

Tea-seller of history

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Sujit Saraf

THE PEACOCK THRONE

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History, Karl Marx said, repeats itself; what is tragedy the first time, recurs as farce. Sujit Saraf, in *The Peacock Throne*, succeeds in proving the truth of that adage. Setting himself an ambitious target – to write a sweeping epic about the politics of modern India – he takes as his pegs three major tragic and politically volatile episodes that destroyed, at least temporarily, the social and communal fabric of Indian society.

The first episode is the 1984 anti-Sikh riots which followed the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards and led to the violent deaths of thousands of innocent Sikhs. The second involves the protests that followed the report of the so-called Mandal Commission which increased the number of reservations in jobs and educational institutions for the backward. And the third major upheaval was caused by the destruction, at the disputed site at Ayodhya, of the Babri mosque by Hindu fanatics in 1992.

Saraf places these events in a tightly controlled setting that he obviously knows very well – Chandni Chowk, once the main street of Mughal Delhi and today a crowded, cluttered shopping area of the old city with its maze of thickly populated lanes and alleys. He brings into the narrative every social and political phenomenon of modern India that he can think of: illegal betting on cricket matches, the education of slum children, the problems of Bangladeshi immigrant labour, illegal foreign exchange deals, corruption in elections, prostitu-

tion rackets emanating from Nepal, increasing awareness about HIV-AIDS, terrorism, the activism of the NGOs and the media.

Amid these currents, the inhabitants of Chandni Chowk play out the drama of their humdrum lives. The illiterate tea-seller Gopal Pandey is Saraf's Everyman, whose destiny is to be buffeted, at the end of 750 pages, to the office of Member of Parliament, only for his election to be declared invalid. Around him are the representatives of political parties, thinly disguised. There are also some low-level two-timing political agents, street thugs, pick-pockets, a fat local policeman, the whores on the terraces of G. B. Road with their pimps, an NGO activist in ethnic clothing and a camera-wielding, pontificating journalist: all have their ambitions, fears, deceptions and secrets.

This is sufficient material for a compelling portrait of modern India. And yet, the novel fails to grip. It lurches from one episode to another with the author trying desperately to create connections that will keep Gopal, the Everyman tea-seller, at the centre of things. A terrified Sikh trader, running for his life from a mob, takes shelter in Gopal's tea stall. Gopal

then saves the man's wife. The Sikh trader later becomes a cricket punter, joins a fundamentalist Hindu political party and rather inexplicably, is the man who entices a poor boy to immolate himself to protest against the Mandal Commission. That boy turns out to be Gopal's lost son. Again, one of the Bangladeshi Muslim boys who is paid to participate in the destruction of the Babri mosque happens to be also regarded by Gopal as his son. While all this is going on, the downtrodden outcasts of Chandni Chowk want to make Gopal their political leader with a cup of tea as his election symbol. And an NGO activist-turned-journalist writes paens to him.

Saraf's links are at best tenuous; the plot is forced. The reader is asked to believe too much, and I am not even sure that the author has got his politics correct. The Sikh who lost his son in the 1984 riots has little reason to be playing low-level politics during the Mandal Commission protests. Similarly, to suggest that Muslim boys were involved in the destruction of the Babri mosque is cynical, and dangerous.

The events Sujit Saraf has chosen to write about were cataclysmic not only in terms of a nation's polity. Individuals lost lives, livelihoods, futures; political careers were changed for ever. To do justice to these events, a novel needs to explore the emotional impact in greater depth and bring out the pain of at least one of its characters. But except for brief moments, such as when the Sikh barely escapes with his life while an axe sinks into his son's back, or when the Bangladeshi boy becomes the victim of a terrorist's bomb, the narrative remains on the surface and thus is tragedy reduced to farce.