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## In Light of India

Octavio Paz

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"One of the most brilliant and original essayists in any language."  
— Washington Post Book World

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IN LIGHT OF INDIA

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**Octavio Paz : In Light of India** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In Light of India:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Not Naked, But Through a Veil By Etienne RPI In Light of India begins with a false start. In 1951, the author was living as a junior diplomat in Paris, enjoying every minute of it in the company of poets, artists and intellectuals, when the jealousy of a more senior Mexican official had him moved to India (the lesson he retained was that diplomats may well pursue literary ambitions, but that one must avoid, at all

costs, having two writers in the same embassy at the same time.) So after a long and pleasant journey, Octavio Paz reached Bombay and set foot on the Indian subcontinent. There he discovered a country "populated by dark men with pointed mustaches and scimitars at their waists, by women with amber-colored skin, hair and eyebrow as black as crows' wings, and the huge eyes of lionesses in heat." But his erotic fantasy was brutally interrupted once again by the same implacable Mexican minister who, feeling perhaps that India was still too close to home, has him transferred to Tokyo, where another adventure began. Some eleven years and about the same number of published books later, Octavio Paz returned to India, this time as the ambassador from his country (history doesn't tell whether he exacted revenge against the jealous official that had him transferred twice against his will.) He then stayed for a little more than six years, before resigning from public office in reaction to his government's repression of the students movement in 1968. He had the occasion to come back to India for a series of lectures in 1985, and this book, part memoir and part essay, is an extended version of his lecture notes. The first part of *In Light of India* tries to answer a similar question to the one he addressed about his own country in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: to paraphrase a famous address, how can a nation conceived under particular circumstances and dedicated to a certain ideal can long endure the passing of these circumstances and the fading of this ideal. In the case of India, the specific question is: how is it possible to turn this conglomeration of peoples, religions, castes, and languages into a true nation? Octavio Paz's answer to this conundrum is a rather conventional account of India's multifaceted identity. In my opinion, this first part doesn't add much to the standard literature written by journalists or foreigners passing through India. These are "glimpses of India: signs seen indistinctly, realities perceived between light and shadow". The author takes aim at the Hindi version of nationalism or *Hindutva*, which he sees as a "political corruption of religion" that borders on fanaticism. Believers from both sides may take offense at his affirmation that "neither Hinduism nor Islam had a Renaissance, as in Europe, and thus they had no Enlightenment." But before reacting with saintly indignation, one should apply the observation that the Mexican poet makes in discussing the relationship between Gandhi and Tagore: "Dialogue between a poet and a saint is difficult because a poet, before speaking, must hear others--that is to say, their language, which belongs to everyone and to no one. A saint speaks with God or with himself, two forms of silence." Despite the distance between the two founts of ancient civilizations, Octavio Paz draws interesting parallels between Mexico and India. There are indeed a few surprising similarities between the two cultures. Paz notes the prominence of chilies in both Indian and Mexican cooking, and signals that the dish is of rather recent introduction in India. Another food probably of Mexican origin is the fruit known in India by its Spanish name: *chico*. Curry and mole are somewhat similar, and so are the Mexican tortillas and the Indian chapattis used as edible food-grabbing devices. The similarities do not stop here. It is said that the costume of the *China Poblana*, a national symbol in Mexico, is an adaptation of the clothes worn by Gujarati women, which reached Mexico through Cochin and the Philippines. The mystical illuminations of Catarina de San Juan, a local saint from Puebla who confided to her Jesuit spiritual guides, are tinted with a powerful eroticism that echoes the sexually explicit visions of devotees or Krishna or of Sufi mystics. Not coincidentally, the famous religious woman from Mexico's colonial period was born a Hindu. The second part of the book is an extended meditation over the poetry and artistic traditions of India. It is more personal in style, and brings the Mexican poet to his natural element. Classical Sanskrit poetry is little known in the West, where the translators and scholars have tended to concentrate on India's great religious and philosophical texts, on the epic poems (the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*) and on the folklore stories and fables. And yet this poetry, which was written between the fourth and the twelfth centuries, is contemporary with the height of ancient Indian civilization. The classical Sanskrit short poem, like Greek or Latin, is an epigram. Like the Greek and Latin poems, it has eloquence, nobility, a sensuality of forms, violent and sublime passions. To read these poems is to experience clarity. But--also like Greek and Latin--it doesn't know how to remain silent. It never knew the secret of the Chinese and Japanese: insinuation, oblique allusion, ellipse. Among the many poems chosen by Octavio Paz for their physical luxuriousness and their intellectual content, let us conclude with an excerpt by the lyric poet Vallana: Beauty is not in what the words say but in that which they say without saying it: not naked, but through a veil, breasts become desirable. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A man of electric intelligence By Diana Acuna Reading some of the passages of this book is like being transported to the corridors of a lavish, sinister, endless dream. He creates an exegesis of a country so elusive and full of contradictions but magnetic and magical at the same time. I particularly enjoyed reading the poem of friendship. This book is his journey's moral and philosophical testament, that is both moving and makes us reflect. POEM OF FRIENDSHIP Friendship is a river and a ring The river flows through the ring The ring is an island in the river The river says: Before there was no river, After there is only a river Before and after: that which erases friendship Erases it? The river flows, forming the ring Friendship erases time and thus it frees us It is a river that, flowing, invents its rings In the sands of the river our tracks are erased In the sands we seek the river: where has it gone? We live between oblivion and memory: This moment is an island weathered by incessant time. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Big Ideas in a Little Book By Fireside Chat Octavio Paz is clearly a deep thinker. His essays tend to be very philosophical, although for the most part, they aren't difficult to understand. His writing ranges widely. His comparison of Indian and Mexican food is fascinating. His discussion of the caste system and its origins is enlightening. His examples and discussion of ancient Sanskrit poetry will leave you hungry for more. Paz looks beneath the surface of everything he

writes about. You get a very strong sense of a man who is an original thinker. No superficial skimming or surface descriptions here. I found his Mexican background particularly beneficial. It gives him a different angle from that of an Anglo. This a very thought-full book.

One of the most brilliant and original essayists in any language (Washington Post Book World) reflects on the six years he spent in India as Mexican ambassador-and reveals how the people and culture of that extraordinary land changed his life. Translated by Eliot Weinberger.

.com Uncertainty stalks Octavio Paz. In *Light of India* is Paz's return to issues addressed in his poems of India that were inspired by his residence there three decades earlier. The paradoxes of a troubled nation are persistent, and Paz revisits the unfathomable facets of India with an eye on his Mexican homeland. Beneath the sensuous veneer of modern India lies a complex lattice of religious tendrils that reach into and influence Indian history, society, literature, and art. Paz follows these tendrils as well as anyone can, piecing together a nation of beauty, profundity, and enigma. Profundity aside, if Paz were writing about dust particles, he'd be worth reading. From *Library Journal* The Nobel laureate and ambassador to India in the Sixties, Paz infuses these three essays on India's history and culture with "perceptive comparison...between India and his native Mexico." Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Kirkus* sA personal discourse on India, broaching topics cultural, spiritual, and historical, by the Nobel laureate. While employed as a diplomat, the Mexican-born poet lived in India for six years during the 1960s. Neither a memoir nor a scholarly treatment, Paz's work is instead a meditative response to "the question that India poses to everyone who visits it." The question for Paz in particular: "How does a Mexican writer, at the end of the twentieth century, view the immense reality of India?" Answering the question, he works most fruitfully when drawing comparisons between Mexican and Indian habits. His range is instructive. For example, Paz writes about the uses of chili peppers in Indian and Mexican cooking, observing the kinship between mole sauce and Indian mola, a type of curry. Later, thinking on a larger scale, he compares the historical sense of each nation: "Neither the Indians nor the Mexicans deny their past; they cover it over and repaint it. It is a process that is not entirely conscious, and that is its effectiveness, as a protection from criticism. It is a psychological vaccine." Paz also considers literary and religious matters at length, writing provocatively about eros in classical Sanskrit poetry and the paradoxes of Hindu morality: "Indian tradition cannot conceive of freedom as a political ideal or incorporate it into the fabric of society. Not only is such freedom incompatible with the caste system; India lacks a tradition of thinking critically." This quote also illustrates the drawbacks of his approach, though, which include a tolerance for cliché and a grandiosely oracular intellectual swagger. Some of his more cerebral explorations here also suffer from hubris, intermittent condescension, and an unconcern for triteness of expression (in translation, at least). One pines, perhaps wickedly, for a candid Indian response to Paz's intelligence and his bombast. -- Copyright 1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.