



## A Place Within

*M.G. Vassanji*

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**A *Globe and Mail* Best Book**

It would take many lifetimes, it was said to me during my first visit, to see all of India. The desperation must have shown on my face to absorb and digest all I possibly could. This was not something I had articulated or resolved; and yet I recall an anxiety as I travelled the length and breadth of the country, senses raw to every new experience, that even in the distraction of a blink I might miss something profoundly significant.

I was not born in India, nor were my parents; that might explain much in my expectation of that visit. Yet how many people go to the homeland of their grandparents with such a heartload of expectation and momentousness; such a desire to find themselves in everything they see? Is it only India that clings thus, to those who've forsaken it; is this why Indians in a foreign land seem always so desperate to seek each other out? What was India to me?

The inimitable M.G. Vassanji turns his eye to India, the homeland of his ancestors, in this powerfully moving tale of family and country. Part travelogue, part history, **A Place Within** is M.G. Vassanji's intelligent and beautifully written journey to explore where he belongs.

## A Place Within Details

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Author : M.G. Vassanji

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### **Roberta says**

I liked this to begin with and I like his voice - contemplative and gentle. Vassanji tries to pull over a dozen years worth of trips into one book and, as a result, the book becomes confusing. I was always trying to figure out when more current events were happening. I learned a lot about India but I'm not sure it will stay in place. It feels like a think layer of learning.

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### **Kiran says**

A wonderful read by a keen observer of people and the places they inhabit both physical and mental. It takes the reader on a gentle quest, without making a fuss, and leaves one at the door to enter , or not, to discover new worlds or to retrace ones steps to the old, familiar landscapes the feel safe.

A highly recommended book and writer. Vassanji skillfully deals with the human condition and our search for meaning and connectivity.

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### **Patty says**

A memoir about a man going back to India to discover his family's roots. I always enjoy it when a book focuses on places I know well, and this book lavishes attention on the cities I personally happen to be most familiar with: Delhi, Baroda, Ahmedabad (okay, there's also chapters on Shimla and Kerala, but I haven't been to either). Unfortunately I didn't like much else about the book. Vassanji's style wants to be deep and poetic, but he doesn't actually have anything interesting to say. And I love purple prose! I will totally read your multi-page description of a sunset! Just as long as you're saying something new, and not merely repeating cliches worn pale and empty through overuse. Vassanji really wants to make a connection to his family's history or uncover some deep truth about himself, but he doesn't manage to do so. Which isn't surprising, after all, when it's been generations since his family left and there doesn't seem to be any relationships they've maintained, but if that's the case, admit it! Write about your lack of connection and how that makes you feel. But instead Vassanji just keeps wandering in circles, promising an insight that he never reaches and obfuscating how shallow his "rediscovery" is. Not recommended.

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### **Julie says**

Lovely little book for those seeking a window into India. Very descriptive.

I found it perhaps a little too self-reflective, at times, which means in this instance that I felt like I was reading someone's journal that I didn't particularly want to read. At times, the minutiae (and incidentals) that meant so much to the author leaves the reader out in the cold.

Still, and over all, one gets the sense of being an armchair tourist, and sometimes that's good enough.

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## Ozen says

Vassanji sums it up the best: "This country that I've come so brazenly to rediscover goes as deep as it is vast and diverse. It's only oneself one ever discovers." (p.322)

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## Manu says

The best travelogues, I always have believed, travel across time and space. This one goes beyond, as it also involves the author's search for his own identity. When an observer writes about places/people, there is always an amount of detachment and/or objectivity and that's what I have seen in many travelogue writing styles. And that was probably why I took a bit longer than usual to adjust to the author's way of seeing places and writing about them - he is writing and processing/linking the information at the same time. Once that was taken care of, I enjoyed the ride.

It begins with a chance train journey caused by an airlines strike, and his description of people and scenarios during an Indian Railways trip is something I could easily identify with and even visualise! From Kerala to Calcutta to Baroda to Delhi, the first section zips, giving us peeks of the people and the place.

The next sections focus on specific places - Delhi to begin with, taking us back in time through a narrative that uses monuments as devices for the time travel. Though not given its due, Delhi has remnants of its past bursting out of every corner and the author manages to bring out stories of mystics, rulers, poets and even the lives of regular people from years past. Tughlaqs, Mughals, Nadir Shah, Ghalib, Nizamuddin, all come to life even as we read about Karim's, and chats with Khushwant Singh.

Shimla is next, and it is almost as the pace of the narrative somehow matches the place itself as there are long, descriptive treks, relaxed evenings and long conversations with people. The Mall, the court where Nathu Ram Godse's trial took place, train trips from Delhi to Shimla, a meeting with Mulk Raj Anand, conversations with Bhishm Sahni, a trip to Amritsar and reunions all make this a slow but interesting read. The search for the land of origin of the author's community - the Khojas and more specifically, his own family, actually takes place in Gujarat. Trips in time to the era of great kings are interspersed with the riot ridden scenario of Gujarat around 2002, and the author is able to get into the minds of people living there- their biases, insecurities and their fear. A meeting with the father of Irfan and Yusuf Pathan, shaking minarets and a conversation with an ex-correspondent of the Times of India, who gave everything up to tend to an ancient grave (of a pir), visiting the places where Jinnah, Z A Bhutto's families came from, a climb up Girnar - a pilgrimage, all add texture to this section.

Kerala is the final section, which is only a few pages, and the author meets famous authors and travels the length of the state, providing glimpses of life. The journey ends, fittingly at Kanyakumari, the tip of the subcontinent. Almost. About 3 pages are left for the Himalayas. :)

It is interesting to see the author switching between his identities, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, as he relates to people and places. The flitting between time frames - historic to present - also helps form a non linear narrative. The book worked differently for me (from other travelogues) and is very much a journey within too. It was a book that took getting used to, but was worth the effort. :)

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## Sanjay says

A genteel and courtly look at the land of Vassanji's forebears. Written with detailed observation, affection

and a desire to link history to the present. However, Vassanji tries to encompass over 15 years' worth of trips to India into one volume, and this sometimes results in a straggly mess.

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### **Diane says**

I nearly stopped reading this book at about page 70 but am glad I persevered. The author is Indian, but was born and grew up in East Africa - mostly Dar Es Salaam. His parents were also born in East Africa. They maintained many Indian customs, spoke Indian languages (Gujarati, Kutchi, some Hindi, some Urdu) and strong religious ties to Ismaili Islam - which seems to be (my knowledge is solely from the book) a poetic and mystic blend of Islam and Hindu faiths.

The book is the author's pilgrimage to discover himself in India and India in himself and covers many visits over many years. The very best parts - and there are many - are when Vassanji describes his own travels to temples and to visit other writers and his attempts to find evidence of his family's existence in India - these activities always lead to his reflections on the religious tensions and violence that cause him emotional and physical despair. Vassanji loves India and feels that it is within him, but he lives in Toronto.

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