

The dull rain of tragedy

How Western ideas ignore India's overwhelming reality, which is poverty

India is one of the poorest countries in the world; but it is also inhabited by very many rich people, to whom, such are Indian disparities, the destitution of India often comes as news. It was so to Jawaharlal Nehru, when in 1920 he visited a peasant revolt very close to his home town in North India, still one of the poorest regions in the country. Nehru, educated at Harrow and Cambridge, had then spent twenty of his thirty-one years in India. Decades later, he wrote of his "revelation": "I was filled with shame and sorrow, shame at my own easy-going and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city which ignored this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India, sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India . . . my mental picture of India always contains this naked hungry mass."

Nehru was to retain that picture, but as Siddarth Dube points out in his book, *In the Land of Poverty*, he couldn't do much to alleviate it after he became Prime Minister, and officially assumed the "frightening responsibility" he had felt on that first encounter with poverty. As things turned out, Nehru's party, the Congress, ruled North India for most of its first fifty years of independence and did most, even as it parroted the slogans of socialism, to prevent an equitable redistribution of the land that the British had entrusted to a handful of large landowners. At every step, Nehru found himself thwarted by well-entrenched feudal members of his own party. Indeed, few of his successors were even as well intentioned as him; his daughter, Indira Gandhi, assumed power on the promise of removing poverty, and created a venal personal coterie out of the very same feudal Congressmen.

Dube's book attempts to be both a personal memoir and an analysis of this greatest failure of modern India. The various land-reform and poverty-alleviation programmes are described from the perspective of Ram Dass, the head of a low-caste, "untouchable" family in North India. Dube interviewed Ram Dass and his family at some length; made them talk about the changes, or the lack of them, in their lives: Oscar Lewis's ethnographic classic, *The Children of Sánchez*, was obviously a model here. In separate chapters, Dube interposes his own diagnoses and provides statistics. Something of a narrative emerges from these first-person accounts and analyses; the reader learns to understand the various ways in which Ram Dass's life intersects with larger events in India. The extremely deprived years in the village, the migration to, and return from, the metropolises, the hard years as factory-worker and tiller, the hunger and misery, the infant deaths, the big and small blows – Dube has managed to put in a bit of everything, and the result is that this short book often seems cursory. At one point Ram Dass mentions a visit to the Prince of Wales museum in Bombay – a respite from his hard and mean life in the slums – where he was captivated, more than anything else, by Gandharan statues of the Buddha. But Dube moves on; he doesn't ask imaginative questions: what was it about Indo-Hellenic sculpture that attracted a peasant from North India? Yet Ram Dass's stories are heartrending, despite the fact neither he nor his translator seek to manipulate their audience; it is their simplicity that is so devastatingly effective. Here is Ram Dass, for

PANKAJ MISHRA

Siddarth Dube

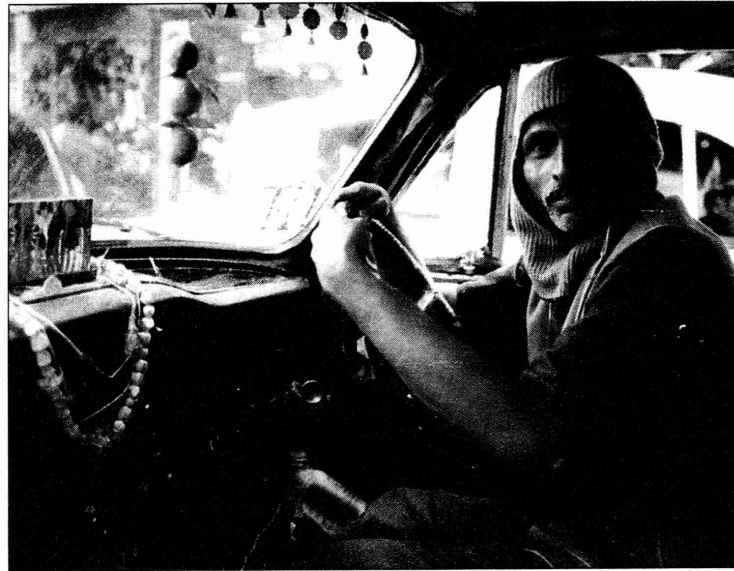
IN THE LAND OF POVERTY
Memoirs of an Indian family 1947–97
234pp. Zed. £45 (paperback, £14.95).
1 85649 597 3

Human Rights Watch

BROKEN PEOPLE
Caste violence against India's "untouchables"
289pp. Human Rights Watch. Paperback, £12.95.
1 56432 228 9

instance, talking about life in his village at the time of independence:

We would have only one piece of cloth. We wore it until it disintegrated . . . And in the winter nights we would wrap rice stalks in old discarded clothes, and then hide under that.



A taxi driver; from *Sacred India*, photographs by Richard L'Anson
(176pp. Lonely Planet. £19.99. 0 88450 0638)

What did we know what a quilt was? We didn't even know what shoes were. Only at the time of marriage the bridegroom might have got a pair of shoes which at his death would be given away to the barber or some other person. This pair of shoes would have to last from your wedding until your death.

Here he remembers the death of five members of his family in just one month:

First my son died. I was here in Bombay. And so I went home to the village and then I saw that my uncle and others had died. We had no land at that time, we worked as labourers. There we laboured and here we laboured. All of them there – my wife, my father and mother, my sisters – they all worked.

These first-person accounts have such a flat affectless tone to them that you suspect, momen-

arily at least, that the emotions were lost in translation. But it is rather that the steady and dull rain of tragedies has left no time for remembrance and grief. The past is retrieved only because it is of value to the visiting anthropologist. And here one wishes Dube had been more transparent about his methods and his relationship with his subject; he keeps himself scrupulously in the background, but we would like to know more about just how a Western-educated, obviously affluent Indian got to know an untouchable rural family so intimately. There is another narrative here, one of delicate negotiations and compromises, which Dube never really tried to coax out, which could have lent his book more authority.

Even as a broad, not particularly well-organized account of a poor low-caste family's fortunes, *In the Land of Poverty* remains compelling. Dube underlines a basic problem: that the hierarchies of power in rural India are so fixed that all social and economic engineering from above ends up benefiting the already privileged. For instance, a populist scheme proposed by Rajiv Gandhi as late as the 1980s called for

Shrinath's own young son has been even better educated – he was the first low-caste student from his village to acquire a bachelor's degree. The family is far from being secure, socially and economically; but in a province where 60 per cent of the population is illiterate, these little advances add up to an achievement of sorts.

There is another kind of advance which is less easily discernible. Western Indophiles and spiritual seekers have sometimes claimed that poverty deepens and enriches Indians, that it endows them with a special humility unavailable in the affluent West. The idea, first formulated in the counter-cultural 1960s, is part of the lingering romance of India in the West. It acquired new respectability in the figure of Mother Teresa, who managed to exalt both poverty and death while preaching the faith to the poor and the sick. But it is a notion that doesn't survive direct experience of the dehumanizing effect of poverty, the psychological wounds and the crippling mentality of subjection it causes, a subjection that is diminished only when people oppressed for generations begin to awaken to ideas of individual dignity and human rights. This has at last happened with Ram Dass and his fellow caste members. Education and travel have made them less vulnerable to their upper-caste neighbours; they are more likely to stand up against the cruelty and injustice they meekly accepted as their fate in the past.

Their new assertiveness and self-awareness are part of the general change of attitude among low castes in India, and they have led to the expected backlash from the rich upper castes. Much of the Human Rights Watch report on caste violence in India documents the systematic murder of landless low-caste peasants in Central Bihar, where once the Buddha had his great awakening, and which is now the poorest, most violent state in India. The routine massacres of scores of landless peasants by mercenaries hired by upper-caste landlords; the rape of low-caste women (at an average of one every seven hours); the private armies of feudal lords, the crime empires run by coal mafia dons; the sale of medical and engineering degrees; the "booth-capturing" during elections; the blinding of prisoners; the cruel medieval justice of Communist-run "people's courts"; the antics of Bihar's leading politician currently accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the state treasury; the extremes of destitution that have created a nomadic group of rat-eaters; the brutal government-aided suppression of tribal peoples in mineral-rich areas; the periodic famines and starvation deaths – the stories are so numerous as to wear out the most conscientious of newspaper editors in New Delhi.

Human Rights Watch could possibly cover only a few of them in *Broken People*; and it has done so with admirable diligence. The most valuable part of its report deals with the militant Communist movement in Bihar. The movement is divided into several factions, who fight as much with each other as with upper-caste landlords. Unlike the older Communist parties of India, they are indifferent to electoral politics, preferring to build up mass support, Mao-style, among the poorest low-caste peasants. Each faction has its area of influence, which is often as large as Belgium, with separate "governments" that collect taxes and administer justice. Their presence points not only at the persistence of

Much possessed with death

The fairy tale and nightmare of Benares

JOHN CROOK

Richard Lannoy

BENARES SEEN FROM WITHIN
640pp. Bath: Callisto; distributed by
Central Books, Ltd. £60.
1 902716 000

Michael Ackerman

END TIME CITY
Text by Christian Caujolle
142pp. Zurich: Scalo; distributed in the UK by
Thames and Hudson. £29.95.
3 908247 13 6

Communism in India (two large Indian states, West Bengal and Kerala, are already run by Communist parties), but demonstrates its new appeal, as India's globalized economy makes the rural poor considerably poorer.

It has become a journalistic tic in India to refer to Bihar as the "Fourth World", in an attempt to partition off the state from the somewhat more manageable Third World conditions elsewhere in the country. But the new category increasingly appears porous. The Human Rights Watch coverage of violence against the low castes in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu makes it clear that the marriage once considered unique to Bihar has been consummated in other parts of India, that is, the marriage between lumpen capitalism and feudal brutality, between the imported modernity of fast-food restaurants and MTV and deformed traditions of bride-burnings and bonded labour.

The role of the State in all this is no less disturbing. A corrupt legal system and police make justice an even more difficult task, and encourage the rise of such extra-constitutional centres of power as exist in Bihar. The Human Rights Watch report and *In the Land of Poverty* are full of damning examples of the civil administration's failure to assist trampled-upon peoples. Such indictments perform an intellectual service of sorts. The steady undermining of the Indian State is a fact often obscured by the commonplace and rarely examined assumption about India: that it is, after all, a democracy whose political institutions resemble – no matter how superficially – those of the democratic West. The rhetoric of globalization comes with its own built-in exaggerations and distortions: India possesses, we are repeatedly told, a 200-million-strong middle class, and has all the potential of being a great consumerist society. Predictably, not much note is made of the other 750 million Indians, of whom 320 million live in abject poverty and 500 million are illiterate.

The myopia claims more than Western observers or gung-ho free-marketeers. Trained in the West or working in Western-style institutions, Indian intellectuals find themselves discussing Indian matters in the terms of the current anxieties and concerns of the liberal Western intelligentsia – so much so that India begins to seem a poor but upwardly mobile cousin of modern liberal democracies, menaced by nothing more dangerous than Hindu/Islamic fundamentalism or more pressing than the possibility of nuclear war. The assumption here is that India, too, is converging, in its own plodding way, with the liberal capitalist model presented by the triumphant West. But this merely proves how liberal capitalism has become an article of faith among migrant intellectual labour from underdeveloped countries (the Fukuyama thesis of convergence and derivativeness might be proved true in the market place of ideas, which the discourse of liberal capitalism dominates, if not the realm of politics and economy).

In the latter half of this century, the West has won all its larger battles; its major sources of anxiety are now religious fundamentalism and nuclear proliferation. An inquiry about India, a Third World country in almost every respect, has to travel quickly beyond these concerns. These two books make this point in their own way: that for India the bigger battles are far from being won, and Indian democracy, a rather meagre thing at present, is not so much threatened by Hindu fundamentalism or nuclear adventurism as by India's great poverty and ancient inequities, and the unprecedented violence they are now breeding.

Pankaj Mishra is a writer based in Simla and New Delhi. His novel, The Romantics, will be published later this year.

Benares Seen from Within is a labour of devotion that has taken Richard Lannoy many years to complete, doing the layout and design personally, for lack of a publisher courageous enough to take the book on. It is a two-sided work, representing the unifying vision of a photographer intent on uncovering meaning; photographs of a luminous intensity, matched by a text of depth, insight and brilliance. Lannoy has spent many years living in or visiting Benares, now renamed Varanasi in the Hindi of modern India. He first went there in the 1950s and was soon captivated by the light and sounds of that extraordinary place. He resolved to "evoke the multitudinous diversity of the city – to present the viewer-reader with the same kind of revelation as Benares has granted me – without the falsification of reality by bogus spirituality or by sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist, to which photographic books are prone". He argues that the inhabitants of the city have created through their behaviour a unique, lived environment, and that aspects of that way of life can be captured and sensed through photography in a way impossible solely through writing. He explored the city in copious detail not only in the 1950s but again recently, and has used the intervening gap of thirty-eight years to mull over the meaning of his pictures, photography, the written word and India itself in all its extraordinary diversity, complexity and depth of spiritual intuition. For this is as much a major interpretation of Indian civilization as it is of its most noble city.

Benares is the capital of Hinduism, and the last city to retain traces of a way of life dating from an ancient world at least 3,000 years old; traces enfolded in the narrow alleys, temples, holy wells, precincts of eye-catching architectural detail, patterns of movement, song, holy

cows of consummate self-assurance, and the vision of the river-front basking almost translucently in golden sun, or the powerful yet softly flowing waters lying deeply shadowed by temple architecture dreaming under a full moon.

The impact of Benares on the casual tourist can be overwhelming. At first visitors may feel they have entered the realm of madness, so utterly strange is the ancient culture they have reached. Yet, after recovery from an initial shock, the invasive beauty, poise, tolerance and a paradoxical peace of mind gain an entry. The waterfront of the city is backed by such tiny twisting alleyways that no motor vehicle can penetrate there. Even today the river is tranquil; only a distant hoot of a steam train crossing the long railway bridge in the distance sometimes gives a hint of modernity. When you take a boat and are rowed in silence to the "other shore", the sands of the Ganges, famous from Buddhist scriptures of a millennium ago, still stretch to a

distant skyline of trees and, as you look back over the gently eddying waters, the kites of innumerable small boys twinkle and twirl in the evening sky, and the chopping of wood for funeral pyres rings a timeless knell. As the sun sets, the glow of these fires lights up here and there the clifflike faces of the ghats. Such an experience cannot fail to be a philosophical moment, even when we too may reach for our cameras, if only to remember.

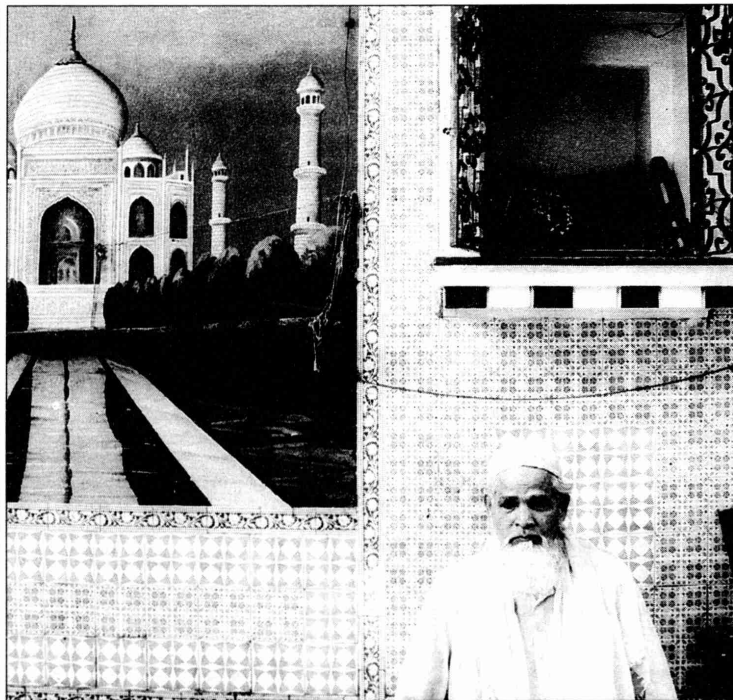
Lannoy's book takes us right there. His detailed photographs cover almost every aspect of life in the city; crowd scenes, bathing in the holy water at dawn, the busy commerce around tiny shops and stalls, temple architecture and mysterious hidden wells, the covert mysteries of winding alleys.

What is primarily at stake in Benares is the perennial search for the inner freedom implicit in the strictures of the caste system from which the only escape is a death while still in life – the abandonment of householding culture in the fourth phase of life, and the wandering off alone or in company, among the socially dead who are also the holy ones. Here is a world of spiritual depth and sometimes falsity, to which entry by a Westerner is difficult if not impossible. Hinduism is not exportable. Yet even such fierce transcendence demands servicing, and the city is vibrant with gurus and institutions catering for the less ardent, and guilds pursuing time-honoured trades. The crafts and art of Benares are renowned, perhaps none more so than those of the brocade-weavers with their gold and silver threads tracing intricate patterns into fabulous cloth.

I tried to select some photographs for special mention, but listed so many I must only remark on three of them here. My first choice is an exquisite picture of a family coming to the city for market in the misty light of early morning. The mother, basket balanced on her head, trends demurely on the sandy ground followed by a grandmother. Their reticence has a contained beauty which is balanced by the inquisitive faces of two young daughters and the more assertive gaze of a boy on the threshold of manhood. One feels the sweeping movement of their flowing, belly-centred, walk in the chill of the morning mists. My second choice of photograph is a shot of a procession of totally naked sadhus, Naga *babas*, on their way to the Vishwanath Temple in 1960. They stroll naturally across the page, aware of but unconcerned by the camera. Shopkeepers look on, for them an everyday event, and a police constable keeps pace, his brass buckle shining on his belt. In my third choice, husband and wife wait, interminably no doubt, for a train, wife asleep full length on the hard bench, husband looking up startled from behind his newspaper, their numerous baggage and parcels piled around.

The text consists of a set of carefully integrated essays dealing with all aspects of Benares culture, from its mythological foundation through the phases of its history to detailed discussions of the psycho-ethnology of the people and the philosophical perspectives of the many groups, sects and religions, all of which have their stake in the complexity of the city. In Lannoy's readings of Indian history, his themes are always linked to context.

The essays on the Buddhists of Sarnath, and Lannoy's treatment of the life of the Buddha, are exceptionally thorough, while his account of the devotional movements in which the hard



A detail from one of Richard Lannoy's photographs in *Benares Seen From Within*

Mishra, Pankaj. "The dull rain of tragedy." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5049, 7 Jan. 2000, pp. 3+. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200540005/TLSH?u=tlshacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.