

ANDREW ROBINSON

## DELHI MIX

THE PEACOCK THRONE

By Sujit Saraf  
(Sceptre 754pp £12.99)

FIREPROOF

By Raj Kamal Jha  
(Picador 388pp £12.99)

DURING THE 40TH anniversary of Indian independence in 1987, I interviewed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi for *The Independent*. I admit to giving him an easy ride without reference to the breaking Bofors corruption scandal, which would for ever dog his name. For I lacked the confidence, and frankly the commitment, to enter the labyrinth of Indian politics. Yes, India is the world's most populous democracy, but how many of us can name its prime ministers since Rajiv Gandhi's fall in 1989?

Sujit Saraf's massive novel about Delhi may be the first to make the modern Indian political world interesting – if hardly appetising – to outsiders. Novelists such as Salman Rushdie have dealt with politics, but not put it centre stage. A former prime minister, Narasimha Rao, tried with *The Insider* in 1998. Saraf succeeds by focusing on the pullulating bazaars around the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid and Chandni Chowk. Created by the Mughals in the seventeenth century, the Red Fort is still the symbolic centre of power in the capital – hence the book's title, *The Peacock Throne*. Shahjahan's jewel-encrusted throne may be long gone – looted by a Turkish marauder – but the Red Fort is where, each independence anniversary, the prime minister addresses the nation.

Saraf's portrait is unflattering. Born in Bihar, schooled and educated in Delhi, he now works in California as a space engineer – a trajectory typical of Delhi-ites. His novel calls Delhi variously a city that 'admits all but loves none', that 'belongs to no one, so it belongs to everyone', and a place 'where everyone hates everyone else'. One character, a prosperous Sikh trader who narrowly escapes death in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, calls it a city 'of murderers and thieves'.

The large cast ranges from street boys who survive as pickpockets, prostitutes and thugs to the wealthiest members of the Hindu and Muslim political elite. Yet almost all are cheats, many are thieves, and some connive at murder. Remarkably, there is not one truly sympathetic character, not even the humble tea-seller Gopal, whose unexpected elevation to high office forms the story's main thread. Delhi lovers may bristle, but Saraf evokes a place where people blatantly pursue money and status and not much else. It is no accident

that Mahatma Gandhi was first assassinated in Delhi and then canonised as the Father of the Nation with a grandly landscaped memorial at Rajghat. In the novel, Rajghat hosts a political demonstration – a phoney hunger strike with demonstrators hired by a Muslim politician to protest against Hindu fundamentalism – which gets a bit out of hand.

'Fuck this Mahatma and fuck his grass', thinks a young, crippled Bangladeshi illegal immigrant who has barely heard of Gandhi. Desperate for a piss, he relieves himself on the Rajghat memorial, before being arrested.

Later that year, 1992, he is sent by the same politician to blow up the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, in an utterly cynical plot to rouse Muslim anger. The politician's hope is that the bomber and his partner will die. But although their bomb detonates, adding to the already frenzied destruction of the mosque by Hindus, only the partner is killed. Back in Delhi, the chief bomber eventually turns against his paymaster and during the 1998 election dies in a bomb attack probably instigated by the same politician.

Real places and real events are deftly woven together in multiple subplots with unobtrusive invention, though it is curious that the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), which supported the demolition of the Babri Masjid and came to power in 1998, is renamed as the IPP, unlike other parties. Saraf has a gift for showing how politics arises from competing personal interests while never failing to tell a gripping story. And on the way we slip effortlessly through the overlapping milieux of street traders, whores, perfumers, retail merchants, police officers, New Delhi journalists and others. (The necessary glossary of Indian words, however, is astonishingly incomplete.) Irony abounds, and there are flashes of humour worthy of R K Narayan, such as a tense moment when a wealthy merchant struggling to conceal wads of cash about his person hears a knock at the door, imagines that murderous rioters are outside, screams 'I'm in the middle of my puja!' and then realises that he is being offered a cup of tea. But the book is also bloated with repetition, and its promised link with the Peacock Throne never quite convinces. While the Mughal courtiers who built on the ruins of earlier Delhis may well have been a rogues' gallery, as Saraf maintains, their achievements far outshine those of their philistine present-day descendants. The Urdu culture of old Delhi central to Anita Desai's finest novel, *In Custody*, is virtually invisible in *The Peacock Throne*.

Hindu-Muslim conflict preoccupies the author of *Fireproof*, too, a novel based on the Gujarat riots of 2002, which killed over a thousand people. The trigger was the



Saraf: left