

## 'I show India for what it is'

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Cultural anthropologist Stephen Huyler's recent book on the identity of Indian women documents a sweeping pace of transition, demanding huge changes from them. How do they cope? He discusses this with *Kishore Singh*.

Fifty-five million women — that's one in every six women in the world — live in India, yet the press they receive is at odds with their extraordinary — sometimes demanding but always dignified — lives.

And few know them, or at least their lives, as well as Stephen P Huyler, a widely admired photographer, cultural anthropologist and art historian who has spent 37 years travelling to India to document what we in India so easily miss: their painted prayers, the immense beauty of their lives and the changes that mark every phase of their existence.

In *Daughters of India*, Huyler profiles 20 women across geographies where a Muslim woman can be named Indra Banu without any seeming contradiction. He highlights the cult of goddess worship, explaining that the word for both "strength" and "power" in India is *shakti*, which also means "goddess". "Several hundred million Hindus worship the Divine Feminine as the primary focus of their daily devotion," he writes. Despite cases of dowry murders and female infanticide, or the injustices meted out to widows, Huyler finds Indian womanhood both resilient and progressive.

Even as we tend to overlook them in society, Huyler documents the lives, in pictures and words, of Pushpa, who lives in a Mumbai slum and works as a cleaner at the airport, of Achamma and Minhazz who break the traditional mould, but also of Lalita and Savitri and Kusima...women from Orissa and Gujarat, Bihar and Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra who make up the fabric of the country with their paintings and floral decorations.

"I show respect for women and for their traditions and customs of appropriate behaviour," notes Huyler, "I find that both women, and the men who generally protect them, open to me easily and, as I get to know them, I get emotionally involved with their lives."

Answering a set of emailed questions on a plane seat while on a book tour in Denver, Huyler shares his ideas on the project and what it has meant to him. Excerpts:

### **Doesn't the book have a dated sense to it?**

How could you think that this book might be dated? I am very well read about India and Indian women's issues and I am not aware of any other book ever written that attempts a cross-cultural survey of Indian women's identity.

There are many good anthropological and sociological studies of Indian women, but all focus on specific aspects of women or on specific regions, most trying to prove a particular point.

Although no book can be objective, I try as much as possible, using my 37 years of interviews of Indian women, to draw together a broad introduction to the identity of Indian women. I believe this book is topical and relevant to understanding contemporary India.

### **But you might be accused of exoticisation.**

Quite the contrary: I purposefully did not choose any "exotic" stories for this book. I am a cultural anthropologist. I work with and try to document the pulse of everyday men and women in India.

This has been the underlying purpose of my life's work. It would have been particularly easy to choose exotic women to portray in this book: film stars, princesses, pop stars, major figures in society, political figures, among others. I hope my book will help readers to understand more clearly the identity of the majority of Indian women.

**How involved were you in the lives of the women you portrayed? Did it ever become a problem?**

I am no paparazzi. I introduce myself or am introduced by friends to an individual and try not to be intrusive or invasive in my approach in getting to know them. I honour their sense of privacy and boundaries and try to familiarise myself with the local customs that will prevent me from making major social gaffes. Many women are shy and withdrawn.

Some are still behind the veil or are withheld from open discourse with an outside male, particularly a foreigner. I try to do nothing that would offend those customs. I begin my work by getting to know the individual and her family before I begin to ask questions, take notes or, particularly, to photograph.

I would never do any of those things without first being invited to do so. It is essential that both they and their families are comfortable with my presence. Some of the women have become good friends. Others naturally keep more of a distance and that is fine.

You ask if my involvement has ever become a problem. Not in the sense that it has created any issues. Obviously, some women are not comfortable being interviewed and I just do not pursue them or their stories. Why would I?

**What have you taken away as a photographer and a person from this assignment?**

I could write an entire book just in answer to this question. In fact, *Daughters of India* IS the answer to that question. My life is immeasurably enriched by my experiences in India. My photography has been one of my means of recording those experiences and conveying them to others. But personally, my own interactions with individuals and the valuable lessons that they have taught me are what keep bringing me back. I love my work. I am affected by the people I meet and by their individual stories.

**Could you compare this with the lives of women in any other country, continent or civilisation?**

One of the primary reasons for writing *Daughters of India* is to convey to Western audiences that the women of India are not so foreign as our press and media lead us to believe.

The lives that I portray in this book might at first seem to convey customs and ways of living that are unique to each individual subculture, but each story also has within it aspects that are common to women everywhere in the world.

I am trying to demystify India and Indian women for the foreign reader. These women grapple with many of the same problems that affect women everywhere, though these issues may be presented in the story of a unique individual.

### **Does the sense of a crusader pervade your work?**

I sincerely hope that no one views me as a “crusader”! I am hardly that. I realised many years ago that I have been given an unusual privilege as a foreigner: direct access from my very first days in India in 1971 to living in Indian homes and interacting with individuals.

I did not enter India through an academic programme or through any of the grant agencies. I came through personal invitation (Kamaladevi Chhatteropadhyay and Rukmini Devi Arundale.) They placed me in homes wherever I chose to travel and I have continued to expand those personal links over the decades. Few foreigners have had those opportunities and I decided to write about them and about the people and cultures with whom I became familiar.

I think that the best way to describe my motive is the Indian use of the English word duty. I have been the recipient of so much generosity and thoughtfulness over these years that it is my duty to do something to give back. My books and exhibitions are an expression of that duty.

I am not a crusader who is coming into India to try to make changes. Quite the contrary: I am there simply to record what I see and experience and to try to convey those experiences to others who have not had these opportunities. My only sense of “mission”, if that might be the correct word, is back in the West (not in India) where I speak to audiences whom I feel have deep misunderstandings of South Asia. I try through my books, lectures and exhibitions to help to give a more balanced view of India.

### **Are women all over the world struggling as much as Indian women?**

Yes, in many ways India is no exception. Women have a hard deal in comparison to men in one way or another everywhere in the world. (Even in North America and Western Europe.) But when India is compared to large areas of Africa and the Middle East, for example, most Indian women have more freedoms and more ability to stand up for their rights and make a difference.

You set out to challenge the negative perceptions about Indian women. What do you think are some of their greatest challenges?

This is a very loaded question! I cannot answer it easily, especially sitting on a plane working on my laptop with a short deadline! There are innumerable challenges that Indian women face. Some of them are: poverty, increasing patriarchalism, the conflict of modern and traditional lifestyle choices, the increasing polarisation of religion, sanitation and disease, education, and so many, many more.

### **How were you guided in this effort?**

My major mentors have been Indian women: Kamaladevi Chhatteropadhyay, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Sunithi Narayan, Teni Sawhney, and others. I have a good capacity for listening and they have informed me greatly. I have learned from each of the women I have interviewed for this book and from countless others. I have a large, updated library of books about contemporary women's issues and I try to keep up with new research. The text of *Daughters of India* was carefully read by several Indian feminists before publication and I adapted it according to their suggestions.

Indians might hope you had looked at more upwardly mobile, urbanised, career women instead of paying just lip service in that direction.

I heartily disagree with your assessment that I have paid only "lip service" to upwardly mobile, urbanised, career women. What about Achamma, Minhazz and Swayam? All of them are contemporary, forward-looking, leading edge urbanites. I have also chosen other women who are less high profile and yet still urban: Sunithi, Roopa and Pushpa. But this is intentionally a book about mainstream India, not glitzy, urban and urbane India.

**In your years of working in India, how have you seen Indian women (and India itself) change?**

I have travelled more extensively in India than almost any other foreigner in history. I observe closely the peoples and cultures of the subcontinent. India is still 71 per cent rural. Twenty-25 per cent of the population is Dalit. India still has the largest tribal population of any country.

These cultures cannot and should not be swept under the carpet. I do not romanticise traditional Indian cultures. Quite the contrary. I try to show them for what they are: intelligent, forward-thinking individuals who are trying to make important changes in their lives. Nothing I portray suggests a stagnant or backward society.

I show India for what it is: constantly changing, adapting to new technologies and new social pressures, innovative and finding creative ways to deal with many formidable issues.

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**DAUGHTERS OF INDIA**

**Art and Identity**

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