN GURUSWAMY
Author and President, Centre for Policy Alternatives, New Delhi.

I enjoyed reading Steven Wilkinson's *Army and Nation: The military and Indian democracy since independence* (Harvard University Press) because it is a comprehensive account of the organisational principles of the Indian Army and employs a unique, inter-disciplinary methodology to address key concerns of civil-military relations in India. Wilkinson's exhaustive quantitative data – on recruitment, regimental composition and its restructuring – carefully explains India's successful record in keeping the military out of politics, unlike some of its South Asian counterparts. It is a significant addition to the scholarship on not just civil-military relations but also post-colonial 'governance'. It highlights key policies of security management, and, command and control strategies pursued by the Indian state that have played a vital role in strengthening civilian structures of governance since 1947.

I'm looking forward to reading Srinath Raghavan's *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939-1945* (Penguin, 2016) on the Second World War. Raghavan, awarded the 2015 Infosys Prize, has injected new dynamism into the study of South Asian military and diplomatic history. I'm interested in learning through his book about how the Second World War – now in the 70th anniversary of its conclusion – continues to shape and inform our historical understandings of this period.

—VIPUL DUTTA
PhD Candidate at King's College London



In *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India* (Speaking Tiger, New Delhi) Harsh Mander documents not only the terrible disparity this country has promoted but how, like Marie Antoinette, we have insulated ourselves from "Bharat" and averted our gaze.

India now has the fifth largest concentration of dollar billionaires, after the US and China; the third largest middle class after China and the US; and the single largest concentration of the poor.

Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze refer to "revenues foregone" through policies and measures to benefit the private sector, which since 1991 has been bloated through LPG – liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. In 2011-12, even during the so-called pro-poor policies of Sonia Gandhi, Rs 5,300 billion of corporate taxes, customs and excise duties were written off, a staggering 5.7 per cent of GDP. Of this waiver, just exemptions on diamond and gold imports – a dire necessity for our Marie Antoinettes – were estimated to leave the country poorer by Rs 570 billion. This was twice the estimated additional cost of the much-maligned National Food Security law.

—DARRYL D'MONTE
Founder Editor of *Biblio*.



Early in 2015 I was told that Elena Ferrante's *The Neapolitan Novels* and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* – both with their fourth volumes published in English this year – are must-reads for committed fiction readers. So, I have virtually followed two subversive women in Italy and waded with wonderment into more than 2,000 pages of a Scandinavian man's serial preoccupation with himself. Feminist and post-feminist, relational and narcissistic, North and South, the global-American culture-boutique seems to be boundless! But coming up for air and taking in the noxious fumes of Delhi, I need focus. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (Hachette India) gleams quietly in the smog. Thank God, our godmen didn't hear of it or they would have got it banned! Searing and lyrical, but most significant to me because of hopes raised by the writer's name! When she wins a major international award there could be some global publicist zeroing in on Anuradha as the next buzzword in books. Stranger things have already happened!

— ANURADHA MARWAH
writer and academic.

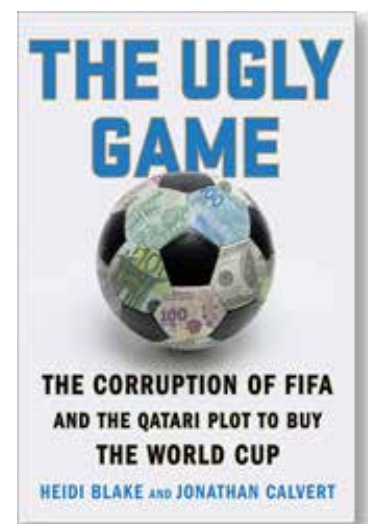
There's a special type of hell that artists inhabit and Benjamin Wood captures it with pulse perfect precision in *The Ecliptic* (Scribner). Divided into four parts *The Ecliptic* traces the journey of young painter Elspeth 'Knell' Conroy, who leaves behind the trappings of celebrity and the dizzy art scene of 1960s London and escapes to a gated, eerie artist's community outside of Istanbul; except, the past comes knocking in the form of a young man named Fullerton. What makes this novel so riveting beyond the stunningly choreographed peaks and dips of near-perfect prose is the way Wood maintains simultaneity of experience, and plays

with linearity. The artist emerges as a filter of her personal history, and one feels the painful desperation of the creative process as Elspeth struggles to reconcile her loaded interior world artistically in present time.

— KARISHMA ATTARI
author of *I See You*.

Akhil Sharma took more than 12 years to write his second novel *Family Life* (Penguin Books). It is a story of his family's emigration from India to the US in the aftermath of the Emergency in the late 1970s. When an accident leaves his elder brother brain damaged after a swimming pool accident, you realise it is not going to be another sunny narrative of a family successfully chasing the American Dream. Instead, Sharma's powerful novel is a meditation on loss and grief and a searing tale of an emigration gone wrong and how a family unravels after a tragedy. The austere prose helps make it the most powerful novel I have read this year.

— SOUTIK BISWAS,
India Editor for the BBC News site.



One of the major talking points of the year has been the scandal in FIFA. And the book that has been at the centre of the storm is *The Ugly Game* by Heidi Blake and Jonathan Calvert (Simon and Schuster, UK).

While there is much talk about whether Qatar will be able to hold on to the 2022 World Cup, which it won against all odds in December 2010, the way the bid was orchestrated is now the subject of intense media scrutiny, especially after the publication of *The Ugly Game*. FIFA executive committee members from across the world were paid sums between 50,000 USD to 2 million USD to secure their votes for the Qatar bid. Most disappointing is the way junkets were arranged and lobbyists employed by bid committees from across the world. Except England, all other bidders employed middlemen and lobbyists to swing members and voters to their side. For an organisation that has fair play as one of its principal ideals, such actions by its 24 member executive and heads of football associations from all parts of the world, who arbitrate on all the key decisions, is plain shocking. While we echo Bill Shankly's prophetic words, 'while some say football is a matter of life and death, I say it is far more serious than that', we must also acknowledge that what we see on the field of play is not the entire story. from such acts of corruption.

— BORJA MAJUMDAR
Sports historian and commentator,
author and member of the *Biblio*
Editorial Board.