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WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

The Age of Kali

Indian travels and Encounters



William Dalrymple
The Age of Kali: Travels and Encounters in India

Аннотация

William Dalrymple, who wrote so magically about India in 'City of Djinns', returns to the country in a series of remarkable essays.Featured in its pages are 15-year-old guerrilla girls and dowager Maharanis; flashy Bombay drinks parties and violent village blood feuds; a group of vegetarian terrorists intent on destroying India's first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet; and a palace where port and cigars are still carried to guests on a miniature silver steam train.Dalrymple meets such figures as Imran Khan and Benazir Bhutto; he witnesses the macabre nightly offering to the bloodthirsty goddess Parashakti – She Who Is Seated on a Throne of Five Corpses; he experiences caste massacres in the badlands of Bihar and dines with a drug baron on the North-West Frontier; he discovers such oddities as the terrorist apes of Jaipur and the shrine where Lord Krishna is said to make love every night to his 16,108 wives and 64,732 milkmaids.'The Age of Kali' is the fourth fascinating volume from the author of 'In Xanadu', 'City of Djinns' and 'From the Holy Mountain'.

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The Age of Kali

Travels and encounters in India



William Dalrymple

The Age of Kali
Indian Travels & Encounters
William Dalrymple



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

To JOCK
who saw the point long before I did

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Introduction

The Age of Kali is a collection of peripatetic essays, a distillation of ten years' travel around the Indian subcontinent. For six of those years I was based in Delhi working on my second book, *City of Djinns*, while for the other four I wandered the region, on a more nomadic basis, for a few months each year. My travels took me from the fortresses of the drug barons of the North-West Frontier to the jungle lairs of the Tamil Tigers; from flashy Bombay drinks parties to murderous Bihari blood feuds; from the decaying palaces of Lucknow to the Keralan exorcist temple of the bloodthirsty goddess Parashakti, She Who is Seated on a Throne of Five Corpses. All the pieces are the product of personal experience and direct observation.

The book's title is a reference to the concept in ancient Hindu cosmology that time is divided into four great epochs. Each age (or *yug*) is named after one of the four throws, from best to worst, in a traditional Indian game of dice; accordingly, each successive age represents a period of increasing moral and social deterioration. The ancient mythological Golden Age, named after the highest throw of the dice, is known as the *Krita Yug*, or Age of Perfection. As I was told again and again on my travels around the subcontinent, India is now in the throes of the *Kali Yug*, the Age of Kali, the lowest possible throw, an epoch of strife, corruption, darkness and disintegration. In the Age of Kali

the great gods Vishnu and Shiva are asleep and do not hear the prayers of their devotees. In such an age, normal conventions fall apart: anything is possible. As the seventh-century *Vishnu Purana* puts it:

The kings of the *Kali Yug* will be addicted to corruption and will seize the property of their subjects, but will, for the most part, be of limited power, rising and falling rapidly. Then property and wealth alone will confer rank; falsehood will be the only means of success in litigation. Corruption will be the universal means of subsistence. At the end, unable to support their avaricious kings, the people of the Kali Age will take refuge in the chasms between mountains, they will wear ragged garments, and they will have too many children. Thus in the Kali Age shall strife and decay constantly proceed, until the human race approaches annihilation.

In my travels in Pakistan and North India there were moments when it seemed as if the *Kali Yug* really was upon us. In the bandit-infested badlands north of Lahore, in Bihar and in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh I found an ancient landscape overwhelmed by rapid change, where the old certainties and the ancient social order had been swept away, but where the new order had yet to fully establish itself. In Lucknow I witnessed a war being fought between rival wings of the student union, where each side was armed with grenades and assault rifles; in neighbouring Bihar, it seemed as if the state had finally succumbed to the tidal wave of violence, corruption and endemic caste warfare that had engulfed

it. Indeed things were so bad that the criminals and the politicians of the state were said to be virtually interchangeable, and the government had pretty well given up any pretence of providing water, electricity or even a semblance of security. The state had given way, and Bihar now seemed to be approaching a situation of pure anarchy.

According to the *Puranas*, the *Kali Yug* is the last age before the world is destroyed by the 'fire of one thousand suns', after which the cycle reaches its conclusion and time momentarily stops, before the wheel turns again and a new cycle begins. Rather ominously, the very week I decided on *The Age of Kali* as the title for this book, Atal Behari Vajpayee, India's first BJP Prime Minister, let off his 'Hindu' nuclear bomb at Pokhran, in what some in India have seen as a sign that the *Kali Yug* is now approaching its apocalyptic climax.

Following the blast, as ecstatic crowds filled the streets to celebrate – and as some BJP activists set about trying to build a Hindu *shakti* temple on the site of the explosion – several Indian papers quoted the lines from the *Gita* uttered by Robert Oppenheimer as he witnessed the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo in 1945:

If the radiance of a thousand suns
Were to burst at once into the sky,
That would be like the splendour of the Mighty One …
I am become Death,
The shatterer of worlds.

Yet for all this, India has consistently defied those who make prophecies of doom for her, and sure enough, outside Pakistan and the Ganges basin, in parts of the Deccan and southern India, I saw a world where notions of a *Kali Yug* seemed to have little relevance. In the far south and west of the country, despite occasional political upheavals in Tamil Nadu, there was a quiet but growing prosperity and stability that defied the grim predictions of imminent apocalypse being made in Patna and Lucknow. The great question for India now, it seems to me, is whether the prosperity of the south and west of the country can outweigh the disorder and decay which is spreading out from Bihar and the north.

This book covers so many sensitive areas that it is bound to raise a few cries of protest and dissent, particularly from Indians understandably touchy about criticism from abroad; but it is a work of love. Its subject is an area of the world I revere like no other, and in which I have chosen to spend most of my time since I was free to make that choice. From my first visit to the region as an eighteen-year-old backpacker, I was completely overwhelmed: India thrilled, surprised, daunted and excited me. Since then it has never ceased to amaze; and I hope that that ceaseless power to delight and astonish, if nothing else, is conveyed by this book.

Over the course of the last decade, I have fallen in to the debt of many friends across the length and breadth of the subcontinent. There are, after all, few areas where people

are so ready to open their house to the weary and confused traveller. I would like to thank the following, all of whom provided invaluable aid, advice and hospitality: Javed Abdulla, Ram Advani, Bilkiz Alladin, S.K. Bedi, Dev Benegal, David and Rachna Davidar, Farid Faridi, Sagarika Ghosh, Salman, Kusum and Navina Haidar, Sultana Hasan, Annie and Martin Howard, Mir Moazam Husain and the Begum Mehrunissa, General Wajahat Husain, Dr S.M. Yunus Jaffery, O.P. Jain, Nussi Jamil, Amrita Jhaveri, Gauri and David Keeling, Sunita Kohli, Momin Latif, Dieter Ludwig, Suleiman Mahmudabad, Sam and Shireen Miller, Sachin, Sudhir and Rosleen Mulji, Mushtaq Naqvi, Saeed Naqvi, Mark Nicholson, Naveen Patnaik, Ahmed and Angie Rashid, Arundhati Roy and Pradip Krishen, Yusouf Salahuddin, Arvik Sarkar, Vasu Scindia, Aradhana Seth, Jugnu and Najam Sethi, Balvinder Singh, Khuswant Singh, Magoo and Jaswant Singh, Mala and Tejbir Singh, Siddarth and Rashmi Singh, Mohan Sohai, Jigme Tashi, Tarun and Gitan Tejpal, Tiziano and Angela Terzani, Adam and Fariba Thomson, Mark Tully and Gillian Wright, Dr L.C. Tyagi, Shameem Varadrajan, and Pavan and Renuka Verma. I would like to give particular thanks to Sanjeev Srivastava, who accompanied me on all the Rajasthan stories and provided brilliant insights into the life of that state. Arvind Das gave me invaluable help with the Bihar story, which was very much inspired by his superb study of the state, *The Republic of Bihar*. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones provided me with invaluable contacts and advice for the Lucknow stories, as did

Pankaj Bhutalia for 'The City of Widows', on which he has made a moving documentary. Priyath Liyanage and Abbas Nasir both helped to bring me up to date on recent developments in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Karan Kapoor and Pablo Bartholomew between them took the pictures which originally accompanied many of the pieces in this book; they also helped set up many of the interviews, and were both wonderful – and patient – travelling companions and friends.

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Lola Bubosh, Nick Coleridge, Jon Connel, Deidre Fernand, Ian Jack, David Jenkins, Dominic Lawson, Sarah Miller, Rebecca Nicolson, Justine Picardie, Joan Tapper, Robert Winder and Gully Wells all commissioned articles from me, and/or have generously given permission for them to be reproduced, although what is published here is in some cases very different from what originally appeared in the articles' first journalistic *avatar*: pieces have been edited, trimmed and rewritten; some have been wedged together; others, where appropriate, have been suffixed with a new postscript to bring them up to date. 'The Age of Kali' was first published in *Granta*; 'The Sad Tale of Bahveri Devi', 'Caste Wars', 'Baba Sehgal' and 'Finger Lickin' Bad' in the *Observer*; 'Benazir Bhutto', 'Warrior Queen', 'The City of Widows' and 'Shobha Dé' in the *Sunday Times Magazine*; 'Up the Tiger Path' and parts of 'On the Frontier' in *GQ*; 'Parashakti' in the *Independent Magazine*; 'Imran Khan' in *Tatler*; 'Sati Mata'

and parts of 'Imran Khan' in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*; 'On the Frontier' in *Condé Nast Traveller*; 'The Sorcerer's Grave' in *Islands Magazine*; 'At Donna Georgina's' and parts of 'The Age of Kali' in the *Spectator*. In all cases the copyright is retained by the original publishers, and the pieces have been reprinted with permission.

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William Dalrymple

Pages' Yard, September 1998

1 The Age of Kali

The Age of Kali

PATNA, 1997

On the night of 13 February 1992 two hundred armed Untouchables surrounded the high-caste village of Barra in the northern Indian state of Bihar. By the light of burning splints, the raiders roused all the men from their beds and marched them out in to the fields. Then, one after another, they slit their throats with a rusty harvesting sickle.

Few of my Delhi friends were surprised when I pointed out the brief press report of the massacre, buried somewhere in the middle pages of the *Indian Express*: it was the sort of thing that was always happening in Bihar, they said. Two thousand years ago, it was under a bo tree near the Bihari capital of Patna that the Buddha had received his enlightenment; that, however, was probably the last bit of good news to come out of the state. These days Bihar was much more famous for its violence, corruption and endemic caste-warfare. Indeed, things were now so bad that the criminals and the politicians of the state were said to be virtually interchangeable: no fewer than thirty-three of Bihar's State Assembly MLAs had criminal records, and a figure like Dular Chand Yadav, who had a hundred cases of *dacoity* and fifty murder cases pending against him, could also be addressed as Honourable Member for Barh.

Two stories I had first noticed in the news briefs of the Indian

press give an idea of the seriousness of the crisis in the state.

The first was a tale of everyday life on the Bihar railways. One morning in October 1996, the Rajdhani Express from New Delhi to Calcutta made an unscheduled stop at Gomoh, a small station in southern Bihar. Mumtaz Ansari, the local Member of Parliament, got in to the first-class compartment. With him were three security guards. Neither Ansari nor his henchmen had tickets, but they nevertheless turfed out of their seats four passengers with reservations. When one of them, a retired government official, had the temerity to protest at his eviction, Ansari answered that it was he who made the laws, so he had the right to break them. When the old man continued to protest, the MP waved his hand and ordered the guards to beat him up. At the next stop Ansari was received by a crowd of supporters, including another MP and ten of his armed retainers. They dragged the retired official out of the carriage and continued the work begun by Ansari's guards. As the train pulled out, the old man was left bleeding on the platform.

The second story was a tale of life in the Bihar civil service. In October 1994, a young graduate named G. Krishnaiah received his posting as District Magistrate of Gopalganj, a remote and anarchic district of northern Bihar. It was not exactly a dream assignment: Gopalganj was renowned as one of the most lawless areas in India, and only two weeks before, Krishnaiah's predecessor as District Magistrate had been killed by a bomb hidden in a briefcase in his office. Nevertheless, Krishnaiah

was energetic and idealistic, and he set about his new job with enthusiasm, giving a brief interview to Doordashan, the Indian state television network, in which he announced a series of measures intended to turn the area around: to control crime, generate employment and uplift the Untouchables of Gopalganj.

Watching the clip now, with the young official speaking so blithely about his intention of rooting out violence, the manner of his end seems all the more horrifying. Two months later, Krishnaiah was driving along a road at dusk when he ran in to the funeral procession of a local mafia don who had been killed in a shoot-out the day before. The procession was being led by the local MP, Anand Mohan Singh, who prior to entering politics had spent most of the previous two decades as an outlaw with a price on his head: in that time the police had registered nearly seventy charges against him, ranging from murder and criminal conspiracy to kidnapping and the possession of unlicensed arms. According to statements collected by the police, Singh 'exhorted his followers to lynch the upstart official', whereupon the mourners surrounded Krishnaiah's car, and one of Singh's henchmen fired three shots at him. Krishnaiah was badly wounded but still alive. So, encouraged by Singh, the mourners pulled him from his car and slowly stoned him to death.

That a sitting MP could be arrested for ordering a crowd to lynch and murder a civil servant was bad enough, but what happened next reveals quite how bad things have become in Indian politics in recent years. Anand Mohan Singh was arrested,

but from his prison cell he contested and retained his seat in the 1996 general election, later securing bail to attend parliament. He recently distinguished himself during a parliamentary debate by snarling, 'Say that again and I'll come and break your teeth' at an opponent on the other side of the Lok Sabha debating chamber. Justice in India being what it is, few believe that the police now have much chance of bringing a successful prosecution.

Over the years, my friends explained, violence had come to totally dominate almost every aspect of life in Bihar. It was said that in Patna no one bothered buying second-hand cars any more; instead armed gangs stopped vehicles in broad daylight, then forced the drivers to get out and sign pre-prepared sale deeds. As the Bihari government was too poor to pay the contractors who carried out public works, the contractors had been compelled to start kidnapping the government's engineers and bureaucrats in order to get their bills paid. Other contractors, desperate for business, had taken to wreaking violence on each other: one report I had seen described a shoot-out in Muzaffarpur between the *goondas* of competing engineering companies after tenders had been put out to build a minor bridge in an obscure village. In some upper-caste areas, the burning of Untouchables had become so common that it was now almost an organised sport. Various lower-caste self-defence forces had formed in reaction, and were said to be busily preparing for war in villages they had rechristened with names like Leninnagar and Stalinpur. There were now estimated to be ten major private armies at work in

different parts of Bihar; in some areas the violence had spun completely out of control, and was approaching a situation of civil war.

Bad things went on in Bihar, my friends told me: that was just the way it was. But the singularly horrific nature of the Barra massacre stuck in my mind, and a year later, when I found myself in Patna, I decided to hire a car and go and visit the village.

The road leading to Barra from Patna was much the worst I had ever travelled on in five years of living in India: although it was one of the principal highways of Bihar, potholes the size of bomb craters pitted its surface. On either side, the rusting skeletons of dead trucks lined the route like a succession of *mementi mori.*

As we drove, I had the feeling that I was leaving the twentieth century far behind. First the electricity pylons came to a halt. Then cars and trucks disappeared from the road; even the rusting skeletons vanished. In the villages, wells began to replace such modern luxuries as hand-pumps. We passed the odd pony trap, and four men carrying a palanquin. The men flagged us down and warned us about highwaymen. They told us to be off the roads by dark.

Eventually, turning right along a dirt track, we came to Barra. It was a small, ancient village raised above the surrounding fields on an old earthen tell. Its population was entirely Bhumihar: Brahmins who had converted to Buddhism at the time of the Emperor Ashoka, around 300 BC, and who had then been

denied readmittance to the priestly caste when Indian Buddhism was wiped out by an aggressive Hindu revival a thousand years later. Bhumihars were still high-caste, but they had never quite regained the top place in the caste pyramid they had lost 250 years before the Romans first arrived in Britain.

I was taken around Barra by Ashok Singh, one of the two male survivors of the massacre. He walked me over to an embankment where a small white monument had been erected to the memory of the forty-two murdered villagers. A hot wind blew in from the fields; dust-devils swirled in the dried-out paddy. I asked: 'How did you escape?'

'I didn't,' he said. And pulling off a scarf, he showed me the lurid gash left by the sickle which had sliced off the back of his neck. 'They cut me then left me for dead.'

Ashok began to describe, in detail, what had happened. He said that, as normal, he had gone to bed after eating his supper at eight thirty. The week before, there had been an atrocity when the Savarna Liberation Front, the (upper-caste) Bhumihar militia, had gang-raped and killed ten *Harijan* (Untouchable) women in the next district; but Barra was far from there, and no one was expecting trouble. Ashok, his brothers, father and uncle were all asleep on their *charpoys* when they were woken by the sound of explosions at ten thirty. They were frightened, and went to the women's part of the house to alert their wives and mothers. The explosions and the sound of gunfire came closer. Then a burning splint was thrown on to the thatch of their roof. At the

same time there was a shout from outside that everyone should come out and give themselves up, or else burn to death.

'As soon as the roof caught fire my uncle and I began trying to put out the blaze. We didn't take any notice of what was being shouted, so eventually these low people had to break down the door and drag us all out. There were hundreds of them, armed with guns, spears, bows, *lathis* and sickles. They left the women by our house, but they tied the men up with lengths of cloth.'

'Did they say where they were from? What militia they were part of?'

'No, but they were local men. We could tell by their accents. At first they left us lying where we were as they destroyed all the village houses with fire and dynamite. Then they said, "There is a meeting," and they dragged us men to the edge of the village. There they made us sit in the middle of a circle. Then, one by one, they started killing us, right there where we were sitting. A great crowd was watching, but only two people were doing the killing, so it took a long time. I was very frightened. My mind went blank.

'They killed all my brothers. They killed my father and they killed my uncle and my cousins. Eventually my turn came. One of the men pushed me forward and the other got his sickle and took three swipes. It made deep cuts on the back of my neck and head. I was senseless. The next thing I knew I woke up in hospital in Gaya. It was three weeks before I could get out of bed.'

'You were very lucky.'

'How can you say that? I lost eight of my kin.'

Ashok's face crumpled, and he looked down. After some time, he again met my eyes: 'I would like to take revenge,' he said quietly, 'but I don't have the capacity.'

Ashok showed me the houses he and the widows of the village had erected with the compensation money they had been awarded by the government. They were miniature castles: tall and square, with no windows except for thin arrow-slits on the third storey. Unwittingly, they were almost exact miniature copies of the Peel Towers erected across the Scottish borders in the sixteenth century, when central authority had completely broken down. There could be no better illustration of Bihar's regression in to the Dark Ages.

Ashok rubbed the huge scar on his neck and said: 'Now the *Harijans* refuse to work on our fields, and there are not enough Bhumihar men left to till them ourselves. When the *Harijans* pass us on the road, they pass comments at us: "We have not finished with you yet," or "You will meet the same fate as your brothers." These low people are enjoying what has happened. They have grown fat and behave like they are Brahmins. But us Bhumihars, every night after sunset we are frightened. Every night I have nightmares. They may come again. What is to stop them? The police and the [Bihari] government of Laloo Prasad Yadav are on their side. This massacre was his handiwork.'

'In what sense?'

'Laloo is from a low caste,' said Ashok. 'He is always

encouraging these *nichla* [oiks] to rise up against us. When Laloo came here after the massacre we threw stones at him. Every day we pray for his downfall.'

'But don't your new houses give you some protection?' I asked.

'Our houses are strong,' replied Ashok, 'but we are vulnerable. We cannot stay in our houses all day. We have to move around.'

Cowherds were now leading the buffalo back to the village for milking. Around where we were standing, women were lighting dung fires and beginning to cook supper. The afternoon was drawing in. I thought of the warnings we had received to be back in Patna and off the roads by the fall of darkness.

'The government will not protect us,' said Ashok as we walked back to the car, 'so we are left at the mercy of God. This is the *Kali Yug* [the age of Kali], the epoch of disintegration. The lower castes are rising up. Everything is falling apart.'

After living in India for five years, I finally left Delhi in 1994. I dismantled my flat and set off to write a book in the Middle East. Returning to the subcontinent two and a half years later, I found that a quiet social revolution had taken place in my absence, with lower-caste politicians seizing power in state after state across India. This process seemed to have started in Bihar, in the person of Laloo Prasad Yadav, the man the villagers of Barra had blamed for their massacre. Laloo in many ways seemed to personify much that was happening in India, and I decided to return to Bihar to try and meet him.

Although a similar revolution was taking place at the same

time in Uttar Pradesh, when he first came to power in 1991 Laloo was still a relatively unlikely figure in north Indian politics. The Indian establishment was then still firmly dominated by the higher castes: Nehru, his daughter Mrs Gandhi and her son Rajiv were all Brahmins, as was Rajiv's successor as head of the Congress Party and Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao. Brahmins had ruled India for forty-four of fifty years of independence. Kshatriyas (the second rung in the caste pyramid) ruled for two more years, in the persons of V.P. Singh (1989–90) and Chandra Shekhar (1990–91). Lower- or intermediate-caste Prime Ministers had been in power for fewer than four years of the half-century since the British left India.

Laloo was the son of a low-caste village cowherd. In the Bihar of the 1960s and seventies it was against all the odds that a man like him would manage to get educated and attain even a foothold in politics. Despite the fact that the lower castes, the Untouchables and tribesmen together formed a full 73 per cent of the population of Bihar, in the 1962 Bihar Legislative Assembly over 60 per cent of MLAs were from the top two castes, while less than 7 per cent were from low-caste backgrounds. But from the early 1980s onwards the lower castes had been on the rise, while the upper castes were in rapid retreat. In the 1984 general election, Bihar returned twenty-five upper-caste MPs to the national parliament, including seven Brahmins. By 1989 this number had sunk to eighteen, with the Brahmins still retaining their quota of seven. In 1991, the year Laloo came to power,

replacing a Kshatriya Chief Minister, the number of upper-caste MPs had shrunk to ten, with only one Brahmin among them. From 1989 to 1991, the Congress Party was unable to field even one Brahmin who could win a parliamentary seat in Bihar. In the Bihar Legislative Assembly there has been an equally dramatic shift. Today only 10.2 per cent of Bihar MLAs are from the top two castes, while 52.5 per cent are from low-caste backgrounds.

Laloo's political views were formed by his childhood experience of being kicked around by the higher castes of his village. From the beginning of his career he spoke out bitterly against the Brahmins and the Hindu revival that in many areas was bringing about a new hardening in the caste system. 'Our fight is against the wearers of the Sacred Thread [i.e. the Brahmins],' he told his audiences. 'For centuries the priests have made fortunes by fooling villagers. Now I tell them they should learn to milk cattle and graze them, otherwise they will starve.' On other occasions he publicly voiced his disbelief in the Hindu gods: 'Ram should punish these murderous fundamentalists – if he exists, that is. But he is nowhere. If he was there, so many poor people would not have died, there would not have been such poverty, such fights…'

In a country as obsessed with religion as India, such brazen anti-Brahminical atheism was a completely new message, at least in the north. But, to many people's surprise, it worked. In the 1991 general election, Laloo – supported by the combined votes of the poor, the casteless and the oppressed Muslim community

– was swept in to power with an unprecedented majority. Since then, in the 1996 election Laloo's vote fell back slightly, but he managed to retain his hold on power, despite increasingly clear evidence that his government – and indeed his own family – were deeply corrupt, and were presiding over the looting of the state treasury. One act had brought him in to particular disrepute: the alleged embezzlement of vast sums of agricultural subsidies, referred to in the Indian papers as 'the multi-*crore* fodder scam'.

Yet, notwithstanding the fall in his share of the vote, Laloo had gained greatly increased national power, as he now formed part of the ruling coalition government. For what had happened in Bihar in 1991 happened elsewhere in northern India in the 1996 election, with the rural lower castes seizing control of state governments across the country, and candidates from the upper-caste élite losing their seats *en masse*. H.V. Deve Gowda, a middle-caste farmer from Karnataka, was sworn in as Prime Minister to replace the Brahmin Narasimha Rao, propped up by a variety of regional parties, many of whom represented the lower castes. Where Bihar had led, the rest of the country had followed.

There are two theories about the effects of this social revolution. Pessimists point out that while the Anglicised Brahmin élite produced leaders of the calibre of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the rise of the rural lower castes has resulted in the emergence of a cadre of semi-literate village thugs, men like Laloo and his counterpart in Uttar

Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, a small-time wrestler and alleged mafia don who has now risen to become India's Defence Minister. Many such rustics can barely write their names, and they certainly have no hope of mastering the finer points of international diplomacy and economics.

On the other hand, the last decade of Brahmin rule brought to power a man like Rajiv Gandhi, who for all his polish was barely able to speak Hindi, and certainly had no grasp of the realities of life for the 80 per cent of Indians who lived in villages. Ten years ago every second person at Delhi drinks parties seemed to be either an old schoolfriend of the Prime Minister or a member of his cabinet. Now, quite suddenly, no one in Delhi knows anyone in power. A major democratic revolution has taken place almost unnoticed, leaving the urban Anglicised élite on the margins of the Indian political landscape. As Mulayam Singh Yadav put it on his elevation to the national cabinet, 'For the first time, power has come to the underprivileged and the oppressed, and we will use it to ensure that their lot is bettered.'

This is also the stated intention of Laloo. So far his political success may have done little in concrete terms to boost the welfare of the lower-caste poor, but what it certainly has done is to boost their confidence. The lower castes are no longer content to remain at the bottom of the pile and be shoved around by the Brahmins. Laloo has given them a stake in power and made them politically conscious: exactly as the Civil Rights Movement did for American blacks in the 1960s.

The rise of lower-caste politicians has also done something to slow the rise of the Hindu revivalist movement, by demonstrating to the masses how little they have to gain by voting in a Hindu theocracy dominated by the same castes which have oppressed them for millennia. In the dying days of 1992, when India was engulfed in the bloody chain of Hindu–Muslim riots that followed the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya, even the previously peaceful commercial capital of Bombay was burning. Yet Bihar remained uncharacteristically – indeed almost miraculously – peaceful. With a series of unambiguous threats to the more excitable elements in the Bihar police force, Laloo had been able to contain the anti-Muslim pogroms which elsewhere in India left two thousand dead.

Indian politics are rarely predictable, but it was certainly one of the more unexpected developments in modern Indian history that led to the low-caste and semi-literate Chief Minister of India's most corrupt and backward state becoming the custodian of the crumbling Nehruvian ideal of a secular, democratic India.

The more I read about Bihar, the more it became clear that Laloo was the key to what was happening there. But ringing Bihar proved virtually impossible from Delhi: it was much easier to get through to Britain, ten thousand miles further away. Unable to contact Laloo, I was forced to take pot luck and book a flight to Patna without having arranged an interview. But by remarkable good fortune, it turned out that Laloo had been speaking at a rally in Delhi, and was returning to Patna on the same flight as myself.

The first I learned of this was when the Bihar flight was delayed for half an hour while it waited for Laloo to turn up. When he eventually did so, striding on board like a conquering hero, he brought with him half his cabinet.

Laloo turned out to be a small, broad-shouldered, thick-set man; his prematurely grey hair was cut in a boyish early-Beatles mop. He had reserved the whole of the first row of seats for himself; his aides, MPs and bodyguards filled up the next seven tiers. They were all big, slightly sinister-looking men. All, including Laloo himself, were dressed in white homespun cotton pyjamas, once the symbol of Mahatma Gandhi's identification with the poor, but now (when synthetic fibres are far cheaper) the unmistakable insignia of political power.

The delay, the block-booking and the extravagant manner in which Laloo sprawled lengthwise along the first row of seats like some degenerate Roman Emperor, graphically illustrated all I had heard about Laloo being no angel of political morality. To get to the top, he had had to play politics the Bihar way: at the last election, one MP had gone on record to declare: 'Without one hundred men armed with guns you cannot hope to contest elections in Bihar.' To become Chief Minister you would need to have more toughs and more guns than your rivals. Laloo was no innocent.

Yet, in the most ungovernable and anarchic state in India, his government had been at least relatively effective. A retired senior Bihar civil servant quoted Chanakya, the ancient (c.300

BC) Indian Machiavelli, when he described the administration of the new Chief Minister: 'Chanakya said that to rule India you must be feared. Laloo is feared. He likes to play the role of the simple villager, but behind that façade he is nobody's fool. He is a violent man. No one would dare ignore his orders.'

Certainly the entourage at the front of the plane seemed bewitched by their leader. They circled the Chief Minister, leaning over the seats, squatting in front of him on their haunches and laughing at his jokes. When I eventually persuaded one of the MPs to introduce me to his leader, the man literally knelt down in front of Laloo while he explained who I was.

Laloo took it all in his stride. He indicated that I should sit down on the seat beside him – leaving the MP on his knees to one side – and asked how he could help. I asked for an appointment to see him. With a nonchalant wave of his hand he called over a secretary, who fixed the interview for five thirty that afternoon.

'But,' he said, 'we could begin the interview now.'

'Here? In the plane?'

'Why not? We have ten minutes before we arrive.'

I asked Laloo about his childhood. He proved only too willing to talk about it. He lolled back against the side of the plane, his legs stretched over two seats.

'My father was a small farmer,' he began, scratching his balls with the unembarrassed thoroughness of a true yokel. 'He looked after the cows and buffaloes belonging to the upper castes; he also had three acres of his own land. He was illiterate, wore a

dhoti and never possessed a pair of shoes in his life. My mother sold curds and milk. She was also illiterate. We lived in a mud-thatch cottage with no windows or doors: it was open to the dog, the cat and the jackal.

'I was one of seven. I had five brothers and one sister. There was never enough money. When we were old enough we were all sent out to graze the buffaloes. Then my two elder brothers went to the city [Patna] and found a job working in a cattle farm near the airport. They earned ninety-four paise [five pence] a day. When they had saved enough money, my brothers called me to Patna and sent me to school. I was twelve. Until that time I did not know even ABC.'

I asked: 'How were you treated by the upper castes in your village?'

Laloo laughed. The other MPs – who had all gathered around and were listening reverently to the words of their leader – joined in with a great roar of canned laughter.

'All my childhood I was beaten and insulted by the landlords,' said Laloo. 'For no reason they would punish me. Because we were from the Yadav caste we were not entitled even to sit on a chair: they would make us sit on the ground. I remember all that humiliation. Now I am in the chair and I want those people to sit on the ground. It is in my mind to teach them a lesson. I don't hate them,' he added. 'But their minds have to be …' He paused, searching for the right word: 'Their minds have to be changed. We have been an independent country for fifty years, but there

has been no alteration in the caste system, no social justice. I want to end caste. I want inter-caste marriages. But these Brahmin priests will not allow it.'

'But how can you hope to destroy a system that has been around for three and a half thousand years?' I asked. 'Isn't caste the social foundation of Hinduism?'

'It is an evil system,' said Laloo simply. 'It must go.'

The plane was now wheeling above Patna. Below I could see the grey ribbon of the Ganges threading its way along the edge of the city, past the *ghats* and out in to the fertile floodplains of Bihar.

'Go back to your seat now,' said Laloo curtly. 'I will talk to you again this afternoon.'

No one has ever called Patna a beautiful city; but revisiting it I found I had forgotten how bad things were. As you drive in through the outskirts, the treeless pavements begin to fill with occasional sackcloth shacks. The shacks expand in to slums. The slums are surrounded by garbage heaps. Around the garbage heaps goats, pigs, dogs and children compete for scraps of food. The further you go, the worse it becomes. Open drains line the road. Beside them lie emaciated migrants from famine-hit villages. Sewer-rats the size of cats scamper among the rickshaws.

Bihar is in fact one of the last areas of the subcontinent which really conforms to the image of India promoted by well-meaning Oxfam advertisements, all beggars, cripples and overpopulated

leper hospitals: 'Send £10 and help Sita regain her sight …' For the reality after fifty years of independence is that India is now the seventh industrial power on earth, with a large, prosperous and entrepreneurial middle class.

Yet while much of the south-west of India seems to be surging purposefully towards a future of modest prosperity, health and full literacy, Bihar has begun to act as a kind of leaden counterweight, dragging the north of the country back towards the Middle Ages. One of the state's few really profitable industries is the manufacture of counterfeit pharmaceuticals – salt pills dressed up as aspirins, sugar tablets pretending to be antibiotics – a field in which it apparently leads South Asia. Recently an enterprising Bihari counterfeiter expanded his operations to include the manufacture of great quantities of a fake chalk-based toothpaste called Colfate. Otherwise, despite exceptionally rich mineral deposits and fertile soil, the state remains the poorest in India.

Not only is the economy stagnant, crime is completely out of control: 64,085 violent offences (such as armed robbery, looting, rioting and murder) took place between January and June 1997. This figure includes 2,625 murders, 1,116 kidnappings and 127 abductions for ransom, meaning that Bihar witnesses fourteen murders every day, and a kidnapping every four hours. Whatever index of prosperity and development you choose, Bihar comes triumphantly at the bottom. It has the lowest literacy, the highest number of deaths in police custody, the worst roads, the highest

crime, the fewest cinemas. Its per capita income is less than half the Indian average. Not long ago it even had a major famine. The state has withered; Bihar is now nearing a situation of anarchy.

The day I flew back in to Patna, there were six stories vying for attention on the front page of the Bihar edition of the *Hindustan Times*; each in its own way seemed to confirm the collapse of government in the state.

The paper led with a report about a group of tribals who were demanding an independent state in the hills of southern Bihar. They had just carried out a raid on a mine and successfully got away with 'almost six hundred kilograms of gelignite, over a thousand detonators and fifteen hundred metres of igniting tape'.

Below this was a report of a shoot-out in which the Patna police killed 'a notorious criminal wanted in several cases of *dacoity* including the kidnapping of the Gupta Biscuit Company's proprietor'.

Next, a political piece carried a statement from the Congress opposition accusing the Bihar government of 'ignoring the famine-like situation prevailing in the state'.

Another report, headlined 'Crime on the Rise in Muzaffarpur', detailed the arrest over the previous three months of '1,437 criminals' during the '116 riots' that the town had apparently suffered since the New Year.

At the bottom of the page was an item announcing an initiative to resuscitate the moribund Bihar tourist industry: a paramilitary Tourist Protection Force was to be set up, providing a heavily

armed escort for any Japanese tourists wishing to brave a visit to the site of the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodh Gaya.

But the most astonishing story concerned the goings-on at Patna University. There angry examinees had 'torched a police jeep and damaged the car of the Vice Chancellor'. What had caused this? A cut in student grants? Nothing of the sort. 'According to reports, the Vice Chancellor, in a surprise visit to the [exam] centre found all the examinees adopting unfair means. He ordered a body search and seized two gunny bags full of notes, chits and books from the examinees … In a brazen move the examinees then walked out of the examination hall and resorted to wanton vandalism.'

That afternoon I called on the Vice Chancellor, to see if the reports were exaggerated. Professor Mohinuddin was a small, wiry man with heavy black glasses. He maintained that, on the contrary, the press had played down the violence. On being caught red-handed the students had attacked him, hurling desks and chairs, and forced him to take shelter in a sandbagged police post. There, despite a valiant defence by the six policeman on duty, the mob had succeeded in driving the Vice Chancellor from his refuge with the help of a couple of crude firebombs. Later, for good measure, the students had issued a death threat against him. 'It is lucky I am a widower,' said the Professor. 'I only have my own safety to worry about.'

Not far from Professor Mohinuddin's house was the home of Uttam Sengupta, the editor of the Patna edition of the *Times*

of India. Like his academic neighbour, Mr Sengupta had had a somewhat upsetting week. Two days previously, someone had taken a potshot at him with a sawn-off shotgun. The pellets had lodged themselves in the back door of his old Fiat. Sengupta had escaped unscathed but shaken.

According to Sengupta, what was happening in Bihar was nothing less than the death of the state. Much of the problem, he said, derived from the fact that the Bihar government was broke and unable to provide the most basic amenities. The National Thermal Power Corporation, the Indian national grid, had recently threatened to cut off Bihar's electricity supply unless its dues were paid. In the Patna hospital there were no bedsheets, no drugs and no bandages. The only X-ray machine in the city had been out of order for a year; the hospital could not afford to buy the spare parts. Patna went black at night, as there were no lightbulbs for the street lamps. (According to the writer Arvind Das, who researched the problem in some detail, the city apparently required six thousand bulbs. On one occasion during Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, the administration managed to muster as many as 2,200; but normally only a fraction of that number were available. Occasionally businesses clubbed together to light a single street; otherwise, every day at sunset, Patna, a city of over a million people, was plunged in to medieval darkness.)

What was bad in Patna, said Sengupta, was much, much worse in rural areas. Outside the capital, electricity had virtually ceased to be supplied – this despite the fact that Bihari mines

produce almost all of India's coal. Without power, industry had been brought to a grinding halt. No roads were being built. There was no functioning system of public transport. In the villages, education had virtually packed up and literacy was rapidly declining: since 1981 the number of adult illiterates had actually risen from thirteen to fifteen million.

There were two principal effects of this breakdown, Sengupta told me. Firstly, those who could – the honest, the rich and the able – had migrated elsewhere. Secondly, those who had stayed had made do. This involved a sort of unofficial wave of privatisation. As the government no longer provided electricity, health care or education, those who could had had to provide them for themselves. Middle-class residents in blocks of flats had begun to club together to buy generators. There had been a mushrooming of private coaching institutes and private health clinics.

This privatisation had not been limited just to the towns. In rural areas, the richer villagers had begun to build their own roads to link them to the markets. In the absence of state buses there had even been a revival of the use of palanquins. The four men I had met on the road to Barra on my last visit were brothers, who were returning from carrying a woman to her relatives in a nearby village. They had made their palanquin themselves, they said, and were now bringing in more money from it than they were from their fields.

All this was very admirable, but the situation became more

sinister when people took in to their own hands the maintenance of law and order. It was the landlords who were the first to recruit armed gangs, initially to deal with discontented labourers. In response, the poor had fought back, organising themselves in to amateur guerrilla groups and arming themselves with guns made by local blacksmiths. Great swathes of countryside were now controlled by the private armies of landlords or their rival Maoist militias.

When Delhi newspapers publish articles on Bihar's disorders and atrocities, they tend to make a point of emphasising the state's 'backwardness'. What is needed, they say, is development: more roads, more schools, more family-planning centres. But as the ripples of political and caste violence spread from Patna out in to the rest of north India, it seems likely that Bihar could be not so much backward as forward: a trend-setter for the rest of the country. In a very real sense, Bihar may be a kind of Heart of Darkness, pumping violence and corruption, pulse after pulse, out in to the rest of the subcontinent. The first ballot-rigging recorded in India took place in Bihar in the 1962 general election. Thirty years later, it is common across the country. The first example of major criminals winning parliamentary seats took place in Bihar in the 1980 election. Again, it is now quite normal all over India.

So serious and infectious is the Bihar disease that it is now throwing in to question the whole notion of an Indian economic miracle. The question is whether the prosperity of the south

and west of the country can outweigh the moral decay which is spreading out from Bihar and the east. Few doubt that if the 'Bihar effect' – corruption, lawlessness, marauding caste armies and the breakdown of government – does prevail and overcome the positive forces at work, then, as Uttam Sengupta put it: 'India could make what happened in Yugoslavia look like a picnic.'

Everyone I talked to that week in Patna agreed on one thing: behind much of Bihar's violence lay the running sore of the disintegrating caste system.

One of the worst-affected areas was the country around Barra: the Jehanabad District, to the south of Patna. There, two rival militias were at work: the Savarna Liberation Front, which represented the interests of the high-caste landowning Bhumihars, and the Maoist Communist Centre, which took the part of the lower castes and Untouchables who farmed the Bhumihars' fields. Week after week, the Bhumihars would go *'Harijan* hunting', setting off in convoys of jeeps to massacre 'uppity Untouchables', 'to make an example'; in retaliation, the peasants would emerge from the fields at night and silently behead an oppressive landlord or two. The police did little to protect either group.

Similar battles take place across the width of Bihar, and this caste warfare has provided great opportunities for criminals wishing to gain a foothold in Bihar's political arena. Anand Mohan Singh first made his name as the protector of the upper castes against a rival low-caste outlaw-MP, Pappu Yadav. In the

same way, Pappu Yadav first gained his seat in parliament by leading a low-caste guerrilla army against high-caste landlords and attempting a Bihari variant of ethnic cleansing, emptying his constituency of Rajput and Brahmin families. In June 1991, whilst he was engaged in this work, three cases of murder were lodged against him, and he was also booked under the National Security Act for creating a 'civil war situation'. In the current parliament he remains the MP for the north Bihar district of Purnea.

The closer you look, the more clear it becomes that caste hatred and, increasingly, caste warfare lie at the bottom of most of Bihar's problems. The lower castes, so long oppressed, have now begun to assert themselves, while the higher castes have begun to fight back in an attempt to hold on to their ground. Moreover, job reservations for the lower castes have begun to be fitfully introduced around the country, reawakening an acute awareness of caste at every level of society. The proportion of reserved jobs varies from state to state – from 2 per cent in Haryana to 65 per cent in Tamil Nadu – but all over India a major social revolution is beginning to take place. This is particularly marked in institutions like the Indian Administrative Service, where prior to the introduction of reservations the Brahmins, who make up just 5 per cent of the population, filled 58 per cent of the jobs.

In the 1960s and seventies most educated Indians believed that caste was beginning to die out. Now it has quite suddenly

become the focus of national attention, and arguably the single most important issue in the country's politics.

Later that afternoon when I turned up at the Chief Minister's residence I found Laloo sitting outside, his legs raised on a table. He was surrounded by the now familiar circle of toughs and sycophants. Their appearance reminded me of the incident on the train when the civil servant had been beaten up by one of Laloo's MPs, and I asked him if the press reports had been accurate.

'Why don't you ask the man responsible?' replied Laloo. He waved his hand at one of the MPs sitting to his left. 'This is Mumtaz Ansari.'

Ansari, a slight, moustachioed figure in white pyjamas, giggled.

'It is a fabricated story,' he said, a broad grin on his face. 'A baseless story, the propaganda of my enemies.'

'It was only his party workers who beat the man up,' explained Laloo. 'Ansari had nothing to do with it.'

'So the man *was* beaten up?'

'A few slaps only,' said Ansari. 'The fellow was misbehaving.'

'What action have you taken?' I asked Laloo.

'I told my MPs: "You must not behave like this. A citizen is the owner of the country. We are just servants."'

'That's all you did?'

'I have condemned what happened,' said Laloo, smiling from ear to ear. 'I have condemned Mr Ansari.'

Both Laloo and Ansari burst out laughing. Laloo then finished

the cup of tea he was drinking, threw the dregs over his shoulder and dropped the cup on the grass, calling for a turbaned bearer to pick it up. 'Come,' he said, standing up and indicating that I should do the same. 'This was a small incident only. Let me show you my farm.'

Before I could argue, Laloo had taken my arm. He led me around what had once been the neat rose garden of the British Governor's residence. Apart from a small patch of lawn at the back of the house, the whole plot had been ploughed up and turned in to a series of fields. In one corner stood Laloo's fishpond and beehives; in another his dairy farm, rabbit hutches, cattle and buffalo sheds. In between were acres of neat furrows planted with chillies, spinach and potatoes. 'This is *satthu*,' he said. 'Very good for farting.'

'Who eats all this?' I asked.

'I do – along with my wife and family. We villagers like fresh produce. The rest we distribute to the poor.'

While we examined a new threshing machine manned by one of Laloo's cousins, Laloo talked of the Brahmin political establishment.

'The BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] and the Congress are both Brahminical parties,' he said. 'The backward castes have no reason to vote for them. Already they have realised this in Bihar. In time they will realise this everywhere. The support of these parties will dry up like a dirty puddle on a summer's day.

'The backward castes will rise up,' he said as he led me back

to my car. 'Even now they are waking up and raising their voices. You will see: we will break the power of these people …'

In the darkness of the porte-cochère, Laloo was declaiming as if at a public rally: 'We will have a flood of votes,' he said. 'Nobody will be able to check us.'

The driver was itching to be off: it would soon be dark, and he wanted to be back at the hotel before sunset. Even in Patna, he said, it was madness to be on the roads of Bihar after dark.

Postscript

Despite many of the key witnesses suffering mysterious fatal 'accidents' before the police could interview them, the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation gradually closed in on Laloo during the spring of 1997, as the full scale of the amount embezzled by his administration in the 'Fodder Scam' became clear: around a thousand *crore* rupees, or £180 million – a large sum anywhere, but a truly colossal figure by Bihari standards. In May 1997 Laloo was finally arrested, but when pressure on him to step down became insupportable, he pulled off a *putsch* of characteristic audacity: he resigned as Chief Minister of Bihar, only to hand over the reigns of government to his illiterate wife, Rabri Devi. She continues to rule Bihar at the time of writing.

Despite these scandals, in the 1998 general election Laloo's party performed much better than anyone had expected. Indeed, he was one of the few senior Janata Dal figures not to suffer electoral disaster, proving once and for all (if it still needed proving) that the Indian electorate regards all politicians as equally dishonest, and thus remains oddly immune to revelations of misconduct, however damaging. Standing for election while on bail awaiting trial, Laloo was returned to his seat with a reduced but comfortable majority, while his – or rather, technically, his wife's – government returned to power in alliance with the Congress.

During polling, despite the deployment of whole regiments of the Indian Army, violence in Bihar reached spectacular new levels, with mortars and landmines being deployed to assist the ballot-stuffing manoeuvres, prompting the memorable *Statesman* headline 'Many Dead in Bihar: Police Party Blown to Smithereens'. The true scale of the fatalities will probably never be known, but certainly well over fifty died on polling day, including one of the candidates. The accused in the murder, one Brij Behari Prasad, was rewarded with the post of Power Minister in Laloo's government, though there are reports that he has recently 'absconded' in order to avoid arrest.

Meanwhile, the anarchy in Bihar grows worse month by month. This winter, a friend of mine tried driving from Patna to the north Bihari district of Purnea to inspect a series of obscure Moghul monuments. On the first day of his trip, in broad daylight, his car was stopped on a national highway by *dacoits* armed with an assortment of spears, swords and automatic weapons. My friend was robbed of everything he had with him – money, cameras and baggage. He had, however, anticipated just such an eventuality, and bravely continued on his journey with the dollars he had secreted in his socks. Twenty miles later he was stopped by a second hold-up, and in the ensuing strip-search his dollars, shoes, socks and car were taken too. He was forced to return to Patna barefoot.

In the Kingdom of Avadh

LUCKNOW, 1998

On the eve of the Great Mutiny of 1857, Lucknow, the capital of the Kingdom of Avadh, was indisputably the largest, most prosperous and most civilised pre-colonial city in India. Its spectacular skyline – with its domes and towers and gilded cupolas, its palaces and pleasure gardens, ceremonial avenues and wide *maidans* – reminded travellers of Constantinople, Paris or even Venice. The city's courtly Urdu diction and baroque codes of etiquette were renowned as the most subtle and refined in the subcontinent; its dancers admired as the most accomplished; its cuisine famous as the most flamboyantly elaborate. Moreover, at the heart of the city lay Lucknow's decadent and Bacchanalian court. Stories of its seven-hundred-women harems and numberless *nautch* girls came to epitomise the fevered fantasies of whole generations of Orientalists; yet for once the fantasy seems to have been not far removed from the swaggeringly sybaritic reality.

'But look at it now,' said Mushtaq, gesturing sadly over the rooftops. 'See how little is left …'

We were standing on the roof of Mushtaq's school in Aminabad, one of the oldest quarters of the city and the heart of old Lucknow. It was a cold, misty winter's morning, and around us, through the ground mist, rose the great swelling,

gilded domes of the city's remaining mosques and *imambaras*. A flight of pigeons wheeled over the domes and came to rest in a grove of tamarind trees to one side; nearby a little boy flew a kite from the top of a small domed Moghul pavilion. It was a spectacular panorama, still one of the greatest skylines in the Islamic world; but even from our vantage point the signs of decay were unmistakable.

'See the grass growing on the domes?' said Mushtaq, pointing at the great triple dome of the magnificent Jama Masjid. 'It hasn't been whitewashed for thirty years. And at the base: look at the cracks! Today the skills are no longer there to mend these things: the expertise has gone. The Nawabs would import craftsmen from all over India and beyond – artisans from Tashkent and Samarkand, masons from Isfahan and Bukhara. They were paid fantastic sums, but now no one ever thinks to repair these buildings. They are just left to rot. All this has happened in my lifetime.'

A friend in Delhi had given me Mushtaq Naqvi's name when he heard I was planning to visit Lucknow. Mushtaq, he said, was one of the last remnants of old Lucknow: a poet, teacher and writer who knew Lucknow intimately, and who – slightly to everyone's surprise – had chosen never to leave the city of his birth, despite all that had happened to it since Independence. Talking with my Delhi friends, I soon learned that this qualification – 'despite all that has happened to Lucknow' – seemed to be suffixed to any statement about the place, as

if it were a universally accepted fact that Lucknow's period of greatness lay long in the past.

The city's apogee, everyone agreed, was during the eighteenth century, under the flamboyant Nawabs of Avadh (or Oudh) – a time when, according to one authority, the city resembled an Indian version of '[pre-Revolutionary] Teheran, Monte Carlo and Las Vegas, with just a touch of Glyndebourne for good measure'. Even after the catastrophe of 1857 and the bloody reprisals of the vengeful British, Lucknow had been reborn as one the great cities of the Raj.

It was Partition in 1947 that finally tore the city apart, its composite Hindu-Muslim culture irretrievably shattered in the unparalleled orgy of bloodletting that everywhere marked the division of India and Pakistan. By the end of the year, Lucknow's cultured Muslim aristocracy had emigrated *en masse* to Pakistan, and the city found itself swamped instead with non-Muslim refugees from the Punjab. These regarded the remaining Muslims with the greatest suspicion – as dangerous fanatics and Pakistani fifth-columnists – and they brought with them their own very different, aggressively commercial culture. What was left of the old Lucknow, with its courtly graces and refinement, went in to headlong decline. The roads stopped being sprinkled at sunset, the buildings ceased to receive their annual whitewash, the gardens decayed, and litter and dirt began to pile up unswept on the pavements.

Fifty years later, Lucknow is renowned not so much for its

refinement as for the coarseness and corruption of its politicians, and the crass ineptitude of its officials. What was once regarded as the most civilised city in India, a city whose manners and speech made other Indians feel like oafish rustics, is rapidly becoming notorious as one of the most hopelessly backward and violent, with a burgeoning mafia and a notoriously thuggish and corrupt police force.

'You must have seen some sad changes in that skyline,' I said to Mushtaq as we turned to look eastwards over the charmless tower-blocks which dwarfed and blotted out the eighteenth-century panorama in the very centre of the city.

'In thirty years all sense of aesthetics has gone from this town,' he replied. 'Once Lucknow was known as the Garden of India. There were palms and gardens and greenery everywhere. Now so much of it is eaten up by concrete, and the rest has become a slum. See that collapsing building over there?'

Mushtaq pointed to a ruin a short distance away. A few cusped arches and some broken pillars were all that was left of what had clearly once been a rather magnificent structure. But now shanty-huts hemmed it in on three sides, while on the fourth stood a fetid pool. At its edge a cow munched on a pile of chaff.

'It is difficult to imagine now,' said Mushtaq, 'but when I was a boy that was one of the most beautiful *havelis* in Lucknow. At its centre was a magnificent *shish mahal* [mirror chamber]. The *haveli* covered that whole area where the huts are now, and that pool was the tank in its middle. *Begums* [aristocratic women]

from all over Aminabad and Hussainabad would go there to swim. There were gardens all around. See that tangle of barbed wire? That used to be an orchard of sweet-smelling orange trees. Can you imagine?'

I looked at the scene again, trying to picture its former glory.

'But the worst of it,' continued Mushtaq, 'is that the external decay of the city is really just a symbol of what is happening inside us: the inner rot.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Under the Nawabs Lucknow experienced a renaissance that represented the last great flowering of Indo-Islamic genius. The Nawabs were profoundly liberal and civilised figures: men like Wajd Ali Shah, author of a hundred books, a great poet and dancer. But the culture of Lucknow was not just limited to the élite: even the prostitutes could quote the great Persian poets; even the tonga-drivers and the tradesmen in the bazaars spoke the most chaste Urdu and were famous across India for their exquisite manners.'

'But today?'

'Today the grave of our greatest poet, Mir, lies under a railway track. What is left of the culture he represented seems hopelessly vulnerable. After Partition nothing could ever be the same again. Those Muslims who are left were the second rung. They simply don't have the skills or education to compete with the Punjabis, with their money and business instincts and brightly-lit shops. Everything they have has crumbled so quickly: the owners of

palaces and *havelis* have become the *chowkidars*. If you saw any of the old *begums* today you would barely recognise them. They are shorn of all their glory, and their *havelis* are in a state of neglect. They were never brought up to work – they simply don't know how to do it. As they never planned for the future, many are now in real poverty. In some cases their daughters have been forced in to prostitution.'

'Literally?'

'Literally. I'll tell you one incident that will bring tears to your eyes. A young girl I know, eighteen years old, from one of the royal families, was forced to take up this work. A rickshaw driver took her in *chador* to Clarke's Hotel for a rich Punjabi businessman to enjoy for five hundred rupees. This man had been drinking whisky, but when the girl unveiled herself he was so struck by her beauty, by the majesty of her bearing, that he could not touch her. He paid her the money and told her to go.'

Mushtaq shook his head sadly: 'So you see, it's not just the buildings: the human beings of this city are crumbling too. The history of the decline of this city is written on the bodies of its people. Look at the children roaming the streets, turning to crime. Great-grandchildren of the Nawabs are pulling rickshaws. If you go deeply in to this matter you would write a book with your tears.'

He pointed at the flat roof of a half-ruined *haveli:* 'See that house over there? When I was a student there was a nobleman who lived there. He was from a minor Nawabi family. He lived

alone, but every day he would come to a *chaikhana* [teahouse] and *gupshup* [gossip]. He was a very proud man, very conscious of his noble birth, and he always wore an old-fashioned *angurka* [long Muslim frock-coat]. But his properties were all burned down at Partition. He didn't have a job and no one knew how he survived.

'Then one day he didn't turn up at the *chaikhana.* The next day and the day after that there was no sign of him either. Finally on the fourth day the neighbours began to smell a bad smell coming from his house. They broke down the door and found him lying dead on a *charpoy.* There was no covering, no other furniture, no books, nothing. He had sold everything he had, except his one set of clothes, but he was too proud to beg, or even to tell anyone of his problem. When they did a post-mortem on him in the medical college they found he had died of starvation.

'Come,' said Mushtaq. 'Let us go to the *chowk:* there I will tell you about this city, and what it once was.'

At the height of the Moghul Empire during the early seventeenth century, said Mushtaq, Shah Jehan, the builder of the Taj Mahal, had ruled over a kingdom that stretched from the Hindu Kush in the north almost to the great diamond mines of Golconda in the south. But during the eighteenth century, as the empire fell apart, undermined by civil war and sacked by a succession of invaders from Persia and Afghanistan, India's focus moved inexorably eastwards, from Delhi to Lucknow. There the Nawabs maintained the fiction that they were merely the

provincial governors of the Moghuls, while actually holding a degree of real power and wealth immeasurably greater than the succession of feeble late-Moghul monarchs who came and went on the throne of Delhi.

Gradually, as the Moghuls' power of patronage grew ever smaller, there was a haemorrhage of poets and writers, architects and miniature-painters from Delhi to Lucknow, as the Nawabs collected around them the greatest minds of the day. They were men such as Mir, probably the greatest of all the Urdu poets, who in 1782, at the age of sixty-six, was forced to flee from his beloved Delhi in an effort to escape the now insupportable violence and instability of the Moghul capital.

The Nawabs were great builders, and in less than fifty years they succeeded in transforming the narrow lanes of a small medieval city in to one of the great capitals of the Muslim world: 'Not Rome, not Athens, not Constantinople, not any city I have ever seen appears to me so striking and beautiful as this,' wrote the British war correspondent William Russell in the middle of the Great Mutiny. 'The sun playing on the gilt domes and spires, the exceeding richness of the vegetation and forests and gardens remind one somewhat of the view of the Bois de Boulogne from the hill over St Cloud … but for the thunder of the guns and the noise of the balls cleaving the air, how peaceful the scene would be!'

After six hundred years of Islamic rule in India, what the Nawabs achieved at Lucknow represented the last great

swansong of Indo-Islamic civilisation, a final burst of energy and inspiration before the onset of a twentieth century holding little for Indian Muslims except division, despair and inexorable decline.

Since I had arrived in the city I had spent a couple of bright, chilly winter days jolting around the old city on a rickshaw, visiting a little of what was left. The architecture of the Nawabs has sometimes been seen as a decadent departure from the pure lines of the great Moghul golden age, and there is some truth in this: there is nothing in Lucknow, for example, to compare to the chaste perfection of the Taj. Moreover, in the years leading up to the Mutiny some of the buildings erected in Lucknow did indeed sink in to a kind of florid, camp voluptuousness which seems to have accurately reflected the mores of a city whoring and dancing its way to extinction. To this day a curtain covers the entrance to the picture gallery in Lucknow, after a prim British *memsahib* fainted on seeing the flirtatiously bared nipple of the last Nawab, Wajd Ali Shah, prominently displayed in a portrait of the period. The same feeling of overripe decadence is conveyed in late-Nawabi poetry, which is some of the most unblushingly fleshy and sensual ever written by Muslim poets:

I am a lover of breasts
Like pomegranates;
Plant then no other trees
On my grave but these.

(Nasikh)

Confronted with such verses, Mir expressed his view that most Lucknavi poets could not write verse, and would be better advised to 'stick to kissing and slavering'.

He may well have thought the same of late-Nawabi architecture, with its similarly unrestrained piling on of effects. For by the end Lucknow's builders had developed a uniquely blowsy Avadhi rococo whose forms and decorative strategies seem to have borrowed more from the ballrooms and fairgrounds of Europe than from the austere shrines and fortresses of Babur and Timur the Lame. There was no question of sobriety or restraint: even in monuments built to house the dead, every inch of the interior was covered with a jungle of brightly coloured plasterwork intertwining promiscuously with gaudy curlicues of feathery stucco.

Nevertheless, the best of the buildings in Lucknow – those that date from the late eighteenth century – are evidence of a remarkable silver age which in sheer exuberance has no equal in India. The Great Imambara complex was constructed by Asaf ud-Daula for Shi'ite religious discourses in 1784. One of the largest vaulted halls in the world, it was built in order to create employment during a famine. Here there is none of the camp doodling that would be seen on later Nawabi buildings. Instead the Imambara is a vast and thoroughly monumental building: long, echoing arcades of cusped arches rise to great gilded onion-domes and rippling lines of pepperpot semi-domes; at

the corners soaring minarets culminate in solid, well-designed *chattris.* The whole composition surrounded by the Great Mosque and the Rumi Darwaza exudes a bold, reckless and extravagant self-confidence. Lucknow was consciously aiming to surpass the glories of late-Moghul Delhi, and the Great Imambara shows it could do so with dashing panache.

Driving today through the melancholic streets of modern Lucknow, the massive buildings dating from the days of the Nawabs rear out of the surrounding anarchy like monuments from some lost civilisation, seemingly as disconnected from the present as the pyramids are from modern Egypt. At times it seems almost impossible to believe that they date from less than two hundred years ago, and that at that period Lucknow was famed as one of the richest kingdoms in Asia. For today the city is as shabby and impoverished as anywhere in India. Waves of squabbling cycle-rickshaw drivers pass down the potholed roads, bumping in and out of the puddles. Rubbish lies uncollected by the roadside, with dogs competing with rats to snuffle in the piles of garbage. Beside them, lines of desperate street-vendors squat on dirty rush-mats, displaying their tawdry collections of cheap plastic keyrings and fake Rolex watches. There is no grass in the parks and no flowers in the beds; barbed wire hangs limply around what were once beautiful Moghul gardens alive with the sound of parakeets and peacocks. Above the crumbling ruins of the old city of the Nawabs rise the monsoon-stained tower-blocks erected since Independence, and now, like the ruins, showing

signs of imminent collapse, with deep fissures running up their sides.

The contrast between the magnificent follies of the Nawabs and the decayed, impoverished post-colonial intrusions which stand among them is almost unbearably painful: everywhere, it seems, there has been a universal drop in standards and expectations.

Yet even as the greatest buildings of Nawabi Lucknow were being erected, the Kingdom of Avadh was acutely conscious that it was living on borrowed time. In 1764, before the Nawabs had even established their capital at Lucknow, their armies had already been defeated in battle by the East India Company, and over the course of the early nineteenth century the Company ate like a cancer in to the territories of Avadh: in less than fifty years the British annexed more than half the kingdom. But the Nawabs remained surprisingly well disposed towards Europeans, and delighted in the trinkets and amusements Westerners could provide for their court: European jugglers, portrait painters, watch-menders, piano tuners and even fashionable London barbers were all welcomed to Lucknow, and were well paid for their services.

If the Nawab sometimes amazed foreign visitors by appearing dressed as a British admiral, or even as a clergyman of the Church of England, the Europeans of Lucknow often returned the compliment. Miniature after miniature from late-eighteenth-century Lucknow shows Europeans of the period dressed in long

white Avadhi gowns, lying back on carpets, hubble-bubbles in their mouths, as they watch their *nautch* girls dance before them. Even those who never gave up European dress seem to have taken on the mores of Nawabi society: Major General Claude Martin, for example, kept a harem which included his favourite wife Boulone as well as her three sisters. Nor was this sexual curiosity one-way: at least two British *memsahibs* were recruited to join the royal Avadhi harem, and a mosque survives which was built by the Nawab for one of them, a Miss Walters.

Much of the surviving architecture of the city reflects this unique moment of Indo-European intermingling. Constantia, Claude Martin's great palace-mausoleum, now the La Martiniere school, is perhaps the most gloriously hybrid building in India, part Nawabi fantasy and part Gothic colonial barracks. Just as Martin himself combined the lifestyle of a Muslim prince with the interests of a renaissance man – writing Persian couplets and maintaining an observatory, experimenting with map-making and botany, hot-air balloons and even bladder surgery – so his mausoleum mixes Georgian colonnades with the loopholes and turrets of a medieval castle; Palladian arcades rise to Moghul cupolas; inside, brightly-coloured Nawabi plasterwork encloses Wedgwood plaques of classical European gods and goddesses.

For while Martin designed Constantia to be the most magnificent European funerary monument in India, the East India Company's answer to the Taj Mahal, it was also intended to be defensible. The eighteenth century was an anarchic and

violent time in India, and during an uprising in the 1770s Martin had to defend his residence with a pair of cannon filled with grapeshot. It was a lesson he never forgot, and he built Constantia to be his last redoubt in case of danger. Lines of cannon crowned the façade, and thick iron doors sealed off the narrow spiral staircases which connected the various 'bomb-proof' floors. On the façade Martin erected two colossal East India Company lions which were designed to hold flaming torches in their mouths. The sight of these illuminated beasts belching out fire and smoke on a dark night was intended to terrify would-be intruders.

In its wilful extravagance and sheer strangeness, Constantia embodies like no other building the opulence, restlessness and open-mindedness of this city on the faultline between East and West, the old world of the Nawabs and the new world of the Raj. To this day the whole extraordinary creation stands quite intact, still enclosed in acres of its own parkland. As you approach on your rickshaw you proceed along a superb avenue of poplar and tamarind, eucalyptus and casuarina, at the end of which you pass the perfect domed Moghul tomb which Martin built for his beloved Boulone. As he rather touchingly wrote in his will: 'She choosed never to quit me. She persisted that she would live with me, and since we lived together we never had a word of bad humour one against another.'

Not far from Constantia, a short rickshaw ride over the railway crossing, I stumbled across a smaller but equally remarkable building from the same period. It turned out to be the ruins

of one of the Nawabs' most lovely pleasure palaces, named Dilkusha, or Heart's Delight. Yet despite this very Persian name, Dilkusha was in fact closely modelled on one of the great English country houses, Seaton Delaval in Northumberland – but with four gloriously ornate octagonal minarets added to the otherwise austere Palladian design.

The whole period was an extraordinary moment of Indo-European fusion – a moment pregnant with unfulfilled possibilities, and one which is often forgotten in the light of Lucknow's subsequent history. For this process of mutual enrichment did not last. As the nineteenth century progressed, the British became more and more demanding in their exactions on the Nawabs, and more and more assured of their own superiority. They learned to scoff at the buildings and traditions of Lucknow, and became increasingly convinced that they had nothing to learn from 'native' culture. Relations between the Nawabs and the British gradually became chilly: it was as if the high-spirited tolerance of courtly Lucknow was a direct challenge to the increasingly self-righteous spirit of evangelical Calcutta. In 1857, a year after the British forcibly deposed the last Nawab, Lucknow struck back, besieging the British in their fortified residency.

In the event, after nearly two years of siege and desperate hand-to-hand fighting in the streets of Lucknow, the British defeated the Mutineers and wreaked their revenge on the conquered city. Vast areas of the capital of the Nawabs were

bulldozed, and for half a century the administration of the region moved to Allahabad. Every site connected to the Mutiny was lovingly preserved by the British – the pockmarked ruins of the besieged residency, the tombs of the fallen British leaders, every point in the town where the relieving forces were ambushed or driven back – turning much of Lucknow in to a vast, open-air Imperial war memorial, thickly littered with a carapace of cemeteries and spiked cannons, obelisks and rolls of honour. But shorn of its court and administrative status, preserved only for the curiosity of British visitors, Lucknow gradually turned in to the melancholic backwater it is today.

'Yet even in my childhood something of Lucknow's old graces survived,' said Mushtaq. 'I'll show you what I mean.'

We walked together through the *chowk,* the narrow, latticed bazaar-labyrinth which was once the centre of Lucknow's cultural life. Above us, elaborately carved wooden balconies backed on to latticed windows. Figures flitted behind the wooden grilles. Every so often we would pass the arched and pedimented gateway of a grand *haveli:* the gateway still stood magnificently, but as often as not the old mansion to which it led had been turned in to a *godown* or warehouse. A bird's nest of electricity wires was strung down the side of the *chowk,* often brutally punched through the walls and arcades of the old mansions.

Below the latticed living quarters was a wonderful collection of tiny, boxlike shops, all arranged in groups by trade: a row of stores selling home-made fireworks would be followed by

another row piled high with mountains of guavas or marigold garlands; a group of ear-cleaners – whose lives revolved around the patient removal of wax from their customers' inner ears – would be followed by a confraternity of silver-beaters who made their living from hammering silver in to sheets so fine they could be applied to sticky Lucknavi sweets.

'When I was a boy, before Partition, I came here with my brother,' said Mushtaq. 'In those days the *chowk* was still full of perfume from the scent shops. They had different scents for different seasons: *khas* for the hot season, *bhela* for the monsoon and *henna* for the cold. Everywhere there were stalls full of flowers: people brought them in from gardens and the countryside roundabout. The bazaar was famous for having the best food, the best kebabs and the best women in north India.'

'The best women?' Looking around now, all I could see was the occasional black beehive flitting past in full *chador*.

'Ah,' said Mushtaq. 'You see, in those days the last courtesans were still here.'

'Prostitutes?'

'Not prostitutes in the Western sense, although they could fulfil that function.'

'So what was it that distinguished them from prostitutes?' I asked.

'In many ways the courtesans were the guardians of the culture,' replied Mushtaq. 'Apart from anything else they preserved the traditions of Indian classical music for centuries.

They were known as *tawwaif*, and they were the incarnation of good manners. The young men would be sent to them to learn how to behave and deport themselves: how to roll or accept a *paan*, how to say thank you, how to *salaam*, how to stand up, how to leave a room – as well as the facts of life.

'On the terraces of upper-storey chambers of the *tawwaif*, the young men would come to recite their verses and *ghazals*. Water would be sprinkled on the ground to cool it, then carpets would be laid out and covered with white sheets. Hookahs and candles would be arranged around the guests, along with *surahis*, fresh from the potters, exuding the monsoon scent of rain falling on parched earth. Only then would the recitations begin. In those days anyone who even remotely aspired to being called cultured had to take a teacher and learn how to compose poetry.'

We pulled ourselves on to the steps of a kebab shop to make way for a herd of water-buffaloes which were being driven down the narrow alley to the market at the far end. From inside came the delicious smell of grilled meat and spices.

'Most of all the *tawwaif* would teach young men how to speak perfect Urdu. You see, in Lucknow language was not just a tool of communication: it was a projection of the culture – very florid and subtle. But now the language has changed. Compared to Urdu, Punjabi is a very coarse language: when you listen to two Punjabis talking it sounds as if they are fighting. But because of the number of Punjabis who have come to live here, the old refined Urdu of Lucknow is now hardly spoken. Few are left who

can understand it – fewer still who speak it.'

'Did you ever meet one of these *tawwaif*?'

'Yes,' said Mushtaq. 'My brother used to keep a mistress here in the *chowk*, and on one occasion he brought me along too. I'll never forget her: although she was a poor woman, she was very beautiful – full of grace and good manners. She was wearing her full make-up and was covered in jewellery which sparked in the light of the oil lamps. She looked like a princess to me – but I was hardly twelve, and by the time I was old enough to possess a *tawwaif* myself, they had gone. That whole culture with its poetic *mehfils* [levées] and *mushairas* [symposia] went with them.'

'So is there nothing left?' I asked. 'Is there no one who can still recite the great Lucknavi poets? Who remembers the old stories?'

'Well, there is one man,' said Mushtaq. 'You should talk to Suleiman, the Rajah of Mahmudabad. He is a remarkable man.'

The longer I lingered in Lucknow, the more I heard about Suleiman Mahmudabad. Whenever I raised the subject of survivors from the old world of courtly Lucknow, his name always cropped up sooner or later in the conversation. People in Lucknow were clearly proud of him, and regarded him as a sort of repository of whatever wisdom and culture had been salvaged from the wreck of their city.

I finally met the man a week later at the house of a Lucknavi friend. Farid Faridi's guests were gathered around a small sitting

room sipping imported whisky and worrying about the latest enormities committed by Lucknow's politicians. A month before, in front of Doordashan television cameras, the MLAs in the State Assembly had attacked each other in the debating chamber with microphone stands, desks and broken bottles. There were heavy casualties, particularly among the BJP politicians who had come to the Assembly building marginally less well armed than their rivals: around thirty had ended up in hospital with severe injuries, and there was now much talk about possible revenge attacks.

'Power has passed from the educated to the illiterate,' said one guest. 'Our last Chief Minister was a village wrestling champion. Can you imagine?'

'All our politicians are thugs and criminals now,' said my neighbour. 'The police are so supine and spineless they do nothing to stop them taking over the state.'

'We feel so helpless in this situation,' said Faridi. 'The world we knew is collapsing and there is nothing we can do.'

'All we can do is to sit in our drawing rooms and watch these criminals plunder our country,' said my neighbour.

'The police used to chase them,' said the first guest. 'But now they spend their time guarding them.'

Mahmudabad arrived late, but was greeted with great deference by our host, who addressed him throughout as 'Rajah Sahib'. He was a slight man, beautifully turned out in traditional Avadhi evening dress of a long silk *sherwani* over a pair of tight white cotton pyjamas. I had already been told much about

his achievements – how he was as fluent in Urdu, Arabic and Persian as he was in French and English, how he had studied postgraduate astrophysics at Cambridge, how he had been a successful Congress MLA under Rajiv Gandhi – but nothing prepared me for the anxious, fidgety polymath who effortlessly dominated the conversation from the moment he stepped in to the room.

Towards midnight, as he was leaving, Mahmudabad asked whether I was busy the following day. If not, he said, I was welcome to accompany him to the *qila*, his ancestral fort in the country outside Lucknow. He would be leaving at eleven a.m.; if I could get to him by then I could come along and keep him company on the journey.

Suleiman's Lucknow *pied à terre*, I discovered the following morning, turned out to be the one surviving wing of the Kaiserbagh, the last great palace of the Nawabs. Before its partial destruction during the Mutiny, the Kaiserbagh had been larger than the Tuileries and the Louvre combined; but what remained more closely resembled some crumbling Sicilian *palazzo*, all flaking yellow plasterwork and benign baroque neglect. An ancient wheelless Austin 8 rusted in the palace's porte-cochère, beside which squatted a group of elderly retainers all dressed in matching white homespun.

Suleiman was in his study, attending to a group of petitioners who had come to ask favours. It was an hour before he could free himself and call for the driver to come round with the car.

Soon we had left the straggling outskirts of Lucknow behind us and were heading on a raised embankment through long, straight avenues of poplars. On either side spread yellow fields of mustard, broken only by clumps of palm and the occasional pool full of leathery water buffaloes. As we drove Suleiman talked about his childhood, much of which, it emerged, had been spent in exile in the Middle East.

'My father,' he said, 'was a great friend of Jinnah and an early supporter of his Muslim League. In fact he provided so much of the finance that he was made treasurer. But despite his admiration for Jinnah he never really seemed to understand what Partition would entail. The day before the division, in the midst of the bloodshed, he quietly left the country and set off via Iran for Kerbala [the Shias' holiest shrine] in Iraq. From there we went to Beirut. It was ten years before he took up Pakistani citizenship, and even then he spent most of his time in London.'

'Did he regret helping Jinnah?'

'He was too proud to admit it,' said Suleiman, 'but I think yes. Certainly he was profoundly saddened by the bitterness of Partition and the part he had played in bringing it about. After that he never settled down or returned home. I think he realised how many people he had caused to lose their homes, and he chose to wander the face of the earth as a kind of self-imposed penance.'

Mahmudabad lay only thirty miles outside Lucknow, but so bad were the roads that the journey took over two hours.

Eventually a pair of minarets reared out of the trees – a replica of the mosque at Kerbala built by Suleiman's father – and beyond them, looking on to a small lake, towered the walls of the *qila* of Mahmudabad.

It was a vast structure, built in the same Lucknavi Indo-Palladian style I had seen at La Martiniere and Dilkusha. The outer wall was broken by a ceremonial gateway or *naqqar khana* (drum house), on which was emblazoned the fish symbol of the Kingdom of Avadh. Beyond rose the ramparts of a medieval fort on to which had been tucked an eighteenth-century classical bow front; above, a series of balconies were surmounted by a ripple of Moghul *chattris* and cupolas.

It was magnificent; yet the same neglect which had embraced so many of the buildings of Lucknow had taken hold of the Mahmudabad *qila*. The grass had died on the lawn in front of the gateway, and the remaining flowers in the beds were twisted and desiccated; bushes sprouted from the fort's roof. In previous generations the chamber at the top of the *naqqar khana* would have been full of musicians announcing the arrival of the Rajah with kettle drums and *shenai*. It was empty now, of course, but there was certainly no shortage of servants to fill it. As we drove in to the *qila*'s courtyard a crowd of between twenty and thirty retainers was massed to greet the Rajah, all frantically bowing and *salaam*ing; as Suleiman got out of the car the foremost ones dived to touch his feet.

I followed him in to the *qila* and up through the dark halls

and narrow staircases of the fort; the troop of servants followed behind me. Dust lay thick underfoot, as if the *qila* was some lost castle in a forest in a child's fairy tale. We passed through a splintered door in to an old ballroom, empty, echoing and spacious. Once its floor had been sprung, but now many of the planks were missing, and others were littered with pieces of plaster fallen from the ceiling. A torn family portrait of some bejewelled Rajah hung half in, half out of its frame. It looked as if no one had entered the room for at least a decade.

Suleiman threw back a door and led the way in to what had once been the library. Cobwebs hung like sheets from the walls; the chintz was literally peeling off the armchairs. Books were everywhere, great piles of 1920s hardbacks, but you had to wipe them with a handkerchief to read their spines and to uncover lines of classics – *The Annals of Tacitus, The Works of Aristotle* – nestling next to such long-forgotten titles as *The Competition Wallah* and *The Races of the North-West Provinces of India*.

'This library was my ancestors' window on the world,' said Suleiman. 'But, like everything, it's fast decaying, as you can see.'

I looked around. There were no carpets on the floors, which, uncovered, had become stained and dirty. Above there were holes in the ceiling, with the wooden beams showing through the broken plaster like bones sticking out of wounded flesh. Suleiman was at the window now, pressing the shutters to try to open them; pushing too hard, he nearly succeeded in dislodging the whole window frame. Eventually the shutter gave

way and hung open, precariously attached to the frame by its one remaining hinge.

A servant padded in and Suleiman ordered some cold drinks, asking when lunch would be ready. The servant looked flustered. It became apparent that the message had not reached them from Lucknow that we would be expecting lunch; probably the telephone lines were not working that day.

'It wasn't always like this,' said Suleiman, slumping down in one of the moth-eaten armchairs underneath a single naked lightbulb. 'When the 1965 Indo–Pakistani war broke out, the *qila* was seized by the government as enemy property. My father had finally made the decision to take Pakistani citizenship in 1957, and although he had never really lived there, it was enough. Everything was locked up and the gates were sealed. My mother – who had never taken Pakistani citizenship – lived on the verandah for three or four months before the government agreed to allow her to have a room to sleep in. Even then it was two years before she was allowed access to a bathroom. She endured it all with great dignity. Until her death she carried on as if nothing had happened.'

At this point the bearer reappeared and announced that no cold drinks were available. Suleiman frowned and dismissed him, asking him to bring some water and to hurry up with the lunch.

'What was I saying?' he asked, distracted by the domestic chaos.

'About the sealing of the palace.'

'Ah, yes. The Indian Armed Constabulary lived here for two years. It wasn't just neglect: the place was looted. There were two major thefts of silver – they said ten tons in all …'

'Ten tons? Of silver?'

'That's what they say,' replied Suleiman dreamily. He looked at his watch. It was nearly three o'clock and his absent lunch was clearly on his mind. 'Ten tons … though it's probably exaggerated. Certainly everything valuable was taken: even the chairs were stripped of their silver backing.'

'Were the guards in league with the robbers?'

'The case is still going on. It's directed against some poor character who got caught: no doubt one of the minnows who had no one to protect him.'

Suleiman walked over to the window and shouted some instructions in Urdu down to the servants in the courtyard below.

'I've asked them to bring some bottled water. I can't drink the water here. My stomach – you've no idea the hell I've been through with it, the pain. I have to keep taking these terrible antibiotics. I've been to specialists, but they can't do anything.'

Shortly afterwards the bearer reappeared. There was no bottled water, he said. And no, Rajah Sahib, the *khana* was not yet ready. He shuffled out backwards, mumbling apologies.

'What are these servants doing?' said Suleiman. 'They can't treat us like this.'

He began to pace backwards and forwards through the ruination of his palace, stepping over the chunks of plaster on

the floor.

'I get terrible bouts of gloom whenever I come here,' he said. 'It makes me feel so tired – exhausted *internally*.'

He paused, trying to find the right words: 'There is … so much that is about to collapse: it's like trying to keep a dike from bursting. Partly it's because I don't live here enough … But it preys on my mind wherever I am. I feel overwhelmed at even the thought of this place.'

He paused again, raising his hands in a gesture of helplessness: 'I simply can't see any light at the end of *any* of the various tunnels. Each year I feel that it is less and less worth struggling for. Sometimes the urge just to escape becomes insupportable – just to leave it all behind, to take a donkey and some books and disappear.

'Come,' he said, suddenly taking my arm. 'I can't breathe. There's no air in this room …'

The Rajah led me up flight after flight of dark, narrow staircases until we reached the flat roof at the top of the fort. From beyond the moat, out over the plains, smoke was rising from the early-evening cooking fires, forming a flat layer at the level of the treetops. To me it was a beautiful, peaceful Indian winter evening of the sort I had grown to love, but Suleiman seemed to see in it a vision of impending disaster. He was still tense and agitated, and the view did nothing to calm him down.

'You see,' he explained, 'it's not just the *qila* that depresses me. It's what is happening to the people. There was so much

that could have been done after Independence, when they abolished the holdings of the *zamindars* who were strangling the countryside. But all that happened was the rise of these criminal politicians: they filled the vacuum and they are the role models today. Worse still, theirs are the values – if you can call them values – to which people look up: corruption, deception, duplicity, and crude, crass materialism. These are seen to be the avenues to success.

'The world that I knew has been completely corrupted and destroyed. I go in to fits of depression when I see the filth and dirt of modern Lucknow and remember the flowers and trees of my youth. Even out here the rot has set in. Look at that monstrosity!'

Suleiman pointed to a thick spire of smoke rising from a sugar factory some distance away across the fields.

'Soft powder falls on the village all day from the pollution from that factory. It was erected illegally and in no other country would such a pollutant be tolerated. I spoke to the manager and he assured me action was imminent, but of course nothing ever happens.'

'Perhaps if you went back in to politics you could have it closed down?' I suggested.

'Never again,' said Suleiman. 'After two terms in the Legislative Assembly I came on record saying I would leave the Congress Party if it continued to patronise criminals. The new breed of Indian politician has no ideas and no principles. In most cases they are just common criminals, in it for what they can

plunder. Before he died I went and saw Rajiv and told him what was happening. He was interested but he didn't do anything. He was a good man, but weak, unsure of himself. He did nothing to stop the rot.'

'Do you really think things are that bad?' I asked

'There has been a decline in education, in health, in sanitation. There is a general air of misery and suffering in the air. It's got much, much worse in the last fifteen years. Last week, a few miles outside Lucknow, robbers stopped the traffic and began robbing passers-by in broad daylight. Later, it turned out that the bandits were policemen.

'When I first joined the Legislative Assembly I was elected with an unprecedented majority. Perhaps you are right: perhaps I should have stayed in politics. But what I saw just horrified me. These people … In their desire to get a majority, the rules are bent, the laws broken, institutions are destroyed. The effects are there for anyone to see. You saw the roads: they're intolerable. Twenty years ago the journey here used to take an hour; now it takes twice that. Electricity is now virtually non-existent, or at best very erratic. There is no health care, no education, nothing. Fifty years after Independence there are still villages around here which have no drinking water. And now there are these hold-ups on the road. Because they are up to their neck in it, the police and the politicians turn a blind eye.'

'But isn't that all the more reason for you to stay in politics?' I said. 'If all the people with integrity were to resign, then of

course the criminals will take over.'

'Today it is impossible to have integrity or honesty and to stay in politics in India,' replied Suleiman. 'The process you have to go through is so ugly, so awful, it cannot leave you untouched. Its nature is such that it corrodes, that it eats up all that is most precious and vital in the spirit. It acts like acid on one's integrity and sincerity. You quickly find yourself doing something totally immoral, and you ask yourself: "What next?"'

We fell silent for a few minutes, watching the sun setting over the sugar mill. Behind us, the bearer reappeared to announce that the Rajah's *dal* and rice was finally ready. It was now nearly five o'clock.

'In some places in India perhaps you can still achieve some good through politics,' said Suleiman. 'But in Lucknow it's like a black hole. One has an awful feeling that the forces of darkness are going to win here. It gets worse by the year, the month, the week. The criminals feel they can act with impunity: if they're not actually Members of the Legislative Assembly themselves, they'll certainly have political connections. As long as they split 10 per cent of their takings between the local MLA and the police, they can get on and plunder the country without trouble.

'Everything is beginning to disintegrate,' said Suleiman, still looking down over the parapet. 'Everything.'

He gestured out towards the darkening fields below. Night was drawing in now, and a cold wind was blowing in from the plains: 'The entire economic and social structure of this area

is collapsing,' he said. 'It's like the end of the Moghul Empire. We're regressing in to a dark age.'

The City of Widows

VRINDAVAN, UTTAR PRADESH, 1997

The eye of faith can often see much that is hidden from the vision of the non-believer. To most secular visitors, Vrindavan appears to be nothing more than a rundown north Indian bazaar town, its dusty streets clogged with cows, beggars, bicycles and rickshaws. But to the pious pilgrim it is the dwelling place of Krishna, and thus – in that sense at least – an earthly paradise fragrant with the scent of tamarind and arjuna trees.

Devout Hindus believe that Krishna is still present in this temple town with its crumbling palaces and swarming *ashrams*, its open sewers and its stalls selling brightly coloured lithographs of the God Child. Listen carefully in Vrindavan, I was told by an old *sadhu* (holy man) on the riverbank, for if you are attentive you can still catch the distant strains of Krishna's flute. In the morning, said the *sadhu*, the god can sometimes be glimpsed bathing at the *ghats*; while in the evening he is often seen walking with Radha along the bank of the Jumna.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Hindu devotees come to Vrindavan, making their way barefoot to the Jumna along the *parikrama* which links all the town's most holy temples and shrines. Most then head on to another neighbouring pilgrimage site: the mountain of Govardhan, which, according to legend, Krishna used as an umbrella, lifting it with his little finger. It is

now not much more than a hillock, but this does not worry the pilgrims; they know the legend that the more sin proliferates in the world, the more the mountain is diminished.

Some who come to Vrindavan, however, never leave the town again. For many Hindus believe that there is nowhere more holy in all India, and therefore that there is nowhere better to spend your final days, nowhere better to prepare for death.

The pilgrims come from many different castes and communities, from amongst the rich and the poor, from the north and south; but one group in particular predominates: the widows. You notice them the minute you arrive in Vrindavan, bent-backed and white-saried, with their shaven heads and outstretched begging-bowls; on their foreheads they wear the tuning-fork-shaped ash-smear that marks them out as disciples of Krishna. Some of them have slipped out of their homes and left their families, feeling themselves becoming an encumbrance; others have fled vindictive sons and daughters-in-law. Most have simply been thrown out of their houses. For in traditional Hindu society, a woman loses all her status the minute her husband dies. She is forbidden to wear colours or jewellery or to eat meat. She is forbidden to remarry (at least if she is of reasonably high caste; low-caste and Untouchable women can do what they want) and she is forbidden to own property. She may no longer be expected to commit *sati* and throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, but in many traditional communities, particularly in the more remote villages, she *is* still expected to shave her head and live

like an ascetic, sleeping on the ground, living only to fast and pray for her departed spouse.

This practice receives a certain legitimacy in the ancient Hindu tradition that old people who have seen the birth of their grandchildren should disappear off in to the forest and spend their last days in prayer, pilgrimage and fasting. In modern India the custom has largely died out, but in some parts, notably rural Bengal, a form of it has survived that involves simply kicking bereaved grandmothers out of their houses and sending them off to the City of Widows.

Every day widows from all over India arrive in Vrindavan. They come to seek the protection of Krishna, to chant mantras and to meditate on their own mortality. They live in great poverty. In return for four hours of chanting, the principal *ashram* will give a widow a cupful of rice and two rupees – about four pence. Otherwise the old women, a surprising number of them from relatively wealthy, high-caste, landowning families, subsist on what they can beg. They have no privacy, no luxuries, no holidays. They simply pray until they keel over and die. There are eight thousand of them at present in the town, and every year their number increases.

'If I were to sit under a tree,' said Kamala Ghosh, a local women's rights activist, 'and tell you the sadness of the widows of Vrindavan, the leaves of that tree would fall like tears.'

'My husband died when I was seventeen years old,' said Kanaklatha. 'He had some sort of stomach disorder. I took him

to lots of hospitals in Calcutta but he did not recover. He suffered for a month. Then he died.'

The old lady looked past me, her clouded eyes focused towards the *ghats* and the course of the holy river Jumna.

'I still remember his face when they brought him to me,' she said. 'He was very fair, with fine, sharp features. When he was alive his eyes were unusually large, but now they were closed: he looked as if he was sleeping. Then they took him away. He was a landlord in our village, and greatly respected. But we had no children, and when he died his land was usurped by the village strongmen. I was left with nothing.

'For two years I stayed where I was. Then I was forced to go to Calcutta to work as a maid. I wasn't used to working as a servant, and every day I cried. I asked Govinda [Krishna], "What have I done to deserve this?" How can I describe to anyone how great my pain was? After three years Krishna appeared to me in a dream and said that I should come here. That was 1955. I've been here forty years now.'

'Do you never feel like going back?'

'Never! After my husband died and they took away everything I owned, I vowed never to look at my village again. I will never go back.'

We were standing in the main bazaar of Vrindavan. Rickshaws were rattling past us along the rutted roads, past the tethered buffaloes and the clouds of bees swarming outside the sweet shops. Behind us rose the portico of the Shri Bhagwan Bhajan

ashram. Through its door came the sound of bells and clashing cymbals and the constant rising, falling eddy of the widows' incessant chant: '*Hare Ram, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram, Hare Krishna* …' Occasionally, above the chant of two thousand women, you could hear snatches of the soaring Bengali verses of the lead singer:

Mare Keshto rakhe ke?
Rakhe Keshto mare ke?
Whom Krishna destroys, who can save?
Whom he saves, who can destroy?

It was ten in the morning and Kanaklatha had just finished her four-hour shift. In her hand she held her reward: a knotted cloth containing a single cupful of rice and her two rupees. 'We try to remember what we are chanting,' said Kanaklatha, following my gaze, 'but mostly we carry on so that we can eat. When we fall ill and cannot chant, the *ashram* doesn't help: we just go hungry.'

Kanaklatha said she had got up at four thirty, as she did every day. She had bathed and dressed her Krishna idol, spent an hour in prayer before it, then performed her ablutions at the *ghat*. Then from six until ten she chanted her mantras at the *ashram*. After that, a day of begging in the bazaars of Vrindavan stretched ahead.

'I stay with my mother,' said Kanaklatha. 'She is ninety-five. My father died when I was sixteen and she came here then. We have to pay a hundred rupees [£2] rent a month. It is my main worry in life. Now I'm two months in arrears. Every day I ask

Govinda to help us make ends meet. I know he will look after us.'

'How can you believe that after all you've been through?'

'If Govinda doesn't look after us who will?' said Kanaklatha. 'If I didn't believe in him how could I stay alive?'

The widow looked straight at me: 'All I want is to serve him,' she insisted. 'Whatever we eat and drink is his gift. Without him we would have nothing. The way he wants things to be, that is how they are.'

'Come,' she said, her face lighting up. 'Come and see my image of Govinda. He is so beautiful.'

Without waiting to see if I would follow, the old lady hobbled away along the street at a surprising pace. She led me through a labyrinth of lanes and alleys, past roadside shrines and brightly-lit temples, until eventually we reached a small courtyard house near the *ghats*. There, on the floor of a cramped, dark, airless room, lay Kanaklatha's mother. She was shaven-headed and smeared with ash like her daughter, but she was toothless and shrunken, lying curled up like an embryo on a thin cotton sheet. Around her were scattered a few pots and pans. Kanaklatha squatted on the floor beside her and gently stroked her head.

'My mother was a strong woman,' she said. 'But she had a haemorrhage two years ago and after that she just withered away. Now she just lies on this bed. If I could afford to give her just one glass of fruit juice she would be better than she is. I want her to die without pain, but I am consumed by the thought that if something bad happens we could not afford medical treatment.'

'It is all fate.' It was the mother speaking. 'When we were young we never imagined this would be our end.'

'We were a landowning family,' explained Kanaklatha. 'Now we have to beg to survive. Even now I'm full of shame when I beg, thinking I am from a good family. It is the same with all the widows. Our usefulness is past. We are all rejects. This is our *karma*.'

'Only Govinda knows our pain and misery,' said her mother. 'No one else could understand.'

'Yet compared to some of the others …'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Some of the other widows. At least we are together. But many women I know were thrown out of their houses by their own children. When their sons discover that they are begging on the streets of Vrindavan they are forbidden from writing to their grandchildren.

'We haven't committed a crime,' said the old lady. 'Why should we go through all this?'

'Sometimes I think even *sati* would have been preferable to the life of a widow,' said Kanaklatha. 'At the time, burning on my husband's pyre seemed horrible. But after living through so much pain and misery, I wonder whether *sati* would not have been the better option. Now all I want is to serve Govinda and my mother, and spend the rest of the time in prayer. Here, come inside, see my little Krishna.'

Kanaklatha indicated that I should step over her mother. She

pointed to the end of her tiny room. There, raised up on a wooden bench beside a small paraffin stove stood a pair of small brass idols of Krishna, each dressed in saffron dolls' clothes. One figure showed Krishna as a child; the other as a youth, dancing with a flute in his hands.

'Look at his beauty!' said Kanaklatha. 'Every day I bathe him and change his clothes and give him food. Krishna is my protector. He cannot resist the entreaties of any woman.'

She walked over to the shrine and bowed her head before the images.

'Sometimes when I am asleep he comes to me,' she said. 'I tell him my sorrows and he tells me how to cope. But the moment I awake, he disappears …'

That evening, in a nearby temple, I met Kanaklatha's landlord, a Brahmin priest named Pundit Krishna Gopal Shukla.

'If those women die tomorrow,' he said, spitting on the floor, 'I will have to bear the expense of cremation. It should be the *ashram*'s responsibility. They get so much money from pilgrims. I do so much for these widows already. I rent them a room. I even give them free water.'

According to Shukla, the widows' *ashrams* in Vrindavan were increasingly set up by Delhi businessmen as a means to launder black money. They would give donations to their *ashrams* and receive receipts stating that they had given much larger amounts, which would be written off against tax. As far as the *ashram*

owners were concerned, the widows were just a means to a financial end, a quick route to a clever tax dodge.

There was no doubting the very considerable funds the *ashrams* of Vrindavan receive. One medium-sized one attracted donations by undertaking to erect an inscribed marble plaque recording the name of any devotee who gave at least two thousand rupees (£40), and promising that the widows would sing *bhajans* for the donor 'for the next seven generations'. The resulting plaques covered not only every wall in the hangar-sized building, but also its floor and ceiling. Many of the donors turned out to be British Hindus: next to plaques recording donations from Agra, Varanasi and Calcutta were a number from rather less exotic centres of Hindu culture such as Southall, Northolt and Leicester.

'They treat the old women very badly,' said Shukla. 'They show them no respect. They give them less than the minimum on which they can survive. Some of the *ashrams* even demand a down-payment from the widows when they first arrive. They say it is to cover the cost of their cremation, but after a death they simply put the woman's body in a sack and throw it in the Jumna.'

Shukla walked with me along the *parikrama*, through the crowded streets of the town. As we walked, we passed long lines of widows, all shaven-headed and with begging-bowls stretched towards us.

'My family have been priests in Vrindavan for many generations,' said Shukla as we walked. 'The town used to be very

beautiful. But now it has expanded and become very dirty and polluted. Before, people came here and they found peace. Now they just find corruption and mental pollution.'

I asked the priest about the stories that appeared occasionally in the Indian press claiming that the *ashram* managers were in the habit of taking beautiful teenage widows as concubines, or selling them at ten thousand rupees (£200) a time.

'It happens,' he said. 'Many of the *ashrams* are now run by criminal elements. Even some of the *sadhus* are involved. They lure young girls in, then sell them to local landowners. When the landowners are finished with them, they can sell them to the brothels in Delhi. They pay the police off, so they don't intervene.'

What Shukla said was confirmed by local women's groups: 'Go to the villages around Vrindavan,' said Kamala Ghosh, 'and you'll see that all the landowners have little widows as mistresses. When they tire of them the widows are sold to whorehouses in Delhi and Bombay. And we have had widows here as young as ten.' Among those I talked to in Vrindavan, there was agreement that nothing was being done to save the widows from such exploitation, least of all by the police.

Shukla and I were now standing outside the Shri Bhagwan Bhajan *ashram*, the biggest of them all, where I had met Kanaklatha that morning. A prayer shift had just finished and the street was full of tired old women in white saris. On the steps of the *ashram* sat a fat man in white homespun who Shukla pointed

out as one of the managers. I asked him about the allegations, but the fat man simply shrugged.

'The widows come here because they love Krishna,' he said. 'After they sing we give them some rice and two rupees. That is our duty. But we are not their keepers. What they do when they go is their business.'

Inside, the *ashram* consisted of two vast halls. On the floor of each squatted about a thousand widows in their identical white saris. Most of them seemed to be in their fifties or sixties, but there was a thin scattering of much younger women, while around the edge of the hall, leaning against the walls, or occasionally completely prostrate on the ground, were a number of much older women. Some of them were clearly mentally disturbed, letting out high-pitched shrieks like wounded birds, while others compulsively combed their hair or brushed away imaginary flies. The windows of the two halls were shuttered, and the only light came from a pair of naked bulbs suspended from the centre of the ceiling, leaving the edges of the rooms in a deep, Dickensian darkness. The whole establishment stank of urine and dirty linen.

Then a woman stood up in the centre of each room and began clashing cymbals; from another place a bell started to ring. A new shift was beginning. A cantor started up the chant, answered by two thousand widows singing as one, on and on, faster and faster: '*Hare Ram, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram, Hare Krishna …*'

This form of devotion was the invention of the great sixteenth-

century Bengali sage Shri Krishna Chaitanya, an Orpheus-like figure believed by his followers to be an incarnation of Krishna. After Chaitanya's wife died from a snake bite, the sage became a wanderer, travelling to all the sites connected with the life of Krishna, building many new temples and rescuing others from decay, particularly Vrindavan, whose shrines and temples had become overgrown and ruined.

Chaitanya's devotion to Krishna was of a deeply emotional kind, and his contemporary biography, the *Chaitanya Charit Amrita*, is filled with accounts of him falling in to mystical raptures, 'breaking in to song, dancing, weeping, climbing up trees, running to and fro like a madman and calling out the name of Radha and Krishna'. He encouraged his followers to come together and chant devotional songs called *kirtans* which, sung with a rising tempo and accompanied by the ringing of cymbals and bells, were supposed to lift the devotee in to a mystical rapture. In Chaitanya's own time there are many accounts of thousands of devotees caught up in the mesmeric beat, falling in to a state of trance, dancing and jumping as if in a frenzy, carried away in torrents of religious hysteria. So unruly and ecstatic did many of Chaitanya's prayer gatherings become that the Moghul governor of the area tried to ban his cult, and to arrest its leader for disrupting public order. According to the *Chaitanya Charit Amrita*, even the wild beasts were affected by his *kirtans*:

When the herd of elephants saw Chaitanya coming through the woods of Vrindavan they shouted 'Krishna' and danced and

ran about in love. Some rolled on the ground, others bellowed. As the master sang a *kirtan* aloud, the deer flocked thither and marched with him on two sides. Then six or seven tigers came up and joined the deer in accompanying the master, the deer and the tiger dancing together shouting 'Krishna! Krishna!', while embracing and kissing each other. Even the trees and creepers of Vrindavan were ecstatic, putting forth sprouts and tendrils, rejoicing at the sound.

Yet anything less ecstatic than the singing of today's widows in Vrindavan would be hard to imagine. At the back, the madwomen are shrieking. In the foreground, the exhausted old widows struggle to keep up with the cantor's pitch, many nodding asleep until given a poke by one of the *ashram* managers walking up and down the aisles with a stick. It is difficult to think of a sorrier or more pathetic sight. Vrindavan, Krishna's earthly paradise, is today a place of such profound sadness and distress that it almost defies description.

At the end of the shift, as darkness was beginning to fall outside, a pair of Brahmin priests walked in to the hall and began to perform the *arti.* Taking a burning charcoal splint, they revolved the flame in front of the idol of Krishna which stood at the centre of the room. As they did so the widows let out an unearthly ululation: an eerie, high-pitched wailing noise. Bringing their hands together in the gesture of supplication, they all bowed before the idol as the priests closed the temple doors for the night. Then slowly the women began to file outside.

‘This is not life,’ said one old woman who came up to me out of the shadows, begging for a rupee. ‘We all died the day our husbands died. How can anyone describe our pain? Our hearts are all on fire with sorrow. Now we just wait for the day when all this will end.’

Warrior Queen: The Rajmata of Gwalior

GWALIOR, MADHYA PRADESH, 1993

The Inspector General of Police had thick tufts of black hair growing out of his earlobes; his sunglasses glinted in the bright winter sunlight. He looked out over the dusty airstrip towards the heavily armed guards lining the perimeter fence. Facing them, at the end of the strip, a group of local dignitaries sat waiting in the shade of a tarpaulin. The IG looked up in to the sky, down at his watch, and then felt at his hips for the reassuring hilt of his carbine.

'So,' I said. 'You're expecting trouble?'

'Trouble?' he replied. 'What is trouble?'

'Protests? Demonstrations? Riots?'

'Anti-social elements are there,' said the IG, patting his carbine again. 'But we can deal with them.'

Suddenly the dignitaries rose from their chairs; from the sky came the faint buzz of a distant plane. The small jet circled lower and lower then came in to land, throwing up clouds of dust in its wake. After a pause, the door opened and the guards stiffened to attention.

From the dark aperture in the side of the plane emerged the figure everyone had been waiting for. It was no peak-capped general or briefcase-carrying government minister. Instead, an old, grey-haired woman tottered down the steps of the private

jet, clutching a small white handbag. She wore a white sari, and as she emerged in to the sunlight she covered her head with a thin muslin veil. Waiting for her at the bottom of the steps was a thick-set figure in a leather jacket and rollneck pullover. He was bald and slightly sinister-looking: not dissimilar to Blofeld in *Goldfinger*.

As the woman stepped off the bottom rung, the assembled reception committee ran up and threw themselves to the ground, competing with each other to be the first to touch her feet. The woman acknowledged the scrabbling dignitaries with a slight nod of the head, then handed her bag to Blofeld and walked on towards the waiting limousine. A liveried bearer slammed the door. Blofeld got in the other side, and the chauffeur drove off.

Behind the car followed a convoy of open-topped police jeeps. Each was filled with paramilitary troops armed with assault rifles and sub-machine-guns. With a screeching of tyres, the convoy passed through the gates of the airstrip and disappeared past the bullock carts and bicycle rickshaws in to the dusty heat-haze of the Indian evening.

If you ask people in India what they think of Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia – the Dowager Maharani of Gwalior, Vice-President of the World Hindu Council and doyenne of India's growing army of militant Hindu revivalists – you will get many different replies. All of them will, however, be forceful. Like Lady Thatcher – whose unshakeable convictions and sense of destiny she shares – the Rajmata provokes the strongest of

responses.

In her time the Rajmata (Queen Mother) has been called a madwoman and a saint; a dangerous reactionary and a national saviour; a stubborn and self-righteous old lunatic and a brave and resilient visionary. At the age of seventy-nine she is still an enigma. Though her father was born to an ordinary smallholding family in an anonymous Indian village, she managed to win the hand of one of the subcontinent's premier Maharajahs, and for many years ruled with him over an area the size of Portugal. Her vast baroque palace contained – among other treasures – the second-largest chandelier in the world; but her kingdom was dissolved at Independence in 1947, and by the mid-seventies her politics led to her spending months in a filthy Indian prison, sharing a cell with prostitutes, gangsters and murderers.

The Rajmata is very religious, and spends at least two hours every day deep in prayer. Few, even among her enemies, would deny that she is one of the most remarkable politicians in India, and for nearly fifty years she has ceaselessly fought and suffered for what she believes in: the toppling of the increasingly corrupt and power-hungry Congress Party and its replacement by the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Yet it is far from impossible that the political revolution the Rajmata hopes to effect could in the long term change India from a tolerant secular democracy to some sort of ultra-nationalist Hindu state. Moreover, if she succeeds in her aims, India's largest minority – its 150 million Muslims – will effectively find

themselves second-class citizens in their own country. Although the Rajmata may personally be a good and even a holy woman, many aspects of her party's agenda remain deeply troubling.

For the BJP is not like other Indian political parties, in that it was founded as the political arm of a neo-fascist paramilitary organisation, the secretive Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (Association of National Volunteers, or RSS). To this day most senior BJP figures have RSS backgrounds, and several hold posts in both organisations. The RSS and the BJP both believe, as the centrepiece of their ideology, that India is in essence a Hindu nation, and that the minorities, especially the Muslims, may live there only if they acknowledge this.

Like the Phalange in Lebanon, the RSS was founded in direct imitation of 1930s European fascist movements; and like its models it still makes much of daily parading in khaki drill. The RSS views this as an essential element in the creation of a corps of dedicated and disciplined paramilitary followers who, so the theory goes, will form the basis of a revival of some long-lost golden age of national strength and purity.

It is easy to laugh at the RSS as they line up every morning in shabby *mofussil* towns across northern India to drill with their Boy Scout shorts and bamboo swagger-sticks, but their founding philosophy is anything but comical. Madhav Gowalkar, the early RSS leader still known simply as 'the Guru', took direct inspiration from Hitler's treatment of Germany's religious minorities: 'To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture,

Germany shocked the world by the purging of its Semitic race, the Jews,' Gowalkar wrote admiringly in *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*. 'National pride in its highest has been manifested there. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures having differences going to the root to be assimilated … The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must learn … to revere the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving nothing.'

During Partition, the RSS was responsible for many of the most horrifying atrocities against India's Muslims, and it was a former RSS member, Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, for 'pandering to the minorities'. Today, both the RSS and the BJP have moved a long way since the time when they were little more than a vehicle for an extreme form of neo-fascist Hindu fundamentalism, and the BJP in particular now embraces a wide spectrum of conservative and nationalist opinion. Moreover, the rise of the BJP has taken place, at least partly, due to Indian Muslims' increasing distrust of the Congress, which despite claiming to be a secular party has, since the 1980s, done less and less to protect India's minorities.

Nevertheless, the BJP and its Hindu nationalist allies have been consistently implicated across northern India in the almost monthly anti-Muslim pogroms which are becoming such a defining feature of India at the close of the twentieth century. However respectable its leaders have become, and however inured the Indian élite have become to its message, when

communal riots break out the local cadres of the RSS and the BJP are rarely far away. Indeed, as the Rajmata's BJP gathers momentum, and its ideology grows in popularity and respectability, India has seen communal conflict assume a scale and significance not witnessed since the massacres of Partition half a century ago.

Yet for all this, to meet the Rajmata, and to sit listening to her over breakfast, you would never guess she could be capable of anything more sinister than winning an award for Most Loveable Granny at an English village fête.

'Please, Mr William,' she said, 'you must have one more guava. This is the height of the season.'

'I mustn't. I've got to watch my weight.'

'When I was a girl I always thought it better to have a little extra round the middle. In those days we thought it a sign of good health.'

'No. Really. Thank you.'

'Never mind. I'll keep it for you for tea.'

She clapped her hand, and the small green piece of fruit was carried away on an escutcheoned plate by a liveried bearer.

The Rajmata was sitting at the top of the table in the grand dining room of the Jal Vilas Palace in Gwalior. As she nibbled at pieces of fruit from the huge crystal bowl in front of her, she chatted happily about the progress of her day. Although it was only eight o'clock in the morning, the old lady had already been up for two and a half hours performing her lengthy morning *puja*

(religious devotions).

'Everyone gets very angry,' she said, 'because before I do *anything* in the morning I must spend at least two hours bathing my little Krishna, putting on his clothes and decorating him with garlands. I do it just the particular way he likes it.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes.'

'You have a … close relationship with Krishna?' I asked.

'I can't really describe what it's like,' said the Rajmata. 'I mean, I really shouldn't: it's so personal. It's … it's like two lovers: you can't say to them, "Describe how you behave when you are together."'

Sitting silently beside me, still in his leather jacket, was Sardar Angre, the Blofeld-figure I had seen the day before at the airport. He kept out of the conversation about the Rajmata's *puja*, and for its duration appeared absorbed in his omelette.

When the Rajmata's husband died in July 1961 and the Dowager Maharani became estranged from her son Mahadav Rao Scindia, the new Maharajah, Sardar Angre stepped in to the breach and began acting as her constant companion and adviser. A nobleman whose family has served the Gwalior Maharajahs since the eighteenth century, the Sardar holds the Rajmata in an awe and respect which has not dimmed with time. She in turn looks to him for advice and guidance. They make a good team: he is as dry, sober and practical as she is mystical and quixotic.

As the conversation at the breakfast table turned, inevitably,

to politics, the Rajmata commented that the recent dramatic rise in the popularity of the BJP seemed to be almost supernaturally guided.

'Really,' she said, 'it is nothing short of a miracle.'

'No, no, Highness,' said Sardar Angre in his measured tone. 'It is the will of the people.'

'This is your view,' said the Rajmata firmly. 'But I see the hand of God. I believe it is the doing of Hanuman.'

'You really think the BJP is somehow … divinely propelled?' I asked.

'I have a feeling so,' said the Rajmata, turning to me with an excited conspiratorial whisper. 'Miracles can happen even these days.'

Seeing me scribble the Rajmata's comments in to my pocket notebook, Sardar Angre sensed danger, and whispered sharply to the Rajmata in Hindi: 'The modern world does not believe in miracles.'

'You are wrong, Sardar,' said the Rajmata, holding her ground. 'Only yesterday I was reading in the *Reader's Digest* about a great miracle in America: some invalids being healed – I can't remember the details. But if these people are believing …'

Sardar Angre frowned.

'If you are on the right path,' persisted the Rajmata, 'truth will always prevail. My Hanuman is always on the side of truth. I have taken His protection, and Hanuman will always sort out our problems. He will remove all obstacles from our path.'

Seeing the Sardar's expression, I said: 'I don't think Sardar Angre likes you to talk about religion.'

'No, no – you are quite wrong,' said the Rajmata. 'He also is very religious. One day I was looking for him and he would not answer my calls. So I went to his room and there he was sitting cross-legged in front of his Krishna idol …'

Sardar Angre was visibly blushing, but the Rajmata was in full flight.

'… and tears were running down his face. I would not have thought – such a practical man …'

Sardar Angre was spared more embarrassment by one of the bearers bringing in a great pile of the morning's papers. He and the Rajmata began scanning the headlines.

'Riots, riots, riots,' said the Rajmata. 'Every day it is the same.'

Sardar Angre was however engrossed in a report in a Hindi newspaper concerning the latest episode of his own long-standing feud with the Rajmata's son. The dispute, which had been going on for some fifteen years – and which had, since its outset, been closely followed by the whole country – was currently enjoying one of its periodic flare-ups. Sardar Angre read the report out to the Rajmata.

'This is all my fault,' said the Rajmata, shaking her head. 'A mother's weakness.'

I must have looked a little confused by all this, for I was immediately treated to a résumé of the whole celebrated affair. In 1975, when Mrs Gandhi locked up the opposition, suspended

the Constitution and declared the Emergency, the Rajmata found herself transferred from the splendours of Gwalior to the less familiar surroundings of the infamous Tihar jail near Delhi. Her son, however, did a deal with the Congress and escaped to Nepal, leaving the Rajmata to fester in prison. She has never forgiven him. Moreover, as a minister in the current Congress government, the Maharajah remains a political as well as a personal adversary, the battle within the divided family mirroring the political divide of the nation at large.

'He did not fight the people who imprisoned his own mother,' growled Sardar Angre. 'He should have gone underground and joined the resistance against Mrs Gandhi. Instead he totally surrendered. Nobody in this great family has ever done that. He betrayed his own ancestors.'

'When he was in power Sardar Angre's house was attacked [by the police, apparently acting on Mahadav Rao's orders]. Half his possessions were taken, photographs were smashed …'

'My two Rottweillers were shot dead …'

'But worst of all,' continued the Rajmata, 'in the Emergency he left me inside that jail with the criminals and prostitutes. Imagine it: one of the inmates had *twenty-four* cases against her, including four murders. These were the companions he thought suitable for his mother.'

'How did you cope in jail?' I asked.

'I had faith in my Hanumanji,' replied the Rajmata. 'He sent help.'

'Hanuman came to you in person?' I asked.

'No,' replied the Rajmata, sighing and shaking her head sadly. 'But He spoke within me and showed me that all human beings – even the most hardened criminals – will respond if you show them affection.'

The Rajmata raised her eyes to heaven:

'And He was quite right, you know: they did. One murderer became my cook – I don't think I've ever had such a faithful servant. I wept when I finally left the prison – I was leaving so many close friends.'

From the front hall a bearer appeared and whispered in the Rajmata's ear. She nodded, dabbed her mouth with a napkin and got up.

'I have to go,' she said. 'There are some ladies here to see me.'

She added: 'Sardar Angre would, I'm sure, be pleased to show you around.'

Sardar Angre duly took me around the palace.

I followed him through room after room, hall after hall – great prairies of marble reflected back and forth by tall Victorian pier-glass mirrors.

Upstairs, all was rotting chintz and peeling plaster: a faint but unmistakable scent of decay hung in the air. Several of the rooms were unlit and seemed to be unused. They were visited only by the sparrows nesting in the wooden hammerbeams of the roof; a heavy lint of old cobweb formed fan-vaults in the corner-angles. When the shutters were opened the intruding beams of

light illuminated thick snowstorms of swirling dust-motes.

Only the Rajmata's bedroom really seemed loved and cared for. In a corner was a little silver shrine, full of idols. In front, a line of incense sticks were still smouldering. Every surface in the room was heavily loaded with other pieces of devotional clutter: photographs of Hindu saints and *sadhus;* a pair of Shiva *lingams* and a black mirrorwork image of the boy Krishna playing his flute.

By the bed, somewhat surprisingly, stood a photograph of the Rajmata's son taken on his wedding day. Despite all the hurt of their disagreements and public wrangling, the Rajmata's maternal ties still remained strong.

'Come,' said Sardar Angre, seeing where my eyes were resting.

He opened the double doors and stepped out on to the balcony. Together we looked out over the long lawns of the garden leading up, past groves of palm trees, to a delicate Moghul pavilion at the end.

Then I noticed that to one side of the palace, a few hundred yards away, lay another, even larger, edifice. Suddenly I realised that the vast building I had just toured was only a small, detached wing – a kind of garden cottage – tucked off to the side of the main bulk of the Jai Vilas Palace. This far larger palace was the home of the Sardar's enemy, the Maharajah. Like the building we were standing in, it was a late-nineteenth-century construction built in an Italian baroque style: a kind of massive Milanese

wedding cake air-dropped in to the jungles of central India.

It was here, in the larger palace, that lay the two most celebrated follies of India's nineteenth-century Maharajahs. Upstairs glittered the great chandelier, said to be rivalled only by that in the Tsar's Winter Palace in St Petersburg. So heavy was it that before it was hoisted in to place, a ramp a mile long was built, allowing twelve elephants to climb up on to the roof. Only after it was confirmed that the vaults could indeed bear the weight of all twelve of these massive beasts did the architect feel confident enough to order the chandelier to be raised in to place.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the dining room, the palace's other great eccentricity was being constructed: a solid silver model railway that took the port around to the Maharajah's male dinner guests. When a guest lifted the decanter from its carriage, the train would stop until it was replaced. Then it would hoot and shunt its way around the table to the next guest.

Both of these follies, and indeed the entire palace complex, were built for the ill-fated visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to Gwalior in 1875. Realising that his present palace was ill-suited for entertaining European royalty, the Scindia of the day had given orders that work should begin on the grandest and most modern palace in Asia. A fortune was spent on the new building. In its nine-hundred-odd rooms gold leaf covered every dado, while solid marble flagged every floor. Everything was to be of the best: a warehouseful of Bruges tapestries, Chippendale chairs and huge Louis XIV mirrors was imported from Europe.

Only one thing was lacking: it never occurred to the Maharajah to take the trouble to find a proper architect.

Instead, he turned to a jobbing amateur, and instructed a local Indian Army Colonel to knock something up. Colonel Michael Filose had no formal architectural training – in fact, prior to starting work on Jai Vilas he had worked on only one building: the Gwalior jail. But the Maharajah saw this as no obstacle: he packed Filose off to Paris to see Versailles, instructing him to come back quickly and build something similar in Gwalior before the Prince of Wales arrived.

It is not clear exactly what went wrong, but on the night the Prince of Wales came to stay, the silver train braked suddenly and toppled the port decanter right in to his lap. Later that night there was another disaster. Before she went to bed, the future Queen Alexandra decided to have a bath. As the vast marble tub filled with water, it quivered imperceptibly, then slowly sunk out of sight through the floor.

As we were leaving Jai Vilas, Sardar Angre and I bumped in to a couple of other elderly *sardars*, or noblemen, from the old Gwalior kingdom. Brigadier Pawar was in the lead, accompanied by his wife, Vanmala, and another old gentlemen who was addressed throughout merely as 'the Major'. As Angre and Vanmala stood chatting, I asked the two old *sardars* what they missed most about the old days when the Maharajah and Rajmata ruled Gwalior.

'Well actually,' said Brigadier Pawar, 'the old days we miss

altogether. We miss them so much you can't pinpoint any one thing: *everything* is missed.'

'In the old days everybody had time,' said the Major.

'There was time for processions, for riding, for tiger-shooting …'

'There was not much competition,' continued the Major. 'Things were just there. Now you have to struggle for each achievement.'

'Before it was a very much sheltered life. Now it's more competitive.'

'Unless you pull someone down you can't go up.'

The two old men looked at each other sadly.

'You cannot imagine the splendour and affluence of those days,' said Vanmala, filling the moment's silence. 'If I started telling you, you would feel it is a story I am making up.'

'In those days every *sardar* had fifteen horses and an elephant,' said the Major. 'But now we cannot afford even a donkey.'

'But it's not just the *sardars* who are nostalgic,' said Vanmala. 'The entire population is nostalgic. That's why the Rajmata – and all Scindias – are still so popular. Whenever any of them stands for election they are voted in by the people.'

'But why is that?' I asked. 'Don't people prefer democracy?'

'No,' said the Pawars in unison.

'Absolutely not,' said the Major.

'You see, in those days there was no corruption,' said the Brigadier. 'The Maharajahs worked very hard on the

administration. Everything was well run.'

'The city was beautifully kept up,' said the Major. 'The Maharajah would himself go around the city, you know, at night, incognito, and see how things were being managed. He really did believe his subjects were his children. Now wherever you go there is corruption and extortion.'

'Today,' said Vanmala, 'every *babu* in the civil service thinks he is a Maharajah, and tries to make difficulties for the common man. But in those days there was just one King. The people of Gwalior had confidence that if they told their story he would listen and try to redress them.'

'The Maharajah and the Rajmata were like a father and mother to them,' said the Major.

'Now all of that is no more,' said Brigadier Pawar.

'That world has gone,' said the Major.

'Now only our memories are left,' said Brigadier Pawar. 'That's all. That's all we have.'

When they died, the mortal remains of the Maharajahs were cremated at a sacred site not far from the Jai Vilas Palace. After saying goodbye to the Pawars and the Major, Sardar Angre took me over in his jeep to see the place.

The memorials – a series of free-standing marble cenotaphs raised on the site of the original funeral pyres – were dotted around an enclosure dominated by a huge cathedral-like temple.

'The complex has its own staff,' said Sardar Angre as we drove in. 'In each of the shrines is a small bust of one of the Maharajahs.

The staff changes the clothes of the statues, prepares them food and plays them music, just as if they were still alive.'

He jumped out of the jeep and led me towards one of the cenotaphs.

'The same will happen to the Rajmata when she dies,' he said. 'You see, in Gwalior the people still believe the Maharajahs are gods – or at least semi-divine. They think the departed Maharajahs are still living in the form of the statues.'

'You believe this?' I asked.

'No,' said Sardar Angre.

I laughed, but soon realised I had missed the point: 'No, actually I believe in reincarnation,' said Sardar Angre. 'I think the Maharajahs are alive somewhere else in a different body, not in some statue.'

Sardar Angre removed his shoes and led the way in to one of the shrines. In the portico stood a small marble Shiva *lingam;* ahead, in the main sanctuary – the part of the temple normally reserved for the image of the god – sat a statue of a large, rather jolly-looking lady in 1930s Indian dress.

'This is the mother of Her Highness's late husband,' said Sardar Angre. 'Look! She has a new pink sari.'

She had, but that was not all. What looked like a diamond necklace had recently been hung around her marble neck; someone had also placed a sandalwood *tikka* mark on her forehead, between her eyes. A small cot with a mosquito-net canopy and a full complement of blankets and pillows had been

left to one side of the statue; beside it, on the bedside table, stood a framed photograph of the old Maharani and her husband.

Sardar Angre explained the statue's daily routine. It woke up in the morning to the sound of musicians. Then the priest gave it a discreet ceremonial bath, after which its clothes were changed by a maidservant. Later, the statue had lunch, followed by an afternoon siesta. In the evening, after tea, it was treated to a small concert before being brought dinner: dal, rice, two vegetables, chapattis and some sticky Indian pudding. Then the bed was put out and made ready – the corners turned back – and the lights turned off. The statue was allowed to make its own way between the sheets.

Grave goods – everything the Maharani would need for the afterlife – lay scattered all around. I felt rather as if I had stumbled in to a pyramid twenty years after the death of Ramses II.

'Death is nothing to us,' said the Rajmata later, as we went in to lunch. 'For us it is only a change of circumstance.'

'Like moving house?'

'Exactly.'

I knew then, before it arrived, exactly what we were going to have to eat: dal, rice, two vegetables and chapattis, followed by some sticky Indian pudding. The same meal as the statues, cooked by the same kitchen, just the way the old Maharajahs liked it.

I left Gwalior that day, both charmed and amazed by the

Rajmata: it seemed impossible to reconcile the old-fashioned, slightly batty Dowager Maharani I had met with the fire-breathing fascist depicted by her detractors in the Indian press. Her eccentricities seemed weird but endearing; there was absolutely nothing sinister about her.

I put my notebooks away in a bottom drawer, and forgot all about them.

Then, eleven months later, on 6 December 1992, the Rajmata hit the headlines again, this time in the most unsavoury circumstances.

For the previous five years Indian politics had been dominated by the Babri Masjid dispute. This concerned a sixteenth-century mosque in the town of Ayodhya, reputedly built by invading Muslims over a temple marking the site of the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

Every year since 1989, various of the Rajmata's Hindu organisations had held an annual rally at the disputed mosque. There they had performed sacred rites to indicate their wish to rebuild a temple on the site. In 1992 the rally was called as normal, but things did not proceed as expected.

Instead, having been whipped up in to a frenzy by the Rajmata and other BJP leaders, the vast crowd of two hundred thousand militant Hindus stormed the barricades. Shouting slogans like 'Victory to Lord Ram!' 'Hindustan is for the Hindus!' and 'Death to the Muslims!' they began tearing the mosque apart with sledgehammers, ropes, pickaxes and their bare hands.

One after another, like symbols of India's time-honoured traditions of tolerance, democracy and secularism, the three domes of the mosque fell to the ground. In little more than four hours the entire structure had been reduced not just to ruination but – quite literally – to rubble.

By the time the last pieces of the mosque's masonry had been brought tumbling down, one group of Hindu militants had begun shouting 'Death to the journalists!' and attacked a group of foreign correspondents with knives and iron bars, smashing cameras and television equipment. Having tasted blood, the mob set off to murder as many local Muslims as they could find. They finished off the job by torching the Muslims' houses.

While all this was happening, Rajmata Scindia – who had earlier signed a written pledge to the Indian High Court guaranteeing the mosque's safety – stood on the viewing platform, cheering as enthusiastically as if she was a football fan watching her team win the World Cup. As the demolition proceeded, she grabbed a microphone and encouraged the militants over the Tannoy.

Later that afternoon, a party of journalists stopped her limousine as she was leaving the town. They asked her whether she at least condemned the attacks on the correspondents. She replied in just two words: '*Acha hoguy*' – it was a good thing.

Over the next fortnight, unrest swept India: crowds of angry Muslim demonstrators came out on to the streets, only to be massacred by the same police force that had earlier stood by and

allowed the Hindu militants to destroy the mosque without firing a shot. In all, about two thousand people were killed and eight thousand injured in the violence that followed the demolition of the mosque.

Bombay was the scene of some of the worst rioting, but – as elsewhere – the trouble had pretty well died down by Christmas. Then, on the night of 7 January 1993, a Hindu family was brutally roasted alive when petrol bombs were thrown in to their shanty-hut. It is still unclear who was responsible for the killings – the evidence seems to point to criminal gangs working for unscrupulous property developers – but the local Hindu fundamentalists assumed it was the work of the Muslims, and set to work orchestrating a bloody and brutal revenge.

For the next week Bombay blazed as Muslims were hunted down by armed mobs, burned in their homes, scalded by acid bombs or knifed in the streets by mobile hit-squads. A few prominent middle-class Muslims – factory owners, the richer shopkeepers, newspaper editors – were also singled out for attack. Some of the poorer Muslim districts of the city were completely gutted by fire. In several places the municipal water pipes were turned off, and when the Muslims began to creep out of their ghettos with buckets in their hands, they found themselves surrounded by thugs who covered them with kerosene and set them alight, burning hundreds alive. In all, an estimated forty thousand Hindu activists went on a meticulously planned rampage, with the tacit support of the (96 per cent Hindu) police

force. For a fortnight Bombay, India's effervescent commercial capital, was transformed in to a subcontinental version of Beirut or Sarajevo.

When the army was finally brought in, a curfew declared and the acid bombs, flick-knives and AK-47s had been put back in their hiding places, at least fourteen hundred people – the overwhelming majority impoverished Muslims – had been slaughtered. Many more were injured and disfigured. Hundreds of thousands of others fled from the city to the shelter of their ancestral villages. According to a memorandum prepared by Citizens for Peace, a pressure group formed by Bombay's business élite, the violence was 'nothing short of a deliberate plan to change the ethnic composition of what was hitherto regarded as a cosmopolitan city'.

Behind the mass murder and ethnic cleansing was the local Hindu nationalist party allied to the Rajmata's BJP: the Shiv Sena (Lord Shiva's Army). Their leader, a former cartoonist named Bal Thackeray, made no secret of the fact that the mobs were under his control, and boasted in a magazine interview that he aimed to 'kick out India's 110 million Muslims and send them to Pakistan'. 'Have they behaved like the Jews in Nazi Germany?' he was quoted as asking. 'If so, there is nothing wrong if they are treated as Jews were in Germany.'

Yet according to one newspaper report that I read, the Rajmata, far from attacking the bloodshed, let it be known that she regarded Thackeray and the Shiv Sena as close allies of the

BJP: their aims were right, she said; only some of their methods were a little questionable.

Her position on this, and her apparent lack of concern at the bloody massacre of several thousand Indian Muslims – indeed the whole country's gradual slide towards communal anarchy – seemed irreconcilable with the impression I had formed of her in Gwalior as a cosy old grandma. Baffled, I decided to revisit the Rajmata, to try to understand how one woman could behave so very differently in different circumstances.

I telephoned her aides in Delhi and discovered that the seventy-nine-year-old was now busy campaigning in the jungles and villages of central India: after the recent upheavals, she expected the government to fall by March, and wanted to be ready for the general election when it was called. The Rajmata was uncontactable, said her aides: she was campaigning in the remotest corners of her old kingdom, far from any working telephone. But, I was told, if I went to the town of Shivpuri the following weekend I might be able to catch her on her way through.

I did as I was told. By Sunday morning I had tracked the Rajmata down to the house of the local Sardar in Shivpuri. She was heading south towards Bhopal in half an hour, she said. She did not have time to speak to me now, but if I came with her in her car I could interview her on the way.

'Oh!' she said as we headed down the driveway in the limo. 'I wish you had been there at Ayodhya when the mosque fell!

When I saw the three domes come down I thought: "This is what God wanted. It was His will.'"

'But what about all the murders? What about the massacres in Bombay?' I said. 'You wouldn't say Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena thugs were the hand of God as well, would you?'

'I won't criticise Thackeray,' said the Rajmata benignly. 'For so long the Muslims have been appeased by the Congress. What happened was a reaction. Thackeray is a bit extreme, but …'

'No,' said Sardar Angre. 'He is quite right. The Muslims must be made to understand that they should be proud of Hindustan. We cannot tolerate Muslims in this country if they don't feel themselves Indian. Look what happens at cricket matches: the Muslims always support Pakistan.'

I wondered whether Angre realised he was unconsciously echoing the sentiments of Lord Tebbit, but decided not to complicate the issue. I simply said: 'You can hardly justify murdering people because they support the wrong cricket team.'

'Hindus are docile people,' said the Rajmata. 'They always welcome anyone – even the Jews.' She nodded her head as if to emphasise what she clearly regarded as an extreme feat of tolerance. 'They are not violent.'

'They don't seem to be very docile at the moment,' I said.

'The Muslims have been appeased for so long,' repeated Angre.

'The police don't seem to appease them much,' I said. 'They always take the side of the Hindus.'

'Well, naturally birds of a feather will flock together,' replied the Rajmata brightly. 'You cannot expect Hindu policemen to attack their own Hindu brethren.'

'And what about the police raping Muslim women? There have been many reports of that.'

The Rajmata considered this for a minute then replied: 'I think that maybe those policeman who do that have seen some similar atrocity done to Hindu women by the Muslims. That would make them mad with anger and grief.'

She looked across at me, smiling benignly as if she had just solved the whole problem.

'Anyway,' she said, 'if only the Muslims followed the Hindu ideology there would be no more trouble.'

'But you can hardly expect a hundred million Muslims to abandon their faith and convert to Hinduism.'

'That's just the trouble,' she replied. 'The Muslims should realise that they are Indians. Babur [the first Moghul Emperor] was not their ancestor, Ram was. They should accept our common culture and unite with us in the name of God. This must be the answer. Anyway,' she added with a frown, 'they are too many to drive out.'

What can one make of a naive and pious old woman who can close her eyes to the massacre of innocent people carried out by her own supporters? Who can wilfully fail to make the connection between the emotions she whips up and the garrotted corpse lying in the dirt of a narrow alleyway? In her blindness,

the Rajmata remains an unsettling reminder that you need not be personally objectionable to subscribe to the most deeply objectionable political creeds: charm and sweetness are clearly not guarantees against either violent nationalism or the most xenophobic religious fundamentalism and bigotry.

My last image of the Rajmata was the sight of her addressing an adoring crowd in a remote district in central India. After she had finished speaking and the crowds were cheering and clapping, the drums were beating and marigold garlands were being thrown over her neck, she slowly made her way through a police cordon towards her waiting helicopter. Already the rotor blades were beginning to turn.

'Who is going and who is not?' asked an aide.

'I have no idea. I am going. That much I know,' replied the Rajmata, looking at the helicopter with some misgiving.

'Are you frightened of flying?' I asked.

'No, no,' she replied. 'Flying I am absolutely at home. But it has to be with wings.'

Then she smiled.

'My Hanuman can fly too. He flew to Lanka to rescue Sita. But of course, he does not need a helicopter …'

The aides were waiting. Bending low beneath the rotor blades, the old lady scuttled in to the cockpit, ready for another bout of campaigning in some other district of her old kingdom.

As the crowd of villagers looked on, the blades turned quicker and quicker. There was a noise like a great wind, and clouds of

dust blew over the podium where the Rajmata had been speaking just minutes before.

Some of the villagers, terrified, ran for cover; others prostrated themselves on the ground. When they raised their heads they saw that the Rajmata had risen like a Hindu goddess in to the heavens, carried, as it were, on the wings of Garuda, the great winged vehicle of the immortals.

Postscript

In 1997 the Rajmata suffered a major heart attack, but following bypass surgery she has returned undaunted to full-time politics at the age of eighty-four. In the 1998 general election she retained her seat, albeit by a slightly reduced margin.

Ever since the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya, the BJP has continued to grow in popularity and influence. In 1992 it took 113 seats in parliament, up from eighty-nine in the previous election. In 1996 the number rose to 161, making it the largest single party in the Lok Sabha (Indian parliament). It succeeded in forming a short-lived coalition government which survived only two weeks before losing a crucial vote of confidence. Finally, the BJP won the 1998 general election with a record 179 seats, but this still fell short of a majority, and its administration was forced to rely on a hotchpotch of minority parties, some of which were strongly opposed to its more extreme pro-Hindu policies.

Moreover, the BJP's entry in to the political mainstream from the mid-nineties onwards was largely achieved by toning down much of its more inflammatory Hindu rhetoric. The party's leading moderate, Atal Behari Vajpayee, was appointed as its leader, and many of its more extreme figures, including the Rajmata, were sidelined. It remains to be seen, however, if this new, relatively acceptable face of the BJP represents a fundamental change in the party, or merely a disguise with which

to woo the credulous voter. The decision to explode the 'Hindu' nuclear bomb, the hawkish anti-Pakistan rhetoric that followed it, and the call by some BJP activists to erect a temple at the site of the blast, would seem to indicate that the extremists and bigots in the party are still far from defeated.

East of Eton

LUCKNOW, 1997

Just before dawn on 7 March 1997, two figures made their way to a small classical bungalow on the perimeter of La Martiniere College in Lucknow, India's oldest and once its most distinguished public school.

Walking silently to the back of the building, they found a broken windowpane looking in to the bedroom of the school's Anglo-Indian PT instructor, Frederick Gomes. The two took aim and, at a signal, fired at the sleeping figure with a .763 Mauser and .380 pistol. One shot missed, but the other hit Gomes in the leg. The schoolmaster immediately leaped out of bed and hobbled in to the corridor.

According to the police reconstruction, the two killers then ran round to the front of the building, kicked open the front door and took some more shots at the terrified man, wounding him in the back as he tried to run back to his bedroom. Bleeding heavily, Gomes succeeded in shutting the door and barricading it with a chair. But the killers returned to the back and fired a random hail of bullets in to the room through the window. When Gomes' body was later discovered by another schoolmaster, the PT instructor was found to have sustained no fewer than eight hits: four in the chest, one in the leg, two in his back and the fatal one on his temple.

The murder, which remains unsolved, created a sensation in India, particularly when several guns (though not the murder weapons) were found to be circulating among the school's pupils. For La Martiniere is an institution of legendary propriety and distinction, as *pukka* as Kipling himself, who appropriately sent his fictional hero Kim to a Lucknow school – St Xavier's – clearly modelled on La Martiniere. During the Raj, the school produced generations of District Magistrates, Imperial civil servants and Indian Army officers, and the names of many of these Victorian pupils – Carlisle, Lyons, Binns, Charleston, Raymond – are still carved on the front steps of the school. Since then La Martiniere has educated several members of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty, as well as producing great numbers of cabinet ministers, industrialists and newspaper editors. If India's increasingly endemic violence and corruption could creep in to such an institution, it was asked, what was the hope for the rest of India? 'The killing is a metaphor of our times,' I was told by Saeed Naqvi, one of the country's most highly regarded political commentators and an old boy of the school. 'For such a level of violence to reach the groves of academe and the sacred precincts of La Martiniere is symbolic of the way the country of Mahatma Gandhi has completely ceased to be what it once was.'

In Britain there may have been widespread celebrations marking fifty years of Indian Independence, but in India there has been much less rejoicing. As *The Times of India* acknowledged in an editorial to mark the 1997 Republic Day, 'in

this landmark year not much remains of the hope, idealism and expectations that our founding fathers poured in to the creation of the Republic. In their place we now have a sense of abject resignation, an increasing sense of drift. We are ostensibly on the verge of a global breakthrough; yet the truth is that the deprived India is eating voraciously in to the margins of the prosperous India.'

If decay and corruption have set in to many of the old institutions of the Raj, the public schools that the English left dotted around the subcontinent have always vigorously resisted any accommodation with the post-colonial world outside their walls: however much India and Britain may both have moved on since 1947, India's public schools have, for better or worse, maintained intact the ways and attitudes of early-twentieth-century England. 'Independence changed nothing at La Martiniere,' I was told by one old boy. 'The curriculum didn't change, the boys didn't change, the games didn't change, the discipline didn't change. They kept the Union Jack flying from the roof well in to the mid-sixties. [The Hindu festival of] Diwali continued to be celebrated as Guy Fawkes Day. Even today they teach the history of the First War of Independence [the Indian Mutiny] from the British point of view.'

'The literature, poetry and music are still English,' I was told by another old La Martinian. 'The manners, tastes and customs are English, even the sports are English. In my day there was very little about the history or culture of Continental Europe, and

nothing at all about the history and culture of India. In fact we were encouraged to forget all the Urdu culture we had learned at home. Instead, we were always taught about all the brilliant things that British civilisation was about, and how we *paan*-chewing Indians were basically degenerate and we'd never get anywhere. Look how far the British had come, they told us; the sun never sets on the British Empire. We were indoctrinated in to believing that talking in Hindi, reciting Urdu poetry, wearing *khadi*, chewing *paan* and spitting in to spittoons – all this was vulgar and obscene, and after a while it really did seem like that to us. Still does sometimes.'

La Martiniere was founded in 1845 by Major General Claude Martin, an enigmatic Frenchman in the service of both the East India Company and the Nawabs of Lucknow, the last Muslim dynasty to rule India. In life Martin lived like a Moghul; in death he adopted the Moghul practice of building a tomb to commemorate his achievements. But in his will he broke with tradition by leaving the somewhat bizarre instruction that a school for children of all religions should be established in his vast mausoleum.

So it was that within this strange Indo-baroque necropolis complex, India's first English public school opened in 1845. Here, everything that might be expected in a school on the banks of the Thames was exactly reproduced on the banks of the Gomti, right down to the statutory inedible food and the oddball cast of eccentric schoolmasters. Of these, according to Saeed

Naqvi, none was more memorable than Mr Harrison.

'Harrison had a huge moustache which he used to wax,' remembers Saeed, 'and he also had a talking parrot which used to say things like, "Rise and shine, rise and shine" – you know, the usual public school nonsense. Chaufin, a friend of mine in school who hated Waxy for a variety of very valid reasons, used to get up in the morning at five o'clock and tried teaching the parrot to say, "Waxy is a bastard, Waxy is a bastard."

'He did this with such an absolute sense of dedication and purpose that in a year's time the parrot picked up the line, and every time Waxy walked past he'd squawk, "Waxy is a bastard, Waxy is a bastard."

'Now, Waxy thought this was a joke, but then one day he was taking Doutre, the headmaster, on a tour of all the wonderful things he was doing to the dormitories, and as he walked past the parrot recited the famous line. So the story had a very macabre ending, because Waxy in his temper twisted the neck of the parrot; and that was the end of Waxy's parrot.'

On the surface, little appears to have changed at La Martiniere since Saeed left thirty years ago. Now, as then, boys of all religions still attend chapel every day, listening to a choir made up of Muslims and Hindus dressed in white surplices sing the 'Te Deum', 'Jerusalem' and 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. The masters still wear black academic gowns, the curriculum and uniform remain firmly those of the English public school of the 1930s, and khaki drill, cricket, the works of John Buchan and furtive

schoolboy homosexuality are apparently all still very much *de rigueur*. Urdu or Hindi literature is never taught; instead pupils still learn by heart great swathes of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Byron.

One morning, after the boarders had attended chapel and the whole school had massed at assembly to sing the school hymn, 'Bright Renown', I talked to some of the boys who were doing their prep in the spectacular Moghul-Gothic school library. At the rear of the room, the form mistress, Mrs Faridi (who earlier in the morning had doubled up as organist on the old manually-pumped organ in the chapel), was looking around her, scowling through her hornrims and shouting out: 'Settle down now, boys! Settle down!'

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