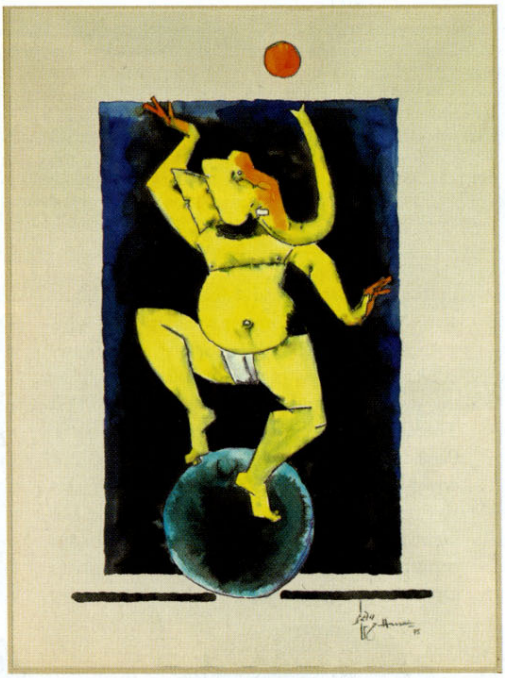
INDIA 2008

THIS LAND OF ROYALS, RICKSHAWS, CASTE POLITICS, AND CRUSHING POVERTY IS ALSO A TECH-SAVVY NUCLEAR POWER OF HIGH-RISES, GLOBAL COMMERCE, AND CUTTING-EDGE ART. IN THE 21ST-CENTURY INDIA IS SHIFTING GEARS, AND ITS FOOT IS ON THE ACCELERATOR.



***Untitled (Ganesha)*, a 1975 watercolor by legendary painter Maqbool Fida Husain, still active at the age of 93**

Into the Fast Lane

When I was a child, people traveled around Delhi mostly by walking or bicycling or taking a bus. India was much poorer in the seventies. On the rare occasion when someone on our street bought a scooter, he would also pay for a religious ceremony. This was largely to bribe God to ward off the evil eye, an often envious gaze that brings on a curse. A pandit would come and light a small fire inside the man's house. Usually a dozen relatives showed up, and they would sit on the floor and pray. At the end of the ceremony the pandit went outside and drew an evil eye and a red swastika (to invoke a blessing) on the scooter.

While scooters were uncommon, private cars were even more exotic, the sort of thing one saw in movies. The religious ceremony for a new car was much larger. A tent would be put up at one end of the street, and the pandit would get a roaring blaze going. The whole neighborhood

might show up. Hundreds of people would bustle around the parked car, inevitably an Ambassador sedan, which, silent and still in the hubbub, resembled a demure bride.

India has changed a great deal. Cars are now everywhere—Fords, Fiats, Toyotas, BMWs, Indian Tatas. Journeys around Delhi that used to take 20 minutes take an hour. Tata recently bought the illustrious British brands Jaguar and Land Rover from Ford, a deal with symbolism that was hard to ignore. Cars and highways, like call centers, have become emblems of the new India.

The old India hasn't disappeared, though. In fact, one way to see the two Indias is by driving. Start on the new highways and then take some of the old roads that have existed for centuries (and which many Indians still prefer, to avoid paying tolls). Highways, as Americans think of them, are relatively recent in this country. During the first 50 years after independence in 1947, India constructed only 330 miles of four-lane roads. Then in 1998 a right-wing Hindu party took power and, as an assertion of national pride, tested a nuclear weapon and began a 15-year project to build 40,000 miles of highways—including the so-called Golden Quadrilateral, which connects Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Calcutta. Before that, the last time India had a road-building boom was in the 16th century, when the Moghul emperors were knitting together their empire.

Driving the new highways, you pay a toll, use the on-ramp, and things become effortless. There is steady but not overwhelming traffic. Periodically the road rises, allowing you to look down on mud-hut villages, dun-colored farms, and oxen dragging wooden plows. On the best highways, there is the sense you could be in any country. There are rest stops with tarmac plazas, gas stations, and glass-and-steel restaurants that might be found on the New Jersey Turnpike. Only instead of burgers and fries, the smells are of spices from rice and lentils.

After the broad highways, India's old roads are a shock. If you use them, leave early in the morning, perhaps while it is still dark. These roads are crowded and narrow and uneven, and it will take a long time getting where you want to go. Driving requires complete focus. A camel squatting by the side of the road might suddenly lurch up and draw a cart into your path. Young boys delivering tea frequently run across roads

SOCIETY

The Rising Middle Class

WHENEVER I'M IN INDIA, I USU- ally spend a day or two with my aunt and uncle in Gurgaon, the satellite city on Delhi's southwestern fringe marked by new high-rises, gated communities, shopping malls, movie theaters, and wide avenues. This is where India is building its future.

My relatives' home—three bedrooms, three baths, a recent-model Honda out front—is on the top floor of a four-family building. My aunt and uncle, now retired, live with their son, who works for Lufthansa, his wife, and their two-year-old daughter. In the evenings everyone gathers in front of a 42-inch Sony flatscreen to watch the latest episode of *Indian Idol* or this country's version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.* Commercials tout Surf laundry detergent and Tata cars. Their life is typical of upwardly mobile urban families in India today.

Yet their middle-class lifestyle doesn't spare them the discomforts of a developing country. At some point most days, the lights flicker as the apartment's convertor kicks in, the city's electricity having once again failed. My cousin jumps up to switch off nonessential devices. Last spring Gurgaon's main water pipe burst, and my relatives were forced to pay inflated prices for water delivered in jerricans. The pipe was repaired, but Gurgaon's groundwater is fast being depleted.

Gurgaon boasts more shopping malls per capita than any other Indian city, nearly 25 by my count. Levi's, Benetton, Pizza Hut, T.G.I. Friday's: They're all here—at the Galaxy Mall, the Ambiance Mall, and the Mall of India, the country's biggest. Recently I went to a multiplex in one of these malls to see the blockbuster movie *Taj Mahal.* The service was superb. Smiling men and women in neat uniforms take your $3.50 ticket and usher you to a reserved, impressively plush seat.

Once settled, you order your pizza or Indian *chat,* and the staff brings it as the previews for coming attractions roll. Onscreen, gorgeous actors in trendy clothes race around in new cars, wielding sleek electronic gadgets. It's an India where water is no problem and the electricity never falters. On our way out, I stopped in the restroom. It was the most immaculate I have ever seen.

MIRA KAMDAR *is the author of* Planet India: The Turbulent Rise of the Largest Democracy and the Future of Our World.

A trio of "Head" sculptures from 2007 by Ravinder Reddy

with their kettles. The U.S. State Department warns that in case of an accident, you should abandon your vehicle and escape the likely mob by going to the nearest police station.

While these old roads can be nerve-racking, they are where one finds India as it is experienced by Indians: a tree in the road with a tiny temple beneath it; *kos minars,* 30-foot towers on brick platforms that the Moghuls put up as distance markers (a *kos* is just shy of two miles); odd signs encouraging careful driving—DO NOT BE RASH AND END IN CRASH, MAKE LOVE NOT WAR BUT NOTHING WHILE DRIVING.

In farming areas, you'll come upon piles of wheat, about the height of a reclining man, in the middle of the road. The women in bright clothes on either side use the passing cars as threshers. After your car bumps over their piles, in your rearview mirror you'll see them scurrying to sweep up the grains.

Although these two types of roads are very different, to think of them as entirely separate Indias isn't accurate. The prosperous, Westernized India holds many of the same beliefs as the poorer, more traditional India. Stuck in one of the country's increasingly ubiquitous traffic jams, you sometimes see a Mercedes sedan or a Toyota SUV that appears to have been covered with graffiti. But looking more closely you see it's actually those swastikas and evil eyes.

AKHIL SHARMA *is the author of* An Obedient Father, *winner of the Hemingway/PEN Award.*

Bharti Kher's *Squaring the Circle*, 2007

THE ART SCENE

Power Couple

Bharti Kher's studio in suburban Delhi is filled with a large and curious object. From different angles it looks vaguely like the base of an uprooted tree or perhaps a giant mango plucked off with the branch or, very possibly, a pair of inflated testicles. At 10 feet long and 5½ feet high, the sculpture is roughly the size of a car. In fact, it's a life-size fiberglass replica of a blue whale's heart, the largest on earth. Two women in saris, one bent low, the other on a stool, are busy sticking thousands of gray, green, red, and black felt dots called *bindis* across nearly every inch of its surface. The sculpture is the last in an edition of three, one of which was snapped up by a collector at this summer's Art Basel fair.

A couple of blocks away, Kher's husband, Subodh Gupta, has a studio stacked with shiny stainless-steel and brass utensils—the pots, pans, pails, "tiffin carriers," and votive vessels that are staples of Indian kitchens and temples. These are the everyday ready-made objects he uses in monumental sculptures that have earned him comparisons to Marcel Duchamp and the catchy, if ill-suited, sobriquet the Damien Hirst of Delhi. Gupta is feverishly working on sculptures and paintings for a show at the Arario gallery in Beijing this fall as well as a major piece for next year's Tate Triennial, in Britain.

It's mid-June and the two artists have just returned from a five-week trip in Europe with their two children—a busman's holiday that took in Kher's show at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, England, and Gupta's at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy. Breaking for lunch at their apartment, which is equidistant from their studios, Kher frets over five-year-old Lola's bout of Delhi belly; their son, Omi, who is 11, is out with friends. Both parents have the look of relief that comes just before school opens after a long summer break.

This has been a big year for the pair. Already represented by top galleries in Paris, New York, Delhi, and Mumbai, both artists were signed by Hauser & Wirth, the influential dealership with branches in London and Zürich. Their work, showcased at fairs, auctions, and exhibitions from Miami to Dubai to Hong Kong, is coveted by important collectors such as François Pinault, Charles Saatchi, and Frank Cohen. In 2006 Pinault installed Gupta's 12-foot-high skull composed of welded utensils outside his Palazzo Grassi in Venice. Both Kher and Gupta have seen their auction records more than double in the past year, with his reaching $1.4 million. In the Subcontinent's exploding art scene they are, without question, the leading power couple.

Gupta, 44, and Kher, 39, literally bumped into each other at an artists' commune in Delhi in 1992. It's a story straight out of a Bollywood blockbuster: London-born Indian chick falls

POLITICS

***"The caste system** is still a major issue in India. Traditionally there were four categories: the Brahmins, the priests, at the top; the Kshatriya, the warrior caste; the Vaishya, the merchant class; and the Sudras, the people who did manual labor. Beneath them were the Untouchables, those who dealt with things that are unclear. There's always been some mobility—more and more so today. But for the Untouchables, or Dalits (meaning 'the oppressed'), as they're often referred to now, things are pretty bad. In certain parts of India, there are very strong political parties associated with the lower castes, who vote against the Brahminic parties. But while the lower castes have some power and influence, they're benefiting little from the economic boom."*

—**SIDDHARTHA DEB** is writing a book about wealth and poverty in India.

for a yokel. "I could barely understand a word of what he was saying," Kher says, laughing. "He took me to Old Delhi to buy art supplies and pursued me without pause."

"I had never met anyone like her. But I think she was more impressed by my art than by me," says Gupta.

A compact man who speaks English haltingly, Gupta fixes you with an intense gaze. Kher, ponytailed and ebullient, speaks in a clipped British accent. Raised in London, the daughter of a self-made immigrant businessman, she moved to India 16 years ago. Gupta was the son of a railway guard and went to a village school in the poor state of Bihar, in northeastern India. "I was only good at cheating on exams," he says.

Working his way up from small-time jobs at provincial theaters and newspapers, he arrived in Delhi in 1988, penniless but determined to make it in the art world. Gupta's breakthrough came only after a long period of experimentation and frustration. He turned to his roots, making art from cow-dung patties (used as cheap fuel in village homes), ritual vessels offered in prayers to the dead, everyday pots and pans. His work today—which ranges from sculpture and painting to video and performance—speaks of dislocation, globalization, aspiration, and reinvention.

Kher, whose art touches on similar themes, adopted her signature motif, the *bindi,* after being captivated by a snakelike one she saw on the forehead of a vegetable vendor. For millions of Indian women the *bindi* is a symbol of marriage and fertility or piety or the final touch when dressing up. In Kher's hands *bindis*—often applied in brightly colored concentric circles on painted board or in swirls on aluminium panels—can be meditative or optically electric.

They can also be haunting. *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own,* her well-known sculpture of a dying elephant, is covered in sperm-shaped *bindis*, denoting their procreative power. "The *bindis* make its skin come alive, and they make the figure float visually," says Kher, adding, "I must have been an elephant in my last life."

SUNIL SETHI *is a senior editor at NDTV in Delhi. He hosts the show* Just Books.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Bollywood Confessions

In 1970, when I was 11, a Bollywood movie called *Chetna* was released in Bombay. All its poster showed of the heroine, Rehana Sultan, was her naked legs. The hero, framed in this inverted V, gazed up as she stood, feet firmly planted apart on a bed. The implication was that Rehana, who played a prostitute, was nude. One had to buy a ticket to find out just how much she revealed.

The film caused a furor. How could the censors allow a nude scene when actors weren't even permitted to kiss onscreen? Had they forgotten this was India, the last bastion of Victorian prudishness? Outraged denouncements started appearing in the papers, each adding another few weeks to the movie's wildly successful run.

The effect on a boy my age was predictable: I was desperate to see the film. Whispers about its sensational scenes whipped me into a frenzy. I'd been raised on Hindi movies, where bosoms were always safely (if provocatively) packed into blouses, and even Helen the vamp danced with a flesh-colored cloth covering her midriff. Just once, I wanted to gaze at the female body in its natural state—as, apparently, did crowds of my repressed fellow countrymen.

Because *Chetna* was rated "A," for adults only, it meant I couldn't get in until I was 18. This A rating became essential advertising for the spate of *Chetna* knockoffs that followed. In the posters scantily clad actresses were shown draped over outsize, luridly colored letter As, leaning seductively against a side, straddling the central stroke. Each time I glanced at a film poster, it seemed, an A jumped out to taunt me.

At 14, when *Chetna* was rereleased, I decided I couldn't wait any longer. I stuffed pads of cardboard into my shoes and smudged my mother's eyebrow pencil over my upper lip to give the illusion of stubble. I put on a pair of sunglasses for good measure. Then, trying not to wobble on my uncomfortable pads, I set out for my tryst with Rehana.

The ticket collector waved me in, without the slightest interest in the pains I'd taken with my getup. Rehana came on, nude on the bed as promised, but her long black tresses cascaded over her breasts, meeting up at the waist to obscure everything below as well. I left the theater feeling cheated, disillusioned. The next day at school, however, I was a hero for venturing beyond the A sign. In the smoldering version I related to my classmates, Rehana exposed every inch.

A year later came *Gupt Gyan,* in which the censors did permit everything to be revealed. But it was a sex education film, and body parts were bared to exhibit venereal diseases. Still, it didn't matter—wide-eyed audiences flocked to ogle anyway. I sneaked in as well, and the experience was traumatic. Although very much a virgin, I checked myself for weeks afterward to make sure I hadn't contracted anything.

It wasn't until 1978 that India got a glimpse of disease-free near nudity on the Bollywood screen. The movie was *Satyam Shivam Sundaram,* and director Raj Kapoor not only took advantage of the relaxation on the ban on kissing but also kept drenching his heroine, so that

***Spill*, a 2007 sculpture by Subodh Gupta**

little beneath her sari was left to the imagination. The reaction was fierce: Groups of housewives banded together to denounce the movie for exploiting women. The film was not a hit.

Three decades later Indian sensibilities can be as inflammable as ever. Last year playful kisses Richard Gere planted on the cheek of Indian actress Shilpa Shetty at an AIDS awareness event resulted in widespread protests and arrest warrants for both on charges of public obscenity (later dismissed). Although reactions such as these are politically engineered, many Indians took genuine offense. And yet the country is no longer the pressure cooker of repressed curiosity it was once. Since VCRs came on the scene, the availability of uncensored Hollywood films on video has provided a safety valve. DVDs, satellite TV, and the Internet have further broadened this access.

While the younger middle class may be quite progressive, conservative sections of society remain. It is to the latter that the censor board still caters. Although Bollywood is allowed to tackle bolder themes, scenes of sex and nudity are trimmed as ruthlessly as before. Perhaps this is the way to keep everyone happy—no questions asked about what's on home TVs or computers, as long as it's not available in public. In India, today's confrontation gives rise to tomorrow's unspoken accommodation, as always.

MANIL SURI *is the author of* The Death of Vishnu, *a PEN/Faulkner Award finalist. His latest novel is* The Age of Shiva.

Syed Haider Raza's *Bindu Rajasthan*, 2005

DIPLOMACY

Friends and Rivals

It has become commonplace to describe the future of the world as belonging to China and India—Chindia, as the ugly neologism would have it. Both economies are roaring along, of course, with China hitting double-digit growth rates and India reaching the high single digits. It is widely assumed that in just a few decades China will overtake the United States as the world's largest economy with India likely to follow by 2050.

But if 21st-century economic interests have supplanted traditional geopolitics as the primary driver of foreign policy, then somebody forgot to tell China and India. The two nations are in the midst of ambitious, multibillion-dollar military modernizations, with implications that stretch across the globe.

Although Beijing and New Delhi have strengthened ties in recent years, the neighbors have long had an awkward, at times tense, relationship, going back to a bitter war in 1962 over still-unresolved territorial disputes along their 2,500-mile border. China's aiding of Pakistan's nuclear and missile capabilities continues to chafe India, and to be sure, China hasn't forgotten the slip of the tongue by the Indian defense minister who said the chief aim of the country's 1998 nuclear weapons tests was, in fact, to deter China.

Since then India has become America's newest best friend. Partly as a way to counterbalance China, the Bush administration has actively sponsored India's rise and pursued close military relations with New Delhi. Last year battleships from India, the United States, Japan, Singapore, and Australia conducted one of the largest peacetime naval exercises in history. Operation Overlord it was not, though China might have been forgiven for thinking otherwise. The five days of war games in the Bay of Bengal, dubbed Exercise Malabar, sparked noisy protests from India's Communists. China, which had been invited to participate but declined, said nothing.

It was a telling moment between India and China. Neither wants war with the other. But as

SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

Like a Prayer

A FEW YEARS AGO MY AUNT Chandra sold her house to move closer to the Sri Meenakshi Temple in Pearland, Texas. Her face time with the Hindu deities, she boasted, now rivaled that of the priests themselves. When my cousin Romi* announced she was having twins, Aunt Chandra did what many religious Hindu moms do when faced with a pregnant daughter: log on to the Internet and make an appeal to Lord Vishnu, using her Platinum MasterCard.

"Which one do you think I should choose for Romi?" she asked me over the phone. She was on a site called ePrarthana.com, billed as the Divine Link. It allows Hindus around the world to offer—for a fee—prayers at more than 2,000 temples in India with just a few clicks of the mouse. "Two hundred eighty-nine temples to my dear Vishnu *bhagwan*!" my aunt declared, sounding deeply gratified. And the choice! There was Ganesha, the elephant-headed god and remover of obstacles (144 temples). And Shiva, the fierce destroyer of evil (662 temples).

Brushing aside my nitpicking about God's being present everywhere, Aunt Chandra decided on a *puja*—an offering with special prayers—for Romi. She was torn between the *puja* "for your righteous wishes to come true" and the more specific *puja* "for problems in pregnancy and for a normal delivery."

"The choice is clear," I said.

"But Romi's had no problems so far," my aunt countered. Then after a pause: "I want her to have a girl and a boy. Then she can be done!" She finally decided on both. Total cost: $18. Maximizing her blessings: Priceless.

For good measure she also went to Prarthana.com (*prarthana* means "prayer") to order another *puja* at the temple of Guruvayur in Kerala, famous for many miracles. "Romi needs all the help she can get!" she said. True believers know that the idol of Vishnu in Guruvayur—rumored to be 5,000 years old—has healing powers par excellence, a veritable Lourdes for Hindus.

After we said goodbye, I couldn't stop imagining men and women in dusty Indian villages bounding off to temples on Aunt Chandra's behalf, making sure the priest said Romi's name loud enough for Vishnu to hear. Several months later Romi called. Her labor had been easy. "I had twin boys," she said. "Mom's a little disappointed."

MEERA NAIR *is the author of* Video, *a collection of short stories.*

**Characters are fictional composites of real people.*

Bill Emmott notes in his absorbing new book, *Rivals,* conflict between China and its neighbors "is not inevitable, but nor is it inconceivable."

Even if, in the interest of politeness, neither would admit to it, India and China seem to be preparing for the worst while hoping for the best. It is hard to interpret their movements any other way. China is now building a "blue water" navy to rival that of India. The latter already has two aircraft carriers and is on course to have at least three by 2020. China's first carrier should be ready by 2015. Both countries, particularly China, are developing space-based military capabilities.

In addition, China is establishing a "string of pearls" around the Indian Ocean—naval ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, all India's neighbors and some, like Pakistan, openly antagonistic. China says the ports are peaceful in design, but some Indians see them as "forward bases," part of a Chinese strategy of encirclement.

India is leaving nothing to chance. Whereas New Delhi might once have accepted China's explanation or simply pretended it wasn't happening, 21st-century India is a much more hard-nosed operator. It has set about building closer ties with China's most neurotic neighbors, particularly Japan and key members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. But India's most significant step has been its move closer to the United States, even calling the two countries "natural allies"—words Gandhi and Nehru, who viewed Americans as neocolonialists, could never have uttered.

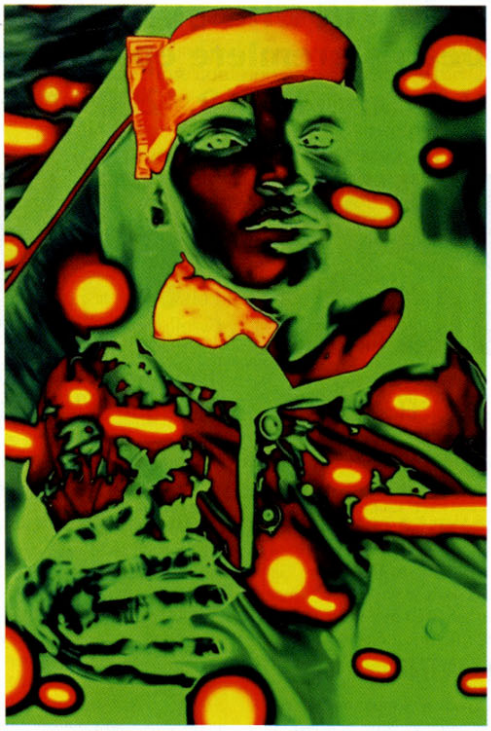
Were it not for India's Communist parties, which prop up Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's waning coalition government and are motivated as much by Americaphobia as by Sinophilia, New Delhi would have already implemented its historic 2005 civil nuclear agreement with the United States. The deal would allow access to nuclear fuel technology India wants to feed its fast-growing, energy-guzzling economy. It would also, at least implicitly, shore up India's nuclear weapons capability.

The agreement has the necessary support in India and may be approved by the U.S. Congress this fall. But even if the deal sinks into the Bay of Bengal, the ships overhead will be conducting ever more elaborate naval maneuvers. The next Exercise Malabar is scheduled for 2009. By then China will be another year closer to completing its string of pearls.

EDWARD LUCE, *the Washington, D.C., bureau chief for the* Financial Times, *is the author of* In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India.

CONFLICT

***"Throughout the** winter of 1990 millions took to the roads in Kashmir, protesting the Indian government and chanting slogans for freedom. I did nothing else. It really seemed like—we were so naïve—it would happen tomorrow. There were images at the time of the Berlin Wall falling. But the crackdown was brutal, and there were all these military camps and torture centers. Thirty to forty people were shot every day. Teenage boys left home and crossed the border to get guns. That's how the deadly conflict started. Now the levels of violence have come down. The desire for an independent Kashmir remains, but people are tired. The dominant element is resignation."* —**BASHARAT PEER**'s memoir about the Kashmir conflict, *Curfewed Night,* will be published next year.



T. V. Santhosh's *Scars, Scars, Scars!*, 2007

DEPT. OF TRANSPORT

Riding the Rails

It would be unfair to say that when I ride on India's railways I put my life in their hands. It would be fair to say that I put my time in their hands. I never know when I'll get to my destination, but I know I will eventually. This is the miracle of Indian trains, which travel, sometimes for more than a thousand miles, through a land that has been described as "functioning anarchy."

For passengers the anarchy starts at the station. I always advise hiring one of the red-shirted porters milling around the entrance. With baggage perched precariously on his head and festooning his shoulders, the porter will guide you through the stygian gloom of an ill-lit station. He'll keep at bay beggars and shoeshine boys who soil your footwear and then suggest you clean it. The porter also ensures you'll reach the place on the platform where your coach will stop when the train eventually arrives. As Indian trains can be more than a third of a mile long, that is rather important.

While waiting, travelers are reminded that they have lost control of their time by broadcasts of the dismal litany of delays, punctuated by the meaningless "Inconvenience is regretted." Everyone in India has a story about being pleasantly surprised by the timely arrival of a train, only to be told that it is yesterday's train running 24 hours late.

Once you're under way, unscheduled halts are common and can be inordinately long. Frustration is heightened by the difficulty in finding out what is wrong. There are no official announcements, so

rumors abound. A few years ago, when my train stopped between Agra and Jhansi, in central India, I was told we'd halted because the line had been punctured, which turned out to mean a rail had cracked. Some trains make such long stops that they are actually described as lost.

The railways are run by the government, and there's nothing Indian bureaucrats like more than complication. There are a bewildering number of classes of carriages and types of trains, from the very slow Passenger at the bottom to the Super-Fast at the top. By today's standards "super-fast" is a bit of an exaggeration. Once when I complained to a ticket inspector that my Super-Fast express seemed to be a slow train, he replied aggressively. "No sir. This is a Super-Fast train. It is only going slow."

The slower a train goes and the more time that is lost to delays, the greater the camaraderie between passengers. Barriers break down. I once found myself in the middle of a lively discussion between a Muslim woman (who took off her burka when she boarded), an elderly Hindu nationalist politician, and a student who had no patience for politics.

I firmly believe that anyone who never takes an Indian train fails to arrive in the real India. The key is to forget time, relax, and enjoy the opportunities to experience the unusual. I learned this lesson on a complicated journey involving several changes. At my first change I was told by a railwayman that my connection was "indefinitely delayed."

"You mean it's lost," I said angrily.

"You could say so," he replied politely. "But do not be so concerned, sir. There is another train which was lost and we have found it."

I caught that one and, sure enough, arrived at my destination on time.

MARK TULLY *is the author of* India's Unending Journey, *out in paperback this month.*

THE UNDERCLASS

Man vs. Machine

"As men we have to earn to live and feed our families," says Sukhdeo Rai, one of some 18,000 Calcutta peasants who still labor pulling rickshaws the old way—by hand. "We rickshaw wallahs do not steal. We are honest. We earn and we send money home."

Even in this city of intense poverty the rickshaw wallahs are marginal citizens, most from the poorest states—Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand. In India's social caste system, they belong to the lowliest strata. Here in Calcutta they ply India's last 6,000 licensed "man-drawn" rickshaws. But Sukhdeo Rai and his brethren are fighting for their livelihoods.

Already under pressure in an increasingly affluent petroleum-fueled economy, the rickshaw wallahs face another threat: West Bengal's Marxist government has amended licensing rules in an attempt to abolish the hand-pulled rickshaws on the grounds that they are inhuman. Moreover, the rickshaws are seen as clashing with efforts to modernize a city that has proudly but undeniably languished in squalor.

Since 1914, when the Chinese introduced their version of the original Japanese *jinrikisha*s, men from Calcutta's hinterland have traveled to the city of fables, in search of the gold that their forebears once said paved the streets. Three generations of some families have worked pulling rickshaws, living in makeshift garages called *dera*s. Most wallahs don't own their vehicle; they lease it from a middleman, who in turn rents it from the owner.

***Somnium Genero-Incitatio,* a 2007 painting by the duo Thukral and Tagra**

Rai, who is in his early thirties, says he dropped out of school after eight years and left his village in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district (as famous for its poverty, lawlessness, and caste politics as it is for the most luscious lychees in India) to drive a taxi in Calcutta. But after seven years of unpredictable, occasionally violent passengers and "being treated like a dog" by every traffic policeman on the lookout for extra cash, he traded in his driver's license for a license to pull rickshaws. Now, out of a daily income of three or four dollars, he sends half home. With the rest he rents the vehicle and the room he shares with four others and pays for food and occasional entertainment.

Despite the new regulations, Rai believes he will be able to carry on for several more years. "We have been barred from the big roads, where the motorized rickshaws operate," he says. "Eventually we will be barred from the inner roads."

Abolishing hand-pulled rickshaws is not going to be easy. The wallahs and owners have banded together under the All Bengal Rickshaw Pullers Union to fight, and the dispute is now in the Calcutta High Court. They have found sympathy for their cause among intellectuals as well as the customers who rely on them.

These customers, especially those in areas prone to flooding during the monsoons (when motor vehicles can be rendered useless), argue that the hand-pulled rickshaw fulfills a need. For women with children and for some elderly, it is an ideal mode of transport, as it is for small retailers, who use it as a cart for goods. Proponents have also put forth compelling environmental arguments, noting that hand-pulled rickshaws emit none of the eye-watering fumes spewed by autorickshaws, taxis, and buses.

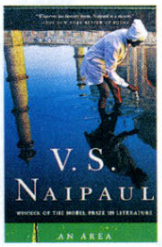
Whatever happens, Sukhdeo Rai knows the sectors that matter in India's growth story have no place for the millions like him. All he wants is the opportunity to work so he can educate his sons, and "if fate is kind," he says, "they will come to Calcutta and find employment—as a security guard or in some office."

SHIKHA MUKERJEE, *a former political editor of* The Times of India, *is now a freelance journalist and heads the Paul Foundation in Calcutta.*

BOOKS

Essential Reading

India, with its many languages, religions, and ethnic communities, is more diverse than even Europe. It defies easy generalization: Whatever you say about India is probably true, but so is its opposite. No nonfiction account can hope to do more than capture a slice of its life. Roving across imagined landscapes, fiction has more scope. But the novelistic imagination still has to compete with the overwhelming reality of India. Not surprisingly, the country has not only attracted some of the world's finest artists and intellectuals but has also produced many of them. The following recommendations are a necessarily arbitrary selection—no Salman Rushdie, no Rohinton Mistry, no Kiran Desai—from a wide and deep reservoir of literature on India over the last century.



AN AREA OF DARKNESS

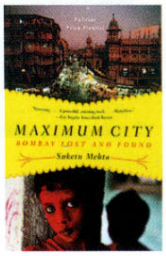
By V. S. Naipaul (1964)

In 1962 the Trinidadian-born writer Naipaul first traveled to the land of his ancestors, and this account of poverty-stricken India is fierce, unsparingly blaming the caste system and preoccupation with religion for the country's backwardness. Naipaul's mood has since softened (see his 1990 *India: A Million Mutinies Now*), and his rage seems a bit extreme today. Despite—or perhaps because of—its overt neurosis, the book immediately strikes one as a masterpiece, illuminated by the intensity and beauty of Naipaul's perceptions.

SWAMI AND FRIENDS

By R. K. Narayan (1935)

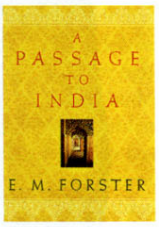
This novel by one of the country's greatest writers in English first described a small town in south India—Malgudi—which for generations of Indian readers became as recognizable a terrain of human striving as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County was to Americans. Narayan steadily populated Malgudi in novels over the next four decades. The schoolboy Swami and his friends were easily the happiest of his characters, and the novel reads today as nostalgic testament to a more leisurely time, the small-town innocence and idealism of India in the thirties.



MAXIMUM CITY: BOMBAY LOST AND FOUND

By Suketu Mehta (2005)

With nearly 18 million people (almost the entire population of Australia) crowded into bustling Mumbai, India's first modern metropolis mocks all human notions of a civilized urban existence. Hanging out with criminals, politicians, Bollywood stars, and businessmen over a couple of years, Mehta produced an epic of observation and detail. No book matches its meticulous account of the vulgar vitality as well as the costs—social and environmental—of "rising" India.



A PASSAGE TO INDIA

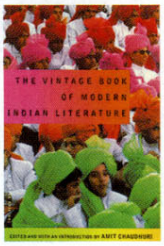
By E. M. Forster (1924)

The British legacy in India—the English language, cricket, the cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Bangalore—is inescapable even today. But few enduring human relationships between the rulers and the ruled were formed. This emotional deficiency is the famous theme of Forster's novel, which also expressed a longstanding Western interest in Indian spirituality. Exploring the attractions of Hinduism and Islam, Forster became one of the first countercultural figures of the modern era—presaging Allen Ginsberg and the Beatles—who sought in India escape from the pressures of the modern world.

THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA

By Jawaharlal Nehru (1946)

Possessed of a resonant prose style, independent India's first prime minister was also a writer of stirring history. In this book he outlined, with an elegant brevity comparable to H. G. Wells's in *A Short History of the World*, the history of India over several millennia: from the first-known classical civilizations of the Indus Valley through the emergence of Hindu religions and Buddhism, the arrival of Islam and the British, and up to the modern era.



THE VINTAGE BOOK OF MODERN INDIAN LITERATURE

Edited by Amit Chaudhuri (2004) This anthology attests to the extraordinary richness of Indian literature in languages other than English. Many of the writers are barely known in the West, thanks to inadequate translation. All forms—the poem, novel, short story, and essay—are represented from nearly every region of India, introduced by one of the country's finest critical minds today.

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

By Arundhati Roy (1997)

The author of this beautiful, Booker Prize–winning novel set in the South Indian state of Kerala has become well known for her fiercely held opinions on globalization. But there is no polemic in this story, which evokes, with its quicksilver imagery, a world of pure emotion: the frail hopes of childhood, the brutality of power, the glory of love, and the tragic inevitability of heartbreak.

PANKAJ MISHRA *is the author of four books, including* The Romantics: A Novel.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

The Dalai Lama Lives Here

Red-cheeked, with turquoise in his ears and around his neck, thick hair falling down his back, a refugee from eastern Tibet walks to the front of the rickety KhanaNirvana café and delivers a haunting, full-throated rendition of a traditional song from the Himalayan plateau. As soon as he's through, a fellow nomad from Tibet's Amdo Province gets up—it's the regular Monday open-mike night—and belts out a perfect a cappella version of "Hotel California." An Israeli girl goes next, performing a song in Hebrew. Danish drummers, Russian folksingers, a Japanese mother of two share offerings from their own cultures, while Buddhist monks, New York psychologists, and dreadlocked Swedes munch on vegan specialties. The brightly colored room could be in New Mexico.

In truth, it's in the dusty, British-built settlement of Dharamsala, under 15,000-foot Himalayan snowcaps and five hours from the nearest reliable airport. And yet, here at KhanaNirvana, all the globe's villagers assemble—for Shabbat services on Fridays, talks by former Tibetan political prisoners on Sundays, and occasional screenings of documentaries.

When we speak of globalism in India today, it's usually about glittery fashion shows in Mumbai, high-rising suburbs around Delhi, international brands like Oberoi Hotels and Jet Airways, or (too often) call centers in Bangalore, where Indians identifying themselves as Brad and Jen answer your needs regarding that flight to Sheboygan. Yet every time I fly into Delhi and take the wonky combination of overnight train or plane plus a long, long taxi ride up to Dharamsala, I am reminded that there is a different kind of globalism at play in India, having to do with what is old and what is invisible.

Dharamsala proper is an everyday town about 300 miles north of Delhi, sheltered in the mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh. But the Dharamsala that the world seeks out is a cluster of crooked, unpaved roads a few miles up from the town, in what is called McLeod Ganj (a perfectly mongrel name that mixes the memory of a 19th-century lieutenant governor of Punjab with a Hindi word for "neighborhood"). The British alighted on the area 150 years ago as a refuge from summer heat, building cottages with names like Ivanhoe and Eagle's Nest. Lord Elgin, famous for carting off the Parthenon marbles, rests eternally amid the pines around the Church of St. John in the Wilderness.

Jagannath Panda's *Democracy in the Neighborhood*, 2006

For the past half century, this bumpy encampment has also been home to Tibet's government-in-exile. Emptied out by an earthquake in 1905 and having lost most of its population with Partition in 1947, Dharamsala was a forgotten place when Prime Minister Nehru offered it to the 14th Dalai Lama and his people after they fled Tibet in 1959. Today it's the closest thing there is to a living incarnation of the Tibet long known as the Forbidden Kingdom.

Whenever I go—I first visited the Dalai Lama in his yellow cottage at the end of Temple Road in 1974 and have spent three of the past five springs staying across the street—I feel as if I'm seeing a globalism that is rooted in the heart, the imagination, and the conscience. On one side of town is Namgyal Monastery, where monks practice debating and celebrate rites as if still in the Potala Palace in Lhasa; on the other is a Hindu temple and the Third I restaurant, which offers "Origenal [sic] Tibetan, Israeli, Indian, Chinese, continental, pizza" as well as "Marmite/Vegemite toast" and mocha shakes. Signs along alleyways announce DREAMLAND and LOST HORIZON, and flyers invite you to a Shiva Full Moon Party. At certain times of year half the population of Upper Dharamsala consists of young Israelis who, having finished their obligatory military service, come in search of cheap lodgings, easy drugs, and a free-floating sense of community.

In a curious way, the pell-mell internationalism honors the area's ancient history: Inscriptions from around 2,000 years ago mentioning a Buddhist monastery were found in Kangra Valley below, and when the Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang passed through, 635 years after the birth of Christ, he reported seeing 50 monasteries and 2,000 monks. The name Dharamsala means "a place of shelter," usually for pilgrims.

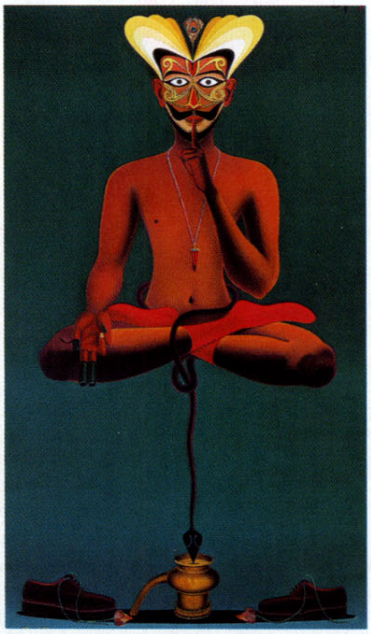
In losing his home, the Dalai Lama wrote recently, he gained a new and more inclusive home in almost every corner of the world. "Our greatest mistake, our

worst mistake of old Tibet," he once told me during the series of conversations we've been conducting for more than three decades, was being too isolated. Now when he offers a two-week series of teachings every late winter, as many as 8,000 people crowd into the courtyard outside his home, listening through earphones to translated versions of his explications of ancient texts. Tibetans from around the world gather for these talks, along with Mongolians (longtime followers of Tibetan Buddhism) and, increasingly, visitors from Osaka and Seoul and Beijing. But there are also students from Atlanta and attorneys from Los Angeles, faces you recognize from Hollywood blockbusters, and honeymooners from newly affluent Delhi, sitting through days of rain and security checks.

Step into Chonor House, the elegant inn run by the Tibetan government-in-exile, and you're likely to bump into editors from *Vogue*, UN workers from Romania, and Nobel Prize–winning scientists, all here to offer their services to the Tibetan cause. It's not hard to recall that the Dalai Lama, born in a cowshed in one of the remotest places on earth, has become one of the most persuasive champions of connectedness, interfaith dialogue, and globalism.

The first thing I notice when I go into a place like the KhanaNirvana café is how Tibetans are singing "Californication," while bearded hippies from Woodstock respond with songs about bodhisattvas and the dharma. The second is that if you close your eyes, you can't always tell where people are from. At its best, Dharamsala and other communities like it across India remind us that our ideas of East and West exist only in our heads.

PICO IYER *is the author of numerous books. His latest,* The Open Road, *chronicles 30 years of conversations and travels with the Dalai Lama.*



***Mephistopheles...Otherwise, the Quaquaversal Prolix*, 2003, by Surendran Nair**

SPORT

Cricket Goes Prime Time

Just past twilight on May 8, storm clouds gathered over Calcutta and lightning flashed alarmingly as we made our way into the VIP stands at India's largest cricket stadium, Eden Gardens. The crowd of 70,000-plus, paying anywhere from $10 to $150 per ticket, was undeterred as rain pelted down and tarpaulins were quickly spread over the grass. They had come to see the local team, the Kolkata Knight Riders, take on the Royal Challengers Bangalore.

It was the midway point in the inaugural season of the Indian Premier League, or IPL, which plays an abbreviated and explosive version of cricket. Traditionally the game stretches over five days or three days or, at the shortest, a single eight-hour day. In the IPL, matches last just three TV-friendly hours.

These same two teams had met a few weeks earlier in the IPL's historic debut (Calcutta won by a whopping 140 runs), showcasing the league's flashy new style: cheerleaders gyrating in skimpy, dazzling outfits, popular music blaring on the PA system, photogenic Bollywood stars in the stands. Many orthodox observers have derided the IPL as "comic cricket" and a

THE STYLE FILES

Royal Reinvention

WHEN INDIA GAINED independence 60 years ago, all the country's princely states were absorbed into a common dominion. Then, in 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stripped India's royals of their official titles and abolished their privy purses as part of an effort to bolster the economy. Some royals found it impossible to adjust to the new demands (also known as earning a living) and watched their fortunes dissipate. Others reinvented themselves for the new India, where entrepreneurial success is now the ultimate status symbol. Many ventured into high-end hospitality and consulting for luxury brands, basically doing what they do best: showing the rest of us how to live the good life.

"The idea of harnessing royalty for a luxury company is a great opportunity," says Maharaj Raghavendra Rathore—known to his friends as Raghu—the great-grandson of the Maharaja of Jodhpur and one of India's leading fashion designers. "When I launched a line of chocolates, I designed an elaborate gold-embossed box with a regal-looking figure, and there was a great response in the market. If you can repackage it, the idea of royalty can work fantastically."

Rathore's father, Maharaj Swaroop Singh, was among the first to convert his royal residence into a heritage hotel, a means of earning a significant income while preserving some of the outward aspects of the family's legacy. Today Rathore's own collections for his burgeoning lifestyle empire, Rathore Jodhpur, include couture, furniture and design objects, and gourmet foods.

In a country where the luxury market is exploding, a royal association can add undeniable brand prestige. Cartier and Hermès have unveiled lines that seek to tap into the allure of India's royal past. Rathore recognizes that his heritage gives him an authenticity that such companies covet. (His family invented the jodhpur pant, after all.) "In the years to come, there will be a lot of money going toward re-creating the royal era," Rathore said during the World Gold Council's Indian Auditions competition in Mumbai, an event aimed at promoting progressive gold jewelry design. Rathore had been brought in to source jewelers, dress the models, head up the judging, and simply lend his famous face.

Asked what his father would have made of all this, he said, "He was a one-man PR and marketing force for Rajasthan. Back then it looked like we were selling our heritage, and other kids teased me for that. But my dad said, 'Let it go in one ear and out the other, because sooner or later they'll be following in our footsteps.' "

SAMEER REDDY *is a special correspondent for* Newsweek International.

"circus." As an itinerant cricket commentator and chronicler of the game around the world for three and a half decades, I found myself a stranger in this new paradise.

Over the winter a formula for the league had been worked out whereby wealthy Indians and corporations were invited to put together eight teams, each of which would play 14 games in six weeks. Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani, one of the world's richest men, put up $112 million for the team in his native Mumbai. Liquor tycoon Vijay Mallya bankrolled a franchise in his hometown of Bangalore for nearly the same, and film star Shah Rukh Khan paid $75 million for Calcutta's.

The players were then bought in a televised auction. Mahendra Singh Dhoni, the national team's brilliant wicketkeeper (similar to a catcher in baseball), went for the highest price, $1.42 million, to the Chennai Super Kings. The flamboyant and hard-hitting Yuvraj Singh cost the Kings XI Punjab $1.04 million.

These large sums were to be offset by the lucrative TV rights, acquired by Sony Max and World Sport Group for close to a billion dollars. In case there had been any creased foreheads at Sony or WSG, the ratings skyrocketed and laid low even India's most popular soaps and serials. The response at the turnstiles was also way above projections, and sales of shirts, helmets, and other souvenirs have generated millions of dollars.

The rain-delayed match between Bangalore and Calcutta finally got under way just before 10 P.M., meaning it would stretch well past midnight. Still, there was enough color, sound, and razzmatazz to make World Wrestling Entertainment proud. The spectators, mostly young newcomers to the sport, cheered every ball, did the Mexican wave, and danced wildly, emulating their Caribbean counterparts. Their enthusiasm was as much for the beautiful people in the galleries as for their favorite son, Knight Riders captain Sourav Ganguly. Megabucks celebrities were on hand—Shah Rukh Khan and fellow screen star Juhi Chawla for the home side, supermodel Katrina Kaif for the visitors. In the end Calcutta won by a wafer-thin five runs.

But the league's finale, played in Mumbai on June 1, was the ultimate showpiece. The sellout crowd, which paid hefty prices for seats, was treated to a thrilling contest between the Chennai Super Kings and the Rajasthan Royals (the league's least expensive team, assembled by Lachlan Murdoch). The match was decided by the smallest margin in cricket—a single run, with the Royals taking the first-ever IPL title.

During the league's six-week run, there were a few spectacular controversies, including an episode where Mumbai star bowler Harbhajan Singh slapped Punjab bowler Sreesanth after a match. But it was a wonderful tournament for the club coffers, as huge money poured into the game and much more has been promised. Indian cricket has graduated from sport to entertainment. And it will never be the same.

KISHORE BHIMANI *is a television sports commentator and a columnist for* The Statesman *in Calcutta.*

Tyeb Mehta's 1997 painting *Mahisasura* sold for $1.6 million at Christie's in 2005.

THE NEW LOOK

"Contemporary design

in India is in a nascent stage. With the economy doing well, people are investing money in furniture, graphics, fashion, art. It's challenging to create good new design here because it's weighed down by so much history. If you're constructing a building next to a three-hundred-year-old temple, it needs to be at a certain level, and that's something I don't think we've managed to do well—most everything modern has been pretty clumsy so far." —**DIVYA THAKUR** heads the Mumbai firm Design Temple.

NUPTIALS

Modern Love

Hi, I am Ravi itself. I'm a simple-living and high-thinking person with jolly nature. So please marry with me or otherwise your life is on your hand. I myself working for foreign MNC in Noida, and earning well." So went a typical, linguistically mangled message from one of my suitors on Shaadi.com, advertised as the "most preferred online matrimonial site for Indians."

For centuries Indians found spouses through arrangements made by their parents, often seeing each other once or twice before the wedding day. Customs have relaxed, but arranged marriage is alive and well, only the arranging is increasingly done on the Internet. Shaadi.com (*shaadi* is the Urdu word for marriage) is just one of numerous sites—Indiamatrimony.com, Jeevansathi.com (*jeevansathi* means "life partner")—that are revolutionizing the way Indians around the globe meet and marry.

I can't say I was overjoyed at the idea of resorting to Shaadi.com. Born in India, I'd grown up in California and always imagined a love marriage. But I was tired of Western-style dating, not to mention Western-style uncertainty over where relationships were headed. I began to think more about arranged marriage (or at least semiarranged—I couldn't relinquish all choice). I looked at my happily married parents who, 40 years earlier, wed after meeting just once. Perhaps I was missing something.

Having passed 30, I felt my options dwindling. In India, women my age are hardly a prime catch. There are even special Web sites for us "older" singles, such as Thirtyplusshaadi.com. At least I'm not divorced, though there's a site for that undesirable group too, Secondshaadi.com.

My parents, once fairly relaxed about my matrimonial intentions, became fixated on my situation. It was my father who initiated the Shaadi.com experiment, and I was all too happy to let him handle the back end of the process. He uploaded my profile, carefully filling out information on my caste, my astrological sign, my hobbies. I was surprised to learn that I enjoyed shopping and never drank alcohol, which led to some confusion when I suggested meeting a date over a glass of wine.

CONTINUED »

After a few years of deflating dating experiences and some misses on Shaadi.com, I left New York for New Delhi, thinking the rapid modernization sweeping India might lead me to a thoroughly 21st-century Indian man. In Delhi I did meet many young men and women who were poster children for the new India, but most weren't thinking about marriage.

More than half of India's population is under the age of 35 (some estimates run as high as 70 percent), and this generation is in the throes of a sexual revolution not too different from the one America underwent in the sixties. You probably won't find them on Shaadi.com, though they're logging onto Facebook and Orkut just as much as their Western counterparts, if not more so.

Yet while more and more young Indians are dating and insisting on finding their own partners, most—even among progressive urbanites—still favor some form of arranged marriage. According to a 2007 poll conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, nearly three quarters of Indians believe parents should have the final say when it comes to marriage.

Several months after arriving in Delhi, I received an oddly enchanting message from an Indian in his thirties named Manoj—living in Luxembourg, of all places—parodying a letter typical of the ones addressed to my father. When I wrote back, I learned it was actually a very clever Nabokovian message within a message. I was thrilled and asked whether he'd be traveling to Delhi anytime soon. A few weeks later he wrote to say he had met someone—and it was going well. Did I mention I'm unlucky in love?

ANITA JAIN *is the author of* Marrying Anita: A Quest for Love in the New India.

FOOD TRADITIONS

Bloom of Youth

During a recent visit to Calcutta, I was invited to lunch by a woman whose reputation as a Bengali cook made me accept with delighted anticipation. The meal surpassed my expectations, and what stood out above the giant prawns, hilsa fish, and lamb with poppy seeds was her *mochar ghanto*, a fragrant dish of banana blossom, or *mocha*, with tiny cubed potatoes, tinier coconut chips, chickpeas, and spices. A Bengali classic, it can be found year-round in Calcutta, though rarely in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I live now.

Bengali gastronomes consider *mochar ghanto* a true test of a cook because of its mélange of textures—dense, chewy, soft, brittle—and the harmonious melding of spices. It's also a cultural marker, identifying a regional palate, and perhaps a generational one. While my fellow guests avidly consumed every item on the table, there was a teenage girl who screwed up her face when she tasted the banana blossom. After lunch, the girl told me what she loved most was going out with friends and ordering french fries at a fast-food restaurant. Any notion I had about extolling the banana blossom to the young Bengali quickly vanished.

Bananas have been around in India for eons, and the fruit, the blossom, even the pith inside the trunk have long been part of the cuisine. But in Bengal the banana has a special mystique. A 16th-century biography of the Bengali mystic Chaitanya eloquently describes a banana blossom dish prepared for him in the house of a disciple. As a child I loved the story of the beautiful Behula, who sailed downriver in a banana raft all the way to the underworld and rescued her husband from Manasa, the vengeful snake goddess.

Growing up I had little interest in cooking, but I delighted in watching my mother painstakingly prepare *mocha*. The process began with her peeling away the purple layers to reveal the clusters of tiny bananas and the ivory-colored center, which she chopped into small pieces and boiled with salt and tamarind to leach away the bitterness. For her *mochar ghanto* she then heated mustard oil and tossed in bay leaves, whole cumin seeds, and a few slit green chiles. As the fragrance of spices filled the air, the banana blossom was added along with the potatoes, coconut chips, and chickpeas. I often imagined I could give up fish and meat as long as I could have my mother's *mochar ghanto*.

Sometimes I'd save a couple of the discarded purple blossom leaves and pin them together with toothpicks. Under my fingers they were amazingly seductive, soft as silk, smooth as velvet, and their conical shape resembled a boat. In the evening I'd go up to the roof, fill a pail with water, light one of the small oil lamps left over from a Diwali festival, and set it afloat on the leaves. Usually there was enough breeze to create little eddies on which the banana boat tossed gently. I would sit mesmerized, wondering if it would capsize. It never did, though the lamp went out after a while.

CHITRITA BANERJI *is the author of several books on Indian food, most recently* Eating India.

The banana blossom, or *mocha*, is something of a specialty in Bengali cuisine.

MUSIC

He's Not There

Even after four decades of a life in rock and roll, 61-year-old Lou Majaw manages to retain an air of mystery about him. No one seems to know much about his family or personal life or exactly what he's got stashed in the little satchel that's always dangling by his waist when he's onstage. The only thing certain about the silver-maned Majaw, it seems, is what he'll be doing on May 24 next year. It will be the same thing he's done on that date every year since 1972: celebrating Bob Dylan's birthday by pulling on denim hot pants and performing a concert of his hero's songs in Shillong, the capital of the state of Meghalaya, in northeastern India.

Dylan "has opened all the doors to my dreams, to my music," Majaw said between sets at this year's tribute, held in the parish hall of an Anglican church. "I'm doing this to thank him for what he's given to the world—and to me."

A simple white banner above the stage informed the audience of around 50 what they were in for—BOB DYLAN'S BIRTHDAY #67, A CELEBRATION OF POETRY AND SONG. Majaw kicked things off with a swinging version of "Simple Twist of Fate," backed by musicians he's known for more than three decades. Like Dylan's early compositions, the afternoon bubbled along unhurriedly and unpredictably. Between performances by Majaw, a nervous man took the stage to read a poem he'd written, called "Amazing Dylan." Then a quartet of

kids in maroon school blazers sang an impassioned version of "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." It's a melody that's especially loved here in Shillong. In fact, last October 1,730 guitarists gathered at the city's largest stadium to play the Dylan tune in unison in an attempt to break the record for the largest guitar ensemble.

Though their feat has yet to be certified by Guinness World Records (the top spot is still credited to the 1,721 guitarists in Kansas City who strummed out Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" in June 2007), the attempt was an indication of the passion that rock music inspires in India's northeastern states, a mostly mountainous wedge between Bangladesh and Myanmar with China and Bhutan to the north. Classic rock and country blares from radios in vehicles and stores, and it's a proud boast in these parts that every home has a guitar.

Thanks to India's colonial past, Western music has long been familiar in the farthest reaches of the Subcontinent. But the rock-and-roll explosion in this region has its origins at least partly in the Church. Three of the seven northeastern states are predominantly Christian, and the hymns introduced by American Baptists, Welsh Presbyterians, and Catholics from Goa made rock and roll seem familiar when it made its way to the hills in the fifties. Elvis Presley, after all, was essentially doing sped-up church songs.

Today Shillong bills itself as the rock capital of India. On the same day Majaw was performing his Dylan tribute, several hundred spectators gathered across town to attend the Roots Festival tour, a caravan of Israeli, British, and Indian acts performing across the region. Among them was Rewben Mashangva, who plays "Naga folk blues" using traditional instruments such as a *tingtelia* fiddle.

"There is more original material now," says Senti Toy, a musician from nearby Nagaland who is studying for a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at New York University. (Her debut album, *How Many Stories Do You Read on My Face,* was picked by *The Wall Street Journal* as one of the top records of 2007.) "It's an exciting time," Toy adds, "as youths are sparked by their own creativity, unwilling to just mimic" Western musicians.

It's a trend Majaw and his band, Great Society, started in the eighties. Even his annual concerts, Majaw noted, aren't about imitating Dylan—a no-show again this year—but "to sing his songs as I hear them, from my heart."

NARESH FERNANDES *is the editor in chief of* Time Out *magazine in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore.*

WILDLIFE

Saving the Tigers

We stare at the drag marks for a few seconds before Fateh Singh Rathore steps out of the Jeep to examine bloodstained mud. Signaling me to join, he heads off into the scrub, following the trail. We walk barely 50 yards when a low growl stops us in

our tracks. Not 60 feet from us, a tigress crouches, breathing heavily, muzzle red, one paw over the shoulder of a large sambar. We're relieved to find her safe, as the area had been hit by poachers recently. "Let's go," Fateh whispers. "She is not going anywhere for a couple of days."

Here in the heart of India's Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve such sightings were rare when the park was created 35 years ago and Fateh was given charge of it as a junior officer. Back then Ranthambhore had rice and millet fields, was home to thousands of buffalo, cows, and goats, and its skies were routinely black with smoke from forest fires. But with an annual budget of less than $25,000, Fateh and his staff of around 40 nurtured 100 square miles of habitat and expanded the tiger population dramatically. Now Fateh is officially retired, though he lives on a farm at the edge of the reserve and continues to fight for the tiger's survival using a strategy he sums up this way: "Keep humans out and protect the habitat from fire, livestock grazing, and poaching. Let nature do the rest."

Ranthambhore is an unusual success story in India, where tiger populations have declined from around 4,000 in 1990 to fewer than 1,400 today. While poaching remains a major threat (demand for tiger bones, penises, and pelts—which can fetch more than $10,000—is especially strong among wealthy Chinese), the loss of territory from human infringement and industrialization is an even greater danger. Quarries, mines, dams, power plants, highways, and other by-products of India's fast-growing economy threaten virtually every tiger habitat.

But preserving areas such as Ranthambhore, which is also home to leopards, sloth bears, and other species, has taken on a new urgency with rising concerns over climate change. Experts are now exploring strategies to mitigate global warming through the regeneration of forests, and Ranthambhore is being meticulously documented as a case study. By combating climate change through forest renewal, India would reap additional benefits in water security, drought and flood control, soil fertility, and biodiversity, not to mention tourism revenues. As the country's most famous tiger nursery, Ranthambhore attracts almost 150,000 paying visitors each year.

In many ways all this is because of the vision of the late prime minister Indira Gandhi, the tiger's white knight. She banned tiger hunting and ordered the creation of a network of Project Tiger reserves. Today there are 36, up from just nine in 1973.

Not that it has come easy. In fact, Fateh nearly lost his life when a mob of angry villagers ambushed him and left him for dead in retaliation for his refusal to allow them to graze domestic animals in the park or gather firewood to sell. When reminded of the incident a quarter-century later, Fateh shrugs it off. "Threats come with the territory," he says. "I only wish that we did not have to work so hard to protect an irreplaceable heritage."

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CONTINUED »

REFLECTIONS

School Days

One cup is all it takes. Not just any cup, though, a cup of Darjeeling. Black, with lemon, milk, it doesn't matter. It transports me back a quarter of a century to a whitewashed stone building on a hillside near Kurseong, in the Darjeeling district, where I lived with boys in blue blazers, navy-and-light blue ties, gray trousers.

From the balconies of that stone building, I wondered every morning at Kanchenjunga's magnificent snowy peak suspended above the clouds and looked down on lush green tea gardens and hillsides forested with pine trees. Hillsides where leeches slipped under our clothes to unleash a sticky trickle of blood, apparently unstoppable thanks to the enzymes in their saliva. We schoolboys knew this sort of thing, like we knew that the Toy Train, the miniature steam locomotive that chugged its way along the road below the school, had been made in England nearly a century earlier. Even if we didn't know that breakfast porridge could be made of oats instead of semolina. It was Darjeeling, not Scotland.

Cup in my hand, memories flood back: of some of the purest air in the world, of a night sky that teemed with stars because we were nearly 5,000 feet up, miles from any town or light pollution. On holidays, rather than watch television, I read books outdoors, went for walks in mist-shrouded woods, clambered over rocks and waterfalls, watched the sun creep across mountains so close I could almost touch them, then slipped down into Kettle Valley for a swim in the cold, cold mountain spring-fed stream.

Harry Potter's Hogwarts it wasn't, nor an English-style public school for the seriously moneyed. My schoolfellows and I were the sons of doctors, lawyers, and bank managers, who were doing well but not expecting to leave their sons large inheritances. A school, in other words, preparing the next generation of the Indian middle class—the rising, shining, spending class of today. In those days, though, the country wasn't booming. Cars were relics from the fifties or earlier, calculators were expensive, television hadn't reached the hills. India was slower, quieter then, and few places were slower or quieter than our school, Goethals Memorial, named for the first Catholic archbishop of Calcutta, a Belgian. In Bengal yet not in Bengal, Darjeeling district is an anomaly, a Nepali-speaking hill tract ceded to the British by the kings of Sikkim.

The main industry is still tea. Can it be that leaves from the very gardens (as the plantations are called) I tramped through in childhood are in my cup? Can they really be from the acres of neat, waist-high shrubs we tumbled past on our boisterous way to town for bowls of noodles, sticky fruit buns, and tandoori chicken?

I went back a couple of years ago to see what it's like now. The tea gardens are still there, flourishing. The school is there, too, with a few new buildings and the boys in square-cut blazers, ties, and polished black shoes. So are the views down into the deep valley, eagles soaring over the river.

Only it isn't the same. There are over a dozen schools now—nearly one on every corner, in fact—and hordes more boys in new uniforms. Internet and e-mail have replaced days-old cuttings on a notice board and letters to faraway families once a week. The boys today know what's happening out in the wide, wide world, where India is waking to global economic power. Their childhood innocence isn't mine; 21st-century cars climb the narrow, steep roads that were navigable in my day only by Jeep and the rickety school jalopy nicknamed The Rocket because it was anything but.

Momos, steamed dumplings of meat and potato (more potato than meat), eight for a rupee, available on credit round the corner from Tuck Shop. I bet they don't pay that nowadays.

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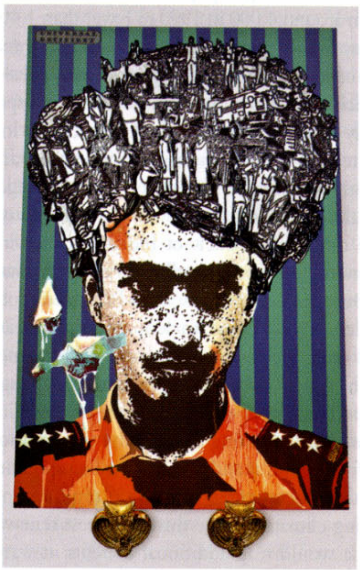

Jitish Kallat's *Universal Recipient 1*, 2008

CUSTOMS AND HABITS

Great Expectorations

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *Midnight's Children,* his magical realist tale of postindependence India, is awash in references to betel chewers, *paan* eaters, and trails of dark-colored sputum. There's even a chapter called "Hit-the-Spittoon," in which a character memorably declares: "Let the walls be splashed with our inaccurate expectorating!"

Paan, a mix of spices and stimulants wrapped in betel leaves, isn't something most foreigners try, put off by fears of red-stained gums and carcinogens. But betel and *paan* are an old and pervasive part of Indian culture. Betel chewing seems to have been widespread in India by 400 B.C. The heart-shaped leaves are a traditional offering to the gods, and in Bengali weddings the bride's eyes are covered with betel leaves until she sees the groom for the first time. *Paan* even turns up in the *Kama Sutra*, which recommends one be eaten to freshen the breath in the morning. Hindustan Latex, the government-run contraceptives maker, actually came up with a *paan*-flavored condom.

Typically the mixture in *paan* contains areca nuts, lime paste, and an extract of acacia wood (tobacco is sometimes added as well). With the betel leaves, these deliver a powerful astringency—hence all the spitting—often balanced with sweeter ingredients like dates, coconut shavings, rose petal jam, and menthol essence.

Some preparations can be seriously weird: Want to try diamond ashes or crushed pearls? Such gimmicky concoctions are dreamed up by *paan* wallahs who make outrageous claims for their creations, such as the "bed-breaker" *paan* (no explanation necessary). While the betel leaves and areca nuts give a mild psychoactive kick, *paan* is primarily used as a digestive, often in its sweeter *meetha paan* form. These are easier to consume, allowing first-timers to avoid the inevitable awkward moment: Spit or swallow?

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THE WAY IT IS

A Tale of Two Indias

Very few countries are as exotic to Americans as India. "Incredible India!" shouts the slogan of the government tourist board. I don't quite believe it, and neither should you.

India gets only 0.5 percent of the world's tourists, even though it has the Taj Mahal and the Himalayas. In 2006 it had 4.5 million visitors, ranking 42nd internationally. Croatia and South Africa attracted almost twice as many travelers. Although India has dramatically improved its airports, hotels, transport, and other aspects of its travel infrastructure, the country still is not particularly tourist-friendly. A big reason is that the poverty is in your face the moment you step out of the airport.

I remember the mother of a French friend of mine who worked for a social service agency in a suburb of Paris. When she flew to Bombay for the first time, she was accosted by a horde of street children at the airport. Overcome by their youth, their destitution, she opened her bags right there on the sidewalk. Within minutes her bags were picked clean.

The first time you travel to India you should, if you have a social conscience, be affronted. Outrage is also okay. Not just because of the poverty visible all around you but also because the rich live so well in the midst of the poor. The rich live well *because* of the poor—outside every high-rise apartment building is a colony of maids, electricians, launderers, drivers, babysitters, cooks. Your hotel will have a similar encampment from which it draws the staff that caters to your every whim. Just notice the number of waiters who flock to your table when you need something; all you have to do is raise your head and someone will appear. There are always three people for every job.

You will feel like shit, frankly, staying in sybaritic opulence when just outside your hotel is squalor. While sipping your $20 cocktail at one of the swanky new bars, you might convert the price to rupees and figure out that it's equal to a month's salary for many Indians. You will feel even worse when your hotel Mercedes passes people sleeping on the sidewalk, when beggars thrust their maimed and deformed children at you. I felt ashamed and guilty when I returned to Bombay to live—and I was born there.

The country has achieved an enormous amount in the 60 years since independence: It's accomplished the greatest transfer of political power in history, from a small elite to the vast majority of its one billion people. But the political power-sharing has not been matched by a sharing of the economic spoils. Four of the ten richest people on the Forbes World's Billionaires list this year are Indian; close to 87,000 Indian farmers committed suicide between 2001 and 2005 because they couldn't pay their debts.

He Is Not My Enemy, 2004, by Ashim Purkayastha

As a thinking, feeling human being, how do you deal with this disconnect? You could argue that the money you spend trickles down. After all, every hotel employs an army of attendants, clerks, and guards, each of whom gets some small share of the several hundred dollars a night you pay for your room, and most of them support extended families with it. India needs your tourist dollars, the rich as well as the poor.

And you could give money. Not to the beggars who parade their babies—although, what the hell, if you gave them 50 rupees it wouldn't be the end of the world. You could give money to any of the hundreds of organizations trying to make life better for the poor. Or you could give your time and your sweat. Some tourists volunteer at Mother Teresa's hospices for the poor in Calcutta. Others go to places like Bhopal, to work at the Sambhavna Trust Clinic, which provides medical services to the survivors of the 1984 corporate massacre known as the Union Carbide gas leak.

Unless you commit to several months or years, you are not going to be able to do much good for the clients of the NGOs you're working with. But it's okay; you're making an effort, and it's a beginning.

Most Americans travel within an America in India: the five-star hotel, the air-conditioned car, the staged cultural show. Do what Bill Clinton sometimes did—get out of your car and wade into the crowd. If you're shocked by the poverty, your shock should lead you to try to understand the roots of the poverty. Understand what colonialism, the caste system, religious strife, globalization, and corruption have done to create a nation that has 400 million citizens who are illiterate but also the world's third-largest pool of scientists; where levels of malnutrition are greater than sub-Saharan Africa's yet the economy will likely overtake America's by the middle of the century. The greatest gift you can give India is to understand its complexity—before trying to do something about it.

Go ahead, meet the poor directly. They won't harm you. Unlike, say, in Brazil or South Africa, poverty in India is not associated with violent street crime, muggings, carjackings. You can take a prearranged tour of the slums in Bombay or Delhi, mostly led by non-Indians who cater to tourists eager to know a more authentic India. Or save your dollars—it's the easiest thing in the world to see the slums. Just ask a waiter or a doorman or a taxi driver to take you to his home. It's there you will discover an India you can believe in. ■

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