

Subcontinental drift

Sujit Saraf's Hobbesian vision of modern India needs no moral moorings, he tells **Manreet Sodhi-Someshwar**

On a typical day, Sujit Saraf calculates the trajectory of a Sun-synchronous low-Earth orbit satellite, pens weighty fiction about modern Indian politics and Mughal emperors, and writes and directs Hindi plays for the Indian population of Silicon valley.

On a book tour of India to promote his sprawling 750-page novel *The Peacock Throne*, Saraf is at a relative's place, and very much at home. "Home is India," he says. "The US is the country where I live. However, the past has taught me that the present is no time to predict the future."

The Peacock Throne opens in Delhi in 1984 with the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi and follows the travails and fortunes of a *chai-wallah* over the next decade and a half. Saraf has laced real events with fiction to produce a novel about modern India.

The very phrase "modern India" may seem an anachronism for a country where 250 million people live on less than US\$1 a day. But, says Saraf, "if you're Indian, you can't fail to notice the oddities of our public life".

People do what they do to get by in the world around them, he says. "In a society of scarcity, grasping and grabbing come instinctively to

them, and they're only as vicious as they need to be."

A newspaper article about a tailor in Calcutta who routinely stood for and lost elections as an exercise of his democratic right first set Saraf on the path to writing *The Peacock Throne*. "What if an obviously unsuitable candidate like the tailor won?" he says.

The novel starts as a straightforward story and develops into a farce. By the end, order is restored as everything falls into its "correct place". "It's a novel about the exercise of power and I set it in Chandni Chowk, a bustling place of commerce. No street in Delhi better embodies the seat of power than Chandni Chowk, from where the Mughals ruled Hindustan from the time of Emperor Shah Jahan.

"It was in those days a tree-lined street with a canal running down the middle and led to the emperor's Red Fort," he says. "Today, the same fort serves as the venue for the prime minister's Independence Day address to the nation on August 15."

An uncle's shophouse in the same street provided Saraf with a feast of stimuli when he lived there while at high school.

Saraf reveals a different country from the one being hyped by foreign media. "The novel is neither a reiteration nor a rebuttal of anything they write. The India in the novel is

simply the India in my mind, and it isn't a corrupt India but a country of people who can't but be how they are. Tolstoy wrote that the blood of the beast is always in man. Under the right circumstances, it will manifest itself. Unlike Tolstoy's stories, however, *The Peacock Throne* has no moral compass, and doesn't grit its teeth when describing the beast. To me, that beast is merely another species – interesting but not reprehensible. My villains are no more oppressive than they need to be, and victims become oppressors whenever they get the chance."

He cites a scene in which Gita, a young woman tricked into prostitution, is introduced in the novel. "When you first see her – a victim by any measure – you don't see her bemoaning her fate. You see her thrashing a customer. I also suggest in the novel that there's nothing wrong with this viciousness. It's natural. It's even sensible. The novel has no sense of morality, so it passes no moral judgment."

Saraf can only shrug when asked what made him write an epic, despite having two unpublished novels on his shelf. "I wrote the novel in the hope – but not the expectation – that it would be published. This released me from all considerations of safety."

"I knew the novel would be lengthy before I began, and I made no conscious effort at economy. A short story has all the elegance of brevity, but a novel must not sacrifice completeness merely to satisfy someone's urge for a quick read. A long story requires a long novel."

This detachment carries a ring of the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu doctrine that advocates action and a simultaneous renunciation of its fruits. And Saraf is persistent in his craft. His first novel, *Limbo*, was published 13 years ago. *The Peacock Throne*, his fourth, was published this year, with none making it into print in between.

Saraf has a compulsion to write,



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but for him there's none of the angst it can bring. "If you're moderately observant, you can't help noticing the world around you," he says. "If you're also moderately sensitive, you can't help being affected by it. And if you also happen to be moderately expressive, you can't help but write your ideas down."

He says it's disheartening to be turned down by publishers. "I'm a much-rejected author. I don't know why I got lucky this time around – perhaps it was the novel, perhaps India's current hot status, perhaps my own novel profile, which could be marketed: a space scientist who

spins yarns. The secret," he says with a smile, "is to send out many, many, many e-mails."

Since he has a day job, Saraf does the bulk of his writing at weekends in stretches of seven or eight hours. A meticulous engineer, he makes elaborate notes to guide him before he begins.

"A Starbucks close to home is my favourite writing spot," he says. "The staff have become accustomed to the sight of me hunched over my laptop, my notes strewn about, and in between serving coffee they query me on the university I'm enrolled in and the courses I'm pursuing."

"They run a book club, and I wonder if they will reward my patronage by recommending *The Peacock Throne*." But he acknowledges that the most popular reads are self-help books and Mitch Albom – "and my novel wouldn't exactly qualify for either category".

Humour comes easily to Saraf and it's easy to see where the novel's sense of irony springs from. He describes his early education thus: "I was sent to boarding school in Darjeeling because, my father said,

they force you to speak in English. So I returned home a modern boy who could say 'good morning' and 'good night', and even warble the Lord's prayer."

Going on to graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, he headed for the US on a trajectory familiar to Indian techies. With a PhD from Berkeley, he has worked for Nasa, a Silicon Valley software startup – where he met and married his wife – and Lockheed Martin, where he's a research scientist.

"I'm banking on *The Peacock Throne* to transfer myself into permanent unemployment," says Saraf. He's keen to be a full-time writer and is already at work on his next project: a fictionalised biography of his grandfather. Born in 1880, the old man died in 1960 after a long, productive life in which he generated a great deal of wealth and raised a large family.

When prodded into pondering the commercial prospects of such a project, Saraf offers little but a shrug – an elegant illustration of the Bhagavad Gita.

Author's bookshelf

True History of the Kelly Gang by Peter Carey
"For the singular voice and the marvellous storyline."

Godaan (Hindi) by Premchand
"The definitive modern Hindi novel."

In Custody by Anita Desai
"A very beautiful novel that captures brilliantly the decadent world of Urdu poetry in today's India."

Tamas (Hindi) by Bhisham Sahni
"One of the better novels on India's partition. Its use of unexpected humour conveys the agony and spirit of a partitioned people."

The Wall (short story) by Jean-Paul Sartre
"Sartre depicts with masterful brevity the useless vanity of all things one is passionate about."

Writer's notes

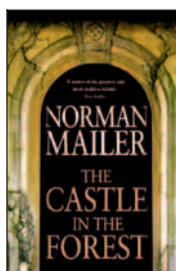
Genre Literary fiction
Latest book *The Peacock Throne* (Sceptre, HK\$236)

Age 38
Born Bihar, India
Lives Silicon Valley, California
Family Married with one daughter
Other works *Limbo* (1994) and unpublished novels. Also writes and directs Hindi plays for a theatre company, Naatak, that he co-founded.
Other jobs Research scientist with Lockheed Martin

What the papers say:
"Saraf's rambunctious commentary on the nature of greed and mendacity is enthralling, but it's the lives of the ordinary people that provide the real drama in this huge novel." – *Daily Mail*
"A masterly work in its own way and a terrific read." – *The Independent*
"Sujit Saraf's massive novel about Delhi may be the first to make the modern Indian political world interesting – if hardly appetising – to outsiders." – *Literary Review*

Review of the week

FICTION



The Castle in the Forest by Norman Mailer
Random House, HK\$270
★★★★☆
Alister McMillan

At 84, Norman Mailer has an incredible hunger to be read and to book his seat among the highest class of writers. The flak Mailer has defied for almost 60 years has goaded the American. John Updike, 75, appears from his dotage only

when the world hits a crisis worthy of a writer with his trophies. Last year's *Terrorist* was just a respectable Updike novel. After extolling the American of his day, Updike seemed unwilling to give his contemporary characters blood.

About the same time, Mailer had a quick shot at the Bush administration and the fallout from September 11 in *The Big Empty*, a series of interviews with his son. But that book was merely a break from working on a trilogy of novels that should take in just about every form of evil mankind could engineer.

Mailer usually devotes his novels to the sins and virtues of major players: generals, politicians, killers, athletes and artists. His last

novel, *The Gospel According to the Son*, an exposition of Jesus Christ, is usually cited as his worst. Most writers would take that as advice to slow down. Mailer was inspired to take on the Bible's other lead role, Satan, and one of his malignant earthly monsters, Adolf Hitler.

The first of the trilogy, *The Castle in the Forest*, opens with narration by Dieter, an SS officer and a mid-ranking devil in the service of the Maestro, who we can only guess is Satan. Dieter is the bad angel assigned to sit on the shoulder of young Adolf and bring out his malevolent potential. He has the ultimate view of the Führer's rise.

"I am ready to write about his early life with a confidence no

conventional biographer could begin to feel," says Dieter. "It is more than a memoir and certainly has to be most curious as a biography since it is as privileged as a novel. I do possess the freedom to enter many a mind."

Dieter is Mailer's ideal narrative vehicle. Mailer's non-fiction often leaves the reader wondering whether he believes some of his pronouncements. But in historical fiction he can have his way with the facts. Hitler is a boy born to incest in a family full of sexual misadventure. Mailer recreates everything from the social structures of 19th-century Austria and Germany to the travails of a family.

Dieter never presumes to have



Photo: Bloomberg News

simply flicked the switch to Hitler's evil. The child rarely even takes centre stage in his story. He occasionally gives the boy's destiny a nudge but more often watches him take shape in the hands of his bullying, ambitious father, Alois, and his cloistering mother, Klara, who is a little too keen to clean her son's anus. Mailer has always been fascinated with excrement and its delivery system, but here it's elemental to hell. Young "Adi" witnesses violence for the first time when his father beats the family dog for crapping on the floor. The boy misbehaves by wiping his own on furniture. His most rabid speeches as an adult were punctuated by farts, Mailer reports, and his mother

was forced to oblige her husband – and her father's – liking for anal sex.

"The proper study of marriage lies not only in partnership, affection, boredom, verbal scuffles and daily despair, but in the guts and smear of it all, the comradely knowledge of all the forbidden tastes, smells and bodily nooks."

Mailer's breadth, style and imagination mark him as a great writer. What sets him apart is audacity: he's unafraid to fail. Few writers would have the energy to find anything fresh to say about Adolf Hitler.

In his ninth decade, Mailer has summoned all his skill and experience for a trilogy of enormous scope.