

# Weighty Indian epic teems with life

## THE PEACOCK THRONE

By Sujit Saraf

Viking, £16.99

**R**OCKET scientist Sujit Saraf has been burning the candle at both ends. In between conducting research on space missions and satellite control, he has somehow found the time to write a 750-page Indian epic.

The Peacock Throne opens on October 31, 1984. For chaivala Gopal Pandey, the day begins like any other. Poor and illiterate, he sets up his tea stall in the same small space where he lives and sleeps in Chandni Chowk, Delhi's bustling main thoroughfare.

But normality is interrupted by breaking news - Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has been

assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. As the rumours filter down on to the streets of Delhi, violence breaks out and anti-Sikh pogroms engulf the Indian capital.

Gopal gives shelter to a Sikh shopkeeper before rescuing the man's wife from the clutches of the angry mob. At the end of the day, the humble stallholder also discovers a small fortune buried in his tea chest.

The reader reunites with Gopal and his associates a further three times over the next 14 years. The personal is interwoven with the political and fiction is set against a backdrop of fact. The Peacock Throne is named

after the Red Fort seat from which the 17th-century Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan held sway over all Hindustan. As such, the novel concerns itself with the struggle for power - at every level - in the world's largest democracy.

The cast is made up of orphans, hawkers, prostitutes, corrupt police officers, petty criminals, scam artists and shady politicians. Conflict arises between castes, religions, sexes and political activists.

This is not so much a tale of good guys and bad guys but of the manipulators and the manipulated. All power corrupts and even the simple and naive Gopal has his price, as he is

ultimately voted in as an MP by the residents of Chandni Chowk. The story is teeming with life. Saraf's incredible attention to detail brings the sights, sounds and smells of Delhi right off the page. The riot scenes are shocking and pacy, usually resulting in a violent and tragic end.

Perhaps the only criticism of this weighty tome is that it is - well - just a little too weighty. Saraf expends unnecessary detail on incidental characters and episodes. Nevertheless, the novel is enlightening and entertaining enough to keep the reader hooked.

It may not be rocket science but The Peacock Throne certainly makes for a fascinating read.

LIANNE KOLIRIN



destruction.

The relentless bombing of Hamburg was a defining moment for the Germans. It was then that their appetite for war started to crumble and many thought the previously unthinkable - that they had been led through the gates of Hell by madness.

It is not surprising that British officials later called it The Hiroshima of Germany.

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