



An Outline of the Republic

By Siddhartha Deb
ISBN: 9780060501570

Introduction

"Herman seemed convinced it was a good story: sex, violence, political turmoil, the remoteness of the border, with the World War II campaign against the Japanese like a heavy, detailed backdrop in an old painting. These were Herman's terms, not mine." But encouraged by the prospect of working for a German magazine, eager to escape the confines of his routine at a Calcutta daily, journalist Amrit Singh sets off to investigate the story behind a photograph of a young woman being held captive by two machine-gun-wielding insurgents. His journey takes him to the farthest outposts of India, to a region governed by competing ethnic factions, corrupt officials, and various militias, to a place where nothing is as it seems, adrift in murky rumors of visionary man whose ideas promise prosperity and peace. As strangers with even stranger stories cross his path, as landslides, bus strikes and army checkpoints threaten to force him back, Amrit travels deeper into a besieged land, where "illusions mask an unbearable reality" in this atmospheric tale of fear and cynicism run amok.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of his journey, waiting in his hotel room, Amrit encounters the first of many strangers who wish to share their stories with him. Does Tripathi, the assistant manager in tea garden, have a covert motive for talking to Amrit? Is he looking for a means of escape? Can we assume that Joseph is also involved somehow? What does the suitcase contain in Tripathi's dream? What does it represent in Amrit's dream? What is revealed about Amrit's character when he finds photographs instead of money in the suitcase? What is the significance of his path toward the suitcase when Amrit find himself "moving like a piece in a chess match ... restricted by the arbitrary rules of the game"?
2. As Amrit follows Robiul to his home, "a gap appeared in the pavement ahead of us, a missing flagstone with a flashing glimpse of the swirling, dark waters of the sewers below." Discovering another room in the Sentinel's obituary rooms, Amrit feels "as if I had stepped through a mirror." Could one compare Amrit's journey to that of *Alice in Wonderland*? Why or why not? Consider the images, metaphors and similes used throughout the novel. How do they hint at, or foreshadow, the reality awaiting Amrit at the end of his search?
3. As Robiul waits with Amrit at the bus stop, he points out posters of local insurgents on the shelter walls, "the rising sun of their organization pasted like an indigenous brand name next to the advertisements for soap, washing powder, and cigarettes put out by big companies." Does the branded nature of the insurgents' poster distort or reinforce their image? Do you find the easy comparison between insurgency and soap disturbing? Does this image hint at other inversions yet to come? What does this image also convey regarding the pervasive effects of marketing in a globalized culture and economy?
4. Who is the woman in mourning at the insurgent-lieutenant's cremation? By her description, voice and mannerisms, does she resemble another character in the novel? At the hotel, what does she request? She tells Amrit, "this is the story you are looking for" -- so why does he run away? Are her words -- "you'll never finish your story, do you understand, you won't get what you're looking for" -- prophetic?
5. Rajan, the caretaker of the hotel in Dimapur, confides in Amrit of his former life as an assistant bank manager. When faced with army officers carrying forged banknotes, Rajan compares his shock to the "loss of religion ... as if some mad iconoclast had shown him how easy it was to dress up a doll or a book and genuflect to it and bombard it with empty rituals." How does this foreshadow Amrit's encounter with the Burmese filmmaker? How does it prefigure what we will get know about Malik?
6. In the jeep ride to Kohima with Malik's wife, Amrit recalls a quote by Thomas Carlyle: "No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men." Do you agree? What words are used repeatedly to describe Malik? How does each speaker tinge his or her description of Malik to resemble what he/she would most like Malik to be? Why? What are the reasons why no one has seen Malik's work in person? What is the significance of the fact that no one, not even the Burmese filmmaker, can remember Malik's face? Would you describe Malik as a charlatan, a visionary, or as something else?
7. As Amrit looks at photographs of the Prosperity Project, he "wanted for a moment to believe wholeheartedly in what I had heard of Malik and his project" despite his nagging skepticism. Why? Why does Maria say, "Who wants to look closer and find out that it's not true?" Do you think illusions are necessary or damaging to people trying to sustain hope in the face of an "unbearable reality"?
8. In Kohima, Maria tells Amrit an "incredible Manipuri story" of a god and goddess who take human form to prove their love to each other. According to the story, what do people in Manipur believe "when things are very bad in our human world"? What will happen when this mythological contest is over? Maria finds the story quite romantic, but what does the story also say about the importance of myth during times of suffering? How do such myths function to make the uncertainties of life more bearable? Is there a difference between the myth of gods in love, and the story of the Prosperity Project?
9. Both Tripathi and Minister Vimeddo go to elaborate lengths to appear as though Amrit is interviewing them. Why do they seem desperate to share their stories with Amrit? How are they different from Captain Sharma, Mr. Das, and the Dimapur hotel owner? Do the last three appear to share Captain Sharma's view that "the absence of old rules and the ability to make up new ones" feels like "walking on the moon"? In Imphal, what does the engineering student, Meghen, mean when he says that to some people, "lower gravity doesn't seem like freedom, but a constraint they've always struggled against"? How do the medical students compare to all the characters Amrit encounters? What does each person's story tell us about the nature of human honesty and decency?
10. From Euan Sutherland's memoir, what do we learn of the British contribution to the present political situation? Do Sutherland's accounts of the newspaper he edited, and of the soldier Jim, create antecedents to the ongoing narrative in **An Outline of the Republic**? How do Jim's actions reveal what lies beneath the veneer of civilization? How do Wright's actions reveal the inhumanity that can coexist with notions of civility? Does Amrit's search for the nameless woman in a photograph resemble Jim's work as "an amanuensis for the spirits of dead enemy soldiers"? How do both men fare at the conclusion of their self-appointed tasks?
11. **An Outline of the Republic** follows the structure of a traditional quest novel, yet can Amrit, the protagonist, be said to be the hero? Are there any heroes? How would you characterize Amrit Singh? In Imphal, he observes that his notes were a "partial, incomplete account ... the guesthouse with the stripped rooms, the woman at the cremation had all been left out. By contrast there was much of Malik." Why did Amrit ignore the strangers whose stories hinted at a truth he had yet to discover?
12. At Max Muller Bhavan, why does Amrit conceal from the Director the true nature of the Prosperity Project? He began his

journey with the hope that the photograph would leave to his "best story yet." Is that hope fulfilled? Why do you think Herman the German encouraged him? In the last paragraph, Amrit comes to a fork in the road and chooses the path away from his home. What do you think becomes of Amrit Singh?

About the author

Siddhartha Deb was born in northeastern India in 1970. He has worked as a journalist in Calcutta and Delhi and has written for *The Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, *New Statesman*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Guardian*, and *Columbia Journalism Review*. He came to New York in 1998 on a literature fellowship and now divides his time between New York and India. His first novel, **The Point of Return**, was published by Ecco in 2003 and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.