

TEMPTATIONS OF THE WEST

HOW TO BE MODERN IN INDIA,
PAKISTAN, TIBET, AND BEYOND

PANKAJ MISHRA

PICADOR



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Tibet, and Beyond*

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for Barbara Epstein

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Preface

Over the last five years I have traveled to places as far apart as Buddhist Tibet, Bollywood, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. *Temptations of the West* describes these journeys in South and Central Asia, through countries that differ radically from each other in many ways but that seem to face the same dilemma: How do peoples with traditions extending back several millennia modernize themselves?

Recent events have ensured that this is no longer an academic question. Western ideologies—whether of colonialism, communism, or globalization, have confronted the countries I visited—India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Tibet—with the same challenge: modernize or perish. But the wrenching process of remaking life and society in all their aspects (social, economic, existential) frequently collapses in violence, which affects not just South Asia but also, as the horrific events of 9/11 showed, the apparently remote and self-contained worlds of the West.

Needless to say, the societies I traveled through are too internally diverse to be summed up by broad generalizations of the kind preferred by policymakers and op-ed columnists. The interconnected narratives do not presume to offer solutions to their great problems, nor dwell abstractly on democracy, religion, and terrorism. Rather, they seek to make the reader enter actual experiences: of individuals—Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists trying to find a way in the modern world—and of the traveler, as, confronted with a bewildering complexity, he moves from ignorance and prejudice to a measure of self-awareness and knowledge.

PROLOGUE

BENARES

Learning to Read

I spent four months in Benares in the winter of 1988. I was twenty years old, with no clear idea of my future, or indeed much of anything else. After three idle, bookish years at a provincial university in a decaying old provincial town, I had developed an aversion to the world of careers and jobs which, having no money, I was destined to join. In Benares, the holiest city of the Hindus, where people come either to ritually dissolve their accumulated “sins” in the Ganges or simply to die and achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirths—in Benares, with a tiny allowance, I sought nothing more than the continuation of the life I had led as an undergraduate.

I lived in the old quarter, in a half-derelict house owned by a Brahmin musician, a tiny, frail, courteous old man. Panditji had long ago cut himself off from the larger world and lay sunk all day long in an opium-induced daze, from which he roused himself punctually at six in the evening to give sitar lessons to German and American students. It was how he maintained his expensive habit and also staved off penury. His estranged, asthmatic wife lived on the floor above his—she claimed to have never gone downstairs for fifteen years—and spent most of her time in a windowless kitchen full of smoke from the dung-paved hearth, conversing in a low voice with her faithful family retainer of over fifty years. The retainer, a small, reticent man in pleated khaki shorts, hinted, in that gloomy setting, of better days in the past, even a kind of feudal grandeur.

The house I lived in, the melancholy presence of Panditji and his wife, were part of the world of old Benares that was still intact in the late eighties and of which the chess games in the alleys, the all-night concerts in temples, the dancing girls at elaborately formal weddings, the gently decadent pleasures of betel leaves and opium formed an essential component. In less than two years most of this solid-seeming world was to vanish into thin air. The old city was to be scarred by a rash of fast-food outlets, video game parlors, and boutiques, the most garish symbols of the entrepreneurial energies unleashed by the liberalization of the Indian economy, which would transform Benares in the way they had already transformed other sleepy small towns across India.

But I didn't know this then, and I did not listen too closely when Panditji's wife reminisced about the Benares she had known as a young woman, when she told me about the time her husband came to her family home as a starving student, when she described the honors bestowed on her father by the maharaja of Benares. I was even less attentive when she complained about her son and his wife, more particularly the latter, who, though Brahmin, had, in her opinion, the greedy, grasping ways of the merchant castes.

I didn't pay much attention to the lives around me. I was especially indifferent to the wide-eyed Europeans drifting about on the old ghats, each attached to an ash-smearing guru. I was deep into my own world, and though I squirmed at the word and the kinds of abject dependence it suggested, I had found my own guru, long dead but, to me, more real than anyone I actually knew that winter I spent slowly making my way through his books.

On an earlier visit to the library at Benares Hindu University, idly browsing through the stacks, I had noticed a book called *The American Earthquake*. I read a few pages at random, standing in a dark

corridor between overloaded, dusty shelves. It seemed interesting; I made a metal note to look it up on my next trip to the library. Months passed. By then I had moved to Benares, and one day, while looking for something else in the same section of the stacks, I came across the book again. This time I took it to the reading room. An hour into it, I began to look at the long list under the heading "Other books by Edmund Wilson." Later that afternoon I went back to the shelves, where they all were, dusty, laden, termite-infested, but beautifully, miraculously, present: *The Shores of Light*, *Classics and Commercials*, *The Bit Between My Teeth*, *The Wound and the Bow*, *Europe Without Baedeker*, *A Window on Russia*, *A Piece of My Mind* ...

It was miraculous because this was no ordinary library. Wilson's books weren't easily accessible. I had always lived in small towns where libraries and bookshops were few and far between and did not stock anything except a few standard texts of English literature: Austen, Dickens, Kipling, Thackeray. My semicolonial education had made me spend much of my time on minor Victorian and Edwardian writers. Some diversity was provided by writers in Hindi and the Russians, whom you could buy cheaply at Communist bookstores. As for the rest, I read randomly, whatever I could find, and with the furious intensity of a small-town boy to whom books are the sole means of communicating with, and understanding, the larger world.

I had realized early on that being passionate about literature wasn't enough. You had to be resourceful; you had to be perpetually on the hunt for books. And so I was, at libraries and bookshops at other people's houses, in letters to relatives in the West, and, most fruitfully, at the local paper recycler, where I once bought a tattered old paperback of Heinrich Mann's *Man of Straw*, which I—such were the gaps in my knowledge—dutifully read, and made notes about, without knowing anything about his more famous and distinguished brother. Among this disconnected reading, I had certain preferences, a few strong likes and dislikes, but they did not add up to coherent standards or judgment. I knew little of the social and historical underpinnings to the books I read; I had only a fleeting sense of the artistry and skill to which certain novels owed their greatness.

I had problems too with those books of Edmund Wilson I had found at the library, some of which I read in part that winter, others from cover to cover. Many of them were collections of reviews of books I could not possibly read at the time, or else they referred to other books I hadn't heard of: Proust, Joyce, Hemingway, Waugh, yes; Malraux and Silone, probably; but where in India could one find John Dos Passos? Wilson's books also assumed a basic knowledge of politics and history I did not have. They were a struggle for me, and the ignorance I felt before them was a secret source of shame, but it was also a better stimulus to the effort his books demanded than mere intellectual curiosity.

I was never to cease feeling this ignorance, but I also had a sense as I groped my way through Wilson's work that my awareness of all these unread books and unknown writers was being filtered through an extraordinarily cohesive sensibility. Over the next few months it became clear to me that his powers of summary and explication were often worth more attention than the books and writers that were his subjects. There was also a certain idea that his lucid prose and confident judgment suggested and that I, at first, found so attractive, the image of a man wholly devoted to reading and thinking and writing. I thought of him at work in his various residences—Provincetown, Talcottville, Cambridge, Wellfleet—and in my imagination these resonant names became attached to a promise of wisdom and serenity.

The library where I found Wilson's books had, along with the university, come out of an old, and now vanished, impulse: the desire among Hindu reformists in the freedom movement to create indigenous centers of education and culture. The fundamental idea was to train young Hindu men for the modern world, and like many other idealisms of the freedom movement, it hadn't survived long in the chaos of independent India, where even the right to education came to be fiercely fought over.

under the banner of specific castes, religions, regions, and communities.

Sectarian tensions were particularly intense in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, the province with the greatest population and second-highest poverty rate in the country, where caste and political rivalries spread to the local universities. The main political parties, eager to enlist the large student vote in their favor, had begun to put money into student union elections. Politically ambitious students would organize themselves by caste: the Brahmin, the Thakur (the so-called warrior caste), the Backward, and the Scheduled (the government's euphemism for former untouchables). The tensions were so great that academic sessions were frequently interrupted by student strikes; arson, kidnapping, and murder among students became common features of campus life.

Miraculously, the library at Benares had remained well stocked. Subscriptions to foreign magazines had been renewed on time; you could find complete volumes of the *TLS*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New York Review of Books* from the 1960s in the stacks. Catalogs of university presses had been dutifully scrutinized by the library staff; the books, as though through some secluded channel, untouched by the surrounding disorder, had kept flowing in.

The library was housed in an impressively large building in the style known as Hindu-Saracenic, whose attractive pastiche of Indian and Victorian Gothic architecture had been prompted by the same Indian modernist aspirations that had created the university. But by the late eighties chaos reigned in almost every department. Few books were to be found in their right places; the card catalog was in complete disarray. In the reading room, students of a distinctly criminal appearance smoked foul-smelling cigarettes and noisily played cards. Some of them chose to take their siestas on long desks; bored young women spent hours scratching their initials into tabletops.

It was hardly a congenial place for long hours of reading, but since I wasn't enrolled as a student at the University, I could not take books out of the library. I was, however, allowed to sit in the reading room, and I was there almost every day from the time it opened in the morning. Since I had little money, I walked the four miles to the library from my house. For lunch I had an omelet at a fly-infested stall outside the library and then a glass of sticky-sweet tea which effectively killed my hunger for the next few hours. In the evening I would walk home along the river and sit until after dark on the ghats, among a mixed company of touts and drug pushers; washermen gathering clothes that had rested on the stone steps all afternoon, white and sparkling in the sun; groups of children playing hopscotch on the chalk-marked stone floor; a few late bathers, dressing and undressing under tattered beach umbrellas; and groups of old men, silently gazing at the darkening river.

Many of my days in Benares were spent in this way, and when I think of them, they seem serene and uneventful. But what I remember best now are not so much the clear blue skies and magically still afternoons, glimpsed from my window-side perch at the library, as the factors that constantly threatened to undo that serenity. For a radically different world existed barely a few hundred meters from where I sat reading about Santayana.

The university in those days was the scene of intense battles between students and the police. Anything could provoke them: a student who was not readmitted after being expelled; an exam that a professor refused to postpone. A peculiar frenzy periodically overtook the two sides, whereupon the students would rampage through the campus, smashing furniture and any windowpanes left unbroken from their last eruption of rage. Challenged by the police, they would retreat to the sanctuary of the hostels and fire pistols at the baton-charging constables. In retaliation, the policemen would often invade the hostels, break into locked rooms, drag out their pleading, wailing occupants, and proceed to beat them.

I once saw one of their victims, minutes after the police had left, coughing blood and broken teeth, his clothes torn, the baton marks on his exposed arms rapidly turning blue. Another time I saw a policeman with half of the flesh on his back gouged out by a locally made hand grenade. Anxious

colleagues watched helplessly from behind their wire mesh shields as he tottered and collapsed on the ground. Terrified bystanders like myself threw themselves to the ground in a defensive reflex we seen in action movies. The grenade thrower—a scrawny boy in a big-collared shirt and tight polyester trousers who, I learned later, had targeted the policeman after being tortured by him in custody—stood watching on the cobblestone road, fascinated by his handiwork.

Such violence, extreme though it seemed, wasn't new to the university, which had long been witness to bloodier battles between the student wings of Communist and Hindu nationalist organizations. These two groups tended to be allied with different ends of the caste system: The lower castes tended to be Communist; the upper castes tended to be Hindu nationalist. But frequently not the violence came for no ideological reason, with no connections to a cause or movement. It erupted spontaneously, fueled only by the sense of despair and hopelessness that permanently hung over North Indian universities in the 1980s, itself part of a larger crisis caused by the collapse of many Indian institutions, the increasingly close alliance between crime and politics, and the growth of state-organized corruption—processes that had accelerated during Mrs. Gandhi's "Emergency" in the mid-seventies.

For students poised to enter this world, the choices were harsh, and it didn't matter what caste you belonged to; poverty was evenly distributed across this region. Most of the people I knew were deeply cynical in their attitude toward their future. You could work toward becoming a member of either the state or national legislature and siphon off government funds earmarked for literacy and population control projects; if nothing worked out, you could aspire, at the other end of the scale, to be a low telephone mechanic and make money by selling illegal telephone connections.

Most of the students in this traditionally backward area of India came from feudal or semirural families, and aspired to join the Civil Service, a colonial invention that even in independent India continued to offer the easiest and quickest route to political power and affluence. But there were fewer and fewer recruitments made to the Civil Service from North India, where the decline in standards, as well as the cheap availability, of higher education had made it possible for millions to acquire university degrees while they had less and less prospect of employment. Bribery and nepotism had played a major part in the disbursement of the jobs in the minor government services. Students from the lately impoverished upper castes suffered most in this respect; if poverty wasn't enough, they were further disadvantaged by the large quotas for lower-caste candidates in government jobs.

The quotas, first created by Nehru's government in the early 1950s and meant as a temporary measure, were expanded and used by successive governments as an electoral ploy to attract lower-caste votes. The upper-caste students found themselves making the difficult adjustments to urban life only to confront the prospect of being sent back to the oblivion they had emerged from, and the sense of blocked futures, which they acquired early in their time at the university, was to reach its tragic culmination in 1990 in the spate of self-immolations following the central government's decision to provide even larger quotas in federal jobs for applicants from lower castes.

My own situation was little different from that of the people around me. I had recently spent three years at the nearby provincial university at Allahabad, where I was in even closer, more unsettling proximity to the desperation I saw in Benares. I was upper-caste myself, without family wealth, and roughly in the same position as my father had been in freshly independent India when the land reform act of 1951—another of Nehru's attempts at social equality, it was meant to turn exploited tenants into landholders—reduced his once well-to-do Brahmin family to penury. My mother's family had suffered a similar setback. Like many others in my family who laboriously worked their way into the middle classes, I had to make my own way in the world. Looking back, I can see my compulsive pursuit of books, and the calm and order it suggested, contrasting so jarringly with the rage and desperation around me, as my way of putting off a grimly foreclosed future.

So, during my months in Benares, I was able to live at a slight tangent to the chaos of the university. And I was able to do this, I now see, partly because of Rajesh.

I got to know Rajesh early in my stay at Benares. A tall, wiry, good-looking man in his mid-twenties, he had continued to live in Benares after finishing his studies at the university. He was eccentric and moody. He would start reciting Urdu poetry one moment and then denounce its decadence the next and start enumerating the virtues of the farming life. “All these wine drinkers with broken hearts,” he would say. “You can’t compare them to simple peasants who do more for humanity.” He used to say he would rather be a farmer than join government service and do the bidding of corrupt politicians. On other occasions he would tell me about the good works honest civil servants in India could achieve and how he himself aspired to be one of them. There was also an unexpected mystical side to him. I once saw him standing on the ghats gesturing toward the sandy expanses across the river. “That,” he was saying to his companion, a slightly terrified young student, “is *sunyata*, the void. And this”—he pointed at the teeming conglomeration of temples and houses behind us—“is *maya*, illusion. Do you know what our task is? Our task is to live somewhere in between.”

Rajesh revered Gandhi and distrusted Nehru, who he said was too “modern” in his outlook, but then he would change his mind and say that Gandhi wasn’t “tough” enough. All of these opinions he delivered with a faraway look; they formed part of monologues about the degraded state of contemporary India. “Where are we going?” he would say, dramatically throwing up his hands. “What kind of nation are we becoming?” He loved Faiz, the Pakistani writer whose doom-laden poetry he knew by heart; he was also fond of Wordsworth, whom he had studied as an undergraduate; he showed me a notebook where he had copied down his favorite poems, “The Solitary Reaper” among them. But I could never get him to talk about them. He did not listen much, and he did not like anyone interrupting his monologues. It wasn’t easy to be with him.

He had been at the university for eight years when I met him, and at first he appeared to be another of the countless students who hung around the campus, mechanically accumulating useless degrees and applying for this or that job. I had come to him with an introduction from a mutual friend at my undergraduate university. This friend believed that “studious” people like myself needed powerful “backers” at Benares Hindu University—he used the English words—and that Rajesh was well placed to protect me from local bullies and criminals. Rajesh himself believed so and was more than happy to take me under his wing. “You are here to study,” he told me at our first meeting, “and that’s what you should do. Let me know if anyone bothers you, and I’ll fix the bastard.”

Part of his concern for me came from an old, and now slightly melodramatic, reverence for the “studious” Brahmins. He was Brahmin himself, but considered himself unequal to what he felt to be the proper dignity of his caste. The feeling was widespread in the region, where the traditional dominance of Brahmins was beginning to collapse in the face of a serious political challenge by assertive lower castes. The decline of Brahmin prestige and authority, intimately linked to the diminishing political importance, was symbolized by a famous family of Benares, which was once very close to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and had been pushed into irrelevance by the new, military kind of low-caste politician. The members of the family still wore their caste marks on their foreheads; they still observed fasts, regularly bathed in the Ganges, were chief guests at temples on holy days, and would not accept food from low-caste people. But it was only this excessive concern about their public image, and an overdeveloped sense of uncleanness and contamination, that remained of their Brahminness. No crowds of job seekers and flunkies gathered at their house anymore; the women in the family walked around the bazaars unescorted and unrecognized; visiting journalists went elsewhere for good copy.

Rajesh felt the general change of status differently. He fasted religiously, went to offer flowers at the temple of Hanuman, the monkey god, every Tuesday. His regard for Faiz and love for Urdu poetry spoke of an older Brahmanical instinct for learning and the arts. But he also gave the impression that none of the old ways or values mattered anymore in a world in which Brahmins were forced to struggle to survive with everyone else. “Yes, I am a Brahmin too,” Rajesh would say, and then add mysteriously, “but I have done things no Brahmin would have ever done.”

I remember my first visit to his room, which was in one of the derelict-looking hostels with piles of broken furniture scattered on the front quad. The stairs to his room were splattered with blood-red patterns made by students spitting betel juice. In the assorted shabbiness of his room—light from a naked bulb falling weakly on scabby blue walls, unmade bed, discarded slippers, rickety table, checked denim jeans hanging limply from a solitary nail in the wall, a bamboo bookstand tottering under the weight of old newspapers—I noticed a jute shoulder bag lying open on the ground, bulging with crucifix pistols. No attempt had been made to conceal the pistols, which seemed to belong as naturally to the room as the green plastic bucket next to them. Their presence made me nervous; so did the hint of instability given by Rajesh’s speech and manner, the long monologues, the unconnected references to Wordsworth, to India. I began to wish I saw less of him.

But it was hard to break off contact, even harder to be indifferent to the innocent friendliness he exuded every time I saw him. He often appeared at the library, “checking up,” he said, on whether I was being my studious self or whether I was there to “ogle the girls.” I would try to avoid him by disappearing from the reading room at the time he was likely to show up there, but he would then appear at a later hour. He also took a surprising amount of interest in my reading, surprising because although he had done an undergraduate course in English, I rarely saw him reading anything more than the Hindi newspapers scattered around the tea shops on the campus. “Edmund Wilson! Again! Why?” he would ask with genuine bemusement, “are you always reading the same man?” He listened patiently while I tried to say a few explanatory words about the particular book or essay he had pointed to. He once caught me reading *To the Finland Station*, and I had to provide a crude summary in fewer words than used by Wilson, of Trotsky’s main ideas. I couldn’t, of course, refuse; the thought of Rajesh’s instability, the pistols in his room always forced me to summon up a reasonably friendly response. It could be exhausting being with him at times. Why, I would wonder, did he, who seemed to have read little beyond Faiz and the Romantics, want to know so much about people so distant from us, like Trotsky or Bakunin? (More simply, why couldn’t he spend his time with other people in the university?)

Rajesh was well known in student circles. There was a special respect for him among other upper-caste students from nearby villages; lonely and vulnerable in what to them was the larger, intimidating world away from home, they saw Rajesh as a sympathetic fellow provincial and older protector. Rajesh fitted the role rather well: He was physically bigger and stronger than most students on the campus; he had a certain reputation—a lot of people seemed to know about the pistols in his room—and it pleased him to be thought of as a godfather-like figure.

A small crowd instantly gathered around whenever I went out with him to a tea stall and eagerly hung on to every word he spoke. He often talked about politics, the latest developments in Delhi, the current gossip about the size of a minister’s wealth; he would repeat colorful stories about local politicians, the imaginative ways in which they had conned the World Bank or some other development agency, the bridges that were built only on paper, the roads that existed only in files.

Indeed, I often wondered—although he seemed content simply talking about politics—if he was not planning to be a politician himself; students with a popular mass base in the university who proved themselves capable of organizing strikes and demonstrations were often handpicked by local political bosses to contest elections to the local municipal corporation. Rajesh seemed to know people of

campus as well; I once noticed a couple of conspicuously affluent visitors who had driven to see him in a sinister-looking pale green Ambassador with tinted windows.

But I was preoccupied, particularly with Wilson's writings and their maze of cross-references that sent me scurrying from book to book in an effort to plug at least some of what I felt were egregious gaps in my knowledge. One of the books I came across in this way was Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, which I had read rather indifferently in a Penguin Classics edition sometime back. Wilson's essay on the politics of Flaubert, collected in *The Triple Thinkers*, made me want to reread it. When I did so, I found Flaubert's account of an ambitious provincial's tryst with metropolitan glamour and disillusion full of the kind of subtle satisfactions that a neurotic adolescent sensibility would be especially susceptible to. I identified with Frédéric Moreau, the protagonist, with his large passionate, but imprecise, longings, his indecisiveness, his aimlessness, his self-contempt. I cannot ever forget the sick feeling that came over me after I finished the novel late one evening at the library. I was only twenty, and much experience, and many more books, lay ahead of me. But I couldn't fail to recognize the intimations the novel gave me of the many stages of drift and futility I was encountering and was yet to encounter in my own life.

I recommended *Sentimental Education* to Rajesh one evening and gave him a photocopy of Wilson's essay. I didn't expect him to read all of it; but he had been curious about Wilson, and thought the essay was a good example of his writing. I didn't hear from him for a few weeks. My life went on as before. I left for the library early in the morning and came back to a house reverberating with the exuberant jangling of sitars, the doleful twang of sarods, the hollow beat of tablas. I ate every evening with Panditji's wife, sitting cross-legged on the floor in her dark kitchen, awkwardly inhaling thick smoke from the wood fire, over which Shyam dextrously juggled hot chapatis from one calloused palm to another.

Later, back in my room, trying to read in the low-voltage light, I would hear the bells for evening prayers ring out from the adjacent temples. I spoke little to the Americans who, after their lesson with Panditji, came up to the roof to smoke opium. I already knew I could not share my intellectual discoveries with them. They hadn't heard of Edmund Wilson; one of them, a Princeton undergraduate straining to recognize the name, thought I meant the biologist E. O. Wilson. The cultural figures they spoke about, and appeared to miss in the often oppressive alienness of this most ancient of Indian towns, were then unknown to me; it was to take me a few more years to find out who David Letterman was. But the Americans were, like me, whatever their reasons, refugees from the modern world of work and achievement, explorers of a world that antedated their own, and I was sympathetic to them.

Several weeks after I'd last seen him, Rajesh abruptly reappeared one afternoon at the library. He had been away, he said, on urgent work. Now he was on his way to visit his mother, who lived in a village forty miles west of Benares. Would I accompany him? I thought of making some excuse, but then realized I needed some diversion, and I said yes. Besides, I was curious about Rajesh's background, which he had told me nothing until then. I could guess that he wasn't well off, but one could have said the same for most students at the university.

We left one cold foggy morning on the small-gauge, steam-engine train that in those days ran between Benares and Allahabad. A chilly wind, gritty with coal dust, blew in through the iron-barred windows as the train puffed and wheezed through an endless flat plain, stubby fields stretching to treacherous blurred horizons, coils of smoke torpid above ragged settlements of mud huts and half-built brick houses. The train was empty, and Rajesh and I stretched out on hard wooden benches, wrapped from

head to toe in coarse military blankets, hurriedly sipping the cardamom-scented tea that seemed to turn cold the moment the vendor lifted the kettle off his tiny coal stove.

We got off at a small station populated entirely, it seemed, by mangy dogs. Another half hour tong ride from there, the horse's hooves clattering loudly against the tarmac road. Mango groves on both sides. Here and there, a few box-shaped houses with large courtyards where men slumbered on striped cots; cold-storage warehouses; tiny shuttered shops. At an enclave of mud huts, swarthy blouseless women swept the common yard with brooms made of leafy neem twigs that left the earth raked over with crow's-foot patterns. Finally, at the end of a row of identical roadside buildings, there was Rajesh's own house, brick-walled, one room, poor—but what had I expected?

The door was opened by Rajesh's mother, a tiny, shrunken woman in a widow's white sari. She looked frankly puzzled to see me at first but grew very welcoming when Rajesh introduced me as a friend from the university. After the early-morning light, it was dark and damp inside the high-ceilinged room. There was a solitary window, but it was closed. In one corner, partitioned off by a flimsy handloom sari, was the kitchen, where a few brass utensils dully gleamed in the dark and where Rajesh's mother busied herself with breakfast. In another corner, under a sagging string cot, was a trunk, leprous with rust. There were religious calendars in garish colors on the walls: Shiva, Krishna, Hanuman. I recall being unsettled by that bare, lightless room and its extreme poverty, something not immediately apparent in Rajesh's life in Benares.

During the morning Rajesh had become silent. Now he left the room while I sat in a straight-backed wicker chair and talked to his mother, both of us forced to speak very loudly to make ourselves heard above the hissing sounds from the kerosene stove. It wasn't easy to express sympathy in that high-pitched voice, and sympathy was increasingly required of me as she began to tell stories from her past: She had been widowed fifteen years ago, when Rajesh was still a child, and soon afterward her wealthy, feudal in-laws had started to harass her. The house in which she lived with her husband and son was taken away from her, and they refused to give back what little dowry she had brought with her. Her parents were dead, her brothers too poor to support her. There was only Rajesh, who had worked since he was thirteen, first in the maize fields and then at a carpet factory in Benares, where he had gone to evening school and done well enough to enter the university. The years had somehow passed.

But now she was worried. Rajesh, she felt, had reached a dead end. There were no more openings for him. All the jobs were going to low-caste people. And not only did Rajesh have the wrong kind of caste, but he also had no connections anywhere for a government job. She added, with a touch of old Brahmin pride, he had too much self-respect to work for low-caste shopkeepers and businessmen.

How little of Rajesh's past I had known! I knew a bit about those carpet factories; they had been in the papers after some human rights organizations petitioned the courts to prohibit them from using child labor. There had been pictures of large-eyed, frightened-looking children in dungeonlike rooms framed against their exquisite handiworks. I was shocked to realize that Rajesh had been one of them. The tormenting private memories of childhood that he carried within himself seemed unimaginable.

On the train back to Benares, Rajesh broke his silence to say that I had read *Sentimental Education* and that it was a story he knew well. "*Yeh meri duniya ki kahani hai. Main in logo ko janta hoon,*" he said, in Hindi. "It is the story of my world. I know these people well." He gave me a hard look. "Your hero, Edmund Wilson," he added, in English, "he also knows them."

What did Rajesh, a student in a provincial Indian university in the late 1980s, have in common with Frédéric Moreau or any of the doomed members of his generation in this novel of mid-nineteenth-century Paris? As it happened, I didn't ask him to explain. I had already been made to feel awkward by

the unexpected disclosures about his past, and the day had been somewhat exhausting. We talked desultorily, of other things and parted in Benares.

It was two years later, when I was in Benares again, that I next heard about Rajesh. The man who told me, someone I remembered as one of Rajesh's hangers-on, appeared surprised that I didn't already know that he had been a member of a criminal gang specializing in debt collection on behalf of a group of local moneylenders and businessmen. That explained his mysterious absences from Benares, I thought, as well as the pistols in his room and the sinister-looking Ambassador with tinted windows.

It was, the man said, a good, steady business; once confronted with the possibility of violence, people paid up very quickly, without involving the police. But then Rajesh had graduated to something riskier, and here, although shocked and bewildered by what I had been told, and fully expecting the worst, I could not take it in.

At some stage, the man said, dramatically pausing after every word, Rajesh had turned himself into a contract killer. It was an extremely well-paid profession and a well-connected one. You worked for small time contractors who in turn worked for wealthy industrialists and also did favors for local political bosses who did not always rely on their own "private armies" (the local term for loyal henchmen) for certain jobs. You got to know everyone well after a few years in the business. You worked for all these important people, yet you were ultimately on your own. The chances of survival weren't very high. Sooner or later the police came to hear of you. Fierce loyalties of caste and class ensured that every murder would be avenged. It was what would one day happen to Rajesh, his onetime friend predicted. In a typical ambush of the kind often reported in the local papers, he would be on his motorcycle when four men would surround him at a busy intersection in the old city and shoot him dead. The prurient excitement on the man's face filled me with disgust and anger.

I never did hear what happened to Rajesh. Such stories were in the newspapers every day. But it took me awhile to sort out my confused feelings. I kept seeing Rajesh at that busy crossing, trapped in the dense swarm of scooters, cycle rickshaws, bullock carts, cars, buses, trucks, and bicycles, the four men converging upon him, producing crude pistols from their pockets ...

Rajesh had bewildered me: his self-consciousness about his Brahmin identity, the pistols in his room, his constant talk of the void. I could now see that he had been struggling to make sense of his life, to connect the disparate elements that existed in it; but so, in a different way, was I.

In 1996 I thought of writing something on Edmund Wilson. I had tried before, in 1995, the year of Wilson's centenary, but what I wrote then seemed to me too much like a reprise of what a lot of other people had already said. I realized, though, that I had been trying to write about him in the way an American or European writer would have. What I had in mind was a straightforward exposition of Wilson's key books; it hadn't occurred to me that a separate narrative probably existed in my private discovery of Wilson's writings in a dusty old library in the ancient town of Benares.

Browsing through old papers in preparation for another attempt, I came across a photocopy of his essay on Flaubert's politics. It looked familiar. Idly flipping through the essay, I reached the pages on *Sentimental Education*, where I saw some passages underlined in red. As I'm not in the habit of marking up printed text, I wondered who had done this. I read the underlined sentences:

Frédéric is only the more refined as well as the more incompetent side of the middle-class mediocrity of which the dubious promoter represents the more flashy and active aspect. And so in the case of the other characters, the journalists and the artists, the members of the

various political factions, the remnants of the old nobility, Frédéric finds the same shoddiness and lack of principle which are gradually revealed in himself ...

On another page the underlined passage read:

Flaubert's novel plants deep in our mind an idea which we never quite get rid of: the suspicion that our middle-class society of manufacturers, businessmen, and bankers, people who live on or deal in investments, so far from being redeemed by its culture, is ruined by cheapening and invalidating all the departments of culture, political, scientific, artistic, and religious, as well as corrupting and weakening the ordinary human relations of love, friendship, and loyalty to cause—till the whole civilization seems to dwindle.

The passage offered a small glimpse of Wilson's way of finding the sources and effects of literature in the overlap between individual states of mind and specific historical realities. But I hadn't noticed this when I discovered the piece. I read it again and thought about the red underlinings. And then, after almost seven years, Rajesh strode back into my consciousness. I remembered the afternoon I had given *Sentimental Education* and Wilson's essay to him; I remembered his words to me on the train. Words I dismissed as exaggeration, the determined look on his face as he said, "It is the story of my world. I know these people well. Your hero, Edmund Wilson, he also knows them."

What had he meant by that?

The question did not leave me. And there came a time when I began to think I had understood very little, and misunderstood much, during those months in Benares. I recalled the day I went to visit Rajesh's village, and I at last saw that there had been a purpose behind Rajesh's invitation to his home, his decision to reveal so frankly his life to me. Even the cryptic remarks about *Sentimental Education* and Wilson on the train: He wanted me to know that not only had he read the novel, but he had also drawn, with Wilson's help, his own conclusions from it.

In the hard and mean world he had lived in, first as a child laborer and then as a hired criminal for politicians and businessmen, Rajesh would have come to know well the grimy underside of middle-class society. What became clearer to me now was how quick he had been to recognize that the society Flaubert and Wilson wrote about wasn't much different from the one he inhabited in Benares. "It's the story of my world," he had said. I couldn't see it then, but in Benares I had been among people who, like Frédéric Moreau and his friends, had either disowned or, in many cases, moved away from their provincial origins in order to realize their dreams of success in the bourgeois world. Only a handful of them were able to get anywhere near to realizing their dreams while the rest saw their ambitions dwindle away in successive disappointments over the years. The degradation of bribery, sycophancy, and nepotism that people were forced into in their hunt for jobs was undermining in itself; so pervasive was the corruption around them that neither those who succeeded nor those who failed were able to escape its taint.

The small, unnoticed tragedies of thwarted hopes and ideals Flaubert wrote about in *Sentimental Education* were all around us. And this awareness, which was also mine but which I tried to evade through, ironically, the kind of obsessive reading that had led me to the novel in the first place, had been Rajesh's private key to the book. Thus, where I saw only the reflection of a personal neurosis—

the character of Frédéric in particular embodying my sense of inadequacy, my harsh self-image—I had discovered a social and psychological environment that was similar to the one he lived in.

That discovery did honor to both Flaubert and Wilson. The worlds we knew in Benares were many years away from those of the French novelist and the American critic. Yet—and this was a measure of their greatness—they seemed to have had an accurate, if bitter, knowledge of its peculiar human ordeals and futility. It was a knowledge Rajesh himself arrived at by a somewhat different route. “To fully appreciate the book,” Wilson had written of *Sentimental Education*, “one must have had time to see something of life.” It sounds like a general sort of adage, but Rajesh exemplified its truth even as he moved into another world, taking what in retrospect look like all the wrong turns. Rajesh had known how to connect whatever little he read to the world around himself, much in the same way Wilson had done in his essay and in his other writings, a way that revealed a symbiotic relationship between life and literature that I, despite all my reading, was not fully to grasp until long after I had left Benares and thought again of that time of hopeful, confused striving when I first read Edmund Wilson.

PART ONE

ALLAHABAD

The Nehrus, the Gandhis, and Democracy

1. The Colonial City and the Countryside

In September 2000 India held its third general election in as many years after the coalition government dominated by the Hindu nationalist BJP (Indian People's Party) collapsed in New Delhi. The Hindu nationalists, who had conducted nuclear tests and challenged Pakistan to a final war over Kashmir soon after joining the coalition government in 1998, were expected to strengthen their position and resume their work of turning India into a militant Hindu state. I thought then of returning to Allahabad, the North Indian city where I had lived as an undergraduate student from 1985 to 1988, a time when Hindu nationalism still seemed as marginal in India as it had been for the previous few decades.

Allahabad lies in the heart of the vast North Indian plains, at the confluence of the two sacred rivers of Hinduism, the Ganges and the Yamuna. Flying across the plains on a clear day, you can follow the rivers as they descend from the Himalayas and then meander through great expanses of flat cultivated land, past clusters of ancient cities and towns. Three millennia ago their waters provided the basis for the civilization of the original Aryan settlers of North India. Each winter hundreds of thousands of pilgrims still travel to Allahabad from all across India for a religious fair near the confluence, and every twelve years the Kumbh Mela, the largest human gathering in the world, attracts millions of Hindus to the site.

Yet the place isn't easy to get to. Commercial flights have been discontinued, and during the election period the overnight train from Delhi was overbooked. To get to Allahabad in time for the early campaigning, I had to take the multi-stop flight from Delhi to Benares, along with a tour group of Italians traveling to see the erotic temple sculpture at Khajuraho, and then drive eighty miles east to Allahabad.

The flight is operated by one of India's private airlines. The breakfast was freshly cooked and warm, the toilets were clean and generously supplied with cologne, and the courtesy and efficiency of the staff were like marvels compared with the resolute badness of the state-owned Indian Airlines. Miles out of Delhi, moving deeper into a part of India still untouched by the entrepreneurial energy and foreign investments of recent years, the flight could seem part of the good things contact with the global economy had brought to India: higher standards of health and hygiene; a greater alertness to individual needs.

But an older India of caste and poverty is never far away even on a plane with its Western-style amenities, its atmosphere of international ease and luxury. In Khajuraho, after the package tourists had departed, another kind of people came on board: dark-complexioned, barefoot cleaners with little brushes and rags. They filled the cabin with the smell of sweat and chewed tobacco, and as they were scuttling through the narrow aisles on hands and knees—as if their degradation were required by the low caste—the expression on the face of the pretty short skirted stewardess, who could have been the glamorous poster girl of a European or an American airline, was one of pure distaste.

The long, bone-rattling drive afterward to Allahabad on potholed roads, through calf-deep floodwaters past the tin-roofed shacks and rain battered villages of mud and thatch—the cowering huts, the

picturesque from the plane, now appearing frail, in danger of collapsing onto the sodden earth from which they had been so arduously raised, the low-caste women paving tiny courtyards with cow dung, the men spinning rope for the string cots, the sky low and gray over the flat fields and tiny huts and the buffaloes placid in muddy poots—the long drive through a world that belonged to itself as fixed as it would have two centuries ago was a reminder of how far even the superficially good things of a globalized economy were from this heavily populated and impoverished part of India.

India, with its severe disparities of income, caste, and religion, is split into so many separate worlds. You can live in one without knowing anything about the others, and no world has an obvious past until you make the effort of dredging it up. I didn't find out until later that the region between Allahabad and Benares, familiar to me from my time as an undergraduate student at Allahabad University, hadn't always been so impoverished. In the early years of the nineteenth century, when the British were still more interested in business than empire, the area had been an important trade center for North India, and its merchants and moneylenders had been known for their initiative and energy.

But as always in India, the prosperity so created had been shared out among a very small group of people; it had led to little except the creation of zealously guarded hoards or, occasionally, an opulent mansion in the midst of a teeming bazaar. When trading routes changed and the region lost its importance, the private fortunes quickly dwindled, the mansions fell into ruin and were taken over by squatters. The region was restored to the wretchedness and cruelties that were probably always there under the gloss of temporary affluence.

Affluence is still a rare achievement, but the gloss has got shinier and deeper. At the time of the elections, my hotel in Allahabad was a new white eight-storied building of egregious luxury, built by a local manufacturer of bidis (cheap Indian cigarettes), who had recently begun to dabble in politics. Every effort had been made to make it conform to international specifications. The menu at the coffee shop offered Mexican and Italian food. A Muzak version of "The Sounds of Silence" played in the elevators. When the power supply broke down, as it frequently did in the city, a massive basement generator groaned into life. The corridors were thickly carpeted; the double-glazed windows kept out the loud film music from the small slum just outside the hotel, where a rain-fed gutter overflowed into the tin-roofed shacks and left green stains of slime on the pale earth around them.

The hotel was fated to remain empty—and so it was—most of the time. Its luxury couldn't be so seem pointless. It met no local needs; it required no local expertise. In fact, people from as far as South India had to be imported to fill in managerial positions. Its purpose, if you could call it that, seemed to lie in its being an assertion of wealth and power in the midst of general deprivation, quite like the newly built houses with Doric columns and Palladian façades in the area around the hotel.

The solidity of the building, its quiet interiors, the monumental presence of its white façade in the middle of the city—in all its deliberate order and calm, the hotel underlined its separateness from its setting. Its effect was felt most keenly by the menial staff, who traveled each day from their homes in the flood-threatened outskirts of Allahabad and approached their place of work with something like awe. They looked very ill at ease in their green uniforms and were obsequiously polite with guests, calling to mind the Indians who had come to serve in the new city of Allahabad built by the British after the rude shock of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the city whose simple colonial geography was plain from my sixth-floor hotel room, the railway tracks partitioning the congested "black town," with its minarets and temple domes, from the tree-lined grid of "white town," where for a long period no Indians, apart from servants, could appear in native dress.

Allahabad was Prayag, a small pilgrim center, before the British, in the early nineteenth century, began to use it as a military base, guarding the up-country trade on the river Ganges. When, in 1857, Indian soldiers in British-led armies mutinied, the British struggled to retain their power across most of North India, except in Allahabad, where they were not challenged greatly. They quickly put down

the few soldiers who did rebel; they razed to the ground those houses in the old quarter that belonged to rich supporters of the insurrectionists. No stories of unspeakable atrocities against British women and children emerged from Allahabad as they did from Kanpur, just 150 miles away to the north of the Ganges.

Nevertheless, the British wished to make a point. The pacifier of Allahabad was a devout Christian colonel called James Neill, who believed “the word of God gives no authority to the moderate tenderness for human life.” Under his direction, some six thousand Indians were hanged, shot, tortured to death, in just a few days.

It was in the months following the pacification that eight villages were confiscated, as a senior official stated, from “dirty Indian niggers” and were turned into the exclusively British enclave of Civil Lines. The great buildings of the city—the Romanesque cathedral, the university tower and dome, the Gothic public library, the Baroque High Court—came up in the decades that followed the suppression of the mutiny, a time of serenity for the British in India, when India officially became part of the empire and the natives remained quiet for the most part.

In Allahabad, the civil and military administration, the hospitals, schools, and the high court produced a small Anglo-Indian society. For these exiled people, the compensations for the city’s great heat and isolation were to be had in untroubled leisure, in the clubs, polo grounds, and large bungalows with wide verandas and sprawling lawns where it was common for a family to have fifty or sixty servants. When, in 1887, the young Rudyard Kipling came to work in Allahabad after some exciting years as a journalist in Lahore, he found himself alienated; the “large, well-appointed club where Poker had just driven out Whist and men gambled seriously, was full of large-bore officials and of a respectability all new.”

When you look now at the buildings of the period after 1857, their playfully diverse architectural styles seem to confirm Kipling’s vision of a people savoring their privilege. In their rhetorical magnificence—quite like that of my hotel—they stand apart from, and indeed loom over, everything around them; they suggest a people made absolutely secure by wealth and unchallenged power. At the public library—built as a memorial to the official who dispossessed the “dirty Indian niggers” of Civil Lines—there are relief figures of Indian peasants and potters and silk weavers on carved capitals. The peasants are wiry, obviously well-fed men with turbans; the physical aspects and setting of the potters and silk weavers have been similarly improved. They are unsettling, not least because severe British methods of revenue collection had ravaged the countryside, forcing generations of the rural poor into vicious circles of endless debt and bondage to local landlords and moneylenders. It is hard to imagine that the architect was aware of the crude irony of his representations; more likely that he was indulging a fantasy about the Indian countryside, a romantic idea about peasants created at a safe distance from their actual condition.

The romance had gone, but this distance hadn’t really diminished with independence; the administrators and the masses still lived in separate worlds. At the commissioner’s office, an ornate sprucely painted bungalow with trimmed hedges in Civil Lines, a middle-aged woman in a torn white sari held a creased piece of paper and pleaded with attendants wearing red-sashed livery. The widow of one of the laborers killed in a mining accident, she had traveled a long way from her village that morning to beg the commissioner to expedite relief money sanctioned more than two years ago by the government. The audience wasn’t granted; the woman was told to take her application to a lower official and not bother the commissioner’s office with petty requests.

I accompanied the commissioner and the district police chief on their inspection tour of rural police stations two days before the elections in Allahabad. We traveled in two white Ambassadors with blue

sirens and official flags on the bonnet. Villagers turned to look at us warily as we raced through a series of traffic jams on narrow country roads. At the first sign of an approaching bottleneck, the driver put on the siren, and bodyguards cradling AK-47 guns leaned out of the windows, forcing big overweight trucks off the roads and onto muddy ledges where they stood leaning dangerously.

Policemen everywhere stood to attention and saluted the cars as they went past. At official bungalows with little flower beds and manicured lawns, junior officials vied with each other to open the car doors and escort us to dining tables overloaded with warm snacks. More members of the Civil Service would invariably join us at this point. These were election observers sent to the region from other states, men in their thirties and forties, eager and fluent. A brisk bonhomie would ensue around the dining table as people compared notes on who was posted where and who was about to be promoted. There would be little talk of the election or the police stations we had visited (some of them in total disarray—small dark rooms full of dusty files and broken furniture, smells of urine and alcohol emanating from lockups—easily imagined as local centers of tyranny, settings for the third-degree torture and custodial deaths and rapes you read about in the papers).

At the beginning of the inspection tour, the police chief, who had the reputation, rare in Allahabad, of not soliciting bribes, looked concerned. His English marked him as a man who had entered the Civil Service from a modest small-town background; he couldn't have been unaware of what occurred in the police stations. Yet after the first, where he scolded the paunchy official in charge who had been clumsily making up the number of men arrested and guns seized, he hurried through the rest, with a look of distaste on his face. The commissioner looked restless throughout the tour and found his voice only with the other Civil Service men. He had earlier spoken to me with feeling about the inconveniences of living in the English town of Hull, where he had been sent by the Indian government to undergo some training. He now spoke mournfully—others around the dining table shaking their head sideways in approval—of criminals with hundreds of police cases against them who had not only joined politics but also become “honorable ministers” and to whom he was required to show proper deference.

Dignity, and how to hold on to it: That was what preoccupied these men, most of whom the Civil Service had rescued from a lower-middle-class shabbiness—the dignity whose emblems included the bungalows, the white cars with sirens, the red-sashed attendants, and the attentive lower officials; the dignity that came out of asserting one's distance from everything tainted by the ordinary misery and degradation of India: the widow outside the commissioner's office, the criminals working for ministers, the corrupted men in the rural police stations.

In the assertion of that distance lay the self-image of the colonial administrators, and over time that has changed as little as the actual hierarchies and structure of the administration itself. Only the gap between rhetoric—more intense in an India with democratic aspirations—and reality has widened. For the people in small towns and villages—the majority of India's population—the sources of power and justice are still somewhere in the larger unknown world, and you can spend all your life waiting for them to work in your favor.

Consider this village thirty miles out of Allahabad: a huddle of huts, unpainted brick houses, and narrow mud lanes on a stony slope. My car was the only motorized vehicle on the rutted country road that dusty late afternoon. Its appearance from behind an abrupt bend startled the bullock cart driver and shepherds and excited fear among the people at this village, standing by the side of the road holding the little green plastic flags of the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party, waiting for the local candidate, Mr. Reoti Raman Singh, to arrive. They stood stiffly, not daring to come closer, until summoned by the driver, when they moved awkwardly and surrounded the car. Anxious, thin, sur-

hardened faces with roughly cut hair, young and old, pressed against the windows; frankly curious eyes quickly took in my camera, diary, pen—glamorous items in this context—and suddenly clouded over with uncertainty. When I asked them about the local issues they wished their member of Parliament to resolve, they shook their heads. One of the best-dressed persons among them, an old man in white kurta and dhoti and thick white mustache, said that there were no problems at all and resumed his scrutiny of my personal effects. It was only when my exasperated driver, a recent migrant to Allahabad from a nearby village, introduced me as a journalist and urged them to tell me the truth that the old man began to speak.

The others prompted him, in shy whispers at first, and then everyone spoke at once. This village was different from those I had already visited that day only in the quality of its deprivation. It was privileged in having a tube well for drinking water, but the nearest hospital was nine miles away, and although the government had installed an electric pole, there had never been any “current.” The biggest problem related to the government’s primary school; it had been around for several years, but the teacher came only once a week from Allahabad and even then only for a couple of hours or so. There was no way of predicting when he would come, and so the students dressed each morning for school and spent the day waiting for the teacher outside locked doors. That wasn’t all. The teacher took all the rice which the government sent for the pupils every year. He had also carved out personal profit from the building of the new one-room school for girls; the foundation was nine inches instead of the usual twenty inches, and the building could collapse any moment.

Earlier that day I had been traveling with Reoti Raman Singh, the candidate for Allahabad parliamentary constituency from the Samajwadi Party. Fierce monsoon rains had accompanied us en route from Mr. Singh’s rambling old mansion in the old quarter of Allahabad to the rural districts. The windshield wipers flailed uselessly; the road was reduced to frothy mud. When the rain stopped, so parkland rolled out on both sides, the green of the grass, trees, and bushes brilliantly vivid and separate in the gray light of the still-turbulent sky; water gurgled through roadside ditches; and for a moment at least it was possible to take pleasure in the poverty-ravaged landscape, to see pastoral beauty in the young boys and girls herding sheep and buffaloes on grassy slopes.

Mr. Singh was a tall, stooping man; he walked with a slight limp and gave an impression of some deep debility, along with a great kindness. He sat impassive in the front of the Jeep and hardly moved whenever his personal attendant, a thickset man in a safari suit, reached out from the back seat to adjust the silk scarf around his employer’s neck. The scarf, stiff with starch, was important. Mr. Singh belonged to an old distinguished feudal family of the region, one that had made its name and wealth in precolonial times, and the external symbols of his prestige had to be maintained. At a railway level crossing, a blind man in wet rags came up to the Jeep and, hopping a bit on his bare, calloused feet, sang a devotional song. Mr. Singh obliged with a generous gift of one hundred rupees, three times the daily wages of a laborer. There was both approval and envy on the faces of the small crowd of onlookers as they watched the rupee note passing from Mr. Singh’s attendant to the blind man; Mr. Singh, or “Kunwar Sahib,” Prince, as he was called, had done the thing expected of him.

Early that morning at his house in Allahabad, men from nearby villages had sat silently in small dark rooms, tense with the urgency of those matters they waited to lay before Mr. Singh: power and water connections, a clerical job, a property dispute. Their blank faces cracked and betrayed disappointment when Mr. Singh, already running late that morning, was rushed out to the Jeep waiting in the front yard. There were many more supplicants at the villages where he stopped, mostly men from the low Nishad (fishermen) caste, small-limbed and dark and half naked, who ran up to the Jeep with hands folded, heads bowed. Mr. Singh addressed them in the local dialect; his manner was easy y

authoritative. He asked them directly about their problems and was quick to respond. He promised to fire the policeman who had been extorting money from one village; he promised to build a culvert linking another two villages across a canal within a month of his election; at villages requiring water he promised to have tube wells dug. He reminded them of the electricity and water he had brought to villages in his region. He didn't say that he had done the good work in his official capacity as a member of the state legislature; it was an earlier contract, and not the obligations of elected office that he was invoking, the contract between the upper-caste wealthy feudal lord and his destitute but loyal subjects. The faces in the crowds looked satisfied; they nodded, childlike, as he spoke, and as he prepared to leave, people lunged forward and tried to reach through the open window to touch his feet. It was as if after the unmet expectations from the flawed institutions of democratic India, after too many disappointments, an uncared-for people had found some security in the still-persisting ideals of noblesse oblige.

Drinking water, police harassment, electricity, schools, and hospitals: These weren't the themes being discussed when I left Delhi, although the media had been as obsessed with the elections as it was with Kashmir, where the Indian Army had fought several bloody battles with Pakistan-backed armed intruders over the summer.

The media grew each year, with new newspapers, magazines, and TV channels appearing almost every week. But only a very small part of what they produced could be called journalism. During the battles in Kashmir, they had assumed the role of cheerleaders and worked up a lot of hysteria among the metropolitan middle classes for whom war and jingoism appeared to clarify, if only momentarily, a self-image that had been blurred by eight years of rapid social and economic liberalization. False stories, disseminated by the Indian Army about the torture of its soldiers by the Pakistanis, were retold endlessly even after it was revealed that they were false. Correspondents in battle fatigues shouted breathless reports into microphones as shells screamed overhead. Stylish young army officers boasted at length about their plans for the Pakistanis. There was little embarrassment when on national TV one of the officers echoed the Pepsi-Cola slogan, *Yeh Dil Maange More* ("This Heart Wants More") and was then killed in battle soon afterward or when in its haste to convert the skirmishes into a splendid little war for itself the government announced on Independence Day that its highest military honor was to go posthumously to a soldier who turned out to be alive in a Delhi army hospital.

And then, as abruptly as it had started, the war was over and forgotten. No one seemed to know how much money had been collected for the families of the 266 dead soldiers; the countless relief functions and benefit concerts and fashion shows became part of yet another Indian scam. Political pundits and analysts replaced military strategists and experts on television and seemed to shuttle endlessly between recording studios, chatting about "swings" and "anti-incumbency factors" and "index of opposition unity." The English-language press was full of opinion polls and analyses, and the suave spokesmen for the two main political parties, the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), exchanged creative insults in daily debates about the foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress, and the alleged failure of the BJP government to act on early intelligence reports about the intruders in Kashmir.

The television experts and newspaper columnists called it an election without issues. But the separation of issues from elections had occurred long before. Elections, held almost yearly, had become a national drama, preceded and followed by even greater dramas of betrayals, defections, buying and selling legislators, no-confidence motions, coalition collapses, new ministries

speculations about who was in and who was out, etc. The drama, created this time by questions like “Sonia an agent of the Vatican?” and “Did our soldiers die in vain in Kashmir?” helped suppress the real issues and also brought about a temporary cohesion and passion among a fragmented, apathetic population.

Yet in Allahabad, once known as the most politically minded city in India, even the drama was missing. As late as the 1980s, politicians and lawyers, dressed in contrasting white and black, gathered at the old coffeehouse in the heart of the “white town” every morning and evening to gossip about various political figures and the size of their wealth. But I found the coffeehouse empty. Waiters in scruffy white livery and turbans stood around vacantly under fans hung high from cobwebbed wooden beams on the ceiling, and lizards made drowsy by the moist heat clung unmovingly to the faded painting of Gandhi on the walls, where the bright-blue paint had peeled off, exposing the solid masonry underneath.

One morning I went to Anand Bhavan, the family mansion of the Nehrus. It is only a five-minute walk from the campus of Allahabad University, where I had lived as an undergraduate; strange to think that I hardly ever went there.

Not that there was much to see. On the morning I went, gaudily dressed peasant women and children sat cross-legged in the long arcades, cautiously running their hands over the cool marble floors. Outside, the posters at pavement stalls were all of fleshy-lipped Indian film heroes. The usual election party banners, the tempos with loudspeakers, and the motorcycled boys with party flags and bandannas were hardly visible on the streets. I walked through the wide verandas and balconies and peered into rooms where French meals were once served on Dresden china with Czech glasses and where, in a more political time, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and other great men of the Congress Party discussed ways of liberating India from colonial rule. In a newer building on the large walled compound, I could see yet more peasant women, also in gaudy nylon saris, shuffling shyly through an ill-lit gallery of photographs from hopeful times: Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, inaugurating dams and factories, what he called “the new temples of India”; Nehru with other celebrities of the postcolonial world, Nasser, Sukarno, Nkrumah; and Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi, in an elegant silk sari, hugging Fidel Castro at a summit meeting of nonaligned nations.

In Allahabad, a decaying city whose brief moment of glory belonged to the anticolonial struggle, you couldn’t but feel distant from these celebrations of postcolonial nationalism and third world solidarity. It was also hard not to wonder what, if anything, the peasant visitors made of the photographs. Most of them came on day trips from the vast rural region around Allahabad where the young Jawaharlal Nehru had, after his seven years at Harrow and Cambridge, first been exposed to “the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India.” Their parents and grandparents were probably among the enthusiastic voters who, after independence, repeatedly elected Nehru to the Indian Parliament from a rural constituency near Allahabad. But they themselves had remained close to destitution.

Things hadn’t changed much even for those with privileged access to the owners of Anand Bhavan. In the late 1970s, Dom Moraes, the Indian writer and poet, met an old couple, Becchu and his wife Sonia, who had worked there for much of the century. Moraes was then researching a semiauthorized biography of Indira Gandhi; the officials in charge of the mansion let him remove the leatherbound books from the shelves and discover Nehru’s interest in Balzac, Dickens, Maugham, and Koestler. The same officials, one rainy day at Anand Bhavan, brought Becchu and Sonia to see Moraes and told him that “Becchu was beating Sonia too much. Now he is not beating. Since she is becoming blind, he is taking care.”

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