



Howard Roark in New Delhi

The surprising popularity of a libertarian hero in India.

BY JENNIFER BURNS | NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2009

Consumer spending in the United States may be down, but an interest in Ayn Rand certainly is not. Sales of Rand's last novel, the vigorously pro-capitalism fable *Atlas Shrugged*, have seen a huge leap in 2009, briefly outperforming even President Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* on Amazon's best-seller list. Few 1,000-page, half-century-old tomes can claim so much.

At tea parties and town halls nationwide, amid outrage over government bailouts of Wall Street banks and Detroit carmakers and the supposed socialization of health care, protesters speak of "going Galt," refusing to work in what they see as a socialist economy, just as Rand's hero John Galt did. Even the *mea culpa* of Rand's most famous fan and follower, former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, has done little to dent the appeal of her radical individualism and libertarianism, which Rand shaped into a philosophy she called Objectivism. But all this makes a certain amount of sense. Perhaps more surprising is the Ayn Rand boom that is building in another mass democracy: India.

Not only do Indians perform more Google searches for Rand than citizens of any country in the world except the United States, but Penguin Books India has sold an impressive number of copies -- as many as 50,000 of *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* each since 2005, a number comparable to sales there by global best-seller John Grisham. And that's not counting the ubiquitous pirated copies of her works that are hawked at rickety street stalls, sidewalk piles, and bus stations -- an honor that Rand, a fierce defender of intellectual property rights, probably would not have appreciated.

As modern India continues to undergo seismic economic and cultural shifts, not to mention the current global recession, Rand is emerging as a touchstone for a new generation. For many Indians, she is a tonic of modernization, helping to inspire a break with India's collectivist, socialist past. Rand's mixture of capitalist boosterism and self-empowerment is an irresistible combination for a range of Indians, from think-tankers to corporate barons to pop stars.

Rand's celebration of independence and personal autonomy has proven to be powerfully subversive in a culture that places great emphasis on conforming to the dictates of family, religion, and tradition. Gargi Rawat, a correspondent and news anchor for top tv channel ndtv and a former Rand admirer, says Rand's theory of the supremacy of reason and the virtue of selfishness adds up to "the antithesis" of Indian culture, which explains the attraction for Rawat in her youth and for many rebellious Indian teens today.

Unlike in the United States, Rand's most popular novel in India--anecdotally at least--is not the overtly political *Atlas Shrugged*, but her earlier novel, *The Fountainhead*, in which Rand's political views are muted. The novel tells the story of Howard Roark, an architect who refuses to compromise his designs for clients or the public in a heroic expression of personal will. It is Rand's most accessible work, and also the one that makes the strongest emotional appeal to those who feel suppressed by attempts to put the collective ahead of the individual.

In recent years, the so-called "Howard Roark effect" has swept across wealthy Indian society. Shortly after winning Miss India Earth, the country's top beauty pageant, in 2005, Niharika Singh cited *The Fountainhead* as her favorite book. "Ayn Rand helped me win the crown," she declared. Other stars, including biotech queen Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, actress Preity Zinta, and soccer-player-turned-dancer Baichung Bhutia have all credited Rand with helping them succeed.

Beyond personal inspiration, however, the Indian excitement for Rand today is linked to a larger enthusiasm for the country's inchoate but powerful drive for development and wealth. Since the 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India has seen a gradual shift away from socialism, much appreciated by Rand's fans. Vikram Bajaj, a 45-year-old entrepreneur who considers himself an objectivist, has lived through Rand's evolution from an ignored outsider to a popular prophet of capitalism. When he discovered Rand, taxation rates for high earners were hovering at 85 percent of income; now, with her books widely available, that upper rate is only 30 percent.

Barun Mitra is the founder and director of the Liberty Institute, which hopes to be India's equivalent of the United States' libertarian Cato Institute and has recently received a grant from an American foundation to launch a Web initiative promoting "Ayn Rand in India." He has been a Rand devotee since the early 1980s and even met his wife through a Rand discussion group.

To Mitra, Rand offers a blueprint for India to develop as a democratic and capitalist society at the same time. He hopes that Rand and her libertarian doctrines can enable India to provide a counterexample to the so-called "Asian model" of economic development, which holds that a certain level of authoritarian government and stifled liberty is a prerequisite for a surging economy. If India can achieve double-digit growth while remaining democratic, Mitra thinks, it could become a model for the rest of the world. Rand's philosophy, Mitra says, can help Indians "moor ourselves to fundamental economic and moral principles."

It's unclear whether Rand will ever become the definitive textbook of modernization for India: Her ideas about religion, capitalism, and society are too anathema to India's traditional culture ever to be adopted completely. But Rand will continue to inspire India's emerging creative class and corporate titans, not to mention the ambitious youth who make up her most passionate fan base, in India as around the world. For those fans, Ayn Rand is truly a prophet of things to come.

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