

# Book review: Our India: Reflections on a Nation Betwixt and Between

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## From serving the army to farming and aviation, Captain Gopinath is qualified to write on a wide range of issues

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By S Giridhar

Our India: Reflections on a Nation Betwixt and Between (Book cover)

Everyone knows that Captain Gopinath is uncommonly multi-faceted – soldier, farmer, entrepreneur ; and aviation pioneer. Most famously, people will recall him as the person who offered an air ticket for one rupee, thus opening the skies to everyone. I had read 43 pages of Captain Gopinath's latest book, *Our India: Reflections on a Nation Betwixt and Between*, when I met him for the first time. And before I had reached Page 99, in the space of a week, I met him on two more occasions.

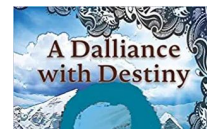
In a sense, these meetings were useful, for I completed reading the book with some insights about the author. I saw a man visibly carrying his 71 years, smaller than I had imagined, and one who was content to smile more and talk less at these gatherings. That quiet demeanour is not to be taken seriously, for he has been prolific in his writing, bringing to people his views with candour, an open heart and fearless honesty. And his book, *Our India*, is an anthology of 53 essays that he has written over the past few years, presented in four sections: Enterprise, Society and Governance, Politics and Musings.

Publishing houses are generally not keen on anthologies. Even more so when the essays have been already published in newspapers and online magazines. But such is Gopinath's deep and sustained engagement in every domain that HarperCollins knew they must publish. When Gopinath writes on farming, you will acknowledge that the man - after resigning from the army - went to a barren land near his village to till, sow and harvest with his own hands. And when the captain recounts tales of his army life in the heights of Nathu La and in the front lines during the Bangladesh Liberation (the 1971 war), he prepares you to listen to his views on how we must respond to Chinese aggression and crossing of the LOC.

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## Sweep and confidence



It's the same when he writes on business and enterprise. With his experience in the aviation business, his essays on the Tata's acquisition of Air India, whether it makes business sense and what they must do to make this a success, are written with the sweep and confidence of a person who knows the subject intimately.

Not surprisingly, the risk-taker has dabbled in politics too. And so, our author in his 30s has been a district president of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and in his 60s a member of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). He writes of his experience of with the BJP and how he hosted a classic Iyengar meal for Vajpayee at his village home. He writes with unconcealed fondness about Vajpayee.

Gopinath calls India, 'a nation betwixt and between' because he believes we are 'neither a totalitarian Hindu state nor an enlightened democracy'. He calls issues as he sees them, and he can thus be critical of the BJP on an issue while being scathing of the Congress on another. The captain is his own man.

Every essay respects the reader and his time. Therefore, Gopinath presents his views on a topic with personal anecdotes or a compelling narrative, inviting the reader to enjoy the journey and then reflect. Each is invariably sprinkled with interesting quotes, from Albert Camus to Browning, Sun Tsu to Napoleon, Einstein to Feynman and from Mahatma Gandhi to Rabindranath Tagore. Gurudev, he quotes often and not surprisingly, for his father read a lot of Tagore to him when Gopinath was in school. The ability to quote pithily is an art that the captain has perfected, knowing that this style of writing will work for him and his reader. Since we met last, the captain and I have conversed over WhatsApp and in one of his messages he quoted Hegel, in a humorously self-deprecating way. From which I can hazard that the author's absorption and recall from his rich and eclectic reading must be special, for him to pull quotes at will.



About the Book

**Title:** Our India: Reflections on a Nation Betwixt and Between

**Author:** Captain GR Gopinath

**Publisher:** HarperBusiness

**Pages:** 239 pages

**Price:** ₹479

**Repetitive examples**

Anthologies that are a compilation of published essays, run a risk. When Gopinath writes twice or even thrice in a particular month on the China problem or the farm laws agitation or the Covid pandemic, and all these articles are featured in a compendium, the repetitive nature of the essays can distract the reader. In a few cases, even the anecdotes and quotes may be repeated. Add to that the fact that newspapers usually restrict Op-ed essays to not more than a thousand words. And so, while reading his essays, if some feel that Gopinath has not adequately dealt with a particular line of argument, it is necessary to remember that is because of the limitation imposed by the word limit on newspaper articles.

Personally, I enjoyed most of these essays - on farming, the defence of the nation against China, the stories of business and enterprise and the need for India to embrace humanity and *Vasudeiva Kutumbakam* in its true spirit. His short essays on eminent personalities such as RK Laxman, Pandit Jasraj, Vajpayee, Girish Karnad and others are refreshing. Since he has known most of them socially, he shares personal vignettes to help us know these people better. The humour that runs through the storytelling is again a craft well-honed. Among the breeziest stories in the book, is the one on how the captain and RK Laxman hit it off (Gopinath cannily speaking to Laxman in Kannada the first time) and how the legendary cartoonist's immortal common man became the mascot for Air Deccan. When Gopinath presents a blow-by-blow account of the Kingfisher–Air Deccan deal, the storytelling has swag.

It is rare to find a writer who presents his points with candour, honesty, and fearlessness. Even rarer to find one who does this so agreeably. One can imagine the broad grin is ever-present even as Gopinath makes the most telling comment.

*The reviewer, S Giridhar, is a member of the Azim Premji Foundation*

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