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# Top of the pecking order

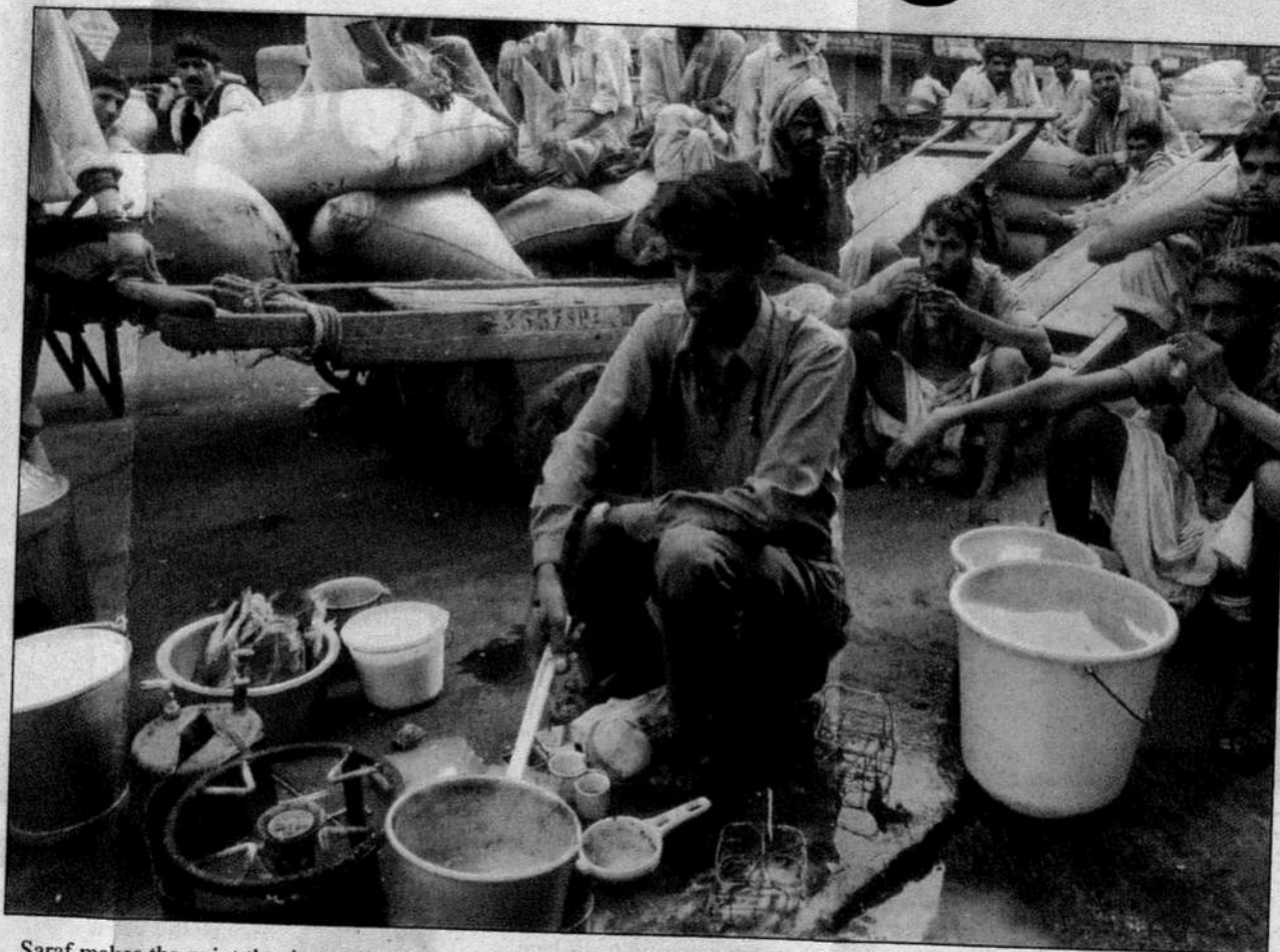
## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

**Sujit Saraf's latest novel explores the hypocrisy of political speech and the reality of everyday Indian life**

Sujit Saraf, author of *The Peacock Throne*, has a day job as a rocket scientist at US aerospace company Lockheed Martin. This suggests a staggering level of technological competence, which is belied when he says he accidentally forgot to turn on the ringer of his telephone. 'Maybe I'm not a very good rocket scientist,' he jokes gently and, doubtless, inaccurately, as he admits to having sat next to the phone for 30 minutes at some ungodly hour in the San Jose morning, wondering why it hadn't rung. But he is a very good writer, and the publication of his dark farce about Indian politics, a book of epic length and complex intertwined plot strands, has been highly anticipated.

► You're meant to notice how people in power are no more corrupt than the people that vote for them ◀

Set in Old Delhi's teeming main artery Chandni Chowk, it features a cast of atavistic characters including prostitutes, shop owners, rent boys, journalists, illegal money handlers and, of course, politicians. Weaving fiction around four key moments in recent Indian history, including the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, every one of Saraf's characters is on the make apart from tea-seller Gopal Pandey. He's a kindly, ineffectual man with no money and no ambition who becomes a pawn in a Machiavellian game of political chess. 'I read this article about a tailor in Calcutta,' says Saraf, who was born in India in 1969 and educated in Darjeeling and Delhi. 'He almost considered it his duty as a good citizen to stand for election. He lost. And I couldn't help imagining what might happen if he had won.'



Picture: Indiapicture/Alamy

Loss of innocence: Saraf's main character is a tea-seller who becomes a pawn in a Machiavellian game of political chess

Saraf makes the point that immersing an innocent in a sea of political intrigue is not a new idea, but the bleak, sardonic treatment he metes out to the theme sets it apart.

'The *Peacock Throne* is not meant to leave you with a warm, fuzzy feeling. You're meant to notice how people in power are no more corrupt than the people who vote for them,' Saraf says.

Some of his characters – Gita the prostitute, Gauhar the one-armed itinerant – are not what Western readers may be expecting, as a system based on corruption and hard-headed commercialism means that those lower in the pecking order learn to mimic the ways of their oppressors. 'Gita's a

victim but, when we first meet her, she's not bemoaning her fate, she's beating a customer,' says Saraf.

'I'm an avid student of politics, especially Indian politics. And I'm fascinated – horrified – by the surreal nature of them. The farce it is.'

Saraf points out that the political system in India bears little relationship to the constituency it's intended to serve. 'If you happen to be a thinking Indian, you'd be shocked by the difference between a political speech and the reality of Indian life.'

He is unapologetic that *The Peacock Throne* shines a searching – albeit fictional – light into unsavoury aspects of his country. 'I would

love it if it was read in India,' he says thoughtfully. 'It would be very useful and very provocative. I think it's a very accurate mirror, very unsparring in its attitude towards Indians and, to some, it would be outrageous.'

He is not, though, being bloody-minded for the hell of it, but to reflect what he sees. 'Yes, the characters are morally compromised,' he agrees. 'But their moral degradation is no greater than it needs to be, in the circumstances. You can hardly consider stealing bread degrading, if you're starving.'

Tina Jackson

*The Peacock Throne* (Sceptre, £12.99) is published on Thursday