ROBIN GUPTA

And What Remains in the End

The Memoirs of an Unrepentant Civil Servant

'Robin Gupta has writers' ink flowing in his veins. His memoirs mirror the chiaroscuro of contemporary India as observed by a civil servant…[This book] is a literary milestone.' **Khushwant Singh**

A career civil servant, Robin Gupta has had the unique distinction of serving in four Indian provinces—Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab—apart from a long period of deputation with the Central Government. He has travelled far and wide across the country and the world and, with an active role in India's governance and politics, he has observed it grow and change over the last four decades. In turn philosophical, sensitive and laced with gentle humour, this is a book that provides the reader with a window into that evolution of India, and the part played by civil servants in its advancement.

From attending lavish parties at exclusive clubs, to working in isolation in far-flung, impoverished corners of India; from dealing with the complexities of bureaucracy, to his contributions to policy-making and development; from encountering both brilliance and apathy in men and women, to the satisfaction of being able to help one's fellow citizens—Robin Gupta documents his experiences with candour, warmth and a deep appreciation of the absurdities of the human condition.

Lucid and poignant, *And What Remains in the End* is not only an account of a rich life but also a portrait of a country in motion and a testament to those who dedicated their lives to serving their nation.

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To Mother,
in whose memory
I survive.

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Prologue

Recently, at a cocktail party in the Blue Room of the Delhi Gymkhana Club, while the assembled guests were exchanging pleasantries, the television was switched on to reveal lakhs of persons raising slogans in support of Anna Hazare and the Jan Lokpal Bill. In between an animated discussion about the good intentions of Hazare and his clarion call for a second war of independence to achieve economic freedom for the Indian people, Lady Pereen Rustomjee, an elegant dowager, clad in a gown of shimmering lamé, fluted glass brimming over with pink champagne in hand, stepped forward precariously, declaring: 'I shall write to Victoria Regina to return and take charge of this mess and to the Indian princes to return to their thrones.'

There is little doubt in my mind that the country is veering dangerously towards catastrophe; the largest democracy in the world, in a little over six decades, has displayed a remarkable inability to take charge of itself.

It is quite clear to me that had it not been for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), successor to the more hallowed Indian Civil Service (ICS), the centrifugal and fissiparous forces in a large subcontinent, with its steeply uneven levels of socio-economic development, would have torn the idea of the Indian nation into shreds. The efforts and successes directly attributable to civil servants have contributed significantly in developing the country, despite the heavy hand of successive, sometimes well-intentioned yet rudderless political leaders who formed the political government of the day.

Sardar Patel, the 'patron saint' of the All India Services, in no uncertain terms told the Constituent Assembly at the time of India's independence: 'You will not have a united India if you do not have a good All India Service which has the independence to speak out its mind, which has a sense of security.' Patel was opposed by state chief ministers who invoked the federal principle and wanted to constitute their own provincial services; however, his logic prevailed although, at that time, his farsightedness was not fully understood. Most of the national leaders then at the helm of affairs were men with a record of integrity—they had dedicated their careers to winning liberty for India and were also witness to the carnage of India's partition from Pakistan. They understood that, apart from constitutional guarantees, the tenure of an officer in a particular post should be long enough to enable him to acquire the expertise needed to do justice to his duties. And so was born the IAS, and the government's fighting arm in civilian administration, the Indian Police Service (IPS).

As a result of Sardar Patel's vision, from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, from Dwarka in the west to Puri in the east, the Indian Administrative Service has held the country together for sixty-six years and ensured the stability and continuity for India as a nation. Today, in a country with a population of over a billion, there are approximately 5,000 members of this highly respected service; however, the number who have made it to the IAS without the crutches of reservation and sifarish does not exceed 2,000.

As we progress into the twenty-first century, there is an acrimonious debate on whether to retain the IAS or to eliminate it—at a time when India is being looked upon as a growing economic superpower, the fourth-greatest in the world, and its scientific and technological achievements are being hailed the world over. It is, however, evident to all who have studied the socio-political history of India over the decades since independence that central to India's governance is the Indian Administrative Service, the officers of which have maintained unquestioned control over the system

at the Centre and in the states. The committed bureaucrat silently performs his duty, whenever he is permitted to do so by the disintegrating circumstance.

I write these memoirs in the understanding that my curious interactions in the civil service—spanning over thirty-six years—would confirm the vastly erratic and unimaginable gamut of individual experience, and to draw attention to the role of absurdity as well as the interchangeability of reality as driving forces in man's quest for life.

My sister Urvashi, who has not married or multiplied, has been resident in distant America for over four decades. And I have never known love in a relationship of my own creation. But though most of the journey is over and life's dream has practically extinguished itself, with silver hair on a receding forehead, there is yet the impelling hope that a wayfarer will emerge.

Throughout these memoirs, Mother, whom I loved dearly and constantly turned to for guidance and support, appears and reappears, for she had a wealth of wisdom and eclectic judgement. She knew the civil service well, her brother having topped the ICS examination in the 1930s, and her father too having been a civil servant who retired in 1913 after serving with distinction all over the Punjab Province. She kept me company till 2006, with her faculties intact in the hundredth year of life.

My brilliant father was amongst the earliest batches of Asians to enrol as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of London, in 1933 and, thereafter, to become a Fellow of the International College of Surgeons, USA. He went on to join the Indian Medical Service, having been commissioned in the British Indian army, in which he served as a celebrated surgeon-soldier, during the Second World War, under Field Marshal Montgomery's command of the victorious 8th Army, in the Middle East Theatre. As I was away in boarding school for long periods, and since my parents should really have been my grandparents, and, more importantly, since I sheltered behind the imposing persona of my magnificent and indulgent mother, I rarely caught glimpses of my debonair father. He was a silent intellectual, elegantly dressed in Saville Row suits and felt hats, an understated gentleman with perfect manners and precise reactions, all of which inspired awe and made me feel insecure. He died a slow painful death battling the incurable and progressive Parkinson's disease that destroyed his life. When he was sixty-five years of age, my father died in the Army Hospital in Delhi, which he had commanded in 1945. I had the privilege of being by his side when, just for a flicker, he opened his expressive brown eyes for the last time. It is my abiding grief that we could not share more time together, that I could not draw upon the luminosity of his mind, that there could be no tender exchanges between an uncertain son and his father. However, he lived to see me join the Indian Police Service and smiled in acknowledgement when he saw me in uniform. He passed away in 1973, a year before I joined the IAS and, decades later, when I was posted to areas where he had served, I felt his inspiring presence by my side while looking at the flag fluttering on my car, bearing the legend: 'Financial Commissioner, Punjab'.

The long years that I spent in the service allowed me to travel through the vast Indian subcontinent. I was perhaps one of the few civil servants who had the privilege of serving the states of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana, apart from a long period of deputation with the Central Government at Delhi, before I was permanently transferred to the Punjab, where I worked for eighteen years.

The IAS training was held at Mt Abu, Rajasthan's royal retreat. I also trained twice at Mussourie, the summer capital of the Taluqadars of Avadh and then known as the Queen of the Hills. The

mandatory Bharat Darshan took me across the country, criss-crossing deserts and mountains by the great railway network that had bound India together with indestructible rails of steel.

My years in the IAS allowed me to leave behind the somewhat rarefied and well-ordered circumstance of my parents' home and interact closely with the deprivation of a sorrowing civilization that was witness to fathomless poverty, amidst which stood the Ashokan pillar at Sarnath and the compelling ruins of Nalanda, the most ancient university and the richest centre of learning in the world.

I also had occasion to study in an American high school for a year and, much later, to travel abroad on government business. However, I found myself ill at ease in foreign climes, with a feeling of being clinically suffocated after a week or so. I took thus to unravelling the complexities of India, rejoicing in her ancient wisdom, her myriad possibilities and her endless confusion.

I have been writing sporadically over the years, for there has never been a sustained desire either to project myself or to forcefully communicate with others. Rather, I learnt in my youth to traverse cities and oceans and walk through meadows to comprehend the patterns woven by glow-worms amidst tall grasses. Living alone, I have often wondered whether it is a pivotal imperative to be confined within the circumference of a household. My experience has been different, for by sharing, empathizing and understanding, and with some measure of resilience, one is enabled to come to terms with situations. It is not difficult then to overcome barriers or walls which disallow human beings to embrace life in its many hues. And, therefore, one is always in love and always related.

I have worshipped at the feet of many gods and goddesses; I have offered flowers, incense and vermilion—though, within my own dialectics, I keep wondering about the existence of God. There must, however, be a Superior Being who keeps the universe in balance. Either way, we are marionettes whose paths are predetermined.

I have tried to understand the nexus between decadence and destruction and wondered about the flowering of the exquisite poetry of Mir, Mir Hasan, Momin, Sauda, Zauq and Ghalib during the last fifty years of the Mughal Empire, when the resplendent peacock throne had been replaced with a wooden platform—at a time when the royal concubines, once bedecked for the evening's revelry, had to go hungry; at a time when the Red Fort had started crumbling and the fountains in the imperial gardens, created to cool the summer air, had stopped playing. In the tragic circumstance which reduced the Mughal Empire to a prison cell in Rangoon, the last emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, himself a gifted poet, died pining for a resting place in the empire that he had ruled.

The purposes of existence have ever bedevilled me. I am convinced, however, that one should sensitize oneself to the nature of nature, as also to the nature of things. Life has also revealed that human relationships are generally transactional. I have, therefore, always laid great emphasis on the development of art, for it is the cry of the artist that changes the world. I have watched with thrill the unbelievable leap of Rudolf Nureyev in *La Bayadere*; I have watched with amazement Sitara Devi interpreting a well-known thumri, 'Ek zamaana beet gaya'—An era has passed by—when she had crossed the eightieth year of life.

It is important to identify with the arts if one is to live with awareness. Listening to Ustad Nisar Hussain Khan rendering the paces of *Megh Malhar* during the monsoon rains has carried me to realms of ecstasy. Nonetheless, I continuously question the relevance and rationality of art and the artist ever since I witnessed a renowned Odissi dancer, while performing the Saraswati Vandana, turning quite suddenly to administer a tight slap to an inexperienced photographer whose camera clicked too loud. One must always enquire into the relationship between music, dance, sculpture, religion, philosophy, spirituality, awareness and goodness. Is it, for example, any less artistic for a

young man to assist a crippled old lady in crossing a busy road before disappearing into the crowd?

Politics, political exercise and revolution, particularly those that lead to violent upheaval, have not been of any great interest to me, for nothing can convince me that the correctional device to life and society lies outside the self. It is necessary to attain harmony born out of clarity of perception. I dedicate what I write to the people who inspired me. For, in my case, a place becomes a person—so also can ideas and objects assume very tangible personalities.

To the extent that an inquiry into artistic expression runs parallel to the living process, my career in the civil service, the periods during which I wielded the power that the government vested in me, helped my responses in alleviating public suffering. In my public dealings, my interest in the theatre of life made it possible for me to understand aberrant, even criminal, behaviour and make allowance for apparently curious and cruel circumstance. Perhaps owing to my solitude, I listened carefully to petitioners and sympathetically went through their representations. For long years, I was posted as a quasi-judicial officer. During these postings, I often rejoiced on hearing a sigh of relief from the litigants, who stood before me, with fear-stricken eyes. I tried to understand rather than judge.

Most importantly, I pride myself on having remained a 'nun' through successive political dispensations and arrangements for thirty-six years—I have kept politicians at an arm's length and visited the offices of ministers and chief ministers on the rarest occasions. And now, with the passage of time, able to view events in one's life with greater detachment, I pause, with a sense of impermanence, to gasp at the beauty of green parrots flying over red sandstone and marble terraces into a glowing sunset.

I should confess at this stage that I have, in these memoirs, permitted myself an element of the writer's licence to interpret and depict places, individuals and happenings. But I write this book to leave behind a legacy that I hope will expand the reader's horizons through its focus on that which is personal yet of universal human interest.

1

The Start of Another Spring

The IAS Academy is housed in what was at one time the Hotel Charleville, which had the high privilege of receiving Her Majesty Queen Mary at the beginning of the twentieth century. The building has French turrets and gabled windows fashioned to catch a lingering view of the forested mountains above and the sinking green valleys beneath. I had heard of its Swiss caterers and its exclusive clientele during the Raj. My mother once mentioned that it was easier to get a job than a room in the Savoy Hotel. At the academy, the main lounge and the dining room were, in 1972, still intact, as was a residential block and some of its buildings, all with sloping roofs. Deep below, in the Happy Valley, there was a riding ground. Some new buildings had been constructed to accommodate the increasing number of probationers while a gymnasium had been added at one end. The hotel had been despoiled from within, its rare carpets and furniture having been replaced by mock Scandinavian couches while plastic wall-lights and peacock prayer lamps gave the room a comic look. The lamps were sometimes brought out and lit with cotton coils during ceremonies and prayer meetings.

There was a transitional period between the ICS and the IAS. Besides constitutional guarantees and safeguards, the successor service was vested with vast responsibilities far greater than the mandate of the British administrators: for, independent India had to achieve economic freedom and liberation from poverty. The most valuable inheritance from the Raj was the civil service that unified India.

Several proposals to shift it from Mussourie's sylvan clime to the Delhi region, where trainees could benefit from the wide spectrum of specialized institutes and witness the three arms of the government in action, had come to naught. The socio-political magnetism of Mussourie ensured the academy's retention in the restrictive luxury of the hill station. The Charleville was quickly being transformed into India's premier training institution: ballrooms were converted into lecture halls, billiards and card rooms were used for holding classes. Apart from Charleville and its annexes, many buildings close by were requisitioned by the institute for its expanding requirements. The lack of uniformity in building and structure lent an air of levity and laxity to the academy.

There were KTPs (keen type probationers) drawn from traditional backgrounds, who pored through books and journals and attended every lecture and seminar. There was also the St. Stephens-Oxbridge category—mostly scions of ICS officers, army generals and princes—who thought that the IAS was their birthright and treated the training with scant attention. For them, the probationary

period was a holiday, a period to rest after the strenuous examinations. For these officers, it was long walks on the Mall and drinking sessions at Whispering Windows or dances at the Savoy and excursions to the Waverley Convent's cafeteria that made for a day's schedule. For the rest, they followed their riding lessons assiduously—horse-riding was still considered necessary for touring in the mofussil and for instilling 'confidence in character'—played sports and frequented each other's room in the evenings.

The dining tables were supervised by the mess superintendent, a Goan gentleman who had retired from the navy and displayed medals on his blue bundhgala suit. He impressed us with his good manners and tales of adventure. To the boys from Balliya and Basti, however, he was an oddity and became the butt of unsavoury humour; Mr Gomes, in turn, found them gauche and awkward. Victims of their circumstances as, indeed, we were of ours, they would stretch out their hands, pulling dishes for second, third and fourth helpings; belch and occasionally break wind; declare mushrooms to be poisonous; and so on.

I had two separate tenures at Mussourie, in the foundation course that lasted four months and was common to all the services, for I had started my career in the police. In 1972, the academy had an ICS officer as its director. A fine gentleman and a crack administrator in British India, he was fond of whisky and soda, Western music and ballroom dancing.

At the end of the foundation course, I left for the IPS Training Academy at Mt Abu with a mind full of misgivings. Mother had decided that I was to continue her family tradition and join the civil service. 'Would you really like to spend your entire career saluting magistrates, commissioners and the secretaries of state?' she said. 'No one respects the police, though the lower classes, tradesmen and criminals fear the constable's lathi. Of course, the benefits are enormous. Free cooks, gardeners, fatigue parties to clean the compound, orderlies, drivers, cars, petrol and the entire bazaar at your mercy. Go ahead and do a stint at Mt Abu,' she continued. 'It will make Daddy happy! Did you know that he too wore khaki uniforms in the British Indian army? It is a beautiful place and a dry area—you could spend time building up your health and preparing to write the civil service examinations next year.'

In 1972, and for many years before as well as after, the IPS was a stepping stone for gaining entry into the civil service. Aspirants to the police service wrote three compulsory papers and two lower papers at the graduate level; officers of the central services wrote three compulsory papers and three lower papers. The IAS entrants had to, in addition, successfully compete in two higher papers at the postgraduate level. The officers who were selected for the civil service left Mt Abu and headed straight for Charleville.

The police academy was located in spectacularly picturesque surroundings, with large princely mansions overlooking the Nakki Lake. We were housed in an old hotel, a heritage building of hoary ancestry. There were two trainees to a room and old bearers in turbans and white achkans attached themselves to the trainee officers. Ranchhod Singh was my Jeeves; he addressed me as 'Hukum' while I called him 'Barkhurdar'. He laid out the uniforms and riding breeches; polished the shoes, the riding boots and the single stars for my shoulder tabs; and knew just when to get soda and ice and place them in an iron tub. Best of all, he helped me to get a permit through which I could queue up at a small window in the single liquor shop in town to obtain, on medical grounds, the permitted number of whisky bottles—Mt Abu was, indeed, bone-dry. Frequently, I came across other trainees, who suffered from the same malaise, standing in line, counting and recounting their paltry resources which would be exchanged for the nectar.

There was great bonhomie amongst the trainee officers, many of whom belonged to Punjab, where

I had spent a major part of my childhood. Strangely, the Ho-Jai Club found itself accommodated in rooms that were within laughing distance of each other. Peals of infectious laughter would pass through the nooks and crannies that divided the rooms that we occupied in the dilapidated buildings which had been declared dangerous and unfit for habitation. (The 'thunderboxes', however, were a drawback; we had to vacate the room when a roommate entered the bathroom.) The sardars from Punjab and other like-minded trainees soon formed an impregnable phalanx, and most of these associations have continued over the years.

A polo ground had been created in the depression of a valley during the days of kings and princes. This area was now used for drills, parades and physical training. It also served as the riding ground. Before and after parade, all the police instructors, apart from the IPS officers, would salute the trainees; however, once we had surrendered ourselves to their superintendence for drill, the choicest Hindustani abuses were hurled at defaulters. I made a fool of myself as a squad cadet captain on more than one occasion. Instead of following the drill master's instructions, I followed the dictates of my thoughts and marched ahead, leaving the squad behind. The abuses I received on those days still resonate in the corridors of memory.

The early morning drill was followed by a hearty breakfast in the mess. Thereafter, it was one class after another. We were taught the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Indian Evidence Act, the Civil Procedure Code, investigation, forensic sciences and, to top it all, a class on the moral sciences. A promoted police officer repeatedly warned us to keep our distance from the ranks: 'Sometimes you may accept a glass of water or maybe a cup of tea while inspecting police stations, but never any snacks.' Mr Tiwari's English was. . .adventurous, for which he was promptly dubbed 'Mr Tea and Snakes'.

After lunch, in the two-hour break, we retired to our rooms to slumber. One afternoon, there was vigorous tapping on the glass pane of my door. Two greasy gentlemen, sporting ties, entered the room purposefully. I had never set eyes on them before. 'We have come to call on you.'

Propped up against the pillows of my bed, I icily responded: 'Have you not read Noel Coward? Only dogs and mad men come calling in the afternoon. Out, you bounders!' I then resumed my siesta to be fresh for the evening parade at 4 p.m.

I had not realized that my rebuke would result in a minor revolution in the academy. Both the trainees belonged to Rajasthan. After the rigorous drill and the horse-riding in the evening, and after merrymaking with the tall sardars, when we, mellow with drink, entered the recreation lounge adjoining the dining hall, it was a tense situation that we encountered. The officers, along with others of their ilk, had been in a closed-door confabulation all evening and appended their signatures, I was told, to a telegram addressed to the secretary of the ministry of personnel in Delhi. The pith of the message was a complaint stating that I had abused them, calling them dogs.

It was a sticky situation, the first in which, I realized, I was not quite with the times. That I was easily misunderstood and vulnerable. That a sense of humour was alien to people climbing out of the well of deprivation. The secretary at Delhi, a seasoned South Indian officer related to the president of India, quietly sorted the matter out after I tendered an explanation, mentioning that I was the aggrieved party, for my sleep had been disturbed.

The Dilwara Temples were at a walking distance from the academy. I visited them several times and, wonderstruck, made a brief study of this unbelievable expression of religious fervour. The five temples, built in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries amidst a range of forested hills, display a stunning use of marble and are a sacred pilgrimage site for the Jain community. Their opulent entrance is offset by simplicity in architecture. And the ornamental details spreading over the minutely carved

ceilings, doorways, pillars and panels, is breathtakingly beautiful. The carvings are not only ethereally beautiful in form but also often presented in a highly poetic context. One of the marble nayikas, for instance, is depicted as having just emerged from her bath, with droplets of water falling from her long hair being drunk by a swan sitting by her feet. In Dilwara, there is not an inch where one can place one's hand without encountering a spectacular frieze. In these temples, chiselling was put aside and the artisans adopted the arduous task of thinning the marble into carved images.

The director of the academy, Mr Gokhale, lived in a large bungalow which had been the British Agent's official residence at Mt Abu. An inspector general of police in rank, the director was known for his honesty and frugal lifestyle. He subscribed to the belief that the pen is mightier than the sword and allowed trainees an extra hour for study in the mornings, trimming the physical drill. He was a religious man who viewed the world with compassion; nonetheless, he would brook no undiscipline or make allowance for aberrant behaviour. When he invited batches of officers to tea in his drawing room, his wife, her head covered by a scarf, served homemade sweets and savouries herself, placing a glass of water alongside each plate. Apart from the guards at the gate, no uniformed orderlies or liveried bearers were in evidence at the bungalow.

In contrast, the assistant director of the academy, in the rank of a police superintendent, was a prince from one of the major erstwhile kingdoms of Rajasthan, and maintained private stables. Tall, personable, well-built and with a regal demeanour, he sported impressive moustaches and was a keen equestrian. His life was divided equally between office work, teaching the trainees and looking after his horses. On returning from a vacation to Europe, he astonished everyone by driving straight to the stables, bypassing his home and the academy.

The deputy director, Syed Fazal Ahmed, a tall, fair and handsome officer, was a deputy inspector general of police from Bihar. He was a truly marvellous personality whom I recall after forty years for his words: 'Robin, you are cut out for the IPS. You should not leave us to become a clerk.' Perhaps he was right.

With India relying increasingly on the police to administer an undisciplined population groaning for economic independence, the power of the baton was becoming the principal pillar of governmental authority. As a result, the IPS cadre made rapid strides: the state police chief was upgraded from inspector general to director general; bypassing the home department, his controlling authority now stood shoulder-to-shoulder with that of the state chief secretary and the chief minister. In many states, district magistrates no longer wrote the annual confidential reports of the police superintendents, who regularly found ingenious methods of bypassing and wilfully disobeying civilian authority, the statute, rules and regulations notwithstanding. Politicians undermined the superintendence of the magistracy by dealing directly with police stations and senior police officers. In turn, policemen resorted to regularly raising the bogey of criminal uprisings, Naxalism and militant threats. Police guards at the gates of governors and ministers confined the civilian government to golden cages.

Meanwhile, a police commissionerate was established in Delhi and in major cities and towns across the country, making for a situation whereby police officers were vested with the powers of an executive magistrate. (This has had serious consequences as evidenced over time: in Delhi, where the 1984 anti-Sikh riots took place with the police force abdicating its duty; in Ahmedabad, where the police commissioner vacated the control room during the Godhra riots, resulting in the murder of thousands of Muslims; and so on.) Soon, IPS officers found their way into the Central Secretariat and were posted as special secretaries and, in some cases, secretaries to the Union Government. In the state governments, police officers made good as managing directors of corporations and members of

state public service commissions. A member of the IPS, till recently, remained chairman of the Union Public Service Commission, within whose domain lay the selection of IAS officers. And many states in India have had former IPS officers as their governors. I sometimes regret not having abided by Syed Fazal Ahmed's advice to continue in the IPS.

The showpiece of the academy during my training days was Kiran Bedi, a tennis champion and the first woman to join the IPS. She reported for duty in a mustard-coloured suit, and the stalwart Rajput guards and the stolid drill masters looked askance. We were all asked why we had opted to join the IPS. While it was true that most of us were, at that time, either too young to join the IAS or, in a majority of cases, had failed to get selected for the IAS, we parroted words to the effect—with Kiran joining in—that we wanted to serve our country and save the public from police brutality since there were, indeed, some trainees who as 'collegiates' had felt the edge of the administrative cudgel. There was in fact no rule barring women from joining the force; though, by precedent, it was unheard of for ladies to work with drunken SHOs, track down criminals, control violent crowds—Kiran would make it her life's ambition to prove gender equality in the service. Though most of the probationers at Mt Abu in 1972 sniggered at the inroads that Kiran had made into the police bastion, I had a soft corner for her. She was a friend whom I had inherited from my sister, also a renowned tennis player. She was lodged in a distant annexe on the premises of the academy. I understood her loneliness and desire to earn a name for herself and to do well. I would sometimes carry delicious golden apples or the royal red for her in brown paper bags.

One trainee, Mr Garg, who had served as a sub-treasury officer in Madhya Pradesh, was terrified of horse-riding or of any kind of equestrian sport. Chandini was the most gentle of mares and was traditionally sought after by all the officers since she effortlessly went through the paces of trotting, cantering and galloping as well as jumping hurdles; she also knew when the riding class was over and would deposit her rider at the edge of the parade ground on hearing the bugle. I had been riding from my childhood and there was instant empathy between me and the mare. I could place my two palms on her back and jump onto the saddle, ignoring the stirrups and reins. One afternoon, I headed towards her to present her with sweets and lovingly patted her cheek. Garg made an issue of riding Chandini. Turning to the two gentlemen who had once come calling and interrupted my afternoon nap, he angrily shouted: 'Yeh apne aap ko kya samajhtey hain? Kya yeh ghora in ke baap ki jaidaat hai?' With the greatest of difficulty, he was helped onto the mare. But he did not know how to handle her. After fifty yards, Chandini bucked and Garg fell down with one of his legs entangled in the stirrup. Worst of all, Chandini turned back and, in a most unusual incident, bit Garg on his pock marked cheek. There were peals of laughter as the officer, all of 5'1" in height, started running out of the parade ground with the mare at his heels. We then heard Garg yelling in a piercing crescendo: 'Bachao! Bachao mujhe! IPS, YPS, kuchh nahi chahiye, main chala Kashi!'

Towards the end of the training, I was allotted to the Orissa cadre, much to my happiness. However, it was time to take a decision on whether to write the civil services examinations the next year. A long-distance telephone call from Delhi, conveying my mother's command, decided the issue. I talked to two colleagues, K. C. Singh and Deepak Samal. We put in leave applications, bought a crate of beer and placing the bottles carefully in an ice box, left Mt Abu without permission from anyone, entraining for Delhi from Ahmedabad.

K. C. Singh later joined the Indian Foreign Service and became India's ambassador to several countries, including the UAE and Iran, and retired as a secretary in the ministry of external affairs. Deepak Samal served in Chennai and eventually got himself absorbed in the Air India Corporation, from which he retired as chief vigilance officer. I left for Charleville at Mussourie to join the civil

service.

By the time of my second tenure at the foundation course, the British look of hotel had vanished altogether. The new director was a purposeful individual with formidable political connections; he had served as the principal secretary to the prime minister of India Lal Bahadur Shastri, after whom the academy was named. In the international arena, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi had done India proud. I was therefore surprised that the academy had been named after the diminutive Shastri. The diffident personality of Lal Bahadur had apparently ranked India with the lesser nations of the underdeveloped world. Fact was, however, that Shastri was a great visionary and a scholar with a viable blueprint for the revival of the country. He was a principled and honest man and a clear-headed administrator. The stories about him having to swim across a river on his way to school for want of money indicated that Shastri had experienced and understood the tragedy of the Indian masses. I soon realized that it was my public school education and the English lifestyle of my family that had previously tainted my vision in understanding the essence of Shastri's visionary postulates and simplicity.

Mr Srivastava, the incumbent director, did away with every vestige of the past and put the trainees through the paces of producing a Ramlila. For several months, the preparations were on in full swing. Each evening, I would watch the rehearsals from the last row of the auditorium. I spent many a happy hour, sipping whisky out of hip flasks with a trusted group of friends and breaking into loud peals of laughter, particularly when the dramatis personae missed their lines and brought about the licentious bedlam of Kabuki theatre. It was incomprehensible to me that trained barristers would hop about the stage, impersonating mythological creatures such as Mareech, the golden deer, to gain the director's favour. However, in India, in every sphere the durbar mentality is deeply ingrained from the very beginning. The Mareech, besides receiving awards and medals, is adjudged a pious follower.

Just as the director was committed to a fine production of the Ramlila in record time, a deputy director with Communist leanings, from the Andhra Pradesh cadre, was determined to sensitize the trainees to the immediate need for alleviating poverty. Since this was my second time at the foundation course, I joined a small band of 'repeaters' who had been through the paces and were asked to make studies on the causes of poverty and the social malaise that afflicted the Uttarkashi region of Garhwal.

My study on trafficking in women from the Jaunsar Bawar and Purola Blocks of the Uttarkashi district revealed that religion, ritual and social practices such as paying a bride price were at the root of women being sold into prostitution by members of their family. Women were considered beasts of burden and were pivotal to household work and for tilling the fields. A groom would thus borrow money from the local moneylender to buy his bride; the interest rates ensured that the bride price could not be repaid for generations—to shake off this yoke, many a groom would then sell his wife to agents who took the young women, via Dehradun and Saharanpur, to the brothels of Meerut and Delhi. There they were sold, at a profit, into a life of prostitution. Many of these women never returned to their beloved green hills. Instead, they peered over faded balconies of kothas in red-light areas—surrounded by pimps, touts and policemen—into the twilight.

In a few cases, I identified the route followed by these women from their villages in the hills to G. B. Road in Delhi. With the help of my former colleague in the IPS, Kiran Bedi, then posted in Delhi, we were able to send many women home and to rehabilitate others. However, stray interventions

cannot be sustained unless the social milieu accepts them as warranted. Morality cannot be superimposed. The trafficking in women was the product of poverty, and in an iron-cast social order, wherein the pandits and the Rajputs were the leaders of society, the problem was not considered worthy of pursuit. And these beautiful hills with their verdant meadows had no police stations or policemen. All disputes would be referred to a village patwari, whose authority rested on the long stick he wielded.

During the course of this study, we were once invited to a village festival. While the food was being cooked in large utensils in the village common, a line of low-caste people was seen on the higher reaches of the mountain; they had, supposedly, cast their shadow upon the food. Immediately, the cooking utensils were emptied and sent for cleaning under the superintendence of a village purohit, who kept chanting mantras for a long time; the food was thrown away in its entirety.

Years later, the study titled 'From the green hills of Purola to the red-light areas of Meerut and Delhi' came to the notice of the government once again and I was invited to speak at an international conference in Delhi. There, I made the point that the building of roads, quicker transport and communication had aggravated the situation and many more women were landing up in the brothels of Delhi since the malaise lay rooted in the social arrangements of the area.

After the training at Charleville and as a part of the extant schedule, we were to train with an industrial unit, serve an attachment with the army and attend courses at an agricultural university. As I packed my bags in Delhi, Mother, who wanted me to accompany her for a holiday to Simla, remarked: 'Jack of all trades, master of none.'

The army attachment was easy enough. I had applied for the Jammu and Kashmir sector since a close friend, Gopal Sharma, also a colleague from my days in the police, was posted in Srinagar. A bright and sensitive boy from Jaipur, Gopal would walk along the Bundh with me and hear my childhood stories, for I had spent five winters in Kashmir. We watched the leaves of the autumnal chinar with all the colours of life—green, red, auburn, brown—fall upon the grounds of the residency buildings.

I entered my name in the visitors' book at Government House and received an invitation to tea from His Excellency B. K. Nehru, Esq., ICS, Governor of Jammu and Kashmir. Dominique la Pierre was at the party. As we looked at the fort built by Emperor Akbar on Hari Parbat across the lake, I told him about my dilemma of not knowing where life was leading me to. 'Do you write?' enquired the legend. 'Sometimes, I try,' I said.

Picking up a paper napkin, I wrote on its tea-stained surface:

When you are ready for me, my dear,
I shall be gone.
The first chill has come to the trees,
And in the waterways
The dead leaves flow
To the start of the another spring.

There were a few lectures on military formation, exultation over the victories of the Indian army and one mess night after another. With the first round of drinks, we were told that our army was invincible and Pakistan would be blown to smithereens; when there was a polite reminder of the

Chinese debacle of 1962, where army commanders took to their heels ahead of the sepoys they commanded, losing vast tracts of Indian territory and handing it over to China's suzerainty, we were told that the army generals were tossed about by the defence secretary—we were reminded that Lord Kitchener, the British commander in chief, had in fact got Viceroy Lord Curzon recalled. There was little point in explaining to senior army officers that during the Raj the army kept India subject to the power of the British, while independent India had given itself a civilian Constitution that aimed at economic freedom and the forces had to concern themselves with defending the country from external aggression. We were told about the valour and glorious traditions of the Indian army, second to none in the world—with all of this we heartily agreed.

At the time of departure, promises were extracted from the IAS officers to solve land disputes, arrange for post-retirement reemployment, renew arm's licences by hook or crook, and to issue driving licences to country cousins. Many lasting relationships started during that army attachment.

The training with an industrial giant was incredibly boring. I would force myself to class to hear about percentages and growth, the constraints and strategic benefits of controlling the economy. Nothing could convince me that it was the role of a government to set up industrial giants. My ideas of the civil servant's role remained trapped in noblesse oblige: maintaining the law and revenue collection. There seemed to me something unclean and unsavoury about business and industry. The training revealed to me the unworkability of a system of regulated controls, whereby an army of untrained clerks hammered out policy that was neither socialist nor liberal, with the inherent disability of licensing and supervisory powers vested in the shifting hands of officers with insecure tenures, without incentive or accountability.

I concentrated my energies on visiting Hyderabad-Secunderabad and made several visits to the world-famous Salar Jung Museum. Some of the rare attractions included the statue of the 'Veiled Rebecca', crafted knives of the Mughal emperor Jehangir and his queen Noor Jehan, famous European paintings and a large clock from which a tiny soldier strutted out to strike the gong. The collection had more than 43,000 exhibits and 50,000 books acquired from all over the world. I found the Urdu spoken in Hyderabad somewhat curious; it seemed to have unwittingly gathered intonations of the local dialect and was quite different from the refined language of Lucknow and the fine language spoken in Delhi.

Each morning, I would look out of the well-appointed room allotted to me and yearn for old Hyderabad. In periods of extreme suffocation, I sketched the brilliant red palaash flowers on a tree outside my window, composed poetry and counted the days for the training to conclude.

Relief from my ennui came through the family of Raza, a friend in Delhi. He belonged to one of the old titled families who had been resident in Hyderabad for several generations and had direct access to the masnad of the nizam. A member of the family—fair, light-eyed, greying, and with exquisite manners—drove into the industrial establishment in a vintage limousine. As we climbed the Banjara Hills, to their palatial home, the elder Bilgrami gently suggested that I move to his house for the rest of my stay.

The next part of the IAS training landed our group in Ludhiana's Agricultural University, which owed its existence to M. S. Randhawa, a civil servant of the Punjab cadre. Along the outer boundary walls, I spotted temporary settlements of bihari labourers, their wailing chants to Durga Mata drowned by the thunderous beat of Bhangra dancers at a nearby marriage palace.

With parents who thought of London as the place to live in, with concessions only to Lahore and

Simla, I revelled in the direct thought process, simplicity and large-heartedness of the Punjab that I had heard of. Without exception, whomsoever we met, invited us to an evening meal in their home. Food and drink were plentiful at a stage when both were welcome. Now, with my shoulder stooped over these memoirs, I still recall the succulent fragrance of the paranthas stuffed with a variety of finely chopped vegetables, cooked over a slow fire with loving hands, served with an endless quantum of yoghurt and freshly churned butter. And as I watched the handsome athletic forms dancing in the university grounds, I was convinced that the zest of Zorba, and the rhythmic beat of Crete, must have originated in the Punjab.

We were taught about scientific methods of increasing agricultural production and the miracle of Borlaug's green revolution, which turned Punjab into India's granary; we learnt about modern dairying techniques and how milk production had risen through cross-breeding and artificial insemination, as the magnificent milch cattle looked over the fence with the pride of a mother who has done her family proud.

Punjab has battled the enemy at the border for centuries. Maharaja Ranjit Singh drove marauding hordes over the Hindukush mountains and restricted the British to beyond the Sutlej. The ten great saints, starting with Guru Nanak, did away with satanic rituals and practices that had entered Hinduism owing to stagnation of ideas over timeless centuries. I recorded in my daily diary that I then maintained: 'Punjab guards India's borders, is the country's granary and has reformed the Hindu religion. It has the highest standard of living. The people here work hard and exult in spending money; they lust for life and lust for death.'

At dawn, I would run along the borders of mustard fields with their flowers beginning to turn from green to gold and listen to the faithful praying in the numerous gurudwaras that dotted the unplanned city of Ludhiana. One day, I recorded: 'The Sikhs have codified and preserved the tradition of Hindustani classical music. All shabads are rendered in thirty-one major raags. These are taught by bhais in classes attached to some of the larger gurudwaras.'

I had tried to learn vocal Hindustani classical music in my early youth, perhaps as a revolt to my nanny's one-step, fox trot and sinuous waltz lessons, the piano master caning me on outstretched fingers, while a crusty Englishman expanded on the mysteries of the *Fifth Symphony*, interpreting it as 'fate knocking on the door'. The bhais, I found, leaned heavily on the morning raags: *Todi*, *Lalit*, *Bhairav*, *Ahir Bhairav*; and a lot of kirtan was set in *Bhimpalas*, *Sarang*, *Gaur Sarang* and *Manmad Sarang*. During the evenings, the raagis scaled the tender notes of *Malkauns* and on some occasions the majestic octave of *Darbari Kanahra*, *Adana* and *Tarana.* In Punjab, *Malhar* and *Basan*t have always had a special place, for they are evocative of a ripe harvest, rainfall and the movement of the clouds.

Had not the tradition of Indian classical music been preserved in the gurudwara, the pandits of Benares may not have passed it down from generation to generation, in its entirety and finest nuances.

2

A Stranger in Paradise

In 1975, I was posted as assistant commissioner in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Any city-bred man would have baulked at being posted to the wild northern region; but I was astonished at the haunting beauty of this neglected area.

Room No. 1 of the old circuit house—which had four large bedrooms, a dining table that could seat eighteen people and a decaying lounge with damp blue walls and moribund drapes—was reserved for the circuit judge. A bachelor, the judicial officer was informal and, when alone in his room, would cook fish curry on a stove placed firmly in the centre of a study table, unmindful of time or schedule. In the evenings, I sometimes called on him, glass in hand, and we became friends over many a pleasant exchange, scoffing at the institution of marriage. When I found the judge dozing in an easy chair, I would turn off the stove, cover the aromatic curry and gently remind him that it was dinnertime. Often, as I left for my morning run along the emerald waters of the Teesta River, I found the judge still asleep. He trained me in criminal law and I presided over the Sessions Court as part of my prescribed training. He then helped me in making judicial orders. Years later, on a visit to the divisional commissioner's office, I was sorry to learn that the judge had run into rough weather. 'Do you know, Robin? They have got him this time. For a favourable judgment, he had demanded a new Ambassador car!'

Jalpai, from which the name of the district is derived, I discovered, meant olive—the local one, distinct from its Greek or Italian cousin. But Jalpaiguri, instead of being a haven of Mediterranean climate, was a land of rainforests that scarcely permitted sunlight to touch the earth. When it poured, one could not see beyond one's nose. It was home to the Royal Bengal tiger and leopards. Herds of wild elephants roamed freely and visited tea gardens, planter's clubs and the military mess, overturned the bar and helped themselves to substantial quantities of rum before returning into the jungle. Often, the cars of tea-garden sahibs dressed to the gills for an evening party would turn back because tuskers blocked their progress. Military men would sit in their jeeps, drinking and smoking, awaiting elephantine clearance.

On my first day in office, dressed in a navy-blue suit, I walked to the collectorate, 200 metres away. I was there punctually, at five minutes before 9 a.m., only to find all the offices locked while cows placidly chewed upon files and papers in the corridor. I returned to the circuit house and enquired from the chowkidar. Court, he said, started a little late and I should have a cup of tea while

waiting for the newspapers. At 9.30 a.m., there was no change; at 10 a.m., the doors of the offices were opened; at 10.30 a.m., I espied the nazir, an impressive gentleman dressed in spotless white, alighting from a rickshaw, savouring the last of a paan. The deputy commissioner did not come to office that day, for he was to perform at a music concert in the evening. There was a strange timelessness in this small mofussil town which had once been the seat of princely power. No one took fixed schedules seriously; they were merely broad indicators.

At a loss, I wondered where to have my afternoon meal. As I looked at my watch, a gentleman walked up to me, introduced himself as the scion of the erstwhile ruling family and invited me to lunch at the rajbari. It must have once been magnificent. The building was large, with serpentine corridors and several storeys. Broken statues and fountains stood in front, between the palace and a tall gate through which the zamindars would make their entrance, astride elephants. Since the deputy commissioner did not call me for training or allow me an audience and the divisional commissioner too was away, I spent the next few days with Babua, the prince, whose loneliness, a wife and children notwithstanding, seemed to me more poignant than my own in this alien circumstance.

The rajbari was full of old servants, many of them wizened and widowed ladies, dressed in crumpled white saris—childhood playmates of the last ruler, a princess. The gilded ceilings were weighed down by Belgian chandeliers, while ivory tusks and Dresden china were displayed in dusty cabinets below sepia silver-framed photographs. Intricately carved furniture was placed on frayed Persian carpets. But most maharajas, rajas, zamindars and raikats had fallen on bad times. On a night when the full moon shimmered upon the lake ahead of the palace, while drinking with the prince on the terrace, I heard the sound of regular thumping from an outhouse. I then learnt that several people were rhythmically jumping on dough, which would be baked into bread. This was the royal bakery—it kept the town supplied with bread to augment the depleted royal coffers.

To help me combat the power failures and loneliness, the assistant attached to me suggested that I interact with the sahibs of the tea gardens rather than awaiting summons from the surly deputy commissioner or the distant mandarins who sat in Writers' Building. This was seconded by the additional district and sessions judge.

The tea gardens in the Dooars were planted in the 1870s. After the Chinese monopoly over the tea trade ended, Englishmen were shipped out to India to superintend the scientific production of tea in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Assam. The plantations were carefully laid out over undulating slopes to ensure constant drainage; the tea bushes, with a lifespan of over a hundred years, could not withstand stagnant water. Shade trees were planted at regular intervals to provide uniform filtered light. The brilliant red blooms of flowering trees, planted alongside avenues and fences, over endless stretches of greenery that climbed into the Eastern Himalayas, formed an ethereal landscape that held one spellbound. After office, I would motor along narrow roads, between the gardens, crossing timeworn bridges over streams of crystal-clear water until the driver decided to turn back.

The wooden villas of the tea sahibs were large, with a half-hacienda running around the rooms. High tea of homemade biscuits and pastry was served on trolleys in the veranda. This was followed by whisky and cocktails after 7.30 p.m., and rounded off with an Anglo-Indian dinner of Melba toast, soup, a roast accompanied by shining green peas, dessert, coffee, cheese, crackers, chocolates and brandy. The conversation concerned the day's events, the misbehaviour of servants, the indiscipline amongst the garden workers, the licentious ladies in the lines and newspapers that came in soaking wet, a week after the reported event.

The first Sunday lunch that I was invited to was held on manicured lawns tended by an army of gardeners. The layout conformed to the traditional pattern of quadrangles bordered by accurately

measured flowerbeds. Along the hedges were rows of hollyhock and sweet pea, smiling dahlias in clusters, salvia beds bordered with candy tuft; in the corners, rockeries of flowering cacti had been created. The memsahibs had fenced off 'English corners' with low white railings; there they lovingly nursed African violets, daffodils, hydrangea, tulips, irises, and daisies. The pride of place, however, went to long rows of the aristocratic rose. There were beds of wide-eyed pansies, temperamental lilies and cineraria, with nasturtium curling around the trunks of tall exotic trees. An assortment of vegetables grew in a kitchen garden. The Burra Memsahib took me for a round of the compound and showed me her asparagus plants and strawberry runners besides the menagerie of pets, maintained for her children when they came home on vacation. 'Times have changed. My father, who was in Upper Assam, kept an elephant for company!' she said.

The Indian ladies were beautifully dressed in chiffon. There was also a sprinkling of English ladies, dressed more soberly in shades of grey or blue, with jewelled brooches on their jackets. Their escorts were dressed in the manner of country squires. Liveried bearers moved between the guests, discreetly pouring out drinks and serving hors-d'oeuvres and canapés. 'What is your poison today?' was the greeting of the host to each guest.

As I was taking in this splendour, word soon got around that a newcomer was attending the party and, as the drinking quickened, I received several promotions, soon attaining the dizzy height of being the district magistrate. After six or seven gimlets, I started revelling in the general camaraderie that only drink can engender. I finally departed to the strains of a feisty tango and the fragrance of magnolias wafting on the breeze.

The next morning bore a message from the district magistrate: I was to report to his office. Mr Sen was a medium-statured gentleman, steeped in Vedic literature, and was also a classical musician. He was renowned for his honesty and obsession with rules. Dressed in khaki trousers and a starched white bush shirt with slightly frayed collars, Mr Sen was sitting behind a large mahogany desk and disposing of files. To those that he affixed his signature, a daftari, standing silently behind the chair, would place in a tray marked 'out'.

After about ten minutes of ringing silence, I cleared my throat. Mr Sen looked up: 'And how have you been Mr Gupta? Please do sit down. Nazir Babu tells me you are comfortable.' He then enquired about the chapters I had read of the Police Regulations and the Land Revenue Manual, the tours I had undertaken and development schemes I could suggest for backward blocks in the district. There was no reference, however, to my rudderless existence, for I had still not been assigned any duties.

'Young man,' Mr Sen suddenly said in a clipped voice, 'with your understanding of men and matters, you must begin the search for answers through the convoluted notings and clerical dialectic. On file, no one can assist you, when you sit in judgment. It is your conscience and sustained labour that will carry you through.' He lit a cigar and advised me to unflinchingly tread the straight and narrow. 'This is a difficult district. The police have made inroads into the administration of the magistracy, threatening the government with violent uprisings by regularly raising an alarm of an impending Naxalite insurrection. There are tea planters living in a make-believe world superimposed on impoverished workers whose monthly wages are lower than the cost of a tin of sardines. There are Naxalites from across the border seeking economic freedom under the Constitution, attempting to revive the conscience of humankind. Then there is the army at Binnaguri, perpetually wanting land to enlarge polo grounds and golf courses; their ballroom dancing is not germane to India's resurrection!' And so he went on until the telephone rang.

The deputy commissioner's confidential assistant, peering through the half-door, reminiscent of a bespectacled caterpillar, announced: 'Your Honour, the manager of Dalsingpara Tea Estate requests

you to grace his wedding anniversary celebrations next Saturday.'

Mr Sen told him to send his regrets immediately. He seemed hopeless about the state of affairs in the area. 'Do you know, nothing seems to happen? There are no results!' He suggested that I acquaint myself with the mandate of the North Bengal Flood Control Commission and recounted the cataclysmic destruction that had taken place during the great flood of 1969 when the swollen River Teesta, a tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra, flowed over its embankments, submerging the entire town of Jalpaiguri, the residences of the commissioner and the deputy commissioner, along with the kutcherry records. Many plantations had suffered heavy losses. Thousands had been killed, livestock had drowned in the heavily silted waters, the death groan of elephants had been heard for miles. The army was called out to normalize the situation, a process that had been continuing for several years, under the shadow of a recurrence of the flood. 'Go out into the field and fall in love with the impoverishment of the countryside, Mr Gupta. This alone is the rationale for the administrative service.'

I was advised to call on the chief secretary in Calcutta and the divisional commissioner in charge of the northern districts; before that, I was told to put in some tangible labour.

Sitting in office, I started studying the deceptively archaic notings in a file on land acquisition. In Bengal, a file is a work of art. Dressed like a bride, all the papers are apparently on record with properly marked notations. There is a continuation sheet at the top indicating the contents, while a red flapper signals that the government means business. The matter in hand was contained in the third volume, and I thought of making a stunning judicial order, sifting issues finely and closing the matter once and for all. The first and second volumes, I was told, had been carried away by the great flood. Soon, I learnt that this was the general rationale for all indecision at the collectorate. Decision occurred on the basis of something else altogether; the office superintendent in charge of the record room furtively whispered to me one day: 'There is no finality, your honour, exchange is the only constant.'

I also visited Binnaguri, the large army cantonment, an hour's drive away, at the invitation of Vikram Singh, a lieutenant from Jalandhar. Vikram Singh had clear fundamentals: no clever talk or half-truths, no transactional exchange—hard-drinking and bloodthirsty retribution. Tall and impressively built, Vikram made many a lady turn weak at the knees. He retrogressed in the company of strangers—the art of conversation was not his, neither was he master of the moment nor of his destiny. When in his cups, he would ask me about the purpose of living; during sunny patches, his laughter was infectious.

I would visit Vikram often. When he had the time, he would ride a motorcycle to the circuit house and stay till dawn for our bacchanalia. We had gathered into our loneliness a committed band of hard-drinking companions, which included the judge, the prince of Jalpaiguri and the estranged intellectual wife of an income tax commissioner. The lady would talk about researching into the secret nature of plants and her love for African Americans and their rhythmic movements as she artfully sautéed fish; she would tell me of her life and relationships in America as she took in large draughts of rum. To our band of lonely hearts was added a comely UNICEF lady—well-shaped, well-intentioned and a professional do-gooder. She too took to the bottle and, unmindful of her service contract, eloped with a Bhutanese prince without ascertaining his much-married status or his economic invalidity. By now, my room was stock-piled with cases of Hercules and crown-shaped bottles of Bhutan's Coronation whisky.

The deputy commissioner watched these developments with dismay, and I was posted to the Maynaguri Block for three months. I was to function as the development officer for the area in order

to better acquaint myself with the initiatives of the Bengal government. Full of renewed resolve, I started sitting in the old building till late into the night, scrutinizing the progress of different schemes, only to discover a situation of near stasis. Nothing had happened in the last three years. The skeletal staff rarely attended office and each was engaged in his or her traditional profession, treating the salary as a government stipend. When I placed a lady assistant under suspension for not coming to the office for weeks on end, she appeared quite suddenly in a bright-bordered sari, her perfumed hair coiled above her head. On being asked to submit her explanation, she gave me a coquettish look and blithely replied, 'I will appear before your honour after office and reveal all.'

The Maynaguri Block was an advanced area of the neglected district. I decided to boost pisciculture and introduced fingerlings in local ponds, hoping that farmers would earn additional income from a greater yield and upgrade their standard of living. Much to my joy, the scheme succeeded in a model farm. Debashish Babu, the proud owner, was overjoyed and organized a puja to the goddess Kali. A sense of satisfaction overtook me. The day looked hopeful and I visualized a long career of public service ahead of me. 'Someday, I will be the governor of Bengal,' I resolved.

But there is a destructive streak in a man's psyche that rejoices in death and disaster. On a moonlit night, a villager unable to confront the idea of progress, as revealed in the exhibit pond, artistically introduced gammaxene into its waters, and sighed with satisfaction when the fish died.

My training in the block soon came to an end and I became a homeless wanderer, for the circuit house had been temporarily converted into a camp office for the North Bengal Flood Control Commission. Vikram arrived in a Jonga, had my bags collected and drove me to the Binnaguri cantonment with its disciplined rows of houses and an army mess, the fulcrum of which was a large bar room with saddle stools. In the army mess, I was received with warmth, and one convivial evening followed the other.

Life's search carries human endeavour to curious horizons. At the headquarter's mess, on a Saturday night, a good-looking lady who was being repeatedly praised for her grace and beauty, turned to me. She was convinced that she was wasting her time in the household of a happily plump brigade major. 'You are a magistrate! Will you not help me to decide? Whom shall I ask for help? These army men are like drunken parrots.'

Close to midnight, we drove Rita, in a jeep, to Niamat Ka Dhaba some twenty miles away from the border of Bhutan. Opiated truckers, disconsolate army men and young Nepalese girls had arranged themselves on wooden benches around rough-hewn tables while being served liberal helpings of curried chicken and mah ki dal with hot rotis, fresh from the wood-fire. As food was served by urchins in ragged knickers, Rita enquired: 'Am I wasting my time with Major Sahib? Will I get a chance in films and become a millionaire in Bombay? Perhaps I can employ him to look after my estate?' Over the next three hours and several tumblers of rum and whisky, Rita mapped out her future, all the while sizing up Vikram Singh, who looked straight through her and into the mist gathering over the forest, wiping out the road to Bhutan. I told Rita that she should rule out an illusory future, that life was a collage of beautiful moments and that the Major Sahib loved her dearly. 'After all,' I concluded, 'it is better to be a big fish in a small pond.'

Vikram finally drove us back to Binnaguri, dutifully depositing Rita at her doorstep; the major had anxiously been pacing outside his gate for a better part of the night. Some years later, I learnt that Rita had indeed slipped away to Bombay to realize her dream. Several producers made her 'sing and dance' as a prelude to a role in films, but she had failed to progress beyond the casting couch, eventually ending up in the city's red-light area.

I left for Calcutta a few days later, to call on the chief secretary. It was raining heavily and I parted with my ticket to a weeping lady. She had no reservation but had to reach Kalighat to attend her son's funeral. I followed later, on a goods train, but missed my appointment at the secretariat.

I approached the Writers' Building with diffidence, for, with its massive red-brick structure, the construction of which had been started in 1690, it made a definitive statement of being the final seat of power. I made my entry through the south entrance, manned by Anglo-Indian police sergeants in white uniform. Across the porch and the road leading to it was a large ornamental pool of water, reflecting the buildings and the angels on the rooftops. I was allowed the permissible ten minutes with the chief secretary.

The head of the executive wore an inscrutable mask: he was unaware of my appointment or where I was posted, much less of what I had been doing. He made routine enquiries, displaying neither warmth nor interest. His indifference was alarming, for I was yet a probationer. From the head of the state administration, I had expected some manner of welcome, whether words of advice or admonishment. There was, instead, a stony silence. A peon placed a cup of tea in front of me just as I stood up to leave. With the wave of a hand, the chief secretary sent both the peon and the assistant commissioner of Jalpaiguri out of his room. His personal assistant outside greeted me with a prune-like countenance and an I-told-you-so look.

I decided to take a chance and call on the chief minister, Mr Siddharth Shankar Ray. I was ushered in, within a few minutes, to find a tall handsome gentleman welcoming me into his chamber. 'Please allow me a moment,' said the chief minister, signalling me to a couch. He got up, came around the desk and sat down on the sofa, simultaneously calling for tea. 'Well, you look like a thoroughbred! Is it Stephen's, Xavier's or Balliol?' asked Mr Ray. A cup of fine Darjeeling tea was poured out for me. 'We are in a conundrum of uncertainty,' said Mr Ray. 'Every effort to move forward seems to backfire. I find today's civil servant imprisoned by rules; the political imperative pulls in the opposite direction. In the process, we are unable to lay the foundation for developing the state. We must draw upon the vision of patriots in the calibre of Netaji. Do you know that he resigned from the ICS to lead an army for the country's freedom?'

From my conversation with Mr Ray, who spoke with honesty and clairvoyance, it appeared to me that the Indian Constitution ought to have abolished the Indian Civil Service with the departure of the Raj; the new political dispensation called for different instruments of governance. Mr Ray told me about Calcutta having been the second London, about its halcyon days as the capital of India after the end of Mughal rule in 1858. He talked of the city's architecture and the university established by Tagore at Santiniketan. He spoke about the cultural tradition, the music, the poetry, the dance, the painting and the plastic arts of Bengal. After some more conversation, Mr Ray wished me well in my endeavours and smilingly bid me farewell.

I then wandered into the room of the undersecretary of Bengal. I also called on the power secretary, S. M. Murshed, a tall and well-built Muslim who drew his lineage from the royal families of Murshidabad and Dacca, and to whom I took an instant liking; Arun Sen, the health secretary, who was a scholar of J. Krishnamurthi; the PWD secretary, Vinayak Mishra, who, like S. M. Murshed and Arun Sen, belonged to the 1956 batch of the service; and J. C. Talukdar, honourable member of the board of revenue and the senior-most civil servant in Bengal.

With each of the civil servants I have referred to, I had something to do for a lifetime. They were remarkable men—last of the guardians, the men who ruled India.

On my return from Calcutta, I was sent to Bankura. The settlement camp there concerned itself

with imparting field training to assistant commissioners regarding the method whereby land settlements were made and the manner in which they were recorded. The settlement training was an archaic remnant of familiarizing ICS officers with the administration of land revenue.

Immediately after the abolition of the zamindari settlement in West Bengal, through the Estate's Acquisition Act, the maximum land holding of an individual could not, legally, exceed fifteen acres. The erstwhile zamindars, particularly the princes who owned thousands of acres of land, had to cede these territories to the state government's department of revenue for distribution to the landless peasantry. This involved a gigantic operation, commencing with the identification of and taking over of the excess land, followed by a resettlement on the ground. It meant literally mapping every square inch of the state and making cadastral surveys. A seemingly impossible task, for every tiny plot of land, every path, every little pond and a plethora of court cases by a battery of brilliant lawyers had to be taken into account. While the land settlement training between 1956 and 1970 was relevant and important, by 1975, when we reached Bankura, all land had been settled, rightly or wrongly, and the redundant training was, appropriately, given in a camp pitched on an erstwhile cremation ground.

I was elected president of the officer's mess and, having discovered two Barua cooks, proceeded to order exotic meals suggested by the chefs, often based on English recipes. On Sundays, the horror-stricken trainees were served steak and kidney pudding. After ten days, the mess funds had evaporated and when asked to chip in with more money my colleagues raised a howl of protest. In retaliation, I put them through a regimen of khichuri, declaring this to be the most nutritious diet of all. Needless to say, I was blackballed on the first day of the following month and was the mess president no longer.

The sultry days were spent in measuring land with jareebs, bamboo poles and chains. The related lectures were dull and incomprehensible. In the evenings, with punctilious regularity, I would cycle down with a colleague to a liquor shop and the two of us would each knock back half a bottle of Old Monk rum and eat heartily at a nearby dhaba.

The settlement training was a farce, for it was not seriously executed either by the teacher or the student. The peons attached to each assistant commissioner would rush towards our bicycles to help us, as if we were dismounting from Arabian steeds; these old retainers were relics of Great Britain's diagram of supremacy. As the weeks stretched and strained endlessly, for lack of anything better, many trainees took to acrimonious exchange, pointing out the failings they perceived in each other's persona. There was nowhere to go except the district headquarters in Bankura, to which we made occasional forays, parking ourselves in a decrepit circuit house with wide verandas, high ceilings on wooden rafters and large rooms with empty spaces through which history had passed into legend.

Bankura was famous for its terracotta temples and horses. The leprosy-stricken district of Purulia adjoined it and beyond lay the beautiful garden city of Ranchi. To break the rigorous monotony of an endless ennui, I prevailed upon two friends to accompany me on an outing to Mukutmanipur, an adjoining block, where the irrigation department had constructed a new bungalow overlooking a dam. I promised them the world: chilled beer and a fishing expedition. However, as we approached the rest house, on the crest of a low hill in an otherwise arid wasteland, we saw something akin to a papal procession. A judge with cheeks puffed out, shining with the exertion of climbing up the hill from his car, was preceded by liveried macebearers, dressed in long white coats and red sashes on which metal badges glinted in the sunlight.

We were denied entry into the bungalow; all the eight large suites had been booked for His Lordship, who was now in camp. Stung by this reverse, it was with some satisfaction that I soon saw the worthy judge, his plump lady companion and squealing children running down the hill rapidly

while the liveried peons covered their faces and ducked for shelter—the cavalcade had disturbed a nest of hornets, and their retribution was unrelenting.

While in camp, in moments of acute depression, I would sit on the edge of my cot and study the Land Revenue Manual with extreme distaste—the entire exercise was unrelated to man's conquest of the Everest or an American spacecraft having landed on the moon. Such was my mounting rage at being incarcerated there that, one evening, I consumed a bottle of rum and started telling off the deputy magistrates, holding forth upon the futility of the settlement training, of life and existence, since I had for quite some time been irked by their beatific complacency, their inability and unwillingness to accept the comic pathos of the archaic camp and the situation we found ourselves in and, most importantly, owing to their disinterest and disapproval of my own perception of the living conditions. I kicked a few collapsible chairs close to where the deputies sat confabulating. The chairs, counterfeit Godrej creations, collapsed. The trainee magistrates took a long look at my tall shadow looming over them and, casting aside their veiled diffidence, took to their heels, waving their arms and mouthing the choicest curses. This incident was reflected in dispatches by the director of land records and surveys, who recommended that the period of my probation be extended.

I returned to Jalpaiguri to complete the last part of my training and to call on the divisional commissioner, whom I had not met in the several months that I had been assistant commissioner.

The commissioner's residence was a huge double-storeyed red-brick structure built on a vast acreage along the Teesta embankment. It had a pel khana (elephant stables) in a remote corner, dozens of orderlies, punkah-pullers and policemen. The commissioner's car flew a maroon pennant and was accompanied by escort vehicles and preceded by a pilot jeep whose sirens resonated and echoed through the hills and valleys of Darjeeling, where successive commissioners spent many months of the year.

The commissioner of a division held sway over the several districts in his charge. He heard appeals in revenue cases that were preferred against orders made by a collector. He was the final supervisory authority over halqua officers and revenue officials. In addition, he held administrative court in complaints against officers in the division. The commissioner kept careful watch over the functioning of the police force, would make inspections into the working of departments and called meetings where deputy commissioners would submit progress reports in respect of different schemes. Very few officers opted to serve in the northern region, for, to a Bengali, Calcutta was the breath of life. The civil servants who came to serve in Bengal from other states would, after their initial shock at what appeared to be a city on the verge of urban collapse, fall in love with it.

I met the commissioner, Mr Roy, in his office. A short, fair gentleman, he was clad in a white shirt and khaki trousers and puffing on tobacco out of a well-worn pipe. Mr Roy was a Stephenian. His father had been a principal of the renowned Hindu College and the commissioner had long and lasting links with Delhi. 'There is apparently very little work,' he said to me, 'for we are our own masters. I live upstairs and work out of the bungalow office downstairs, except on the two days that I hold court. The wonder of the civil service is that we can dream and formulate our dreams into viable initiatives to alleviate poverty, if we are so inclined.'

The Jalpaiguri commissionerate was carved out of the erstwhile Rajshahi Division, which comprised eight large districts. At that time, the commissioner was akin to a lieutenant governor: in the hierarchy of control, he communicated with the secretary of state and the governor of Bengal. Most civil servants concluded their career as divisional commissioners and many former commissioners had been knighted for carrying forth the 'white man's burden'. I was told that the commissioner was not permitted a road transport vehicle; he, however, had a train for his inspection

tours through the changing countryside and for touring the villages. Crossing of rivers was on the back of an elephant. Sporting a sola topi instead of a bejewelled crown, he was the true sarkar.

I liked the commissioner immensely. While offering me a drink during my courtesy call, he slipped in anecdotes containing precious pieces of advice. 'Never be indiscreet in word or action. Your reputation shall precede every post that you hold.' He was a natural raconteur. As the evening proceeded, I was told about the eccentricities of an English commissioner of the Rajshahi Division. He would sit late into the evenings, clearing confidential papers with his assistant. After the day's work, the commissioner would call for his sundowner and then for a silver cutlery box containing his set of Sheffield knives. The confidential assistant was made to stand against the opposite wall, with the commissioner throwing knives and outlining him.

Mr Roy was a sophisticated man and his wife a perfect hostess. The maids in the kitchen had, under her supervision, turned out a splendid Chinese meal. The drawing room was a long hall with windows overlooking the river. 'It is a solitary existence that we lead here. While the commissioner is engaged in administering one-third of the state, receiving salutes and guards of honour, I spend as much time as possible with the Red Cross units in the different districts and subdivisions,' said Mrs Roy. Later, I came to know that Mrs Roy was a medical specialist who had suspended her practice to maintain the impregnable corridor of silence surrounding the commissioner's presence.

Mr Roy was one of the very senior civil servants in Bengal. He had a fine sense of humour and a deep sense of history. 'Have you not heard of Mr Pennel, the district magistrate of Midnapore, at the end of the nineteenth century? One fine morning, he placed the police superintendent under house arrest for insubordination, after which he sailed away in his launch, on tour for a month.' And so came the stories, one after another.

Mr Roy was deeply concerned by the threat posed by the police to the magistracy. 'Though you may have come from outside the state, surely you are aware that a police commissioner looks after Calcutta?' I later learnt that initially the police commissioner of Calcutta was an ICS officer. 'You see, we have consciously adopted a civilian constitution, with the legislature, the executive and the judiciary functioning in line with its directives. The uniformed forces are to function not as independent levies or entities but subservient to the magistracy and the civilian authority, at all times.'

At the end of the evening, Mr Roy walked me to the end of the long driveway to see me off, followed by security men in the shadows. As he bade me farewell, he pointed to the large structures on either side of the gate: 'Not so long ago, these housed four elephants whose only duty was to raise their trunks, in salutation, each time a commissioner entered or exited.'

The Jalpaiguri commissioner, in his own quiet way, had been carrying me through time and the evolution of the civil services in India and the imperatives that should guide a young entrant. I gave deep thought to his words, especially his statement: 'Be prepared to lead the district from the front.'

3

Raag Darbari in Raiganj

In 1976, I was posted as magistrate in charge of Raiganj, a subdivision in the district of West Dinajpur, bordering Bangladesh. It was a large rural area comprising six blocks and six police stations, with no city lights in sight. In the pervasive silence, one could look into the eye of an owl sitting on a tree, guarding her owlets and making forays into the darkness, or listen to the breeze blowing across the border.

No IAS officer had been posted to Raiganj before; it had always been a preserve of the state civil service. And since I lacked the right connections at Writers' Building, my presence, from the start, was viewed with suspicion. A backward region in the remoteness of nowhere had its own advantages, though—there was less interference from inspecting authorities and politicians. The subdivisional magistrate (SDM) thus assumed a larger-than-life position, which would not have been the case in high-profile postings.

In the life of a young entrant to the civil service, on his first independent posting, declaring him magistrate in charge of a sprawling land area, the grandeur of office is intoxicating. There was much fanfare when the SDM sat in office, more so when he ascended the podium in court. Liveried peons, a red beacon atop the office jeep, saluting policemen and bowing revenue staff, and so on.

With Raiganj, it was love at first sight. In the sparsely inhabited wasteland, I felt purposeful, for here there was the requirement for hard labour, and even small initiatives would have a visible impact.

The best eating house in Raiganj was the railway canteen in Kaliaganj, which people still visited for a change of air. Indeed, one could go no further, for the steel gauge to Rajshahi had been dismantled, rendering the two parts of composite Bengal asunder.

The subdivision was completely agricultural. At the headquarters, there was a newly constructed court complex and a row of single-storeyed houses a kilometre away. The bungalow of the SDM was at the far end and stood in a reasonably large compound outlined by low walls and a gate, at which stood several policemen on duty. The sentry stood in a box or sat on a bench and presented arms—the salaami shastra—each time the magistrate entered or exited. On special occasions, the policemen made floral decorations on a bench. On the first day 'Welcome' was fashioned out of the petals of the fragrant madhavilata, making me wonder at its artistic simplicity.

Vast areas of Raiganj were flood-prone and, despite the annual devastation by the Kulik River, no

embankments had been constructed—permanence was inherently counter-indicative to the functioning of the public works department, where officials had an emergent solution at hand to tide over the situation. Therefore, the department of relief and rehabilitation and its inspectorate grew strong and was firmly entrenched in the district headquarters and in the office of the subdivisional magistrate. The magistrate, in charge of the entire governmental machinery—law and order, revenue collection and development—represented the sovereign power of the state. Problems arose when district-level officers found it difficult to take orders from the SDM, notwithstanding the magisterial power vested in him.

In 1976, a terrible flood devastated Raiganj. Village after village reeled under the fury of the turbulent waters. This happened two days after I took charge of my first assignment. Mrs Maya Ray was the local MP; an elegant lady, she was a trained barrister who had lived in London for many years and was the wife of the incumbent chief minister. There was an emergency meeting in the SDM's chamber and a helicopter from Calcutta brought the MP, along with the minister for irrigation and power, to Raiganj.

The plump minister was a nawab from the adjacent Malda district; he alighted from the aircraft in gumboots. Mrs Ray, in a stark cotton sari, looked severe. The hall was full of officers. The district magistrate and his deputies, the police superintendent and relief officials were sitting in rows, while the nazir was getting cardboard boxes of sandesh, glasses of water and tea in cracked brown cups distributed by the peons. I was asked to dilate upon the contingency plan. Yet to familiarize myself with the topography of the area and innocent of the undercurrents of inter-departmental rivalry, I neatly wrote out on a piece of paper: 'I have lost my voice.'

Mrs Ray prescribed me some medicine and called for a tumbler of water from the flask that was being carried for her from Calcutta. A brief consultation with the minister followed, and both trained their anger at the district magistrate. He was asked to locate his headquarters at Raiganj immediately, set up a control room and do the graveyard shift. I was sent to my bungalow to rest and recover. Nonetheless, I started prioritizing the afflicted areas and accompanied the relief inspector to assess the tragedy and get a coordinated plan for relief speedily executed.

Baisya Babu, the relief inspector, had been in the department for decades. He was a raunchy individual, full of a sense of the absurd. He lived in a large mansion, with marble floors and many rooms, in nearby Murshidabad and was regarded as a man of substance. Mapping the tragedy and listening to the cries of children wailing for food as they sheltered with their mothers on treetops, I turned to the inspector. 'What a calamity!' Baisya Babu bowed. 'Indeed, Your Honour, even the snakes have been rendered homeless.'

We sought the help of the army and the paramilitary forces for the rescue operations. However, I found that it was the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, in their long saffron robes, who effectively conducted relief operations and distributed food and clothing with dedication. One of them said to me: 'Lay yourself at the service of all, keeping death as witness, as one day you shall inevitably lie as dust at the feet of all.' Giving Baisya Babu a penetrating glance, the monk told him: 'Those who accept the generosity of others with gratitude set up a chain of generosity, performing magnanimous deeds to aid their fellow beings.'

The civilian staff did marvellous work and soon relief was pouring in from different quarters, including the UNICEF, which distributed flannel knickers, nightgowns and beribboned bonnets. The astute nazir quickly diverted the alien items for fashioning idols of the goddess Durga, as they could be recycled into a kind of papier-mâché.

When the flood receded, the houses that had been held together by the force of water started

falling like ninepins. It is tragedy and misfortune that hold houses and the people who live within them together, I concluded, for on a sunny day the same circus of want, desire and deprivation would commence once again.

During the relief operations, I discovered a depth of compassion in the district magistrate, S. N. Ghosh. An intellectual Bengali, he was honest to the bone. And from the day that the control room was set up, he never returned to his headquarters at Balurghat. Inspired by his leadership, I walked to the small guesthouse where he was camping and said, 'Sir, I have learnt the ropes somewhat. Why don't you go home for the night, and we can meet here tomorrow at noon?' His reply was: 'I will lose two hours travelling either way, which, allowing for tea breaks for the driver, totals up to five. And, young man, how will you comprehend the mind of the relief inspectorate?'

I was told that Mr Ghosh had procured two sets of khadi clothes from the bazaar, for he had come to Raiganj unprepared to halt there. Nonplussed, I stood outside his room, wanting to participate fully in his continuous labour. Mr Ghosh came out to the veranda at midnight. 'Robin, go and rest a bit. I am here for a few days.' As I left, he handed me a note on which he had written: 'The light within you is the luminescence of the Lord. Why superimpose it with the darkness of desire and petty wants?'

Raiganj was the largest of the three subdivisions of the West Dinajpur district, the other two being Balurghat, towards the Farakka barrage, and Islampur, leading to Siliguri, with a short stretch of Bihar in between. The chief attraction in Raiganj was the Kulik Bird Sanctuary, a vast and beautiful swampland on the banks of a river, home to thousands of migratory birds, including open-billed storks, night herons, egrets and cormorants, apart from the indigenous bulbul, kingfisher, dove, sparrow and woodpecker. I stayed in the forest bungalow for about three weeks till the SDM's bungalow was vacated and set in order. I spent my time working late, reading and writing. In the mornings, I would go for a ten-kilometre run between the jute fields.

In West Dinajpur, there were three IAS officers, three officers from the IPS, a civil surgeon, a district judge and the divisional forest officer. Mr Pundarikakshadu, the DFO, would regularly remind me that he was an IFS officer and as a divisional officer he should be ranked with the Jalpaiguri commissioner—there was no way that he would attend meetings called by the district magistrate.

The DFO had been in the army. He was from Andhra Pradesh and had a fiery nature. We became friends after I invited him over for a drink to the forest bungalow one evening. 'You are a good chap, I say, an army son and all that.' Thereafter, we often visited each other in the evenings. He was amazed that I was unmoved at seeing him, a rifle strapped over one shoulder and a glass of rum in his right hand, cursing the world at large as he paced the roof of the jungle kothi and looked over the parapet into the night for hooligans and naxalites.

One evening he said, 'I say, Robin, come here! I will show you a prize from my native place.' In the manner of a matador, he ceremonially tugged aside the curtain of an almirah in his room. In it were dozens of bottles of Andhra pickles, neatly labelled, dusted and stored away from prying eyes. Pulling out a jar of pickled gangura, he said, 'Take this. It is a present for you.'

Mr Pundarikakshadu in reality had no forest cover to superintend. He wanted to work hard but had been put in the cooler. Therefore he would make several rounds of the Kulik Bird Sanctuary each day. I suggested that he get it turned into a tourist attraction, for birdwatchers would flock there, as in the case of the Ghana sanctuary in Bharatpur. 'Now you are suggesting that I hand it over to the tourism department?' was his angry retort.

A Central Reserve Police Force battalion, commanded by one Mr Randhawa, was stationed at

Raiganj. He had converted one of the barracks into a makeshift mess, to which he regularly extended warm invitations. He had been an Olympian athlete who was recruited on the sports quota. After a heavy day of working in the office and writing out pending judgments, I dreaded the prospect of his hearty greetings at 7 p.m., as I returned to my residence, for my head was full of thoughts on how best to implement ongoing schemes. I had made the mistake of allotting one of the vacant houses very close to my residence to the commandant and had to suffer the agony of rambunctious laughter and blaring music night after night. Randhawa would corner me, denounce the civil administration and list out his many achievements in different sports disciplines. One night, when he decided to play loud bhangra music, I called for the town inspector and had a case registered against Randhawa for violating a law: the SDM's written permission was a prerequisite for using a loudspeaker. In the piquant situation of police versus police, Randhawa decided to make an issue out of it and reported the matter to his inspector general in Calcutta. There was an acrimonious exchange of letters. An enquiry was held and, as a result, Randhawa and his battalion were airlifted to Assam.

The zamindari of Itahar formed a part of the Raiganj subdivision. It had a tottering palace with a large sundial in the front. I thought I would have the company of gentlemen steeped in history, with whom I could interact on a lonely evening. But whenever I made enquiries about the princes of the Itahar rajbari, there was deathly silence from my staff.

Poring over files in my office one evening, I smelt the fragrance of ittar wafting into the hall. The zamindar of Itahar wanted an immediate audience in a court case, and I was requested to hear the matter in my chamber. 'Let it be listed for tomorrow and mention be made for an early hearing before the regular cases are taken up,' was my instruction to the reader of the court.

As I came out of the office, I saw a fair old man shaking with rage. 'Your Honour,' said the prince of Itahar, 'our elephants have held sway over this countryside for centuries. Will you not spare a moment to allow me another lease of life?' I retreated into my chamber and granted the requisite ex-parte stay, for I was told that the yuvraj was planning to enter that portion of the rajbari where the Roy Choudhurys stayed to poison his father.

The next day, the son, a handsome youth dressed in Shantipuri dhoti and kurta, with a large diamond glittering in his ear, appeared with his lawyer. It seemed as if the son had been at the receiving end of the stick all along and what remained of his patrimony was being gifted to a senior dancing girl at the palace who had apparently been trying to decimate the yuvraj for many years. Subodh Chandra Mullick Roy Choudhury, standing before me, pleaded for mercy: 'My mother loved me dearly. She was tortured to death by his indifference.'

I invited father and son to tea at my residence to sort out some kind of a working relationship between them. But it was a feeble attempt, for I could never comprehend the labyrinthine thought processes of the blue-blooded gentlemen, both of whom exuded the aura of royalty.

The yuvraj, I learnt later, was an ornithologist and a connoisseur of vocal Hindustani classical music. He brought an ustad into my household and in solitary splendour I would hear *Raag Darbari* unfolding its full octave in the depth of the night.

Shortly after I was posted to Raiganj, my friend Captain Vikram Singh, now attached to a unit in the beautiful hill station of Kalimpong near Darjeeling, caught up with me; he would drive down in a jeep or on a motorcycle to spend a weekend. The entire northern region of Bengal was dotted with lonely people who rejoiced in the largeness of the rainforests and the azure skies above. Each day was planned weeks ahead to ward off the pain of introspection.

Several months passed, and the mandarins at the Bengal secretariat were astonished that I had not petitioned them for a transfer. In reality, I had grown to like the subdivision and was able to do some work that started showing tangible results. For the first time, electric streetlights were put up, some developmental schemes started taking root and others were revived. I would go for long drives along the border, through endless fields of red chilli, pondering what more could be done. The people were simple and religious and had a curious penchant for visiting the circus.

One morning, as I sat at my desk, a delegation of local 'respectables', propelled by a businessman of generous proportions, sought an audience and told me that the Royal Apollo Circus was shortly to be launched—would I consider their request to inaugurate it? The date and time were fixed and a week later I was escorted to the circus site. In my haste, I had not read the invitation card; on entering the capacious tent, I found a large bunting that colourfully proclaimed: 'The honourable magistrate has kindly agreed to inaugurate and actively participate in the circus!'

MISA, the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, had been imposed on the country and several youth were languishing in Raiganj Jail, of which I was, ex-officio, the superintendent. For this, I was allowed rent-free accommodation. I started visiting the jail every day and ensuring that its inmates got their prescribed diet. 'They are state guests,' I told the humongous Bihari warders bursting out of their khaki knickers; they, like many others, were convinced that the hakim was not 'all there'. Upon scrutiny of the records, I found that most of the detainees had been framed in political vendetta, or had been locked up on frivolous charges for not paying a nazrana to the police. Within two or three months, I was able to have forty-three young men freed, and many of them recruited in the army.

Colonel Sawhney, the branch recruitment officer posted at Siliguri, was a large-hearted gentleman. Well-schooled and well-read, he enjoyed socializing to offset his own uncertainties—a divorcee, he ate in the army mess and missed good cooking. I would invite him across to Raiganj, where my cook would turn out chops glacé, colonial soups and desserts for him. I went to see Colonel Sawhney one evening with the request that Bengali youth be recruited in the armed forces on priority. 'It is a myth that just the northern belt is the recruitment ground for cannon fodder,' I emphasized. 'It is equally a myth that the easterner reverses from the enemy's attack.' The Bengali psyche, however, was not in favour of sending boys into the armed forces. 'Khoka will remain here and work in the fields. He paints such beautiful idols during Durga Puja!' seemed to be what they all thought.

I could not bear to see this lack of connectivity between a prospective employer and an able-bodied employee. Through a series of street-corner, block-level and panchayat meetings, I tried to ignite the military prowess of Bengal, deriving from the patriotic fervour of Netaji Subhas and Rashbehari Bose. Somewhere, a chord was struck; of the 565 boys recruited into the army from Bengal that year, there were 168 from Raiganj.

I decided to accept an invitation from the Border Security Force posted on the Bangladesh border in the West Dinajpur sector and to visit literacy camps in villages that lived under continuous threat of gunfire and bombardment. I had to drive through a shallow water course and was told that only once had an ICS officer visited this inaccessible area, some eighty years ago. The villages on the border were trapped in a time-warp, unmindful of the winds of change.

I spent the evening raising toasts to India with the officers, who kept themselves going on patriotic fervour. Though I retired to my tent a little late, I was up with the first sound of the morning bird and in the languorous darkness took a walk by the broad river that separated India from Bangladesh. At a little distance, I could hear voices; it was a lean mastermoshai teaching his five-year-old girl the meaning of *Raag Bhairav*. 'The scale rises,' said the master, 'as the rays of dawn over the river. My

child, may your mind awaken thus!'

I was summoned to Calcutta to make submissions regarding my adventurous initiatives in getting prisoners released from Raiganj Jail. Standing outside Writers' Building, I felt a deep sense of nostalgia for the northern wasteland. On my return trip, as the aircraft circled over the low mountains and green valleys around Bagdogra airport, while I was trying to locate my jeep parked at the edge of the runway, a youthful foreign lady, in travelling gear, leaned over with a troubled countenance. 'Will you help me to get a restricted area permit to visit Darjeeling? Else I shall have to await further orders at the police station.'

Then twenty-five years old and vested with the powers of a magistrate, I, on landing, asked Milly to hop into my jeep. I often described it as a decorated corpse, for while it had been painted to perfection and displayed an impressive insignia, it would break down regularly, particularly during ceremonial send-offs. Upon reaching Raiganj, I planned a welcome party for Milly that evening.

The khansama's repertoire for the evening comprised Anglo-Indian cuisine, for he had worked in a British commissioner's kitchen for decades. As the evening gathered momentum, amidst plentiful drink and wholesome food, there was talk of Milly settling down in Raiganj, close to the circus ground.

'Hey, what do you do for a living?' Milly asked the district magistrate.

'What do I do for a living?' repeated the stunned head of the district. 'I am overall in charge here, I imagine.'

'And you, fatso?' Milly addressed the superintendant of police, crooking a finger into his protruding stomach.

The thakur adroitly steered the conversation elsewhere, enquiring whether she was bored.

'Bored? Why should I be bored? There are young men, music, drink—the works!'

'And, madam,' asked the SP, 'are you a career lady?'

'Yeah! I work at a bar in New York City and stand in for the night waitress when she has had too much.'

The DFO suggested unsteadily that madam be shifted to the bird sanctuary guesthouse.

At this juncture, the DM signalled me to follow him into the garden. 'You do understand, Robin, that this is a restricted area and you are presiding over a crime? Get rid of your guest without delay.'

Looking at the rage in his otherwise gentle eyes, I realized the futility of pleading with him. 'And where shall I escort her to?' I timidly asked.

The answer was prompt and merciless: 'Wherever you brought her from.'

After Milly's departure, there was a definite chill between the DM and the SDM of Raiganj. There was no particular reason, nothing was stated. The season had turned.

Soon after, Mrs Ray decided to make a round of her constituency. There was upheaval amongst the local officers when the MP drove to my office to review projects, issue sanctions of grants and ownership of land certificates to the landless. The nazir drew me aside to enquire about the kinds of fish and the fare that the honourable lady would prefer for the afternoon meal. 'A tuna sandwich, a lightly tossed salad and, if possible, a minestrone soup.' Mrs Ray mentioned that the nawab of Malda would be joining us as well and, since he had a sweet tooth, she suggested that some peaches or a lemon soufflé be added on.

Nazir Babu was aghast; he had requisitioned the local caterer to turn out a traditional eighteen-course Bengali repast, building up from delicately cooked vegetables—including the prized banana flower—to a variety of fish, chicken and mutton, in ascending order. I quietly telephoned my khansama and told the office to get lunch collected and served in the forest bungalow.

In the evening, just as Vikram and I were pacing the garden, waiting for the cocktail hour, a telephone call was received from the police station. The town inspector told me that the honourable MP would be dropping in at my residence at 7.30 p.m.

Mrs Ray was grace itself. When I offered her chilled beer, she gladly accepted. When a tall glass, frothing to the brim, was placed before her, she waved it aside. 'Pour it into a teacup,' said the chief minister's wife. Unperturbed, I called for a new teapot and filled it with cold beer, observing: 'These cups contain just a gulp.' To this, the parliamentarian replied: 'You will be amazed at the number of cups I can put away.'

A platter was made up with Camembert, Brie and Gouda cheeses placed alongside Californian prunes and olives that I had picked up in New Market during my last visit to Calcutta. The evening wore on, and the conversation was delightful. 'I think these wretched Communists must have stopped peeping into the window by now,' said my guest after a while. 'May I have a whisky on the rocks?' A little later, Mrs Ray asked Vikram to get the divisional commissioner on the line: 'Monu, why is this fine young man wasting his time here? Please see that he is put in Siliguri.'

Through a haze, I realized that my mentor had understood my agony of loneliness, despite the enjoyment I derived from my work.

The next morning, an apparently sorrowing superintendent placed a teleprinter message in the daak pad. With his head bowed, in the manner of a dejected sparrow, he mumbled: 'Your Honour has been transferred.'

4

Mahua with Jangal Santhal

I was appointed magistrate in charge of Siliguri, the 'capital' of North Bengal—perhaps, the most sensitive posting in my career. Siliguri, contained in a small land mass known as the 'chicken's neck', was a strategic area with a mixed population of Nepalese, Bengalis and a noticeable sprinkling of North Indians from Punjab. The Sikhs controlled the transport and hotel businesses. In 1977, the town had a permanent undercurrent of tension owing to the conflicting economic interests and social mores of its six or seven lakh inhabitants.

Anybody who had to go anywhere in eastern India had to pass through Siliguri. The road to Nepal, Sikkim, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Darjeeling; the passage to Bhutan and Assam; the road to Bihar and Bangladesh—they all lay through this town. And the old trade routes between India and China, through Nathu la and Jelepa la, were accessible after crossing Siliguri. The city was ridden with crime and was a veritable paradise for smugglers. A visitor could commit larceny or murder and disappear into a tea garden, the mountains or the forests or into a neighbouring district, state or country. The surrounding areas had well-established tea gardens and the ancient Baikunthpur forest. The Bagdogra airport was located in the cantonment area. There were missionary schools and colleges, as well as the sprawling North Bengal University, located in close proximity to each other.

I rejoiced in my posting as the hakim of Siliguri, for I was its first citizen and on VIP duty. I would receive and see off the governor and the chief minister of Bengal, escort Bhutanese royalty up to the aircraft and have single malt at the airport restaurant with a member of the Chogyals family. The city boasted of Sinclair's, a five-star hotel, where tea planters were frequently seen nodding to each other. Sevoke Road had innumerable restaurants, eating houses, bars and business establishments. There was much to-ing and fro-ing with army and civil officers, planters and professionals making a stopover. The powers of the deputy commissioner of Darjeeling, under important acts, were vested in the SDM, with whom almost everyone in the areas around the town had something to do.

I had more acquaintances than genuine friends; to them, it was my credentials that mattered, not the cook's largesse or the bearer's well-ordered living room. The SDM's residence also became the watering hole for IAS officers and, being very junior in service, there appeared to be no escape for me, unless I undertook touring in the Naxalbari area.

Often, heinous murders attributed to the Naxalites were reported over the police wireless. The

target of their fury was the governmental machinery and the sahibs of the tea gardens. As I was sitting down to lunch one afternoon, I was informed about a grisly murder, the second in two days, and I found the corpse of a young assistant manager, who had been hacked to death, lying prostrate amidst tea bushes. Often, mutilated bodies of murdered sahibs were discarded across the railway tracks. The tragedy of Naxalbari started haunting me, and I took to frequently motoring to this dangerous area. Policemen accompanied me in shoddy uniform, their potbellies hanging over torn leather belts with the state government's metallic insignia, askew.

During the day, there was a soporific stillness. The old police station buildings, made of wooden planks and with wide verandas, remained silent. There was an air of abandonment about the place. As daytime touring revealed nothing, one evening, with a trusted security officer at the wheel and without beacon or insignia, I drove into the villages to discover broken huts, school buildings without roofs and health centres overgrown with moss and lichen in a poverty-stricken land.

Two lean youths, rifles slung over their bare shoulders, signalled us to stop. The sub-inspector, Dipankar Som, pulled out a weapon; I got out of the jeep and asked them to take me to the house of Jangal Santhal. The dreaded Naxalite leader offered me mahua and a beedi.

'You are a good man. What can you do about our situation?' he asked me.

'What *can* I do about it?' I parried.

Jangal Santhal was aware of my serious concern for the villagers—he was informed regularly about my forays and my official notings. 'This whole system must be blown to smithereens. Let the rivers of blood flow freely,' he said.

Siliguri shared a border with Nepal. In the small Nepalese town of Dhulabari, foreign goods and scotch whisky were freely available. One evening, a curious complaint was brought to my notice: an army subaltern, from Bathinda in Punjab, who had crossed the border for shopping, returned with two bottles of Johnny Walker. The Nepalese police let him pass, but the Indian customs officer was exacting: 'You are allowed just one bottle. Leave the other behind.' The subaltern took a quick decision; he opened the second bottle and gulped down its contents to the last drop, proclaiming: 'There is little you can do about my insides.'

As in the other parts of India, Punjabi sardars had set up business establishments, owned trucks, operated transport services and successful garages as well as restaurants. They were well-off, which provoked resentment and envy, particularly among the clerks attached to my office. At all times, court officials were suspicious and discerned conspiracy in the most innocent initiative. They would huddle together over small cups of sweetened tea at street corners and comment upon the goings-on in Calcutta, London and, most of all, in Russia; the bylanes around the office of the SDO were abuzz with talk of 'biplab' and, after a drink or two, of Shakespeare. The Nepalese displayed joie de vivre; on Sundays and holidays, entire families with their children, pigtails tied neatly in pink and red ribbons, were seen in open trucks, drinking and singing as they drove up the mountains. The tribal population were engaged in menial jobs and looked to Naxalbari for support.

One morning, the local MLA, Mr Biren Bose of the CPM, telephoned and furtively whispered: 'There is tension between the Bengali and Nepalese population on Sevoke Road. Will you accompany me to the spot?'

I readily agreed, for I had police reports about the potential of a volatile law-and-order situation. I suggested that we visit straightaway, to which the MLA agreed. When the legislator and his supporters arrived, we drove straight to the trouble spot. According to a set formula, I placed five

Bengali and five Nepalese gentlemen under arrest and section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was promulgated in the area. After discussions with the leaders concerned, I drove back to the office to get on with the day's business.

I had been brief and my observations terse to disallow protracted argument. Mr Bose wanted the discussions to be followed by an all-party seminar under his aegis. 'After all, I am a three-time MLA,' he told me. As the commotion merged into the prevailing mistrust, I laid the matter to rest. But the next day, 'Nero plays the fiddle, as Rome burns!' proclaimed the local daily, chastising the SDM, Siliguri, for being an 'outsider, out of his senses and a "Hitler".'

My tenure at Siliguri was uneven and full of strange twists and turns. In the freewheeling vibrations of an indeterminate city, without a cohesive history, each day was a new parable which convinced me that, in life, anything is possible.

The official bungalow was located in Hakimpara. In Bengal, there are paras, meaning sectors or colonies, and guris, which are towns or settlements. Hence, next to Hakimpara was Babupara, which housed the clerks of Siliguri Court. Life at the bungalow was uneventful. My cook kept a good table. There was a bearer, Gaje Singh, who had worked in the tea gardens and later with a British colonel; a bachelor, he was accustomed to hold fort, polishing silver and keeping the house in order. Gaje Singh, however, was unsettled by unruly children and, one afternoon, when a colleague's boisterous ward started pounding on my record changer, the bearer was taken ill. 'I will administer smelling salts,' said Miss Crosby, a visiting British spinster from Dr Graham's Homes in Kalimpong. 'I have been carrying a bottle in my bag since 1947.'

One evening, Vikram called on me with a pleasant weather-beaten colonel and I asked them to dinner. Over drink, I learnt that the colonel was a free spirit at the end of a remarkably unsuccessful career in the army, from which he was trying to escape. He told me of his straitened circumstances and wanted 'fire clearance' for a petrol pump. I referred him to the deputy inspector general of the range. As nothing materialized, the colonel hit upon the idea of hosting a dinner in honour of the police officer, before which he invited me to his residence to work out the details.

Upon my arrival, I found the colonel merrymaking, surrounded by young captains and lieutenants who had come with their girlfriends from Darjeeling and Nepal to spend the weekend in Siliguri. The officers were drinking, the girls were singing and there was an air of disorderly levity in the house. I was taken aback and, conscious of my magisterial status and dignity, I beat a hasty retreat.

The colonel told me about the extravagant arrangements he had planned for the police officer. Having heard that the DIG was wrapped in religion and morality, I advised the colonel to invite his wife and children to substitute for his 'friends'. 'This will not be a problem,' said the colonel, a divorcee.

On reaching the officer's flat on the day of the planned dinner, I noticed a large terracotta Ganapati, with vermillion markings, fixed above the door. The living room was fragrant with incense. In one corner, there was a replica of the Taj Mahal; in another, a Japanese doll in a glass case; and money plants trained along the walls. There were photographs of smiling children, the colonel and his bride, the colonel being commissioned and a lady graduating, in her cloak and cardboard hat. The DIG and his wife were entranced by the religious fervour and simplicity of the lady of the house, who kept her head covered in the pallu of her sari throughout and talked only about the Divine Mother and different forms of the devi, from Chandi, Bhavani, Durga and Kali to Kamakhya.

The dinner had been carefully planned. The colonel restricted himself to a glass of juice while pouring huge pegs of Dimple scotch for the DIG, changing the glass with every drink. Fine sherry in a decanter was brought out for the lady. The evening ended with the hostess rendering a classical

bhajan in *Raag Shyam Kalyan*. The DIG and his wife left, tearfully promising to return soon.

The colonel then decided to celebrate what was apparently a fait accompli. Youngsters reappeared and danced to pop music into the early hours. It was already 2.30 a.m., and I decided to rest for a few hours before returning to my bungalow. Around dawn, I was rudely awakened by an army subedar, who asked me to vacate the mattress on which I was reclining. I then discovered a team of orderlies removing pictures, plants, furniture, crockery and the terracotta Ganapati to return them to the mess under the supervision of the intrepid colonel. I wished him good fortune and left.

Two weeks later, the colonel informed me that he had put in his papers. He was now free from a military regimen and the proud owner of a petrol pump.

In the puzzling chiaroscuro of uncertainty of Siliguri, I found strength—indeed, solace—in my Bengali teacher. Like all babalog, my knowledge of Indian languages was poor. At school, in the old days, a fine was imposed on children who conversed in a 'native' language; at home, it had been English alone through which we communicated. A smattering of Bengali just would not do for a civil servant; so, after a painstaking search, a suitable tutor to instruct me in the finer nuances of the language was discovered in Siliguri.

Mr B. N. Chakraborty, a lean gentleman in his seventies, dressed in starched white apparel, strode into my bungalow early one morning. He had been advised by the 'English Office' of the collectorate to train me in appropriate application of the language. When I offered him a cup of tea, he said, 'Horlicks please, if it is going.' Lowering himself into a chair, Bishnu Babu laid down the ground rule: 'We shall cleave to the classics, for there can be no shortcuts or redefinition.'

My tutor had studied Greek literature and had a tremendous sense of history. Everything that happened or was worthy of happening, according to him, would happen 'theek shei shamay'—just then. He had also internalized a sense of the immediate, for the fiat of the sarkar had to be executed 'tatkhanat'—without a moment's delay. Bishnu Babu was determined to ingrain classical Bangla in me, the exquisite language of bejewelled zamindars. We progressed slowly in syntax, grammar, inflection and elocution. In the process, my tutor escorted me to the majestic peaks scaled by British administrators in India. 'This life is a passage. It is a dream,' said Bishnu Babu. 'Do not waste time, not a moment.' Peering at me over his horn-rimmed spectacles, he continued: 'At all times, keep your distance. We are now in the kalyug, where everyone is doing the worst that he can.'

Awestruck, I meekly said: 'You have witnessed the empire in its full splendour.'

'Yes, indeed,' said my tutor. 'I will now tell you about the last British deputy commissioner of Darjeeling, who at his farewell accepted a bouquet of roses and presented them to me, stating: "Bishnu Babu, janen, ei zila ta apni chaliyechhen!"—Do you know, it is you who have administered the district? He then handed me an envelope—and can you imagine what it contained? It was the key to a house in Hakimpara that he had bought for my retirement. At sunset, the district magistrate saluted the flag outside his court and left for England.'

Despite Siliguri's strategic importance, it was under the overall administrative control of the deputy commissioner of Darjeeling, whose office was two hours up the hill. The brunt of day-to-day decision-making, often in turbulent circumstances, thus lay with the SDM, Siliguri, and I had to take on-the-spot decisions under the threat of their being disapproved. The DC, S. Bannerjee, I was told, had a brilliant academic record and was close to the centres of power in the state secretariat. However, his malevolence is worth recalling. One insidious entry he made in my annual confidential report noted: '. . . apparently his state of health was good'—at a time when I was 6'2", in the prime of youth and could run over ten kilometres in a continuous athletic stride. Another of the entries described me as 'a tall and determined personality with a brilliant mind, with excellent public

relations, a good heart and vision', and then concluded by stating 'but he drinks like a truck driver.'

The DC was always trying to size me up, for he was puzzled by my straightforwardness. He himself epitomized the perversity of an intelligent mind that revelled in pulling down individuals and structures. Under a thinly concealed veil of bonhomie, he was perpetually looking to unearth a conspiracy. He was a regular visitor to my residence and, on seeing me, would immediately want to 'get down to business'. A calculating individual, he never displayed any emotion. While capable of consuming the better part of a bottle, from the first drink his refrain was: 'Just pour a little, I am getting drunk.' He would excessively praise a person whom he planned to decimate. When he wanted to favour a proposal, he would start by noting against it and then listing out the available options; analysing the merits of each, he scored out all but the one he had in mind, describing it to be: 'The best, in the given circumstance'.

Often, after the DC left my residence, I wondered about the nature of man. If the view that man is basically selfish and concerned with self-preservation, and that life is solitary and brutish, held centre-stage, then there would never have been the selfless dedication of the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, or a Mother Teresa lifting lepers into her arms from the foetid slums of Calcutta. Having been brought up in the shadow of elders who emanated kindness, hospitality and good humour, I could never understand the perpetual manoeuvrings and reptilian nature of many of the civil servants I encountered. Many of my colleagues, it appeared, revelled in the misfortune, pain and embarrassment they could cause to others. Progress, prosperity and the happiness of man were considered passé.

The superintendent of police, Mr Sharma, became a close friend. He was direct man and genuinely concerned about the people he met. He had the refined manners of Lucknow, his hometown, and an aesthetically inclined Bengali wife, Radha, who was a marvellous cook. Theirs was a happy household where I stopped over during my visits to Darjeeling. Mr Sharma, his wife and I were befriended by Sonam Gyaltsen, a local aristocrat from Darjeeling, who had married a Bengali, a coalmine owner's daughter. He was a tea planter in charge of the Glenburn Tea Estate and knew every vale and stream of the mountains. We would sometimes gaze at the moonlight refracted from the dazzling peaks of Kanchenjunga, glasses in hand, standing in the lawn of the police officer's bungalow.

Everyone in the Siliguri region, more than in others, was seeking out a reason to live. The tea-garden ladies competed in flower shows and in keeping beautiful homes. The Englishwomen had been replaced by their Indian counterparts, many from Punjab. While the men spoke in a curious accent, finding it difficult to hold the baton left behind by the sahibs, their ladies—without household duties, with children in fashionable boarding schools and having forsaken their filial responsibilities a thousand miles away—took private lessons in English and ballroom dancing. Tracing connections with Indian royalty, followed by links with members of the Indian Civil Service, who were serving governors or had just passed away, was a major occupation. While the men became experts at planting and tasting tea out of professional necessity, their ladies spent time in differentiating between wines. Sometimes, the services of a wine master would be requisitioned to give instructions on how to roll wine over the tongue and imbibe its bouquet. The army officers posted in the area would hum around their mess. Both tea planters and army men were hard drinkers, and the result of late-night revelry often turned the vibrant colours of friendship into foul abuse and fisticuffs. Licentious love affairs were the order of the day. It was a carnal, thoughtless existence, and slowly it dawned on me that I would have to restrict myself to the confines of my bungalow.

Vikram had a fascination for North Bengal. He had lost his initial reticence and had become garrulous, with opinions that he aired loudly. As the evening progressed, he would become belligerent; looking towards the court house, he would repeatedly declare that soon India, like Pakistan, would be placed under martial law. He often boasted of the number of girls he had 'made out' with and told me that 'beauty after beauty' would do anything to be seen with him at a party. 'I shall get married next April and migrate to Canada,' he declared one day, without indicating what he would do in that country. I marvelled at the transformation in his persona. Alongside, owing to indulgent eating and drinking, his sylph-like physique too had been left behind in the rainforest.

Vikram would ride into the SDM's bungalow on a motorbike and go into paroxysms of rage when stopped at the gate by a policeman. 'I will teach you bastards how to hold a rifle,' he would shout at the constable on duty. Within the bungalow, he would scoff at the strains of Mozart and Brahms and play torrid bhangra numbers on the music box. He would order the wizened bearer and cook to dance to its beat or to visit his home in Punjab to turn out a soufflé. As each bacchanalia starting with Vikram's visit ended in disaster, I was left wondering where I had gone wrong.

I was beholden to Vikram for his having stood by me during my days as a trainee magistrate and held him in great affection and regard. But the relationship had slowly disintegrated into some kind of self-flagellation, and I was unwilling to accept that the friendship had ended. He would sometimes arrive with a bottle of scotch and tall brass lamps fashioned out of spent artillery shells. Heedless of my stringent orders of having nothing to do with the marketplace or its eating houses, he took to calling for butter chicken and curries from Punjabi hotels and getting arms and driving licences issued or renewed for friends and relatives. In a short while, he had opened up the sanctity of the hakim's bungalow to ridicule.

'Get rid of that scoundrel,' was Mother's command over a long-distance call. When there was no change in the situation, I was told that she talked to the army chief, who ordered Vikram Singh's transfer to Jodhpur in distant Rajasthan. I was flooded with letters from Jodhpur, both threatening and lachrymose. This spent friendship of mine took a heavy toll on me and would cast a shadow over my life and career for a long time.

I had grown to like Siliguri by now. The bungalow had become comfortable. The drawing room had one or two rare aquatints and some carpets had been brought from Delhi. With cane sofa sets and soft-coloured drapes, the overall look was tastefully informal. Mother had visited me for a fortnight and put the house in order. The dining room and the bedrooms too had been done up and the domestic staff was finely tuned. Whenever I had the time, I would draw a chaise longue onto the terrace and gaze at the Eastern Himalayas and Darjeeling's twinkling lights.

It was a lonely existence, akin to my regimented childhood. Always a fitful sleeper, I walked along the parapet at odd hours, recalling the imperial city of Delhi and its latticed red sandstone and marble monuments. I would remember the associates of my school and college days, all of whom had been left behind. I continued in office day after day, with the increasing understanding that in the absence of vision the country would continue to flounder. Thirty-one years after independence, we still had princes and paupers to cater to, and revenue collection, development and maintaining the law was a continuous exercise in fire-fighting.

I tried to help out petitioners and where immediate relief was not at hand, I would give a date on which they should return, by which time I would call for the papers and attempt a solution. I knew that Siliguri was not my home. But I had tried to remove the barriers between the public and the SDM, and there were many who recognized me, and I could identify on the streets men and women who had

visited me in office. Owing to its ongoing law-and-order difficulties, the SP had to inspect Siliguri frequently. When Mr Sharma and his wife did not stay with me, they would camp in the rest house within the compound of the Siliguri police station. One evening, I had gone across for supper with them, but after a heated argument, I decided to walk back to my bungalow in Hakimpara. As I was crossing the railway line, a little unsteady after drink, an old rickshaw-puller helped me into the seat saying, 'Ashoon, Hakim Sahib, ami apnake bari pouchhe di.'—Come, Hakim Sahib, let me escort you to your residence.

But as with relationships, there is a situational timeframe for postings too. Though I had grown to understand Siliguri and had sent up a proposal to the government to upgrade the post of SDM to that of additional deputy commissioner, keeping in mind the town's growing importance, and had started politicking in Calcutta so that I could continue at the station, as the season turned for my second Durga puja in the town, I knew that it was time for me to leave.

One evening, a party was in progress at the bungalow. As there were just a few weeks left before my departure from the area I had grown to love, I had invited several people to dinner. The dining room had been cleared for dancing and the evening built up to a joyous cadence. Sometime after midnight, loud shouting was heard in the guard room: a drunken Vikram Singh had wandered into the garden, having gained entry into the bungalow unannounced. After an acrimonious and violent exchange with the guards, he was turned out of the gate. A day later, there was a lightning strike by the police force in Siliguri. Vikram Singh had, allegedly, assaulted a sentry on duty.

The matter was widely misrepresented in the press and was the final nail in the coffin of my relationship with Siliguri. I received my transfer orders over the police wireless, and my replacement arrived from Calcutta the next day.

I handed over charge and became a stranger in the city.

5

The London of the East

After Siliguri, my next posting was to a nondescript station in South Bengal. As I had to write the language examination for confirmation in service and for promotions, I went on leave and moved to the state guesthouse in Calcutta.

Bishnu Babu, my Bengali tutor, had told me to pray at the Kalighat Temple. And so I went.

I found the narrow streets and alleys leading to the shrine crowded with pandas bamboozling devotees, offering them a guided tour. A jostling crowd of rudderless individuals was waiting for darshan. The air was heavily perfumed with incense and camphor. It took me sometime to make my way to the entrance of the temple. As I approached the sanctum, I found the doors shut. With no other commitment and nowhere to go to, I sat on a ledge in the courtyard. The head priest asked me to return later. I considered walking the short distance to Park Street for a bowl of Chinese soup and, perhaps, a glass of chilled beer—drink, I told myself, was not alien to worship, it enlarged the heart and encouraged devotion. While I remained sitting on the edge of uncertainty, the priest offered me something to eat. I declined.

'Young man, it is prasad.'

When I refused once again, he looked me over. 'Where are you working?' asked the aged Brahmin. 'Why do you not partake of some sustenance? You have to wait for another two hours for darshan.'

I answered his second question first. 'I accompanied my sister to the temple of Lord Venkateshwara in Andhra Pradesh, and found that it is easier to focus on the divine on an empty stomach.' I smiled. 'I am a civil servant and have been serving in North Bengal for a few years.'

The old purohit sat down beside me. 'What is your aim in life? What do you wish to achieve?'

'I hope I can be of some service to mankind,' was my reply. Recalling the majestic gateway, guarded by elephants, at the residence of the Jalpaiguri commissioner, I added: 'I would like to be posted as a commissioner.'

Two hours passed in this manner, and I received darshan of Devi Kali Mata just as the doors of the temple reopened. I looked again and again at the idol, its slanting eyes lit up by the arati, and left the temple. On my way out, the head priest blessed me: 'You will be a commissioner six or seven times.'

Sitting in the dark corner of a nearby restaurant, it struck me that the devi's idol was—indeed, the

millions of idols and statues of Hindu gods and goddesses were—focal points of thought, that the rationale of ritual was to inspire the mind to explore the sublime. The attempts of the Turkish sultans, the Mughal emperors and the maulanas and imams to destroy Hindu temples and idols were in fact attempts to pulverize Hindu thought into submission. But though the idols were smashed, the temples broken and the pandits put to the sword, Hindu thought did not perish, for it was not confined within the idol. As my head grew heavy with thought and with drink, I returned to my sparsely furnished room, promising myself an evening of mirth and merriment after the examinations were done with.

I wrote the Bengali papers in a decrepit old building. As I sat at the ancient desk which had perhaps seen many pass into civil service legend, my heart was filled with gratitude to Bishnu Babu. I was told later that my answers to routine questions had made the examiners sit up and take notice.

After the examinations, a colleague from Punjab and I decided to go pub-crawling. As we walked towards our fourth bar, a rickshaw-puller signalled us into a dark corner. Without a word, we took a ride to the inner parts of one of Calcutta's infamous red-light areas. The madam was courteous and the girls looked beautiful with their make-up. A round of drinks was offered, and we listened to a couple of thumris that bore the flavour of Lucknow. Thereafter, we moved into different cubicles with our partners. Around 2.30 a.m., the madam, with a Bihari bouncer, escorted us to the exit. My Rolex watch was consecrated to the evening.

The next morning, I called on Mr J. C. Talukdar of the board of revenue and expressed the desire that a room be allotted to me in the Great Eastern Hotel, which had been acquired by the state government for a VIP guesthouse.

'Robin, you should really look after yourself and stay at Alipore,' said the gentleman. 'I will ask that no one interfere in your nocturnal wanderings.'

A scion of one of the landed aristocratic families of Bengal, Mr Talukdar, with his leonine good looks, silver hair and athletic frame, was a portrait painter's delight. He was also a man with a compassionate heart. He silently helped out the Sisters of Charity and would often be seen with Mother Teresa, working on schemes for rehabilitating the poor. During my many visits to Calcutta, I had become a second son in his palatial home in Alipore, the playground of Bengal's displaced royalty. Despite his kind offer, I declined this time to make my residence there.

The Saturday I checked into a room at the hotel, there was a sudden knock on the door. Still fragrant with the perfumes of North Bengal, I was quelling my exhaustion with deep draughts of Gilbey's gin, with a friend. I reluctantly opened the door to find a gaudily dressed middle-aged lady accompanied by two girls. We were not surprised—the Great Eastern had that kind of decadent ambience. The ladies made themselves comfortable without any ceremony, slipping into couches and joining us in our libations. As happens in life when people, however disparate, drink together, walls collapsed rapidly, barriers vanished.

'What savoury do you suggest with the drink?' I politely enquired.

'They all know what we prefer,' said the older woman. The girls smiled coyly.

The door opened again, and trays of chilli chicken and fish tikka were laid out on the coffee table.

I never oppose situations; I become part of them. It was clear that there was a calligraphic unity between the waiters, the well-used furniture, the ladies and their practised gestures. I was happy to enjoy the moments as they unfolded. However, our ebullience by now had diminished, courtesy of the countless tumblers of gin—I discovered that evening that gin is a depressant. We started talking about life.

The older lady told us that she could sing, she could dance, and she now operated a renowned

kotha in Sonagachhi. In her youth, when she had been travelling in the erstwhile kingdom of Murshidabad, a rich zamindar had heard her sing and bought her from her parents. She lived happily with him in a mansion by the Ganges. As age advanced, she was granted a handsome pension and a house in Calcutta and was superannuated. Thereafter, she set up her own establishment. The two girls were her 'wards'. They remained mostly silent, but they made polite gestures and now and then looked at us out of the corner of their eyes.

I was amazed at the madam's knowledge of classical music. She had trained in the mujra and explained to me the divergence between shastriya sangeet in northern India and in the Punjab region. She said that she found the Punjabi rhythm interesting when she was despondent, describing it as 'chanchal'. The eastern school, she told me, was like the slow-moving wide rivers of Bengal. Her favourite raag was *Chandrakauns* and her favourite singer Onkar Nath Thakur.

According to her, all actions were amoral and her profession was as honourable as the career of a civil servant or a military officer. The only difference, she said, was that, though tawaifs were greatly sought after and recognized, they were not referred to in polite conversation.

We gave up attempting any physicality, for I had crossed that stage. My police offer friend too had disintegrated with drink. There may have been the desire, but the ability had left us. Instead, we drank more and talked of many things.

One of the younger girls told me that during Durga puja the previous year she had once tried to enter a pandal to propitiate the goddess. There were tricksters with lit torches between clenched teeth dancing on the street and pious old men who tried to elbow her. She had had to beat a hasty retreat. 'Life,' she said, 'is an endless theatre, in which we are spectators. We can participate only during the night.'

I felt a strange stirring of sorrow at her words. I turned towards the madam and said, 'I will be your brother from now onwards.'

She looked at me. 'I shall tie a rakhi on you.' We exchanged addresses, and she tore a strip of cloth from the hem of her petticoat and tied it around my wrist. I do not remember anything beyond this point.

The sun rises early in the east, but it was still dark when I woke up, feeling as if I were reeling out of a nightmare. I looked under my pillow for a kerchief and noticed that our gold chains and wallets were missing. I awakened my friend.

'Have a large drink,' he said. 'It will part the clouds.'

'What happened?' I wondered out loud. And then I saw a strip of cloth around my wrist and recollection returned.

As I inhaled the torrential downpour of the monsoon rain, I could hear a chorus chanting in the street below: 'Bolo Hori, Hori bol. Ram naam satya hai. Bolo Hori, Hori bol. Ram naam satya hai.'

Reluctant to take up an assignment until I was promoted, I extended my leave and moved in with Mr Arun Sen and his family in their flat on Hungerford Street. A follower of the theosophist J. Krishnamurti, Mr Sen was the son of a distinguished chief justice of the Madhya Pradesh High Court. His wife was the daughter of a civil servant; her brother, S. M. Murshed, was an IAS officer of the 1956 batch and her great-uncle, Syed Fazlul Haq, married to the princess of Dacca, was at one time the prime minister of the composite Bengal Province. While she was known as Begum Atiya Murshed, to official functions she was invited as Mrs Sen. I called her Didi. The Sens had a lovely child who was then five years old. After Rubina, whose uniforms I pressed with an electric iron on

the dining table, struggling to straighten the pleats of the skirt, I was the most pampered member of the family. A joyous peace pervaded the Sen household, and their kindness and hospitality, for weeks on end, remains etched in my memory.

Mr Sen, a principal secretary in the Bengal government, was highly regarded for his intellect and honesty. He believed in giving up material possessions to free the mind and the spirit, and I think his thought processes travelled between Sankhya philosophy, Sufism and the influence of J. Krishnamurti. Didi was the head of the department of Persian and Urdu at Lady Brabourne College, founded by her mother Begum Hasina Murshed, OBE, the first female parliamentary secretary in the Bengal Assembly. Didi also had command over French and was a connoisseur of the ghazal and different forms of Indian classical music. Mindful of my sensitivities, she always had the dinner table laid formally, and meals were served by Munir Mian, a retainer who had retired from the Calcutta Club. Then, late into the night, Didi would discuss with me Ibsen, Kafka, Nijinsky and the intricacies of ballet.

Strangely, I recall that the white bone china dinner plates had a border of cobalt encircled by a line of thin gold, similar to the crockery in the house of a female friend in Egypt. Without a doubt, the British had held their empire together through a thin crust of dark skinned 'Englishmen' who drew their strength from titles announced on the Queen's birthday honours list. I remember wondering whether I should write a thesis on how the empire had been bound together by 'Humpty Dumpty' and other nursery rhymes taught in missionary schools across the globe.

Calcutta was enriched by a large population of Muslims. The city had marvellous eating houses where one could sample Mughlai parathas and a range of kebabs. But the veneer of secularism that I witnessed in the upper echelons of Calcutta society erupted sporadically, through subtle nuances in conversation rather than any violent exchange. I found a deep distrust between Hindus and Muslims alike. There appeared to be an underlying resentment and in-built communalism that I found difficult to understand thanks to my anglicized parents—I had been brought up by an English governess and had studied under the tutelage of British masters. I found the idols in the puja pandals garish and lacking finesse, and the ululating decibels of worship disturbed my sleep. On the other hand, I was comfortable with the polished manners of Muslims of all classes. Nonetheless, when Muslims poked fun at the puja, I found my hackles raised. I had yet to comprehend that there was, between the sublime thoughts contained in Vedanta and the many rituals practised by Hindus, a dark chasm, a gaping hiatus.

When the doorbell rang in Mr Sen's flat one Eid, and I found myself faced with sacrificial meat that was still quivering, I felt queasy—unmindful of the fragrant mutton biryani that I had partaken of the previous evening or the shami kebab I had eaten an hour ago. I retired to my room and lay down, my mind wandering into the timeless streets of Benaras, resonating with temple bells, perfumed with rose petals and marigold. I belonged nowhere, I told myself as I packed my bags.

Born in Delhi and brought up in the sheltered regimen of a senior army officer's bungalow, I found myself on the fascinating path of discovering 'the second London', established on the banks of the Hooghly by Job Charnock in 1690. I marvelled at the divergent strains in Calcutta history. From the records, it appeared that the first Englishmen who settled in the city were greatly influenced by Indian customs and manners. They attended nautch parties, smoked hookahs, enjoyed the recitation of Persian poetry and lived with native mistresses. In fact, over the years, the nautch emerged as the most popular amusement for all classes of people. The nawabs, the rajas and the nobility maintained

their own sets of girls and musicians. It was a prerequisite for all festivals, and no entertainment for Europeans was considered complete without it. According to early accounts, there was nothing obscene in the performances of the nautch girls. The dancing girls were well-versed in Persian poetry and could hold their own in conversation with the elite. I was fascinated also by other little nuggets of Calcutta's history: for instance, one of the direct descendants of the emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, it was said, ran a small tea stall near the railway station.

As I was at a loose end, I would, from time to time, accept invitations from strangers to venture into the unknown. One evening, Mr Jaiswal, a Marwari gentleman who had offered to help me get posted to a sought-after district, invited me to dine at a well-known hotel. The wealthy Congressman, I could judge from the start, was parsimonious. After a round of drinks, he started ordering the evening meal. He turned towards me and enquired: 'Ek roti ke derh roti?' Would I have one roti or one-and-a-half?

Daunted by the prospect of spending the next few hours with him, I ordered another round of drinks. 'On me, this time,' I said. Jaiswal was pleased and gulped down the whisky. After a few moments, I told him that I had not seen much of Calcutta and spoke vaguely of youth a passing phenomenon. Perhaps we could go to Sonagachhi and watch a mujra, I suggested.

'I know just the place,' said Jaiswal with a lascivious smile. 'Calcutta is the only city in India,' he proclaimed. He then took me to a kotha where, to my surprise, the finest scotch was being served on salvers by beautiful young women. With the gallantry of the disinterested, I showered them with compliments and some money. This was an indication to the Marwari gentleman to break loose and, thereafter, he stopped counting the drinks. He had perhaps, it occurred to me, not encountered such an exotic ambience before.

After about an hour, Jaiswal started tugging at the veil of one of the dancers, pulling her towards him. There was a deathly silence. The music stopped, the girls withdrew into the inner chambers and a tall, turbaned Pathan presented Jaiswal with a bill. This he quickly paid and was promptly turned out and hurled down the stairs.

Almost twenty years later, while briefing a Cabinet minister on subsidiary questions, in the Parliament House Annexe, I came across Mr Jaiswal. Dressed in spotless khadi, he was now a member of Parliament.

Unlike in other state capitals, IAS officers posted to Calcutta were allotted functional flats, arranged cheek by jowl, in a colony on Ironside Road. There were distinct groups and, in the evenings, different sets of officers gathered to drink, play cards and conspire against each other. Then, there was the Calcutta of the 'box-wallahs', people who lived the high life in large, expensively furnished flats in fashionable neighbourhoods. There was limited interaction between them and senior civil servants, for the great colossus—Writers' Building—kept a careful watch.

As I meandered through the city, I was promoted to the post of additional district magistrate of West Dinajpur, with headquarters at Balurghat. This was possibly the worst posting that a 'direct' IAS officer could be given; after the distasteful requiem to my tenure at Siliguri, I got the impression that Writers' Building had decided to return me to the cold storage.

Everything about the new posting was blue: the walls of the VIP room in the circuit house, the official car, the overall mood of the area. It was truly the back of beyond.

The working circumstance was indeterminate: an additional district magistrate, sitting next to the district magistrate at the headquarters, was not an independent entity. There were only some land revenue cases to be dealt with and the occasional review of development schemes. Mr Aiyer, the district magistrate, was from South India. He wore caste marks on his forehead and with the

exactitude of an accountant confined himself to official talk and the percentage of poverty.

I would reach the office at 11 a.m. and leave for lunch at 1.30 p.m. The cooks, who used to turn out Anglo-Indian cuisine, had refused to accompany me to Balurghat, and I had settled down to omelettes, turned out of duck eggs, and a vast repertoire of fish delicacies. This post seemed a sinecure, for one received salutes and a salary. There was no lacking in creature comforts and there was no work.

One morning, Mother telephoned me and, on discerning my predicament, told me to return to Delhi. We were to fly to New York within a fortnight. But the state government refused to grant me leave.

My predecessor in office, an Oriya gentleman by the name of Mahapatra, who had been completing a book of poetry, had lived at Balurghat for about three years. He had suddenly been catapulted to the turbulent district of the 24 Parganas, with government orders to send a daily situation report on the deteriorating law-and-order condition of the area. He would ring me up after a drink every evening and were eloquent about the heavenly peace and stillness that had enveloped his soul at Balurghat, to which he wanted to return to complete his book.

We struck a deal. He moved back, and I speedily left for Bagdogra, the nearest airport.

'I shall not work any more at this job,' I told Mother, sinking into the comfort of an armchair in her drawing room.

'Please check the flight timings once again,' was the reply as she handed me two tickets.

6

Marriages Are Made in Heaven

My mother lived alone in Delhi. Elderly and widowed, yet filled with joie de vivre. She had graduated from the renowned Kinnaird College of Lahore and then married a member of the Indian Medical Service. Owing to her inner strength and magnificent personality, she exuded, at all times, confidence and clarity of purpose.

Mother had set out for herself a daily routine that she followed with military precision. A morning walk, followed by exercise. On three days of the week, she played canasta or mahjong. Lunch was served between 1 and 1.30 p.m. Thereafter, the house was shut down, the curtains drawn and the servants packed off. After a cup of tea at 4 p.m., she dressed in French chiffon and drove to the Delhi Gymkhana Club, where a paploo session started by 5.15 p.m. In later years, she would have a young servant, Ghafur Mohamad, with her to shuffle and deal the cards. At 8.30 p.m., she would sit at the dining table at home for a light English meal and then read for an hour or two before retiring for the night.

'Don't you think you should get married now?' she asked me one morning after our return from New York. 'Else you will be left alone at the end.'

Her words caught me off-guard. 'I am quite happy, Mother, and I have you to look after me,' I said, dodging the issue. It was a worrisome prospect to consider introducing an alien element into our comfortable existence.

'You are a tall, handsome boy, from a recognized family, a member of the premier service,' said Mother. 'Here are some letters from former rulers who would like you to meet their daughters.' She explained that some of the erstwhile rajas and maharajas from Punjab, including Patiala, Jind and Nabha, sought matches in the administrative services, particularly after 1947. 'The list is endless,' she said, 'and it is understandable, for they would like an arrangement in the changing circumstance to have access to the present centres of power. However, try to avoid these kinds of offers. Palaces are full of intrigue, and I want you to live happily, with a confident partner, not lying at the edge of a faded carpet, golden goblet in hand.' After a moment, she added: 'I cannot be around forever, and I want a secure person to look after you when I leave.'

I looked at the letters. They were crested and penned in archaic English, written in black ink on richly textured stationery, with embossed emblems at the top. I then saw letters from army generals and former ICS officers, addressed to Mother, on the subject of my marriage. A tall bundle of

missives, from industrialists and businessmen, perched precariously on the edge of her writing desk, inching towards a dustbin.

In the prime of a youth that had been weaned on victuals of every hue for years, one moonlit night, I found myself holding hands with a stocky lady, more to steady myself than out of romantic intent. As we ambled through the Japanese Garden ahead of Delhi's Intercontinental Hotel and as the evening changed its hues, we took in the beauty of illusory Japanese bridges and sparkling waterways as we passed over a pond edged with weeping willow trees. I think we may have spoken of wedlock. The lady, of an intellectual mien, had an Austrian mother who would simultaneously read poetry in Spanish and English and dance the waltz on pencil-heeled shoes. She had served as a female brigadier in the British secret service during the Second World War and, having reportedly escaped from Nazi Germany hugging the undercarriage of a refugee train, generally took matters in her stride.

Unlike most commitments made by drinking partners, which evaporate with the morning mist, the promises of the previous night's bacchanalia proved a spectral reality, for early next morning, as Mother and I were being served chhota hazari in our rooms, a sleepy-eyed nafar announced that three visitors had arrived. It was the father, the lady brigadier in a gown and their daughter, arms akimbo. This was followed by expansive bouquets of passionate red carnations and roses in a wicker basket, rounded off with a case of chilled champagne that was placed firmly on the dining table.

'She is a bright girl. Has French and German. Makes a perfect cheese soufflé. The only child, and an IAS officer to boot,' said Mother sadly, adding in a disinterested voice: 'Marriages are made in heaven.'

Anoushka had been allocated to the Union Territory cadre of the IAS, with a promising future of postings in Delhi. She had earlier been posted in Tawang, a border area of Arunachal Pradesh, where, she told me, administrators enjoyed vast judicial powers over the thinly spread out population, which often thought they were under the suzerainty of China.

She was the only child of her parents and well provided for. Her father too had been a promoted member of the service and had had a successful career. He wielded considerable clout, for he had, over the years, served in many influential positions. He owned a large house in Delhi's Golf Links, where the family lived. Also, he was 'Lord' of an estate of orchard land beyond Simla and owned several flats in the Ansal Buildings in Connaught Circus. Anoushka's mother owned a flat in London. Beyond this, we were unaware of the lineage or of her family, and it was of no interest—as with the marriage proposal or the ceremony that followed. I do recall with clarity her father repeatedly telling me: 'In all my life, I never, ever told a lie.'

The marriage was formalized through a brief ceremony in the Civil Court, which was over in twenty minutes. There was one celebration—a well-attended cocktail party at the Golf Links residence, and the glitterati of the city were seen sipping drinks on the lawn. My friend K. C. Singh, a member of India's Corps Diplomatique, had motored down from Chandigarh and was requested to take photographs. Years later, he would tell me that the camera was sans a roll, for he had sensed even then the fate of this marriage.

On my wedding night, at the Claridges Hotel in Delhi, I had had too much to drink and the marriage was not consummated. Anoushka then hit upon the idea of making a visit to Kashmir, declaring: 'Anyone who is anything honeymoons in Srinagar, if not the Swiss Alps.'

Within a few days, we were lodged in a splendid houseboat, surrounded by flowering lotus, on the Dal Lake. There was a smoking area, an expensively furnished drawing room, a dining room and two bedrooms. Anoushka looked at the lights flickering in the mountain villages and outlined the wonderful life that lay ahead. Unconvinced, I told her that there were taller mountains and larger

lakes.

At midnight, I walked to the prow of the houseboat and, head heavy with drink, engaged the young green-eyed hanji in conversation. 'Is marriage necessary? How does one succeed?'

Holding my hand to steady my wayward step, he led me to the bedroom. 'Your honour has come here to make love.'

The marriage was consummated at dawn.

Anoushka was born in London and had studied at Tara Hall, an exclusive boarding school in Simla. Thereafter, she topped Delhi University from the Indraprastha College, winning a gold medal for academic excellence. She had a good knowledge of French and, without tapering fingers, could play the piano lustily. She loved the mountains and would, at will, take off on long drives to her orchard.

Shortly after our wedding, Anoushka suggested I return to my office in Bengal as she was returning to hers in distant Tawang. She had moved an application for changing my IAS cadre from West Bengal to the Union Territory. She bought a grey Ambassador car that she booked in Arunachal Pradesh, which had more cars than roads; the vehicles, therefore, were heavily discounted. Strangely, after all these years, I still remember the number plate: ARK 746.

The girl I had married was a gifted individual. She could motor through the length and breadth of the subcontinent without showing any sign of tiredness. She loved Mughlai food. A committed carnivore, she would edge out vegetables and salads to the extremities of her plate. She was also a marvellous cook and turned out heavily buttered European cuisine focusing on goulash and garlic chops, which she turned again and again in milk over a low flame. She was, however, heavy-handed with cheese and wine and the mutton would, with all the seasoning, sometimes taste like a pudding. Anoushka also had a multifaceted personality: she was rough with the domestic staff; at the same time, she ingratiated herself with superiors, and thus one good posting in the capital city followed another. And the fulsome magistrate exuded a somewhat distasteful sense of prosperity and was extravagant with money.

On our way back from Calcutta, after I took leave of Bengal, Anoushka and I stopped overnight in Varanasi in a disintegrating palatial mansion overlooking the Ganges; we were guests of the maharaja of Burdwan.

I had got to know the Burdwan family very well during my many visits to Calcutta, and it is an association that I will always cherish. Their ancestors had come to Bengal during the reign of Aurangzeb. They were Kapoors who originally hailed from Amritsar in Punjab and often married their sons to the daughters of Punjab's royalty. My friend Karuna Devi lived in Burdwan House, a large mansion in the heart of the city, where there were on many evenings salons comprising poets, writers and intellectuals. Her brother Henry was the yuvraj, with the formal name of Sadaychand Mehtab. Of all the time that I spent with Henry, the most memorable perhaps was the evening when he decided that it was time to get me 'married'. Amidst a party of friends, I 'proposed' to a pretty receptionist. The lady 'accepted', and this was followed by several rounds of champagne. Henry outlined for me the architecture of a happy future and the 'wedding' was fixed for the midnight hour. A little before then, fortunately, I passed out and awakened the next morning gazing at the movement of mosquitoes on the ceiling of Burdwan House, still a bachelor.

Not so with Anoushka.

Though somewhat bulbous, Anoushka, on a first meeting, made a great impact. We attended several parties in Calcutta and she was well received. At a salon in Burdwan Palace, a former chief

secretary's wife hobbled in on crutches, a malicious smile painted on her wizened face, and whispered into Anoushka's ear, pointing at me with her stick: 'Er bajaarey khoob bhalo naam nei.' I did not, apparently, enjoy a very good reputation. That elderly dowager had ruled the roost in Bengal for a very long time. Once a film actress, she lived in great splendour near the lakes. Some two years before, she had suggested that I marry her granddaughter; that proposal, which I had not seriously considered, was never repeated. The grand dame, having now made her point to my new bride, left the room immediately, her crutch striking the staircase with the regularity of a clock.

Like me, Anoushka was the child of old age. Her father had retired long ago and was working as an advisor to the Ansal Group, a construction company engaged in demolishing Lutyens' skyline to erect skyscrapers. Her mother went for walks, poetry and reading sessions, played cards and maintained a well-ordered house. They were a nice couple who now wanted grandchildren.

I had by now begun to feel sorry for Anoushka, for she had made a wrong choice. I had no physical attraction for her, and particularly disliked the way in which she would draw the bedroom curtains close. I had begun to feel like I was trapped in a locked room. While I told her about the grandeur of Persepolis, of Persian kings who pre-dated Islam by a thousand years, of the compelling legend of 'Satyamev Jayate' inscribed on an Ashokan pillar, she would talk about the promises made to her for bettering her career by Tytler and Sajjan Kumar, contemporary politicians from Delhi's hinterland.

Our meeting points were smoking and drinking, and we would put by several packets and bottles within the week.

7

In the Corridors of Power

A deputation to the Central Government was a time-consuming procedure. A list of officers from different states was collated by the Union department of personnel and circulated to the Central ministries. Anoushka's parents knew a renowned lawyer with access to Mr L. K. Advani, who helped in my appointment as an undersecretary in the ministry of civil aviation and tourism. I was placed in charge of the desk that controlled the directorate general of civil aviation. My office was in a long corridor-like room which I shared with another officer from the Kerala cadre; he was in charge of Air India and Indian Airlines. The room was sparsely furnished and a single peon attended to both officers. We worked under the eagle-eyed superintendence of a director, a joint secretary and the secretary of the ministry, Dr Venkatraman of the 1949 batch of the I.A.S.

There was no air-conditioning in the office and a noisy cooler kept us from the heat. The work was dull and, for the first few months, I would affix my signature to files that were going up to the government, which comprised the secretary and the minister, and would initial the files going down to the section.

The papers received in the ministry were analysed by the section officers. To a newcomer, there appeared to be no scope for making any contribution, for their official noting was apparently perfect. Very few IAS officers opted to serve at the Centre as an undersecretary, leaving behind the glamour of the district. There was no official transport. One had to be in office by 9.15 a.m. and work through the day, well beyond office hours. It was, in fact, unheard of to leave office until the secretary departed, which he usually did at around 7 p.m. During Parliament sessions, the entire ministry was engaged in preparing replies to be made in the house by the minister, as well as answers to supplementary questions that were likely to be asked, for which we had to study all answers given on the subject since the ministry came into existence.

One morning, I was asked to present a case before the secretary. I carried two volumes of files under my arm and, when queried on different aspects, started struggling with the papers, looking for appropriate notifications and government orders.

'Please do not sit down,' said Dr Venkatraman, glaring at me. 'You have appeared before the government without any preparation. Do you not know the subject? I am afraid you are proving to be a disgrace to the service. You may leave my room now.' As a parting shot, he snarled: 'You will hear from my office.' The secretary had been watching my continued disinterest.

I was bitterly unhappy and went with my mother to meet the legendary Mr Dharam Vira, formerly a member of the ICS, who had retired as Cabinet secretary and had served thereafter as the governor of several states. He was a batch-mate of my uncle and had, after my father's death, been a guiding light in my career. I told him that I wanted to be repatriated to my state and that the clerical posting of undersecretary was, in my understanding, unimaginable for an IAS officer.

'Robin, you are in a coveted post. You are a part of making government policy, which your colleagues in the field will execute. Have you not realized that the file has a logical beauty?'

I was dumbfounded. 'Uncle, there is no job! No work. And I cannot make any contribution.'

Mr Dharama Vira replied: 'Undersecretaries to the Government of India are not to be sneezed at. Come to me on Saturday at noon, and request the secretary to allow you to carry one or two files with you.'

About three months had passed and, after a standoff with Anoushka, who had left for a long holiday, I was in a state of depression. Mother told me to try for another few months and see if the posting brought me some satisfaction.

I arrived at Mr Dharama Vira's house on the dot of noon on Saturday. He took me straight into his office room and proceeded to study the two files I had brought with me. 'The thing to do is to separate the noting file from the correspondence file and place them side by side,' he said. 'Once you have been through the correspondence, the architecture of the notings will become clear.'

He then explained to me how a noting was related to the correspondence and the manner in which both were to be examined in terms of extant government policy, rules and regulations, to which an officer could add his own ideas and suggestions.

From that winter day in 1979 until the time I retired from service in 2008, I would study each paper clinically after dividing a file.

Back in office, I worked late into the night and come up with innovative suggestions. When Dr Venkatraman next called me to explain a case, I made a synopsis, with proper notations and references, and left the voluminous files in the room of his private secretary. As a lawyer stands before the presiding officer of a court, I stood behind a chair with my right hand behind my back and explained the case from its inception: the convoluted notings on the file, the difficulties being faced by the airlines while landing at night; to this I added my recommendations about recruiting additional air traffic controllers and suggested that perhaps the aviation department should have its own police force.

The secretary was visibly pleased. He requested me to sit down and ordered coffee. 'Do you know, Robin, music is divine?'

I nodded in agreement, adding that the precision of music can lend it divinity only if there is the passion of worship.

Dr Venkatraman was taken aback. 'You know something about music, young man? Hindustani classical music in the north is quite different to Carnatic music.'

'Sir, I get the impression that in the north it travels vertically, while in the south there appears to be a horizontal movement. However, *Raag Hansdhwani* seems to be the meeting point.'

'Thank you for educating me about the case,' said the secretary after we had finished our coffee. I made a slight bow and left his room.

Within an hour, the administrative officer had shifted me to an airy independent room, with my own personal staff. That evening, I walked the short distance between Shastri Bhawan and my house with a feeling of joy.

One morning, en route to the office, I noticed a cadaverous young man braving the chilly winds

under a leafless tree. He was clad in a translucent shirt and nondescript trousers; the stamp of hunger was writ large on his countenance and his despairing eyes stared ahead. For no particular reason, I spoke to him.

'My name is Chandan Singh,' said the man. 'We are Rajputs from Garhwal. My father served in the British Indian army, returned home on pension, fought an election and lost all his money. Our family is penniless and I have come here in search of a job.'

I looked at my watch, recalling my engagements for the day. Pointing to my house, I told Chandan Singh to meet me on a holiday. Hastening towards the office, I stopped in my tracks, struck by the thought that the boy must be on the verge of collapse. I turned and asked Chandan Singh to follow me. Having taken his application, I took care to recommend his name for a job in the aviation department, standing guarantor for him.

Years later, when I was working on a project in the remote areas of Madhya Pradesh, my mother continued to live by herself in Delhi. At a time when communications were erratic and uncertain, I was in a state of perpetual anxiety about her welfare. From time to time, I would request visitors to Delhi to enquire if she was well, for Mother, an outpost of the British Raj, required me to concentrate on my job in the mofussil; her standard reply to any enquiry about her well-being was 'top of the world'.

One winter day, on impulse, I caught a flight to Delhi and, on reaching home, found the front door ajar and an overall air of abandonment. With a fearful heart, I walked into her room to find her lying on the bed, breathing heavily under an oxygen mask.

Out of the chilly stillness, a young man walked in with medicine. He touched my feet in salutation. 'I am Chandan Singh, sir. I got the job three years back and have been coming to seek Mother's blessings. Mother has been ill for two days, so I am looking after her.'

Stupefied, I said, 'No one informed me. I do not know your address, your father's name, nothing about you!'

Chandan Singh looked straight into my eyes and said: 'Sir, Mother is unwell. I am here to serve her. This is my identity card. I am the son of Lance Naik Bishen Singh. He was in battle with your father in the 8th Army.'

An academic by nature, I started enjoying the access to knowledge, with a semblance of power, at the ministry of civil aviation and tourism. Though on a ringside seat, I met some of the important dramatis personae of the day and noted the manner in which their background influenced their working.

Dr Karan Singh, Cabinet minister and scion of the royal house of Jammu and Kashmir, whose title of maharaja would be used in conversation and personal correspondence, embodied self-effacing wisdom. He worked into the late hours. When the lights failed, he would walk into his personal section and, on finding the ministerial staff poring over papers or typing in the candlelight or with the help of emergency lighting, ask them to go out and enjoy the winter sunshine on Parliament Street. 'The government does not pay you to lose your eyesight!' was the maharaja's gentle reprimand.

Mr Gehlot was a mellow gentleman from the deserts of Rajasthan. He generally went by the secretary's advice. However, having been a magician by profession, he wanted the ministry to outshine other departments of the government and display a continuous chamatkar at a time when the fledgling ministry was still finding its feet and working out likely budgetary proposals that might find favour with the Cabinet.

Mr A. P. Sharma was the minister in charge. An affable elderly gentleman from Bihar, he was

conciliatory, kind and helpful. His room and anterooms were perpetually overflowing with visitors from his constituency, and steaming tea, samosas and jalebis did the rounds with regularity. I was told that Sharmaji had served in the railway department and, while posted as a ticket collector, was suspended for taking a small bribe. Many people, in the caste-ridden circumstance, were of the belief that Sharmaji was not a Brahmin by caste, for, in parts of Bihar, the surname was shared with carpenters. I liked Sharmaji, for he was a warm and well-meaning person; a man without pretensions, he would help out people without looking into the merits of a case. He wore a Gandhi cap, representing the transition between the patriots who fought for India's freedom and the next generation of educated safari-suited ministers who sought to resurrect India's economy.

A year passed since my marriage to Anoushka. After the brief honeymoon in Kashmir, she had moved to her house and we had little to do with each other. I was happy in my working environment and was able to contribute to government files. I enjoyed working in the city in which I was born and, in my leisure time, started making notes and studying Delhi's monuments; and visiting the club library and the bar.

Arun Sen, on a visit to our house in Delhi, suggested that I move to something more active and was good enough to get S. K. Mishra, his batch-mate, then posted as chairman and managing director of the India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), to take me on deputation. I was posted as joint publicity controller. My new assignment concentrated mainly on projecting the excellence of the ITDC chain of hotels, the flagship of which was the Ashoka in Chanakyapuri.

I had to work under a Hyderabadi begum, a litterateur of recognized merit, and was asked to report to her house for discussion. There were bamboo curtains at the entrance and the fragrance of ittar and khus khus wafted down the stairs. Finding the door ajar, I knocked and coughed to announce my arrival. A warbling voice came from the inner recesses: 'Aiye, aiye, seedha andar chale aiye.' There was no one in sight to whom I could hand over a slip, so I followed the instructions with tentative steps.

The flat was tastefully done up in the style of a Hyderabadi mansion. Beautiful firozi lamps and deep green chandeliers stood out against fine curtains hung across doors, windows and balconies, as if the house was in purdah. A marble statue, a few pieces of Rosenthal crystal and old Bokhara rugs caught the eye. I fully expected a turbaned servitor in angrakha and sash to show me the way to Begum Sahiba's boudoir. There was silence but for the rustle of a summer breeze.

The begum was sitting on a carved four-poster, propped up by mirrored cushions. 'I am happy to welcome you to this disintegrating ship,' she began. 'I like travel less and less. I want to meet new people, though. I have no idea about governmental functioning. I have accepted this job only because of the facility of travel and the shelter that these hotels provide. They are really quite bad. Imagine typists and clerks turning out biryani or something a la Kiev. I told the chairman to send an IAS officer to do the work. A writer has no time for the perimeters of life.'

Begum Sahiba never asked me about my credentials or discussed policy matters. Continuing her monologue and pointing to the bed, she observed: 'This is where I sleep. This is where I eat. This is where I work. This is where I do everything, except that which is to be done.'

Sitting precariously at the edge of a chair, balancing a teacup on shifting files, I heard my superior with discomfited delight. Her eyes held a glitter of insanity. 'And what are my orders, madam?' I asked.

'I really don't have a clue. You see, Mr Joseph has become a Cabinet minister and I have decided to give him a taste of Hyderabadi biryani. I have called for Hammo from Bilgram. Do you know, her husband Rafiq has not sired a son in eleven years and this is affecting her cooking? Joseph drinks too

much and I hope there is someone to carry him to his car.' The begum chuckled. Her long curls, which looked like they were from a portrait in bad art from the Guggenheim, shook. 'Tomorrow, kindly escort the ambassadress of Zimbabwe to Ajmer Sharif. I will accompany you.'

The trip to Ajmer Sharif was an eye-opener. The Hyderabadi begum had great clout, nationally and internationally, owing to her lineage and her amazing talent of being able to paint a literary panorama with lyrical sentences that flowed like water over the hills. She could conjure with her words pink clouds billowing over the Sariska Tiger Reserve or the tragedy of the Mediterranean cliffs. 'Have you visited the areas around that sea?' she asked. I told her that I was fascinated by Greece.

The circuit house at Ajmer had been the residence of the British Agent to the adjoining princely states. It had a magnificent view of Pushkar Lake and the two pavilions of Shah Jahan. The turbaned staff addressed us as 'Jo hukum', which delighted the begum.

The ambassadress, who had visited the shrine of Hazrat Moin-ud-din Chishti, was exhausted. She complained about the khadims tugging at her bag, the lepers and beggars seeking alms, the dirt and the dust. The begum flew into a rage: 'Did you not inhale the fragrance of rose petals and the incense filtering through the latticework where millions of Muslims, from all over the world, pray and make commitments? Did you not hear the divine voice of God in the utterances of the qawwali singers?'

I had been cast in the role of aide and bartender; I poured out generous measures of drink when the ambassadress called for it. 'On the rocks,' said the ladies in tandem.

The begum then waxed eloquent on the intricacies of how, in Hyderabad, a lamb was disembowelled and stuffed with seven kinds of meat, in sequence, before being skewered over a slow fire. The lady from Zimbabwe nodded, sighing with appreciation. My vegetarian impulses made me skip dinner and I walked into the stillness of the night. Looking at the low hills in the desert and the lake beneath the residency, I found myself composing a short poem to the beauty of Ajmer Sharif.

The posting at ITDC gave me my first insight into the corporate world. I had an air-conditioned office in Connaught Place, a staff car allotted to me, an expense account, and the facility of travelling by air without governmental sanction. The administrative structure of the corporation was rotten, however. There was no professionalism. Each hotel was running at a heavy loss.

'The Ashoka Hotel is magnificent,' said the chairman. When he told me that all the other hotels should replicate the profits made by the flagship, I told him plainly: 'It is the Government of India's premier circuit house.' State dinners were held in the vast halls and ballrooms of the hotel. Constructed in 1956, modelled to look like a Rajput palace, it had a captive clientele.

The three IAS officers posted in the corporation were viewed with suspicion by the staff, who comprised a rag-tag army of clerks, cooks, typists and personal assistants—they had wormed their way into the corporation through sifarish.

I tried to work out a methodical promotional plan for each of the corporation's units, but my superior, whose moods oscillated between rage and fulmination over the poor quality of soup served to her, would simply not permit me to work. However, there was the joy of travel. I told the begum that I wanted to visit Orissa around Christmas and Calcutta afterwards; she consented.

I boarded my flight to Bhubaneswar and was settling down to a book when there was a tap on my shoulder. It was the begum, smiling like Medusa's aunt. 'I thought I would give you a surprise,' she said, sliding into the seat next to mine.

It was close to Christmas and we motored down to ITDC's hotel, where we were welcomed by a portly manager. A party was in progress, where the DC and the SP, who were the chief guests, were being feted.

A somewhat heavy Father Christmas was dancing between the tables to spread the message of yuletide. Downing her glass of drink, Begum Sahiba removed a stick from the Christmas decorations and, moving towards the inebriated figure, rapped him on his posterior. 'Stop this tomfoolery at once,' she yelled.

There was pin-drop silence. It was the peak season and the hall was full; the guests left the restaurant one by one. The DC moved into a suite and the SP, sensing a law-and-order problem, ordered his dinner in a private veranda.

Having made our presence felt, we travelled upstairs to our rooms overlooking the ocean. Around 2 a.m., I found the begum climbing into my room from the balcony through a bay window.

I wanted to visit the Chilika Lake as one of the princes of Parikud, who was with me in school, had once mentioned the mysterious island located in the centre of the lake. I was told that during the monsoon Chilika stretched to almost 1165 square kilometres before flowing into the Bay of Bengal. Years later, rummaging through old papers, I came across my notes on the lagoon. Inspired by the civilians of Bengal, I used to meticulously maintain a diary and note down the events of each day as they occurred. My notes read: 'I should have travelled on this inland sea in a boat of glass and seen the grey stretches of Chilika curve into the sky. With green islands and white birds rising into the languorous air, this limitlessness is anchored, it seems, in the ethereal substance of beauty.'

When I removed to Calcutta, hoping to regain a measure of equipoise in the loving calm of the Sen household, I found to my horror, a day after I reached, that Begum Sahiba had come calling. 'You know, I thought I should pull up the manager of Centaur Hotel. I would love to spend some time with the Sens.'

The begum was offered the master bedroom with its carved four-poster. However, the honeymoon between my superior and Begum Atiya Murshed was brief. Within a few hours, my superior left the flat on Hungerford Street, hurling curses over her shoulder.

On my return to Delhi, I found that I had been transferred as joint divisional manager of vigilance and inquiries—a post that had been especially created for me.

The three years' deputation allowed to an undersecretary had ended. About a month earlier, the ITDC, on Begum Sahiba's recommendation, had written to the Government of India to extend my tenure by two years. Six months earlier, Anoushka had met the home minister, pleading for my cadre change.

I was therefore neither in the ITDC nor in the ministry. And I could not return to my parent state either.

I decided to bide my time in Delhi.

8

The Second Innings

In a conundrum of stasis, I accepted the olive branch extended by Anoushka—she reappeared one evening as I was sitting alone, reading a tome on the role of sex in history. The next day we went on a holiday to the 'golden triangle': Fatehpur Sikri in Agra, the bird sanctuary at Bharatpur and the city of Jaipur.

I had studied medieval architecture at college and spent time trying to understand how the Islamic arch, the Buddhist stupa, Persian domes and dastagirs—the decorative embellishments from Hindu and Jain temples—had been so aesthetically incorporated into Mughal monuments. Fatehpur Sikri, the city of victory built by Emperor Akbar and abandoned fourteen years after it was completed for want of a regular supply of water, is a good example of this architectural synthesis, with Jain and Buddhist jharokas and stupas in evidence everywhere. We walked through palaces and climbed up narrow staircases to sprawling terraces and viewed the impoverished countryside. At night, we could hear the hooting of owls and the jackal's cry. As I sat with the qawwals at Chisti's dargah, immersed in the kalaams of Amir Khusro, Anoushka watched me from the staircase, smoking one cigarette after another.

We drove to the Clarks Hotel at Agra, dining in its main restaurant overlooking the Taj Mahal. Over good food and drink, something was built up—after which we collapsed together, tired and uncertain. As I awoke in the early hours, amidst crumpled sheets, there was a hollowness in my heart.

At the Taj Mahal, I carefully examined the exquisite pietra dura work. But, on being reminded that the architects, craftsmen and masons who had built the monument had had their hands cut off or been banished or killed to avoid its replication, the beauty of the Taj was, quite suddenly, shrouded in gloom. We drove from Agra to Jaipur, visiting the magnificent palaces and artefacts with only passing interest, for it was becoming increasingly clear that it was not a happy journey that we had embarked upon.

At Bharatpur, the room bookings had not been made owing to a communication lapse. For the first time, I saw Anoushka in the hold of uncontrolled fury. 'Don't you know who we are?' she thundered. I felt sorry for the manager helplessly wringing his hands. 'Robin, let me handle this,' she said to me, and I witnessed the unfolding of a miserable imbroglio.

A police officer arrived at the guesthouse, running behind the local subdivisional magistrate. Within minutes, two French couples were evicted from their rooms and a hurriedly requisitioned taxi

carried them into the darkness. The weeping receptionist had been placed under suspension and a Muslim darbari from Lucknow, his interim replacement, was now in charge of the hotel. The jenaab Rashid Khan had been newly recruited and he was full of aadabs, huzoors and, ultimately, 'Begum Sahiba'. This mollified Anoushka. 'What a fine gentleman,' she said, handing him five hundred rupees out of the depths of the pocket of a long leather coat.

We spent a fitful night, with sleep eluding me for the better part. I tried to reach out to one who had been reaching out for long, but our hands were stretched over a well of darkness.

On reaching Delhi, I suggested to Anoushka that she moved to her parents' house until greater clarity dawned on both of us.

Mother decided that we would visit New York, with a stopover in London. Observing the cleaning staff at Heathrow, performing their duties with diligence, she said to me, 'They are Indian, I think. Their aprons are in place, also their gloves. Do you know, Robin, when they go home they leave behind their aprons, dusters and gloves? They wear Benarasi saris to weddings.'

The connecting flight to New York was late. Mother, in a reminiscent mood, remarked, 'I used to go riding with Lady Linlithgow. One evening, Her Ladyship drew me aside and told me, "Very soon, the world we know will be left behind in the golden book of history." I was part of the exclusive circle of twenty ladies who were entertained by the vicereine, and it was customary to curtsy while being presented. On the first occasion, despite practising earlier, I stumbled and would have fallen if Her Ladyship had not stepped forward graciously and held me up with the comment: "This one won't bend easily."' We ordered another drink and Mother, looking into the distance, quoted Tennyson: 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, and God fulfils Himself in many ways.'

I had visited America several times before. The first was when I was awarded the American Field Service International Scholarship in 1966, for a year of study at an American high school. A dozen students from India, who had just completed the Senior Cambridge Examination and passed out of school, were selected for the prestigious award. Most of them were from Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore.

The time I spent as a student in the USA was integral to my understanding of foreign climes. I remember being astonished by the remarkable prosperity of the country and at the direct manner in which people addressed each other's concerns. The rigorous discipline at school and the American obsession with punctuality too helped me in my working life in India.

I joined the twelfth grade at the New Trier Township High School in Winnetka in Illinois. Founded in 1901, the school had been identified by *Parade* magazine as 'quite possibly the best public school in America'. I was struck by the seriousness with which students pursued their studies on the one hand and the practice of sports on the other. Teachers would not listen to excuses for any lapse in submitting assignments, and coming late to class was unheard of. On one occasion, on arriving late to the morning class, I found the doors hermetically sealed. The administrative office told me to return the next day with my guardians, and I was administered a stern advisory to never repeat my mistake in the presence of Mrs Lawson.

Winnetka was then one of the most affluent suburbs in America, and I was boarding with the Lawson family. Dr Robert Barett Lawson had graduated from Harvard and was chief executive at a leading medical institution in Chicago. From his beautiful heritage bungalow—white-shingled, and tastefully decorated in Prussian blue, grey, ivory and white—in Winnetka, the doctor travelled the whole 31 kilometres to 'The Windy City' every morning by train. His wife, Elsie Earle Lawson, was

of aristocratic lineage. The couple had two sons: Edward, who was then studying at Harvard, and Richard, who was with me in class at New Trier.

The Lawsons were anxious that my time in America be spent in meaningful engagement with my surroundings. They treated me like a son, with genuine love and affection. While I was often guilt-stricken at disturbing the rhythm of their lives, they told me that I had enriched their existence. They were, in fact, surprised that I fitted seamlessly into their household owing to the similarity in our backgrounds: I had had an English governess, and my family had always communicated in English at home.

At the end of my tenure, I passed out of school with A-plus ratings in each subject, and the Scholastic Press Guild of Chicago awarded me a certificate of honour and gave me an honourable mention for coming fourth in the 'Extemporaneous: Essay' section of the annual Writers Tournament. I was also the first foreign student to be elected as a prefect at New Trier. I interacted with different sections of society and also had the privilege of giving talks at the Rotary International Club at Winnetka on subjects concerning Indian history and art. However, more often than not, I felt embarrassed, for I had to discover my own culture before sharing it with foreigners who were keen to know about India's splendid past. The strength of my education at an exclusive public school in Simla (in America, such institutions were called 'private schools') turned out to be a weakness in this regard. I knew very little about Indian religion, philosophy, music or art, for the public schools in India had modelled themselves upon Eton and Harrow and, in those years, the attempt was to familiarize students with Western literature, music and dance.

While I had won the Shakespeare Prize in 1965, the year I passed out, I knew nothing of Kalidas, the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, I had not heard of the Aryanakas or the Upanishads, I had not read the Bhagavad Gita. In America, I immersed myself in learning about Indian civilization and Hinduism, the religion to which I was born, and the wealth of India's civilization. I admonished the Bishop Cotton School for confining me to Tchaikovsky and Pavalova's ballet, to symphonies and the orchestra, and denying me acquaintance with Bharata's *Natyashastra* and Indian classical music. How, I asked myself, could an Indian hold his head high in a foreign land if he were unaware of his inheritance? In my leisure hours, I started visiting libraries to learn about India's rich heritage, from which children who had attended renowned English-medium schools in India had been deliberately alienated as a tribute to Macaulay's Minute on Education of 1835.

It also struck me that the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' in the New World, was now merely a reminder of a bygone era, for American society had, by 1966, stratified itself into clearly demarcated classes. The WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) formed the upper crust of society and the blacks (whose forefathers had worked as slaves) were at the lowest rung of a multiracial social order, the rules of which, though not codified, were impossible to transgress. Jewish people, their wealth and amazing talent notwithstanding, were generally not accepted in elite circles. The Hispanics were placed somewhere in the middle of society and East Europeans were the butt of ridicule. Asians were accepted for their skills: Chinese laundries and cuisines were famous, Indians were recognized for their intelligence; neither occupied a high position in society. I was aware that while in India I was at the top of the social ladder, in America my wheatish complexion came in the way of my being fully accepted by the WASP elite, who were constantly amazed by my command over 'their' language and my etiquette.

Years later, when I visited America with Mother on holiday, we stayed with Dr and Mrs Lawson, who had by then retired to a mansion by the ocean in Miami in Florida. The Lawsons were overjoyed by our visit and we spent a wonderful week in their house. The evening before we were to leave, we

were invited to dine at the local yacht club, frequented by the crème de la crème of American society. When I entered with the Lawsons, I immediately sensed an undercurrent of uneasiness owing to the colour of my skin. However, when my mother—dressed in a white chiffon sari bordered with golden-green brocade, diamonds set in platinum at her ears, a Belgian solitaire on her fingers and a long pendant of rubies and three strings of Basra pearls around her neck, her head covered with the pallu of her sari—made her entrance, the diners gave good manners the go-by altogether and stared at her, transfixed.

New York this time too felt as effervescent as always. At the airport, Mother created a scene: she would not use the escalator and was enraged when offered a wheelchair. The staff at the airport escorted us through some special arrangement. I heard a loud 'Phew!' from the security staff as we neared the exit gate. Mother turned around, adjusted the pallu over her head and gave the uniformed attendants one of her special smiles. 'You are good boys. Your mothers must be proud of you.'

My sister greeted us warmly. She was a tennis pro and had a couple of sports shops in a country club. The number plate of her car was inscribed with the legend 'Tennis is my racket'.

Urvashi, nicknamed Tutu, had been brought up with kid gloves by an indulgent father. She went to the best schools, tennis teachers and French masters. A self-willed child, she had driven away her governess and nanny, attracted Mother's ire constantly and always kept her own counsel. With a brilliant mind, she topped her class in school and won the prize for the best all-rounder for excellence in academics and sports in college. A seeded tennis player, who had more than once won an all-India title, she left one summer for London to witness the matches at Wimbledon—and never returned to live in India. Working her way through Europe and America, she built her own world. My parents arranged several matches for her; however, Urvashi was not willing to consider matrimony. Instead she made her mark as a tennis coach and would teach through the day on the court, irrespective of hail or storm. Soon, her trainees started winning sports scholarships to Ivy League colleges, and she became one of the few Indians who were easily accepted by the WASPs of America. Though she was generally kind and hospitable, her caustic remarks would sometimes make us wince.

Urvashi was now the sports director at a country club—a playground of jaded wealth where bored, misshapen gentry from New York City visited over weekends. She showed us around the estate that encompassed a vast acreage of undulating green countryside, large portions of which had been tastefully landscaped. But the clubhouse, restaurants, swimming and diving pools, card rooms and the dance floor cut no ice with Mother; she missed her maids and servants, her club and the boulevards of Delhi. 'They don't seem to have any library,' she observed with disdain. I stood in as her handyman, and Tutu had to abandon her teaching lessons to help Mother dress.

One of my sister's friends invited us to dinner. After making polite conversation for a while, Mother laid down the rules: the first drink at 7 p.m., and the soup to be served around 8 p.m. 'At home, we ensure this regimen through a gong,' she explained to our distraught hostess, the wife of a wealthy doctor, who, as a routine, served dinner by 6 p.m., finished the dishwashing and walking the dog by 7 p.m., before settling down to a cognac with her husband at 7.30 p.m.

The highways and roads were clean, with well-regulated traffic, and Urvashi drove us to meet cousins settled in different parts of America. After we returned to her tastefully done up house, she told us that IAS officers were the bane of India and American democracy was a model of human endeavour. Soon after, I boarded the bus for New York City to meet a friend of my youth.

Sunil Dogra lived in a handkerchief-sized flat that he shared with a friend and a large Russian wolfhound, whose hair flew in all directions. In New York, single people came home mostly to rest and freshen up. For the greater part of the day, they were in office, many working double shifts, and thereafter relaxing in cafés or stalking the streets in search of a partner. I received a joyous welcome from Sunil, for both of us had been good friends and had learnt since long to make room for each other's sensitivities. There was a largeness to my reception—the small apartment could as well have been a spacious villa on one of New York's islands. I looked for a tumbler and polished off the remains of Pinch, a fine cousin of Dimple scotch.

In the evening, we set off for Greenwich Village and wended our way to Christopher Street. Walking into a bar close to midnight, we found it full of semiclad men and women dancing with abandon. There was nothing formal, and one could switch partners without rancour. I danced with a Pakistani and later with a refugee from Czechoslovakia. Afterwards, we went bar-hopping in the village that corresponded strangely to the wildest convolutions of the human mind. That evening, I must have visited a dozen bars. Everywhere, there was gaiety and dance, laughter and transient romance. At 6 a.m., I met Dorail, with whom I had danced several bars and several hours ago. To see the same face amidst the thousands of dancers and endless streets was reassuring. We sat together in a breakfast room, the exertions of the night left behind.

A gentle person, Dorail's dream was a Green Card and the right to live in America. He pointed towards the Statue of Liberty against the rising sun and told me how policemen had hit him before he crossed the border. 'This is the New World,' he proclaimed. I nodded, trying not to show my disagreement, recalling the strains of Dvorak's 'New World Symphony'.

Why, I wondered, had all the criminals, renegades, destitute and irregulars of the world made America their home? In the process, they had killed most of the original native population and driven the rest into reservations. My heart was suddenly filled with hatred for America. Life here was without any meaning, I thought, looking at the bananas packed in individual wrappers, marked with the date on which they had been pulled off the tree, at Sunil's flat. A glass of juice, followed by cigarettes and coffee, comprised breakfast; there was no aroma of cooking.

Ignoring the dog and the hair it had covered the room with, I fell into a thoughtless slumber on a mattress. At 6 p.m., I awakened, fresh for the evening. It was a Sunday, and Sunil would have to attend his office the next morning. We ambled into a small restaurant, and I recall the light battered onion rings similar to the Indian pakora. Waiting for the cocktail hour, we walked the streets, watching the measured pace of white Americans in dark suits and sober ties. Black Americans danced with Walkman plugs in their ears, grouped around a hamburger stall, their rhythmic movements the envy of many a passerby. The Indians, I saw, were dressed in flashy clothes and herded together in groups.

The next morning, I visited the Metropolitan Museum, spending over two hours in the gallery displaying the French Impressionists. America had shipped out from Paris the masterpieces of Sisley, Delacroix, Cezanne, Toulouse, Monet, Manet, Renoir, Pissaro, Degas, Morisot and Gaugin, as trophies of victory at the end of the World War, which were now beautifully displayed in the carefully guarded building. As one cannot ingest art for long, I came out of the museum and stood on its steps in the sunshine, not knowing where to turn next. A middle-aged blonde with tired blue eyes, a beetroot-coloured scarf over her head, exclaimed: 'Hey! It must be boiling in India!'

My mind wandered home across the oceans. The Indian summer has a beauty of its own. One has only to look at the golden laburnum trees raising one canopy after another over lonely stretches of green grass, as the love-struck koel calls out from her perch in a grove of mango trees, to feel its

lingering beauty. At the height of summer, the magnolia grandiflora, with its large creamy flowers and its sensuous perfume, like a yesteryear empress, holds court all too briefly. Then there are the brilliant red flowers on the gulmohar tree whose leaves filter the sunlight while the blossoms of the jacaranda weave magical patterns around the branches before falling to the ground.

I called Mother. 'I cannot bear America for a day longer. Please enjoy your holiday, it will make Tutu happy.'

'Nonsense!' was Mother's reply. 'Talk to the consulate general and get two tickets booked on a late-evening flight. I will meet you at the airport.'

It came to me that the monsoon must have arrived in Delhi, and peacocks danced in my heart.

Urvashi drove Mother to the airport, her sadness at our departure offset by relief. Doubtless, she must have whistled a 'Phew!' as the airport staff at JFK had done while welcoming us to America.

As we sat in Air India's Maharaja Lounge, I felt sad, for my only sibling had been lost to America. When the doors of the aircraft finally opened at New Delhi, the fragrance of the Indian earth caused a palpitation of reunion in my heart.

Anouskha, who had previously sworn never to part, had filed for divorce during my visit abroad. To teach me a richly deserved lesson, protesting against my indifference, notwithstanding the orchards, houses and bonds she had put in my name, she declared that I was 'A rare species of humanity!'

'What more can I do? Shall I have plastic surgery done on my nose?' she asked Mr Sen, who had been drawn into our troubles and had become the interlocutor.

'There must be a feeling of oneness,' said Mr Sen, 'and all dead relationships must cease.'

Anoushka removed her possessions from my house, leaving behind only a rough rug of lambskin which had been gifted to her in the northeast and several ashtrays overflowing with half-finished cigarettes.

The major ground for the divorce was that I was impotent, and that she had suffered cruelty, indifference and denial on different counts. Manik, Anoushka's lawyer, asked me if I would like to refuse the notice. 'I think she wants to frighten the daylights out of you. Would you like some time to reconsider? She is rich, in the IAS, and will prove a great asset.'

I had known Manik for many years. 'There can be no relationship,' I told him frankly. 'The reasons would require me to write out a volume.'

'Phir, saaley, kaise niklega is jhanjhat se?' he said. How will you get out of this mess?

I told him that I would receive the notice, the marriage should end and that he could draft my replication.

'You are a peculiar chap, I say. Always have been,' said the lawyer as he left.

A few days later, I received an unsigned typed sheaf of papers that revolved around my being impotent, quo Anoushka, in support of which there was a contemporary parallel in Punjab where a raging divorce case between an IAS couple was being reported every day in the press. In that case too, the male partner had been charged with a lack of specific performance. He had studied with me at the Sanawar School, from which I made my escape in the late 1950s. I was told that he took the extreme step of leaving his job, Punjab and ultimately the country to escape the claws of his wife.

After some deliberation, Anoushka reluctantly agreed to annulment of our marriage, 'by mutual consent'.

We were back at the court where we got married in 1979. The judge allowed us six months time to reconsider our decision. After this period passed uneventfully, we again presented ourselves in

court. When we signed the papers, we exchanged rings and, freeing ourselves from the marriage, walked out of a nightmare.

From the well of remembrance and at the periphery of old age, when I consider my three-year marital tenure, it brings to mind a tale that I recount, over and over again, with some relish.

At a state banquet in Europe, after the guests had been formally seated according to the table plan, with name cards placed before each chair, and after several toasts had been raised in honour of the many dignitaries representing their countries, one of the guests turned to his neighbour, proposing that they take the floor.

'Certainly not!' was the irate response.

'May I know the reason, mademoiselle?'

'First, you must know that this is not a dance number, it is the national anthem. Second, you appear a bit tiddly and I fear you may step on my toes. Third, I am no lady at all—I am the archbishop of Antigua!'

One evening, a husky voice informed me over the telephone that the Delhi chapter of the Divorcees Club was hosting a party in my honour. 'Welcome,' she said.

The Divorcees Club which met, by rotation, in the houses of newly divorced IAS officers was a functional organization with a president, two vice presidents, a secretary and a treasurer. Initially, the club was for members of the premier service alone. However, owing to persistent demand and the swelling numbers of disparate individuals, by the time of my enrolment, officers from the Central services and the IPS were honourable members as well. If an officer remarried, he was automatically blackballed.

There may have been over a hundred guests that evening. Couples were dancing with abandon. Others were making their points in corners of the small flat and the adjoining balcony. There was plenty of drink and food that people helped themselves to at will.

It was a Saturday night and I returned home at two-thirty in the morning, with images of Christopher Street and Greenwich Village coalescing into the present. I slept, light-hearted, caressing the bedsheets and pillows with a feeling of joy. Surprisingly, Anoushka had not been invited to the party, even though she too was a divorcee, a free bird.

A few days later, I found my former wife driving her car furiously through the middle circle of Connaught Place, a Chinese gentleman by her side. Perhaps she had taken on the services of a new chef, I thought—of late, her Austrian mother had shown a marked penchant for Schezuan cooking. Why not, I reasoned. At a certain stage in life, food can be more satisfying than sex.

It was only later that I found out that the gentleman I had seen with Anoushka was not a cook. He was an MLA from the northeast, whom she had married on the rebound.

She was, therefore, not invited to the Divorcees Club.

9

In the Heart of India

After my tenure in the ministry of civil aviation and the ITDC had ended, I was required to return to West Bengal, my parent state for what is known as a 'cooling off' period. However, I was unable to do so since Mother was alone in Delhi and doctors had said that her severe asthma could deteriorate in the humid climate of eastern India. I therefore took up a project under the National Institute of Urban Affairs at Delhi as project director, with the mandate of promoting tourism in Madhya Pradesh and making specific recommendations regarding the impact of tourism on environment and society; the underlying objective was to study how best tourism traffic could be increased without causing ecological degradation.

It was a subject that had hardly been researched before, and data was scarce. The project was being financed by the government of Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in the country. Two assistants were taken on contract from the Jawaharlal Nehru University and, while our base remained New Delhi, we made numerous field visits to the erstwhile Central Provinces and Berar.

Our team decided to take up some of the important centres in Madhya Pradesh for study, starting with Gwalior. I had heard about the princely state from its former ruler, Madhavrao Scindia, whose official residence at one time, on Tilak Marg in New Delhi, was close to my parents' home; I used to cycle past his house en route to India Gate. His Highness was a gracious person and extended to me a hand of friendship. On learning of my wanderlust, he spoke to me at length about the beauty of Shivpuri, the retreat of the Gwalior princes. On one occasion, I accompanied the maharaja to Gwalior and stayed as his guest at the Usha Niwas Palace Hotel.

Upon arriving in Madhya Pradesh, I called on P. C. Sen, the divisional commissioner of Gwalior. An aristocratic gentleman, he was a product of the Doon School and St. Stephen's College. Our fathers had been colleagues in the British Indian army.

The premier tourist attraction in Gwalior was its formidable fort, built by Raja Man Singh Tomar on a steepened hill. Surrounded by high walls that enclose buildings from different periods, the fort has been described as the 'Gibraltar of India' and Babar, the first Mughal emperor, wrote of it as 'the pearl in the necklace of the forts of Hind'. The commissioner took me on a visit to the fort and I learnt that the statues of Hindu gods and goddesses which had been carved into the hillsides had been hacked by Muslim invaders over the centuries. We visited a large gurudwara and Mr Sen mentioned that it had been expanding its construction, year after year, without obtaining any kind of permission

or approval. We were received with great ceremony and the manager of the gurudwara showed us around, insisting that we inspect a large new pressure cooker that had recently been installed and could turn out food for a hundred people with just a few whistles. When the research assistant enquired as to where the funds came from and who had designed the magnificent architecture, the manager pointed towards heaven.

Keeping in mind the Scindia ruler's words, I decided to visit Shivpuri. In the vast Madhav National Park, contained in an area of 342 square kilometres, one could see a variety of game and water birds. As there was neither tiger nor leopard there, gazelles roamed about in defenceless innocence. The jungle, with its wide undulating meadows, was negotiable throughout the year, unlike other such parks in India. The Shivpuri forest contained three artificial lakes at different levels, built by the Scindia princes on a terraced plan, in alignment with the moon's crescent. George Castle, a royal hunting lodge, rose out of the wilderness, commanding a view of both lake and forest from turreted heights. Travelling into Shivpuri town from the park along a quiet road, one could stop over at the local museum, a storehouse of rare artefacts, before moving to the cenotaphs erected by the Scindia family in memory of their ancestors. The two royal structures faced each other across a large water tank which, in turn, was intersected by beautiful pathways with decorative balustrades leading into a central pavilion built for the statue of a Nandi bull, fashioned out of amethyst, installed at an elevation. The pathways were lit up with evening lamps from Victorian England.

The pietra dura work in the late Maharaja Sri Madhavrao Scindia's chhatri, commenced in 1926, is perhaps the finest inlay work of semiprecious stones in India. Mother of pearl, lapis lazuli and variant hues of onyx had been used to create the illusion of an extensive vineyard; as filtered sunlight enters vast inner spaces through delicate trelliswork on the sides, the effect is ethereal. To enter the cenotaph, with its dazzling white surface punctuated by brilliant green and blue patterns, heightened by silver-grey flowers in uniform regularity, is to contemplate a possibility of perfection. The chhatri across from this one houses the memory of a royal dowager. It is a larger structure of great dignity, built out of stone, though without the decorative treatment and dressing of the other cenotaph. These statues are propitiated on each day, in all seasons, in the manner of deities in Hindu temples.

I marvelled at the architecture of the cenotaph as a structural form, effortlessly incorporating the ascending shikhara of the Hindu temple and the airy delicacy of Rajput and Mughal-styled jharokas at the corner of the terraces. There were traces of Afghan-style domes set against sloping Bengal pavilions, and there were also beautifully carved fountains with statues based on Western legends. In a single complex consecrated to the dead, the quintessence of ideas derived from Persia and Europe had been brought together to combine with the then prevailing Indian standards of beauty in a remarkable and splendid efflorescence. The architectural conception of the Scindia princes spoke of the sustained worship of beauty as a moving force.

Everywhere in Shivpuri town, the style employed in public buildings was uniformly gracious. The collector's court, for instance, repeated the use of pink walls bordered by white decorative dressing. There was a large summer palace of the Gwalior maharajas at Shivpuri. It was called the Mahal and, with its historic halls and many rooms, was unmistakably a royal home. The towers at the corners of the Mahal afforded the visitor a spectacular view of the town of Shivpuri and the parkland beyond its periphery.

As I was concerned with studying the impact of tourism on environment, the underlying objective of which was the development of touristic potential of relatively neglected parts of Madhya Pradesh, I wondered why the city of Gwalior and its environs had been so far neglected, given its proximity to Delhi and its astonishing heritage. Our team decided to focus upon the historical significance of

Gwalior in order to place it on the map of international tourism.

Gwalior had several other examples of early Mughal architecture—notably, the Gujari Mahal, the mausoleum of the sixteenth century Sufi saint Ghous Mohammed and the tomb of Mian Tansen, reputedly the greatest vocalist in the history of Hindustani classical music. The Tansen Samaroh was held in Gwalior every year, and the city took pride in its rich tradition of music: Baijnath Prasad, better known to all as Baiju Bawra, was the court musician at Gwalior; and Ustad Natthu Khan, Nissar Hussain, Shankar Rao, Vishnu Pandit and Krishna Rao Pandit were amongst the host of outstanding vocalists who were based in Gwalior.

It was during my stay at the stately Morar Guesthouse that I came across Sher Khan. As I was taking in the magnificent wide spaces, statues and sundials silhouetted in the moonlight and wondering how the night would pass, I found this turbaned nafar pouring out whisky, measuring the soda against my brow. He returned after twenty minutes with a fresh glass and enquired whether he should render *Raag Malkauns* or if I would prefer listening to *Darbari Kannada*. Sher Khan belonged to Faizabad, from where the then maharaja of Gwalior had taken him into service.

After our canvass of Gwalior, Lashkar and Morar—including visits to the sprawling Jai Vilas Place, patterned on Versailles and now a marvellous museum; our discovery that Gwalior was an ancient city of Jain worship and boasted a series of rock-cut sculptures which, according to the inscriptions, were excavated between 1441 and 1474; and our exploration of the Telika Mandir, with its wagon-vaulted roof—keeping in mind the history and culture of the area, we recommended to the government that the Gwalior be made part of northern India's tourist circuit, alongside Delhi, Agra and Khajuraho.

I had heard of Orchha, the abandoned city sixteen kilometres from Jhansi in the Tikamgarh district, and we took a train to this wilderness with some trepidation, for none of us knew where we would find shelter. Today, Orchha is a premier tourist destination with a constant flow of visitors, particularly during the cold season; in 1983, we walked into a settlement left behind by time. Orchha was surrounded by scrub jungle, undulating countryside and the River Betwa. This citadel of the Bundela Rajputs had been abandoned around 1790, for reasons of military strategy, thereby consecrating a living city to silence. It lay in a state of poverty and neglect, despite its buildings and palaces being amongst the best surviving examples of medieval Indian architecture—the Bundelas had been inspired by Mughal, Jain, Persian and European aesthetics. The three major palaces at Orchha—the Raj Mahal, the Sheesh Mahal (also known as the Jehangir Palace) and the palace of the royal courtesan Pravin Rai—are held together in a large fortress built upon a natural ridge. The three palaces have airy battlements and pavilions, and colonnaded verandas and balconies jut out precariously over thickly forested jungle tracts.

As I paced the terraces of the fortress, I found it difficult to imagine another city like Orchha—a place peopled by only memory even in the brightness of the noonday sun. Walking down to the river, I passed through a street lined with houses reduced to rubble where, I was told, Orchha's inhabitants at some point, saturated with wealth, had mounted an image of the goddess Lakshmi upon a donkey, pleading with her to go away and allow them some peace!

There are eighteen cenotaphs at Orchha. Some of the chhatris were badly damaged, and one had tilted into the waters of the river. Across the fortress complex is the Chaturbhuj Temple, which bears in its structure patterns derived from Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity, all effortlessly incorporated into the traditional temple concept. A golden covering, weighing about sixty kilograms and priceless in terms of antiquity, was removed in 1971 from the central dome in a daring robbery. The Lakshmi temple that stands just outside the Sainari gateway—the murals and paintings on its walls and ceilings

are possibly the last surviving examples of the Bundela style, renowned for its fine lines, intricate patterns and restrained use of colour—was in 1983 the most blatantly neglected edifice in Orchha. The Rama Raja Mandir, however, had survived through the ages and continued to draw pilgrims from adjacent areas in Bundelkhand.

An aura of drama and mystery had wrapped itself around Orchha. According to legend, on rare moonlit nights, the chiselled countenance of Pravin Rai, the royal courtesan, was said to beckon from within the faded ramparts of the fortress. Some old inhabitants even claimed to have heard her rich voice echo through the citadel, like tinkling bells.

That faded city is unrecognizable in today's Orchha, a desirable destination that tourists flock to every day. But even though tourism has done much to improve the economy of the area, there is something in my heart that longs for the haunting beauty of Orchha's erstwhile solitude.

My next stop was Khajuraho. Much has been written and said about this astonishing place, and there is little that I can add to the descriptions of the ninth and tenth-century temples that stand testament to the artistic and architectural genius that prevailed during reign of the Chandela kings. As my team and I took in the sculptures—the deeply erotic temple art that continues to perplex the Western mind even today, with its conflation of the religious and the sexual—we came across a Frenchman who appeared to be trying to analyse each sculpture down to its finest detail. I was also told that a newly wedded American couple had wondered about the advances that Indians made since the tenth century: 'We tried the Indian curry. Why not try an Indian position?'

In 1983 (and increasingly thereafter), there was a constant inflow of tourists to Khajuraho, which was one of the preferred destinations after the Taj Mahal in Agra. The town had, as a result, developed modern infrastructural facilities and had several well-appointed hotels. Such was the flow of traffic that there was not a room available for months in the better hotels, and the cafés and restaurants were overflowing with tourists from Europe and America. The Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation too had constructed hotels and independent cottages and we were lodged in one of them during our course of study. The impact of tourism on environment and society was clearly discernible in Khajuraho—the temple town wore a festive air and I had the feeling that we were in a foreign land, attending some melee.

I invited the head purohit to talk to me at the cottage. He was full of grief that the increased tourism into Khajuraho had broken his family and traditions. He told me that his two sons had taken up employment as barmen and waiters in a luxury hotel. 'They now drink alcohol, eat the flesh of animals, dance with foreign women and wear bowties,' he said to me. The sons had been cast out and the priest worried about who would succeed him to show people around the temples, interpret their sculptures, or even show mankind the right path, after he was gone. He refused to partake of the tea and savouries offered to him. He declined the sweetmeats as well. I called for a basket of fruits and sent them to his residence after bidding him farewell and receiving his blessings.

The findings of our team with respect to Khajuraho were recorded in glowing terms, for here was an illustrative example of a poor area, hidden away in the jungles of a backward region, having raised its standard of living by many multiples through showcasing the remains of an ancient temple city. In the process, the temples had been carefully restored with the help of experts from France. Khajuraho had its own airport and had become a coveted tourism destination.

However, though the town was gaining an international ambience, avaricious developers had moved into the area and had started mercilessly hacking down the forests and jungles that had protected these temples for centuries, to get more land cleared for construction. We pointed thus to the danger that unrestricted tourist traffic posed to the forest cover and wildlife.

I rejoiced in the light and air of Khajuraho and wondered about making a second home in its environs someday. The thought of the thick forest and the kind of peace that pervades centres of worship and the reassuring traffic of wide-eyed foreigners on their way to watch a Bharatanatyam performance in the courtyard of the Chitragupta temple and the café run by Betty Memsahib put a spring into my step.

Betty, a European lady, had been the mistress of the raja of Chatarpur for years. He had granted her a jaagir called Narangibaugh, where her Swiss husband lived in a tree house to superintend the vast orchard land. I enjoyed talking to her. She had been asked to leave the palace as fallout of the intrigue created by the ranis of the king. Leaving Narangibaugh to her husband, she spent the entire day attending to guests at the café. On her advice, the counter refused to accept payment for our light repast.

I invited Betty to the cottage where I was staying for a drink. She told me about her life and the vacuity of her situation, for there was a constant yearning to revive the relationship that she had shared with the king. As she left a few hours later, I handed her a sheet of paper on which I had been recreating the story of her passion.

> We have run out of excuses
> for not getting to know
> one another better;
> the frailty of your argument
> interspersed with apology
> holds for me strongly
> no longer—
> as I have altered a little,
> and my mind now reacts
> in the natural reflex,
> not selectively as before.
> And in the natural reflex,
> your layers of strength
> have fallen away,
> and I now love you
> for your limitation,
> and for the intensity
> that I shared with you
> alone.

With the objective of focusing upon the unknown beauty of the Marble Rocks situated in Bhedaghat, a village of Jabalpur, on the banks of the River Narmada, I travelled from Khajuraho with my two assistants to Jabalpur. The Marble Rocks took me by surprise; they rise to a height of 100 feet on either side of the river and it is startling to find these white pinnacles sparkling in the wilderness. Alongside the Marble Rocks is the wonder of the Dhuandhar Falls. As the river Narmada makes its way through the rocks, it narrows down before plunging deep, creating a cascade of ‘smoke’, the roar of which can be heard from a great distance. The falls present a magnificent spectacle of the thundering power of nature.

I had thought that this natural wonder, one time a pleasure resort of the Gond kings, could be

developed to attract foreign tourists to the area so that the entire region would benefit from inflow of tourist traffic. But they would not on their own form an independent touristic entity, for international tourism cannot be created along such riverfronts; it is necessary to hold the visitors' interest for two or three days. In a situation where infrastructural facilities were at an incipient stage, and the question of casinos, cabarets, water sports and floating restaurants were illusory postulates, I recommended that promoting international tourism could be taken up later and sent the two assistants back to Delhi.

On leave of study, I stayed in the large bungalow of Lord Chief Justice V. R. Sen. He enjoyed an impeccable reputation and after his retirement from the court that he had presided over he was appointed the chief vigilance commissioner of Madhya Pradesh. He was the father of Arun Sen, who had come from Calcutta to his Jabalpur home to spend time with me. The bungalow we stayed in had belonged to a British High Court judge. It had wide verandas, a large drawing room, a larger dining hall, an office room and several bedrooms, guestrooms and an annexe. The compound comprised several acres and at the far end were eighteen servants' quarters and a coach house.

Many probashi Bengali families, leaving behind Calcutta and Dacca, had settled in Jabalpur, and most of Arun Sen's uncles and cousins, who were judges of the High Court and leading counsel, had long since been absorbed into the largeness of the Hindi heartland. Madhya Pradesh had a place for every community. The city, with its sizeable population of people from Bengal, Gujarat, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and South India, lived in a harmonious amalgam peculiar to itself. I was told that Vinoba Bhave, the modern philosopher-saint, had christened the city Sanskar Dhani—the capital of culture—for he was greatly impressed by its cosmopolitan character.

Social life in Jabalpur revolved around ill-timed visits by relatives or people one marginally knew. The exchange of Indian sweets followed by a glass of water and tea with loud greetings of 'Ji haan' and 'Haan ji' preceded nitpicking over local issues. It was considered friendly to sing songs without any particular reason. The lingua franca was Hindi and its variants, and those who knew English were employed in government offices and appeared to have stepped out of a Shakespearean comedy. The good-hearted middle class of Jabalpur lived in a spacious cantonment with colonial residences left behind by British officers, and children played kho-kho in sprawling ballrooms with parquet flooring.

The other guest at the Sens' bungalow was Tultul, Mrs Atiya Murshed Sen's cousin, a descendant of the royal family of Dacca. The handsome nawab was fair and good-looking and had never worked in his life. He always dressed in spotless starched white attire and wore emerald studs in his earlobes. When queried about a career, he would reply: 'Kaam kare humaare dushman.'

We spent one rather sophisticated evening at the house of Mr Rajinder Singh, a leading advocate, who had been V. C. Shukla's lawyer after the Emergency. Rajinder Singh displayed the usual Punjabi zest for life. He had acquired an old villa and had cobbled together antique furniture from palaces that were fading out of the pages of history. Western dinner was served, and the lawyer's wife, a European lady, had the art of conversation, all of which made for a memorable party.

I enjoyed my laidback existence in Jabalpur. Every morning, an ancient barber, dressed in a suit and a tie, would come to shave me under an old peepal tree, regaling me with tales of the British Raj. 'Never rely on reports sent to you by the police or the district CID,' said Puran Chand. 'Invariably, they cook up stories and mislead magistrates and commissioners.' This sage advice remained in my mind for the rest of my career, and I would always cross-check police reports with the bazaar gossip.

As I was leaving Jabalpur, I realized at the railway station that I had practically no money on my person. Instinctively, Arun Sen pulled out the money he had from his pocket and, with a distant look in eyes, placed it in my hand. 'You will require this to get home,' he said, as the train pulled into the

platform.

10

1984

1984 was a tumultuous year for India. Trouble had been brewing in Punjab, and many believed that it had been aggravated by the Union home ministry. We were stunned by the attack on the Harimandar Sahib, the temporal seat of the Sikhs, at Amritsar. 'Imagine the Indian army training its guns at the Golden Temple!' exclaimed my grief-stricken mother, who then told me that her clan, the Bhandaris, had been blessed by Guru Nanak. According to legend, one of the elders, who was sitting in the afternoon sun, about to partake of his midday meal, witnessed the dust rising as a group of horsemen entered the small town of Batala. Getting up slowly, he offered a tray of food to the guru. Nanak Dev accepted a few morsels and, with both hands, blessed the elder, stating: 'Is ghar da bhandar bhara rahega'—this house will never suffer from want.

'And, do you know, Robin?' continued Mother. 'Guru Nanak's blessings elevated an ordinary home into a leading family in Punjab for five centuries; Raizada Sir Gopal Dass Bhandari was perhaps the richest Hindu in the entire province. Countless ICS men, judges, governors, knights, generals, rai bahadurs and your own mother have been blessed by Guru Nanak.'

Indira Gandhi was a secular prime minister, and fanaticism was alien to the Nehru-Gandhi family. Despite intelligence reports, she refused to transfer her Sikh bodyguards. 'They are my stalwart sons. The smartest of the lot,' she said.

I was appointed deputy secretary to the Government of India in the department of sports in the middle of October 1984. The major event that took place immediately afterwards was the dethronement of the Patiala ruling family from the presidency of the Indian Olympic Association.

The association, which was founded in 1927 with Sir Dorabji Tata as its first president, remained for long under the suzerainty of the royal family of Patiala. Maharaja Bhupinder Singh headed the body from 1928 till his death ten years later. Thereafter, his son Maharaja Yadavindra Singh remained president till 1960, followed by his brother Raja Bhalindra Singh till 1975, and then for a second term from 1980.

Mr V. C. Shukla, who had served as a Cabinet minister since his late thirties, was a master strategist with a forceful personality. With Central India as his fief, he had decided to take on Raja Bhalindra Singh, the incumbent president, whose second term ensured that the association continued to remain a bastion of the Patiala family. He organized a series of meetings with the chiefs of national sports federations and, on the eve of the elections, hosted an extravagant dinner party at the Taj Mahal

Hotel, to which he invited several thousand guests—rivers of champagne, the finest wines and scotch made the attendees gasp.

Shuklaji had arranged dinner on the lawns of the hotel. Crooking a finger at me, he said, 'Robin, you are the master of ceremonies, see that the guests are well looked after, and that they make a pledge in our favour. We have to dethrone that man. Not a drop for you this evening. Early morning, we have the elections.'

I stood by my word to Shuklaji. As the deputy secretary of sports, I had some clout. I talked to the president of each sports federation, the state federations and representatives of different units. These gentlemen had been entrenched in the sports firmament for long and were responsible for India continuously losing matches and cutting a sorry figure in the international arena. Shuklaji had his men and his methods; alongside, he was aided by good drink, a splendid dinner and the suggestions of a personable deputy secretary.

The voting took place the next morning at the National Stadium at the far end of Rajpath, and Mr V. C. Shukla emerged victorious.

The Indian Olympic Association controlled the organizations of sportspersons throughout the country. Its president featured amongst India's glitterati, for he could crack the whip over national sports federations, which were invariably headed by Indian princes, powerful bureaucrats and wealthy industrialists, with the odd army general thrown in. As there was no fixed term for the offices of the federations, they had a tight and cancerous stranglehold over the sports movement in the country.

The IOA, which is responsible for selecting athletes to represent India at the Olympics and other international meets and managing the Indian teams at the events, acknowledged the government simply as a necessary evil. It was only after an independent department to deal with the promotion of sports and youth services was carved out of the ministry of education, during the tenure of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, that the government began to have a say in matters concerning the IOA and the national sports federations and to lay down a sports policy for the country.

I worked with Mr R. Gopalaswamy of the 1953 batch of the Kerala cadre of the IAS, who had served as chief secretary before being posted at the Centre. An Iyenger Brahmin, Mr Gopalaswamy had a razor-sharp intellect; he was also incorruptible and almost an ascetic in his personal life. He, I was told, would awaken at 4 a.m. and, after his yoga, meditation and prayers, would sing bhajans and play the veena during worship. A strict vegetarian and teetotaller, Mr Gopalaswamy would retire early in the evening. In a more sagacious political dispensation, he ought to have been posted to one of the premier ministries such as home affairs, defence, or finance, if not a secretary to the Cabinet.

The sport federations regularly held cocktail parties in the capital. There were attended by members of the media, parliamentarians, ministers, civil servants and erstwhile rulers. The parties went on till the early hours and there was hardly any discussion about the promotion of sports. While the federation chiefs labelled the government an organized mafia, they were greatly in awe of Mr Gopalaswamy, who only met them by appointment. He would meet in his office or at a meeting called by Mr Narasimha Rao, who was then the minister for human resource development, or at the prime minister's summons.

Mr Gopalaswamy was not a sportsman, but he was a committed sports administrator. He wanted to groom the sports movement from the grass-roots level and decided that it was time for the government to formulate a national sports policy. The department of youth affairs and sports was small, with four IAS officers. B. N. Chaturvedi of the 1956 batch of the Bihar cadre of the IAS was appointed bureau head of the department.

Mr Gopalaswamy would reach Shastri Bhawan, which housed the department, at 8.30 a.m. and would take the stairs to his office on the sixth floor. Before he entered his office, a private secretary, also a South Indian Brahmin, preceded him into the very large office chamber, chanting prayers and placing incense sticks on a corner table. Despite his austerity, M. Gopalaswamy seemed to like me, and I spoke to him freely. I undertook to decorate his office and got the starkly unwelcoming walls to display miniature prints portraying Indian sports such as wrestling, riding and polo, as well as a large photograph of Moti Bagh at Patiala.

Till today, the Moti Bagh estate, comprising innumerable palaces and regal structures contained in a vast parkland of over 350 acres of land, houses the Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports, which was founded in May 1961 and developed into one of the premier sports institutes in Asia. Moti Bagh, with its long frontage of cream-coloured walls, floral decorations, frieze-work railings, red sandstone balconies and shapely pavilions, is an architectural marvel. On an official visit to the NIS at Patiala, I was amazed to find that every part of the Moti Bagh estate vibrated with manifestations of the sports movement: the Olympic-sized swimming pool, the basketball courts, the halls for gymnastics, wrestling and weightlifting, the synthetic hockey field, the cricket pitch—it was wonderful to see hundreds of trainees carefully absorbing the mechanics of the sports sciences, preparing themselves for competition in the international arena.

For over five decades, the National Institute of Sports at Patiala has guided and groomed the sports movement in India. In 1985, it was conferred with the rare distinction of being chosen by the International Olympic Committee for being the permanent development centre for Asia. The overwhelming successes of the institute at Patiala gave birth to NIS branches at Bangalore, Calcutta, Gandhinagar and other parts of India.

After Mr Shukla's victory and his installation as president of the Indian Olympic Association, I heard nothing from him. I spoke to his secretary, who told me that he was busy meeting delegations from India and abroad, attending functions held in his honour and receiving felicitations.

During the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Shuklaji, along with Sanjay Gandhi, had been part of a triumvirate that ruled India with an iron hand. He lived in a sprawling Lutyens bungalow, 11 Willingdon Crescent, once home to Radcliffe who had divided the subcontinent with his sharp pencil. After the Emergency, Shuklaji had emerged taller than Sanjay Gandhi, the heir apparent, and had, therefore, been systematically sidelined by the prime minister. His election as president of the Indian Olympic Association was the reassertion of a powerful political mind. A shrewd judge of men and matters, Shuklaji liked me for my straightforward talk and unquestionable loyalty. I was perturbed at the continuing silence from his office, but I immersed myself in learning the ropes of the sports department.

On 31 October 1984, I telephoned Shuklaji's residence early in the morning. Strangely, he took the line himself and in his stentorian voice told me to reach his house by 8.30 a.m. Driving my old black Fiat, I picked up a bunch of yellow roses for him from the florist at Connaught Circus as a congratulatory gesture. There were several policemen at the residence, most of whom recognized me. However, I did notice some reinforcements driving in from the road leading to the presidential palace.

Chandrasekhar, a personal assistant whom I liked, came up to the car and, as I was alighting, bouquet in hand, told me that Bhaiyyaji—that is how V. C. Shukla was known at home—had just left for the prime minister's residence at 1 Safdarjang Road. On seeing my look of disbelief, he

whispered into my ear: 'Madam pe hamla hua hai, bahut buri khabar hai'—there has been an attack on the prime minister, the news is terrible. I handed the beautiful flowers to the aide with instructions to place them on Shuklaji's office table, along with a short note.

Driving between the president's estate and Shastri Bhawan, I found that people had started gathering on the streets in large numbers. By the time I reached my office, it had become public news that the legendary prime minister, Indira Gandhi, had been riddled with bullets, killed in cold blood by her trusted bodyguards. The handsome lady, who had just dressed for an interview with a foreign television channel, lay bleeding on the pathway leading to her house.

I walked into the ministry and found the Press Trust of India tickers surrounded by officers and clerks, reeling with shock, unwilling to accept that the corpse of the assassinated prime minister was being rushed to the hospital. The joint secretary looked at me: 'Madam Prime Minister has met a premeditated violent death. The history of India will now be rewritten.' The chilling truth finally sank in.

From my childhood, I had been mesmerized by the persona of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and later his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who conducted herself throughout her life like an empress. She was quintessential to the growing pride of India, and she made her presence felt in the arena of international diplomacy. She spoke beautiful English, Urdu and French. And she easily dominated President Nixon and made Henry Kissinger bite the dust during 1971, when the Indian army convincingly defeated Pakistan, and East Bengal was liberated from the cruel remote control of Islamabad, giving birth to the new nation of Bangladesh.

I felt a deep sense of personal loss—as if my own pillar of strength and the nation's unifying force had collapsed while the country looked on helplessly. I tried to get a glimpse of Madam Gandhi in the hospital, but my car could not negotiate further than a few furlongs, such was the thickening crowd on Delhi's boulevards.

I had first heard of Indira Gandhi from my mother, who told me that she had seen Priyadarshini as a little girl dressed in khadi, bearing the Congress party flag and standing by the banks of the River Ravi. I first met Indira Gandhi with my parents at Teen Murti Marg, and soon thereafter as an international scholarship holder when I was invited to her residence for a tea party. I was photographed with Mrs Gandhi at 1 Safdarjang Road; when she saw me standing nervously in a corner, she called me to come up to her and said, 'Young man, let me sign this photograph for you, with my blessings.' This was in 1967.

I next met Indira Gandhi in 1980. I had then accompanied Begum Aziza Imam, MP, who had an appointment in South Block with the chief of protocol. The begum had just shifted to the Congress (O), having branched out from the Congress (I). As we were waiting in the foyer, we found ourselves suddenly pushed against the wall: 'Madam has arrived!' Indira Gandhi never believed in making a slow or grand entry. She always felt that time was running out and would virtually run from her car, through the corridors of South Block, into her office. Suddenly, she turned back and saw Begum Imam standing at the reception. The prime minister retraced her steps and came up to Begum Sahiba, and the graciousness of the prime minister's conduct impressed me greatly. After greeting Begum Sahiba with the traditional salutation, she said, 'Begum Sahiba, kya aap ke paas mere liye koi fursat nahin hai? Zara chai to peete hue jaiyega! Agar main aap ke kuchh kaam aa sakoon, main daftar mein aap ki intezar karoongi.' Can you not spare a little time for me, Begum Sahiba? Please do have a cup of tea with me. If I can be of any help or assistance, I shall wait for you in my office.

I also recall meeting Madam Gandhi while I was posted in the ITDC. One evening, just before a state banquet, she walked into the main dining hall, followed by her aides who were carrying a

variety of exotic blooms. She quickly asked the managers to remove the earlier arrangements and instructed them on how the bouquets were to be displayed. 'You see, the flowers I have brought with me bloom in the evening and lend fragrance to the night.'

On 31 October 1984, in all the ministries and offices situated in Delhi, work had come to a standstill. Only one question was being asked, from the Union secretary to the lowly safai karamchari: 'And what will happen now?' The roads to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences were thronged with Delhi's sorrowing citizens.

Indira Gandhi was declared dead around noon and the national flag was lowered. The body of the prime minister, draped in the tricolour, was placed on a gun carriage and kept in state in front of Teen Murti House—earlier the official residence of the British commander-in-chief, and later the house where Jawaharlal Nehru had lived for over seventeen years as the prime minister, with his daughter Indira as his official hostess.

Almost every country in the world paid respects to India's slain prime minister. In the porch of the Nehru Memorial, kings, presidents and prime ministers cued up to place wreaths on her lifeless body.

Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son, was flown in by special aircraft from Calcutta, where he was on tour, and appointed interim prime minister by Giani Zail Singh. The president was generally regarded as a stooge of the Congress party and of Mrs Gandhi in particular. He had once declared while holding the office of president that if Indiraji asked him to sweep the floors with a broomstick he would do so gladly.

Reportedly, in the historic gurudwara of Sis Ganj Sahib, at the far end of Chandni Chowk, from where the Sikh gurus had challenged the might of the Mughal emperors for atrocities perpetrated on the Hindu population, special prayers were being held from dawn and there was a celebratory offering when it was learnt that Indira Gandhi had been assassinated. An official of the gurudwara went to a renowned sweetmeat seller in the neighbourhood and placed an order for 5,000 laddoos to be prepared in pure ghee, to be distributed to mark the 'joyous' event. When he spoke of divine retribution having rightly visited the prime minister in reprisal for the attack by the Indian army on the Golden Temple, the statement—which, it was believed, echoed the sentiment of most Sikhs all over the world—resulted in an uncontrolled, accelerating fury seizing sections of the population all over the country.

It is always difficult to make people understand one's moral convictions, particularly if they are miles apart from one's own. In one of the most sepulchral moments in India's ageless history, the assassination of Indira Gandhi on that tragic October morning led to the physical extermination of Sikhs all over Delhi in what appeared to be a natural reflex but was, in fact, largely orchestrated by vagabond politicians and criminals who hounded down and mercilessly killed thousands of Sikhs living in the capital. Policemen remained inert, and some of them encouraged the murderers who were running amok, shouting: 'Maro, maro, jalaao in gaddaaron ko, Hindustan se bahar nikalo!' Kill these traitors, burn them alive, throw them out of Hindustan.

While the body of the most powerful woman in India's history lay lifeless, Sikhs were dragged out of their houses and brutally murdered in broad daylight. The killings of Sikhs spread from Delhi to Meerut and through the cities and countryside of the Indo-Gangetic plain up to Calcutta and beyond to Assam and the states known as 'The Seven Sisters'. In Punjab, by and large, except for a few stray incidents, such as the one at Lalru, peace was maintained. In other places, the Sikhs had to flee their places of work and seek shelter in the homes of friends and relatives, mostly from the Hindu community.

A delegation comprising the legendary governor Dharma Vira, civil servants, Chief Justice Sikri and judges of the Apex Court called on Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and asked him to call out the army immediately to restore normalcy, and to protect and safeguard the life, property, rights and liberty of the Sikh community. In those days, one-third of the army comprised Sikh officers and soldiers. Rajiv Gandhi, it is reported, said in reply that when a great tree falls an earthquake is inevitable.

The Sikhs were a prosperous community and controlled the transport business all the way up to Assam as well as business establishments in the states of UP, Central India, West Bengal and Rajasthan. I suspect strongly that the unpardonable massacre was actuated greatly out of envy because of the Sikhs having done well in a largely impoverished land—a thought that remains affirmed by the fact that, till today, not a single murderous thug responsible for the killings of defenceless Sikhs has been punished.

As a student of history and one who had been trying to comprehend comparative religions from my early years, I could never understand the difference between the Hindu religion and the Sikh faith. To me, Sikhism was a reform movement and Guru Nanak was part of the countrywide Bhakti cult of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which sought to rid Hinduism of many of its obsolete and satanic practices. The palace of the Sikh rulers and the rooms and halls of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's magnificent structures in Amritsar and Lahore are decorated with frescoes depicting the life of Lord Krishna and the Ras Leela. And the Sikh gurus had given up their lives to protect the Hindu faith.

Introspecting on the state of India, I thought to myself that the country was truly not fit for democracy—the entire tragedy of Indira Gandhi's murder and the Sikh riots was caused owing to the political mishandling of a situation that could have been sorted out by an objective administration, had the trained and the cerebral instead of the corruptible and power-hungry been permitted to execute the law of the land.

The deterioration of governance in Delhi caused the Cabinet secretary to call for an emergency review meeting in his office. Middle-ranking officers of the rank of deputy secretaries and directors were placed in charge of different parts of Delhi and given military contingents to ensure the safety of Sikhs. I was given a part of the Central District to superintend and was accompanied by Captain V. S. Chaudhary, a Jat from Rohtak, and his army jawans.

Near the Rakab Ganj gurudwara and the All India Radio compound, as well as in the heart of Connaught Place, I saw dead bodies of Sikhs lying sprawled across the road. Every now and then, a stray vehicle drove over their burning limbs. In one area, I caught hold of a mob that was trying to lynch a Sikh man and pouring kerosene over his head. The military men drove away the mob, hitting them with the butts of their rifles.

At same time, a chief minister of Haryana encouraged that Sikhs be brutally massacred on the outskirts of Delhi as they were returning to Punjab.

At the Gymkhana Club, my mother's card partners from Punjab changed from saris to the traditional salwar kameez. The rani of Faridkot started sporting a kirpan.

For the son of an army officer who had grown up with Sikh children and who knew Sikhs as large-hearted, hospitable and wonderful people, the riots of 1984 were an unbelievable agony. Most of my enduring friendships that continue to this day have been with Sikhs, and I suffered deep anguish and perplexity through the years that followed. 'What was it all for?' I asked myself again and again.

I grieve for the two tragedies of 1984: the first, the assassination of a great leader; the second, the deaths of thousands of innocents, for which justice has still not been served.

11

Sports for All

Ushering the twenty-first century into India became the signature of Rajiv Gandhi, the young prime minister. This well-mannered gentleman, with his clean image, assumed office in 1984 after, on a sympathy wave, the Congress returned to power with an overwhelming majority in Parliament. Descended from the formidable Nehru family, and owing to his own personal charisma, Rajiv Gandhi was viewed by the masses as the symbol of a national resurgence. It appeared, at the beginning of his tenure, that India had found a leader who would effectively unravel her complex problems in a landscape of unequal economic and social development.

The prime minister had well-intentioned dreams for the country and set his focus on India's youth, her greatest natural resource. However, he had to contend with the lingering shadows of the past—senior Congress leaders, most of whom were wealthy and corrupt and had vested interests, did not want any drastic change.

Though Rajiv Gandhi was usually soft-spoken, he had inherited the famous Nehru temper and often displayed dictatorial tendencies. Soon, he had surrounded himself by a small coterie of Doon School boys, many of whom were scions of princely families and had studied with him at Cambridge. The 'soup and salad' mafia became the prime minister's think tank and, at every meeting, there were audio-visual presentations and charts based on the Maslow curve, indicating how the government proposed to remove poverty according to a schedule.

Rajiv Gandhi was also greatly interested in the development of sports and would regularly hold review meetings for the department in the Parliament House Annexe. The minister in charge would sit to the right of the prime minister and the secretary to the left; the joint secretary, the deputy secretary and the director of NIS would be seated around a semicircular table; hosts of junior officers and ministerial staff would stalk the corridors, holding sheaves of papers and files and making arrangements for tea.

During one of the review meetings, the prime minister looked at me and asked why India lost matches in almost every international arena. I glanced at the secretary and then at the joint secretary, hoping that they would answer the question. In the administrative hierarchy, junior or middle-level IAS officers were answerable to the secretary to the government and there was a channel of communication that had to be strictly adhered to. It was the secretary alone who could communicate directly with the minister, who represented the political government, or its chief executive, the prime

minister.

'Young man, why are you not answering this simple question?' asked Rajiv Gandhi.

'Sir,' I said in response, 'this department does not have the money to lay astro-turf on hockey fields or for synthetic tracks. We have an annual budget of Rs 13 crores.' There was pin-drop silence in the room. 'To win in international sports, our athletes need top-class facilities and training by the best coaches in the world,' I continued. 'Outstanding sportspersons have no incentive. The rare gold medallist is awarded a paltry cash prize and employed with the greatest difficulty either as a Class IV or, at best, a Class III employee.'

The prime minister looked at me carefully. Then, turning to the secretary, he said, 'Is this correct? We must have a sports policy! Please come to me with concrete suggestions and a budget estimate after three weeks. We will meet here at the same time.' Turning towards me, he said with one of his disarming smiles: 'And don't you run off in some other direction!'

Encouraged by the prime minister's interest in the scientific promotion of sports and games in the country, with an eye to winning laurels in the international arena, and with the budget suddenly having been increased to Rs 300 crores, the department of sports got down to serious business. We simultaneously started work at several levels, with an objective and visionary secretary and an extremely laborious joint secretary. The lights in the windows of Shastri Bhawan could be seen burning brightly till late in the evening. The department had started working on a comprehensive national sports policy. This caused amazement and ridicule in many quarters: in a country where the majority of the population lived below the international poverty line, sports, like music, could at the most be viewed with passing interest—our work was considered akin to the consuming interest of King Ludwig II for building castles in Bavaria or listening to the opera all by himself.

Although colleagues advised me to get transferred out of such an insignificant assignment, I had started enjoying my work. The prime minister's personal interest in the sports department had given it flight. Since I mixed easily with the sports fraternity and attended their social gatherings from time to time, the office of the deputy secretary became the link between the government and the public. Dozens of visitors would call on me each day. Their requests followed a pattern: to put in a word for inclusion in a team that was scheduled to visit a foreign land, clearance for visits abroad, sanction of financial assistance and grants-in-aid to universities and state governments to allow them astro-turf on hockey fields and synthetic running tracks. The wrestlers too started clamouring for mats since this traditional sport had now to conform to international standards—the dangal had become a matter of the past.

While the secretary and the joint secretary methodically compartmentalized different sports disciplines and prioritized the assistance that was to be allowed to each, it was my office that had to receive stray and, sometimes, strange requests. Soon, my job became more difficult as heavy-handed visitors, with clout, started dropping names to get me to accede to their requests. Gentlemen I had studied with at school or in college, who had done nothing more in life than taking to different sports disciplines, now swore by our childhood friendship. Princes and princesses—who were skeet shooters, equestrians, tennis players, golfers or committed to polo—would visit my office regularly. Army officers evinced great interest in winter sports and would insist on travelling abroad, sometimes to arid desert areas.

Mr Gopalaswamy was the epitome of dignity. A copybook civil servant, he treated prince and plebeian alike, with no special favour shown to either. I was once witness to a scene in which he took a lieutenant general to task for misleading him. 'I say, what is this nonsensical proposal you have come up with? What are you suggesting?' The general—who on entering the room had puffed out his

medals and greeted the secretary with a limp salute—went red in the face. Mr Gopalaswamy rang the bell and called for his private secretary. Pointing towards the other three officers who had accompanied the general—a brigadier, a colonel and an ADC, who had sailed in as cockleboats with a ship—the secretary asked for them to be ushered out. 'Venkatesh, give them a cup of coffee in the waiting room,' was all he said. He then called for all the files concerning the general's proposal for substantial financial assistance. Eyes glinting with suppressed rage, he showed the general three or four contradictory letters to which he had affixed his signature. Then, turning down the proposal, Mr Gopalaswamy said, 'There are wars to be fought and battles to be won on our vast borders. Why are you immersing yourself in winter games that are to be held in snowbound areas?' The lieutenant general knew when he was beaten. He clicked his heels, gave a smart salute and backed out of the room.

Mr Gopalaswamy was obsessed with promoting indigenous sports: kabaddi, kho-kho, athletics, swimming, walking, cycling and gymnastics. 'You see, the movement for sports consciousness must be built up from the village level,' he would say. 'Gold medals in the Olympics will follow.'

I was able to prevail on the government to send P. T. Usha for training to the Crystal Palace in London and Khazan Singh to Australia for coaching under Eric Arnold. The body-builder Prem Chand Degra too was sent abroad and Kartar Singh, the wrestler from Punjab police, was granted a special diet and allowance, along with focused and uninterrupted training. In the Asian Games held in 1986, these sportspersons won gold, silver and bronze medals, forecasting India's potential in sports.

Looking out of my fifth-floor window, I saw the medallists alighting from a car to enter the ministry. They were celebrities, and people were thronging the corridors to catch a glimpse of them and to get their autographs. I returned to my desk to attend to the voluminous files that had accumulated on my table. There was a knock on my door. P. T. Usha, Khazan Singh, Kartar Singh, Prem Chand Degra and a few bronze medallists entered my room. When I got up to congratulate them on their stellar performance, they greeted me with a pranaam. I hastened the process of getting them appointed to jobs in the railways, in the police force and in the Indian Airlines. It was a good beginning for the National Sports Policy, laying down the foundations of the sports movement in the country.

The policy spoke of sports consciousness, physical fitness and good health, village-level sports, the promotion of sports and games at the district, state, national and international levels, and outlined the way in which the scientific study of sports sciences and sports medicine would be undertaken in the country. The pattern of Central assistance to national and state federations and employment for sportspersons who brought laurels to the country was also clearly indicated in the National Sports Policy. It was a slim but comprehensive document.

Over the issue of hosting the Commonwealth Games, however, Mr Gopalaswamy crossed swords with a junior minister. While the IOA president was pressing for the Commonwealth Games to be hosted in Delhi, the secretary was of the view that this would involve wasteful expenditure. He scuttled Shuklaji's proposals and, at the end of a lengthy analysis, noted on file: 'We should close this matter once and for all.' The file remained in the archives of the Cabinet minister for a few weeks and then returned with a philosophical observation to the effect that there is no finality in life apart from the ultimate finality and that the only certainty is uncertainty. Eventually, for his convictions, Mr Gopalaswamy was transferred to an insignificant post.

On a winter morning, at 9 a.m., the secretary called me to his room. Pointing to a newspaper report, he told me that he had been shifted to the Cabinet secretariat and he would assume charge of his next assignment within an hour. He asked me to sit down while disposing of the few files that

were left on his table. A large number of people were standing in the corridor; Mr Gopalaswamy asked me to invite them inside. 'Please sit down. There is ample room.'

All the ministerial staff and the officers had a tearful look to them. A Sikh superintendent from Punjab, who was hugely popular in the ministry, said, 'Your Honour, will it be convenient to attend a farewell tea party at 11 a.m.?'

'Not necessary,' said the secretary 'I thank all of you for a job well done.'

As they left, Mr Gopalaswamy asked me to stay back. 'You are a good person,' he said. 'I have recommended your name for a posting to the department of culture.' He walked up to the large windows and looked out to see if the car from his next office had reached.

Mr Gopalaswamy had large and luminous eyes. As he stood contemplating the world outside the window, he reminded me of the priests I had seen at the Tirupati Temple, chanting the Suprabhatam at 3 a.m. There was a poignant stillness to the moment. 'I will miss you, sir,' was all I could say.

Looking at me like a sage from a bygone era, the secretary said, 'This is, that was!'

As I escorted Mr Gopalaswamy to the car, I wondered at the brilliance, honesty and purity of the man. The last files the secretary had disposed of had promoted clerks and peons, finalized pensions and provident fund cases and given appointments to widows and next of kin. He had done all that was within his power to help those whom he had worked with.

After a year or so, I was told that the secretary had vacated his sprawling official bungalow in Delhi a day before he retired. He had left for his village in southern India and become a priest in the local temple by the sea.

As part of the policy to get international-level sportspersons the best available coaching and training, during 1985-86, protocols were signed with the USSR, West Germany and later with Australia and Pakistan. As a result of this, seasoned foreign coaches were deputed to train 'top flight' trainees in the NIS centres. Moreover, Indian coaches, trainees and their managers were able to receive training abroad in the latest methods of regulated discipline as well as scientific diet, keeping local conditions in mind.

Important foreign delegates were received in limousines and escorted to the Ashoka Hotel. Driving through the tree-lined boulevards of Delhi's diplomatic enclave and watching the flags of different countries catching the breeze, I experienced a purposeful thrill of importance. (Such motorcades, however, did not impress the citizens of Delhi. On this route, cavalcades were a daily occurrence and had lowered the rates of property in the area.)

The delegations were feted and feasted at the best hotels and taken on sightseeing tours to Agra and Jaipur. After they had looked around the Qutub Minar, encircled their arms around Chandragupta Vikramaditya's pillar, walked through the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid and finished their shopping in Chandni Chowk and Connaught Place, they would repair to their rooms to recline in the luxury of Indian hospitality. Sports protocols were signed in the secretary's office by the dignitaries. While the Indian side paused over every comma and full stop and, in the process, lost sight of the purpose of the visit, the happy delegates were affable and in good humour, receptive to the new initiatives.

There was a welcome lunch, in the routine, to which the minister, the secretary, the directors general of the sports institutes and the Union secretaries of concerned ministries—home affairs, finance and the foreign office—were invited. For me, these formal meals were an excruciating experience: the minister, the secretary and the joint secretary were orthodox Brahmins, vegetarian and teetotallers. They looked ashen when large platters of Mughlai chicken, mutton koftas and fish

delicacies were placed at the centre of the table. Toasts were raised; while the foreign delegates enjoyed chilled champagne and wine, the Indian side responded with small glasses of tepid orange juice. The Russians and Germans and, indeed, the Pakistanis had a vast appetite and, oblivious to the agony of their hosts, the rounds of drink continued till late and many bottles of alcohol were demolished. The Brahmins went on fast or, at best, I had to organize the placement of curd rice from their houses, served on plain white plates, alongside the Government of India's crested crockery.

The visiting foreigners were greatly impressed by the National Institute of Sports housed in the Moti Bagh Palace and took note of the existing facilities. This royal city was not far from Delhi, and the Germans and Russians had heard about the splendid kings and princes who had lived there just a generation ago. While the Russians told us of the murderous shooting of the tsar and tsarina and the decimation of the imperial rulers with sulphuric acid, the Germans recalled the madness of Hölderlin and Ludwig II. The Pakistanis rejoiced in stories of the legendary Gama Pehalwan, who had been patronized by the rulers of Patiala.

For a farewell dinner in Delhi, I was called by the secretary and told to represent the sports department. 'You fix the venue and the menu,' he said. 'Mr Chaturvedi and Laxminarayana are accompanying me to the temple of Guruvayoor early tomorrow and I will have retired for the night by the time dinner commences.' Mr Gopalaswamy then did a mock rehearsal of the next day's ceremony. 'They will drink. You will drink. There will be laughter. There will be jokes. And there will be dishes of dead meat. I have asked Venkatesh to add Karachi halwa and kulfi to the menu. There will be a ghazal singer, love songs about passion extinguishing itself as a moth before the flame. The visitors will present expensive gifts, which you must send to the toshakhana of the foreign office. No doubt these will be used for some such future exercise. Ask them to pray for harmony and peace in this wretched world.'

Unexpectedly, a posting in the Union sports department involved a lot of foreign travel. Between 1984 and 1987, I visited Dacca, Italy, Mauritius and Germany. Each time, I dreaded leaving Delhi: I wished to keep watch over my elderly mother, who would sometimes address me as 'Noor-e-chashm'—the light of her eyes.

In 1985, I was deputed to represent India at a prestigious conference on the subject of 'Sports for All' in Frankfurt. I was received with fanfare at the airport by a comely blonde from the German foreign office and the Indian tricolour fluttered on the car sent by the government. We were required to adhere to a very rigid schedule. The liaison officer showed me to a luxurious suite with a study, a lounge and a very large bedroom. I was accorded the facilities due to a visiting head of a delegation.

The suite commanded a panoramic view of the city. I could as well have been in New York—such was the skyline. Dreaming of fairytale castles with bridges built over moats, of turreted palaces and large opera houses overgrown with rose climbers, of medieval museums and cobbled streets lined with taverns, I had to remind myself that Frankfurt had been rebuilt at the end of the war and that for now I would have content myself with Brahms and Mozart over the radio, in between the tightly trimmed programme. I was overcome with a deep sense of loneliness, incarcerated in the deluxe suite, without being able to engage anyone in conversation.

The visit to Frankfurt was a strange experience, reflective of a people who had organized themselves to the point of imprisonment. This reminded me of my grandmother's sister, a wealthy old lady who had left behind vast properties in Lahore and had built a house in Delhi, where there were iron grills on the verandas leading to the main house, grills between the rooms, grills on the outside verandas and an electric wire on the boundary wall. Nothing could convince the beautifully dressed Soma Devi that the Muslim rioters had been left behind in Pakistan and that in Delhi there would be

no further attacks. She had compartmentalized her life into rooms that had been demarcated by the grills, which she kept unlocking and locking as she moved from one room to the next. When she was found dead in her private temple, at the feet of Lord Krishna, it was not easy to affect entry into the many compartments of her life.

The international conference on 'Sports for All' and sports consciousness was held in a tall building constructed of steel and glass. It was clinically clean from within and without and the only sign of life, before the delegates arrived, comprised the sprightly housekeeping staff in uniform and the potted plants in broken arrangements. Delegates from all over the world presented their papers and shared valuable information about the sports movement in their countries. The entire conference was organized on a mathematical axis, and it was a sight to watch the hundreds of delegates listening to carefully prepared speeches on earphones and assiduously taking down notes.

I was amazed at the importance given to sports and physical education in the developed world and also in many countries of the third world. The planning of the four-day conference was remarkable as well. There were back-up facilities in case of electricity failure, the amplification of microphones was perfect and an air of seriousness pervaded the large auditorium. We could have been determining the war and peace of nations.

Used to chaotic confusion in India's governmental functioning, I noted the ability of the human mind to think with clarity and to execute programmes accurately. Preceded by a breakfast that was more in the nature of a banquet, the conference would start sharp at 9 a.m. There was a coffee break for fifteen minutes at 11 a.m. The delegates would break for light snacks, which they downed with coffee, at 1.15 p.m. Tea was served with biscuits at 4 p.m. and the day would end at 5.30 p.m. For the organizers, the only purpose of the conference was to gain knowledge and share information. When one reached the hotel, one found the papers that would be presented the next day, neatly numbered, placed on a desk in the suite. There was little time for indulging one's fancies.

I had worked hard on my presentation, diffident about the Government of India having selected me to represent the country when I was yet in my thirties. I based my speech on the National Sports Policy: on India's aspirations and on the requirement for protocol that suited Indian conditions for creating sports consciousness. At the end of forty minutes, when I was done, there was a ringing silence, followed by thunderous clapping. My presentation had been rated highly and, I was told later, adjudged among the best.

After the conference was over and business cards were exchanged, the delegates took leave of each other. I motored down to the hotel and, with a sigh of relief, bid the liaison officer adieu.

On my second day in Frankfurt, I had put in a request through my liaison officer to stay on in the hotel, at my personal cost, for two days after the conference. I wanted to visit the museums and art galleries in Frankfurt and, more importantly, in Bavaria.

I sat in the bar room planning out the next two days. That evening, I intended to go pub-crawling and unwind, for which I went upstairs to change into informal clothes. On reaching my room, I found that it was locked from within and, on making enquiries, was told that the new occupants, a honeymooning couple, had installed themselves after lunch in accordance with the booking chart. I found that my bags had been neatly packed and placed on shelves in the baggage room in the basement. I had deferred my departure—and I had nowhere to go. As far as the Germans were concerned, the conference was over and my visit had ended.

Aghast, I stood uncertainly at the kerb with my bags and hailed a cab. The driver was from Lahore and I told him that I wanted to buy a few gifts for my mother and to visit some tourist spots. I also mentioned my unexpected plight and the need to book into a reasonable hotel room. 'What will be

charges for the evening?' I asked him.

Rashid Khan took me to his house, where his begum greeted me with the traditional aadab. One of his sons carried my bags into a room and Rashid said to his wife: 'Mehmaan aaye hai, kuchh khaane ka intezaam ki jiye'—a guest had arrived, she needed to organize food for him.

For the next three days, I stayed with Rashid Khan as his guest. He took me to the taverns, to the operas, to the museums. And he drove me all the way to Bavaria to see one of Ludwig's castles. Though the family wanted me to stay and celebrate Eid with them, I had to return to Mother.

'Ji haan,' said the elderly lady of the house, when she heard this. Looking into the distance, she recited the words of the Holy Prophet: 'Al jannato tahta ikdamil umme haat.' Heaven lies at the feet of one's mother.

When Mr Gopalaswamy wanted to know about the background to the Arjuna Awards, I informed him that the awards had been instituted in 1961 and were in the nature of recognition by the government for outstanding performance in sports at different levels, particularly in the international arena. I sent him a note on the selection procedure and showed him the bronze statuette of Arjuna and the scroll presented to awardees each year. 'Just fifteen such statuettes can be awarded in a year, corresponding to the number of recognized sports disciplines. It is a glittering ceremony held in the Durbar Hall of the Presidential Palace which, I understand, was the hall of authority from where the Viceroy decided matters of state.'

Out of my interest in architecture, I had made a brief study of the Rashtrapati Bhawan, the buildings of which were completed in 1929. It is one of the largest palaces in the world, with 340 rooms and a floor area of 200,000 square feet. I was fascinated by the manner in which Sir Edwin Lutyens had intricately synthesized Indian and European styles and taken the Buddhist stupa as the crowning element of the vast structure. After my visit to the erstwhile viceregal lodge, I had been overwhelmed. Each and every aspect of the palace—whether structural features or decorative elements—inspired awe in one's heart. The dome had been constructed exactly in the middle of the four corners of Rashtrapati Bhawan; from whatever angle it is viewed, one gets the feeling that it is floating in the haze of Delhi's heat. The Durbar Hall, where the awards ceremony was scheduled to take place, boasted a two-ton chandelier that hung from a height of thirty-three metres, and beautiful frescos were painted on the ceilings.

Breaking into my reverie, the secretary said: 'All that is very well, but what about Dronacharya? Is there no award for the guru who brings up the archer to levels of excellence, enabling him to aim into the centre of the fish's eye?'

I replied that so far no award had been instituted by the government for coaches.

'How strange! Can there be a child without the father? Have you not heard of the guru-shishya parampara—the fundamental tradition of knowledge in Indian history? We shall now have a Dronacharya award.'

Mr Gopalaswamy's note was approved by Narasimha Rao and, in 1985, the Dronacharya Award was instituted to honour eminent coaches whose pupils showed excellent results in sports and games.

Under the new dispensation, Giani Zail Singh had been marginalized. Owing to his lack of European mannerisms, he was perhaps considered an unsophisticated man by the new prime minister and his anglicized coterie. There was also a generation gap between the president and Rajiv Gandhi. The prime minister stopped visiting Rashtrapati Bhawan for routine briefings and the head of state and the head of the executive government met rarely. Taking their cue from the prime minister,

members of the Cabinet, Union secretaries and joint secretaries also stopped visiting the president's palace on Raisina Hill.

A piquant situation arose when a marathon was organized by the sports department and the torch, lit by the president, was to be handed over to a representative of the sports ministry and carried by athletes all over the country, with the idea of promoting sports consciousness and the unity of the county. As the secretary and the joint secretary were unavailable, I was deputed to call on the president, who was flanked by his deputy secretary, K. C. Singh, and a retired major general, Narinder Singh, who represented the Sports Authority of India.

There have been many books written about Gianiji and, therefore, the best I can do is to share a personal experience. While posted in Delhi, I would visit the Gymkhana Club on most evenings. On one occasion, as I returned home, a colleague called on me unexpectedly, distraught after a difference of opinion with his newly wedded second wife. He was not a member of the club and suggested that we visit its bar for a drink. While I was in the cloakroom, the presence of my guest was challenged by the secretary of the club, a retired brigadier who, in his cups, insulted the helpless visitor. Coming to my friend's rescue, I found the secretary taunting the two of us with drunken expletives. This led to a violent fracas which was widely reported in the press the next day. No one came to my rescue—no colleague in the IAS, nor the generals and princes who partnered my parents in the card rooms. As a result, I was to be prematurely repatriated to my home state, West Bengal, with a bad chit, my deputation curtailed.

I called on K.C. Singh, who was a confidante of Gianiji. We were, after all, presidential appointees. I asked him to put in a word to the president to see if the ex-parte orders of the personnel department could be rescinded. We trailed the president on his evening walk in the Mughal gardens behind Rashtrapati Bhawan. My colleague coughed nervously, not knowing how to put the matter to Gianiji, who quite suddenly looked back. 'Does this tall gentleman require any help?' he queried, looking at me.

I recounted the entire saga, by which time the president had reached the end of the bougainvillea garden. All this while, he had been talking to the gardeners and the supervisors, enquiring about their health, the welfare of their families and the progress of different varieties of roses. We had been walking along the flowerbeds and I had the impression that Gianiji had not listened to a word. Returning to his office, the tall windows of which opened out into the gardens, the president ordered tea. Then, turning towards his deputy secretary, he broke into loud laughter. 'I never imagined that your friend is an IAS officer! He deserves better.' He told me not to worry, picked up the telephone and ordered the cancellation of the transfer orders. As I got up to leave, the president said, 'I have never in my life heard of a civil servant thrashing a brigadier. Be careful in the future, though.'

It is the chair that makes the man and, thereafter, the man that makes the chair. Initially, Giani Zail Singh had made a poor impression after a succession of erudite presidents such as Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and the scholarly Zakir Hussain. At his oath-taking ceremony, the new president had stumbled over English sentences. People had watched with uncertainty, wondering whether a more suitable person could not have been found to head the world's largest democracy. After assuming office, Gianiji switched to Hindustani, Urdu and Punjabi, over which he had a command. He spoke powerfully and could quote from Mirza Ghalib, Mir, Momin, Faiz or Allama Iqbal at will. In his beautifully tailored achkans and with his warm personality, he turned out to be far more endearing than the fledgling prime minister, to whom there was no access. It became evident that Gianiji was a good man, who meant well by humanity. He went, as president, to enquire about the health of Raja Sir Harinder Singh, Brar Bans Bahadur of Faridkot, when he lay dying in a Delhi hospital, unmindful of

the fact that the former ruler had once had him imprisoned at the Faridkot jail, forcing him to weave carpets for the royal bastar khana.

The tension between the prime minister and the president reached its nadir after insult upon insult had been heaped upon the president, violating Constitutional decorum and requirement. A first-class crisis was brewing in Delhi. The tall senator-like V. C. Shukla—aided by Arun Nehru, Arif Mohammed Khan and Devi Lal—almost got the prime minister removed from office by the president. However, the requisite number of parliamentarians who were willing to sign a memorandum for Rajiv's Gandhi's dismissal wavered and the moment passed. But a dent had been made in Rajiv Gandhi's 'clean image'.

Whenever I visited Rashtrapati Bhawan post 1984, I found that it had a number of visitors from the Punjab, mostly Sikhs, who had come to Delhi for redressal of their grievances. Gianiji had been the chief minister of Punjab and, being a kind man, helped out wherever he could. The idea that the Presidential Palace had become a terrorist hideout for Sikhs in the heart of the capital gained ground. The Hindu and Sikh families in Delhi gave short shrift to this aberrant thought and after Gianiji completed his term, he moved to a bungalow on Circular Road, close to the Teen Murti House. One Diwali, I went to greet the former president and found Gianiji sitting alone, on a gilded chair, in an empty room. Relationships, I told myself, are specific to circumstance and in Delhi, the historic capital of many empires, the centres of extinguished power are, at best, cherished as monuments.

In 1985, I was deputed to escort a large delegation of sports persons to Dacca, the venue of the second South Asia Federation Games, a biannual multi-sports event that had been started in 1982 by an association under the aegis of Rajiv Gandhi. Athletes and sportspersons from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka participated in the games, which were styled as a South Asian version of the Olympiad. The object of the Indian government in organizing these games was to engender economic betterment in a composite region and to bring the participating nations together through the medium of sports. The noble sentiments expressed through the SAF motto—'Peace, Perseverance, Progress'—to which were added on a series of fatuous homilies such as 'Sports is our life, unity our strength' and 'Keep your spirits higher through sports forever'—lacked seriousness. The games were more in the nature of an excursion to the capitals of underdeveloped countries—and the poorer the country, the more extravagant its hospitality. The only logic for the SAF games, strictly in terms of sports promotion, lay in improving records of excellence for gaining entry into the Olympiad to win medals in the international arena.

As the leader of a large delegation of 150-strong sportspersons, with an equal number of sports officials, ministerial staff and cheerleaders, I found that just a minority of the athletes and wrestlers who had been selected were possessed of substantive merit. I was lodged in the Sonargaon Hotel, the best in Dacca, and the suite of the deputy secretary, sports, became a centre for active lobbying by sportspersons and federation chiefs seeking 'adjustments' and the permission to break rules. To my consternation, I discovered that a large number of sportspersons were undisciplined and avaricious, interested mainly in purchasing imported goods to sell them at a profit on their return to India. By and large, they lacked the consuming commitment to excel.

The games were inaugurated by the president of Bangladesh with the kind of fanfare that South Asian nations are known for. Amidst flags and buntings, troupes of dancers wove patterns outlining the names of different countries in turn. There were innumerable food stalls and makeshift toilets that gave a fine impression of a city otherwise renowned for having 400,000 rickshaw-pullers, the largest

number in the world. The streets overflowed with hawkers, peddlers, small shops, vendors and hordes of migrant labourers, all of which left one feeling trapped without sufficient space or fresh air.

Like all old cities, Dacca had its palace of the erstwhile rulers. At the Ashan Manzil, descendants of the royal family had confined themselves to one wing and converted the major part of the structure into a museum. The Tara Masjid and the Dhakeshwari Temple were focal points of worship in the city. Apart from producing the finest muslin in the world, Dacca produced Jamdani saris, and I was told that it took about three months to weave one. The jute carpets of Dacca too were famous—traditional Mughal and Persian patterns were woven into the rough fabric generally associated with gunny bags, and finished with a silken sheen. (I bought a beige carpet with patterns in blue and presented it to Mother on returning home. It had cost just $100. Aghast, Mother looked at the carpet and declared: 'A crow sporting the feathers of a peacock!' Her distaste having subsided, she had it rolled up and put away till it was presented to a relative as a wedding gift.)

During the games, I took up the case of Jai Prakash Pehalwan, a wrestler from Delhi, to whom the referee had been unjust. I had the awards ceremony postponed till the matter was resolved, only to find that he had made an 'out of court' settlement, for a consideration. In the process, for my tactlessness, I received adverse mention in dispatches to the Government of India. Many years later, I read in the newspaper that Jai Prakash had turned into an estate agent, then a dacoit and had finally been booked for murder.

Every evening, the Sonargaon Hotel laid out a banquet by the poolside. There were long tables covered with fresh white linen, above which were placed numberless local and Western delicacies. I was taken aback at the appetite of the sportspersons for food, drink and the good things of life. Theirs ought to have been a scientifically Spartan existence, not the excesses of gladiators.

More than any sports related affair, I recall with joy today the languid fragrance of East Bengal and the lilting song of the boatmen as they glided over silent waters at night.

Thereafter, I escorted an Indian delegation to the Youth Services Camp on the outskirts of Rome. Within the camp the routine was lacklustre and based on social and cultural exchange, with a lot of eating, drinking and dancing, and the kind of peripheral camaraderie that develops over a week or ten days, when people live together in comfortable incarceration. The camp seemed to go on interminably and was rather banal and vapid, particularly the lectures on unity in diversity, the destiny of mankind that depended on youth, the world as a global village and the need to understand ourselves better. Avoiding the conducted tours, I went instead on short excursions to Rome's various historical landmarks, including the Pantheon and the Coliseum. I also took long walks alone, discovering the Italian countryside for myself. After the camp, we were taken to Verona and Venice, to Padua and Milan.

Though the Italians are reputed to be informal, the people do not mix with foreigners. It appeared to be commonly understood that a guest begins to stink like stale fish on the third day of his visit. 'Atithi devo bhave,' counters the Hindu mind. Having grown up with the notion that the guest is akin to God, I was deeply disappointed by this aspect of the country. I attribute this aloofness of Italians to tradition: while Italians grow up reading of Nero, the emperor who consigned his people to vicious death, Indians are brought up with the ideal of Emperor Ashoka, a man who claimed all his subjects as his children. As I paused in front of Domus Aurea, the site of Nero's 'golden house', I wondered why the government had not sent me instead to Thanesar, the capital of Emperor Harshavardhana, who would, every seven years, part with all his worldly possessions and repair to the forest to re-examine the eternal questions of life.

Italy, despite all its splendour, left me cold.

Our tour ended with a midnight reception that was held in an ancient town hall that glittered with subtly coloured chandeliers from Murano. I do not recall champagne flowing so freely ever before, and I can still visualize the life-sized statues of bronze horses at the corners of the building, for the local duke had been a great equestrian. The delegates were asked to make presentations. Some danced, others sang. Not a single performance was of any relevance to the purpose of the exchange programme—which, it appeared to me, had been sidelined altogether in the quest of a 'Roman Holiday'.

I accompanied Mr P. V. Naramsimha Rao to the beautiful island of Mauritius in 1986. The minister, who was placed at second position in the Union Cabinet, was on a political mission to a nation where nearly half the population were of Indo-Mauritian descent. As India's deputy secretary from the Union department of sports, it appeared that I was a mask for the high-powered delegation.

At Port Louis, we were received by the president of Mauritius with a host of dignitaries in attendance. I was spellbound by Narasimha Rao's eloquent speech, which was delivered in flawless French. Thereafter, the long cavalcade of limousines drove to the Gandhi Institute, where the minister waxed eloquent in shuddh Hindi, in which the Mauritian Indians revelled, though the official language was English. Rao Sahib's English, though spoken with a slight accent, would have, in thought, content, grammar and syntax, made a Cambridge don sit up and introspect.

We were lodged in the tastefully appointed president's villa by the ocean. The large living area had two luxurious suites on either side, one of which was allotted to me. There, I noted the similarities between Mr Gopalaswamy and Rao Sahib. Their lifestyle was disciplined and the food they ate was frugal in the extreme. Fruits, yoghurt and cereals; chopped vegetables and rice, with rasam or sambhar. Both Mr Gopalaswamy and Naramsimha Rao were knowledgeable about the Carnatic style of classical music; both were scholars of Vedic literature; both awakened early and were deeply religious. Quite by chance, I witnessed Rao Sahib chanting the Sahastranaam, the one thousand and eight names of Lord Vishnu, as he watched the flaming sun descend into the ocean.

After Ramu Damodaran—an exceptionally brilliant foreign service officer, then posted as the minister's private secretary and who was treated by the widower Rao Sahib as a son—had given him his medicine, the minister retired for the night. The presidential villa was situated close to a resort near the beach and I could catch the strains of rhythmic music from there. Tossing in bed, with sleep eluding me, I picked up the copy of *Zorba the Greek* that I was carrying with me. I felt diffident reading Zorba's lascivious opinions about life with Rao Sahib asleep upstairs—they seemed tangential to our mission of goodwill to consolidate our hold over the minuscule nation in the Indian Ocean. 'Man is a brute,' says Zorba. 'If you're cruel to him, he respects and fears you. If you're kind to him, he plucks your eyes out.' I wondered if this could be the underlying principle for effective diplomatic exchange, couched in sober and carefully considered prose. There was no reprieve from the music and I continued reading. The aim of man and matter, according to Zorba, is to create joy and, according to his postulates, when the body dissolves, nothing remains of the soul. 'And does our unquenchable desire for immortality spring from the fact that during the short span of our life we are in the service of something immortal?' I was getting deeper into Zorba's passionately instinctual approach to life, unencumbered by the esoteric learning of scholarly men. At the end, Zorba concludes that freedom lies in dancing by the sea.

It was 2 a.m., and the drumbeats seemed to have grown louder. Refusing to be confined any longer, I walked into the garden to the surprise of the security staff patrolling the villa. Like a

directionless sleepwalker, I entered a nearby discotheque where a tall African couple asked me to join them. Teaching me the local variations of the hip-hop dance that was then sweeping the Western world, they formed a bridge with their hands and I found myself moving under it from one end to the other, to the rhythmic beat that had reached a crescendo.

When I went, at 8 a.m., to seek my orders for the day from Rao Sahib, I was told that he had left with his private secretary at 7.30 a.m, and would be back in his room around 5 p.m. The minister's Brahmin cook handed over a note with a message that I should get the sports protocol with Mauritius finalized over lunch, in the presence of the sports minister and the vice president. I took out the draft and, still on a high, with the festivities of the night in my mind, I carefully went through the lengthy document I had brought with me from Delhi and added a few adventurous clauses to India's advantage. The Mauritians held meetings in style and, during the course of the extended luncheon, the protocol was signed, with the additional clauses incorporated into the finalized draft.

Thereafter, I took a drive through the island of Mauritius, which I was told formed part of an archipelago caused by a series of undersea volcanic eruptions eight to ten million years ago. The island itself is formed around a central plateau, with its highest peak at a height of 828 metres. Therefore, in an hour's drive, the landscape changed—from sugarcane fields to verdant mountainsides to the sinking hues of the Indian Ocean.

At 5 p.m., I saw the minister returning to the villa after his various engagements. I briefed him about my meeting with the Mauritian sports ministry and showed him the finalized protocol. Rao Sahib went through the entire document and gave me one of his rare smiles. 'Mauritius seems to suit you,' he said as he climbed up to his suite.

In the evening, we were taken in a glass-bottomed boat to some distance into the ocean, towards the coast of Africa. We also made a brief stopover at the ambassador's residence. The ex-army-man-turned-diplomat was gauche, and the drawing room and reception areas were garish. While delicate canapés were served alongside samosas and jalebis, I wondered at the role of the foreign service in a world of technical connectivity. The only rationale, I concluded, was a human face in a foreign land, able to interact in meetings and parties and with the local administration.

Our last engagement in Mauritius was a state banquet hosted in Rao Sahib's honour. It was held in a hotel where the ocean's tide came up to a private jetty before the waters receded. Heavy silver glittered on damask table linen and the candles flickered between the flags of India and Mauritius. The teetotaller Rao Sahib slid the sparkling champagne in a crystal-stem glass towards me. Taking a sip of mineral water, he toasted the Mauritius president and stated: 'The deputy secretary will represent India.'

My tenure in the sports ministry ended quite unsettlingly. One evening, when I was returning to my residence after a dinner party, around midnight, a posse of policemen waved my car to a halt, indicating that I pay them a bribe for driving after imbibing alcohol. Unable to comprehend why I had been challenged, I gave a dressing-down to the inspector, as if I were a magistrate in the districts. The policemen did not believe that I was an IAS member, for the Bengali Market-Connaught Circus area where I lived was not a government colony and no middle-level civil servant could have afforded to live there. One of the policemen physically assaulted me and, getting out of the car, I smashed in some of his teeth.

It was an ugly incident and, helpless at that hour, I had to accompany the policemen to the Tilak Marg police station. The SHO refused to believe that I had been a member of the IPS or that I was

serving as a deputy secretary to the Government of India, and a false case was registered against me.

I had completed four out of the five years of my deputation period and the Government of India, once again, repatriated me to my home state, West Bengal. Determined to set the matter right, I called on several criminal lawyers. Alarmed at the fees they quoted, I told Kapil Sibal, then a leading counsel in the Supreme Court, my story and diffidently indicated a token payment. Kapil smiled: 'Robin, I have since long passed the stage when I work for remuneration.'

In a titanic legal battle against the Union Government, Kapil Sibal, with his impressive presence and resonant voice, appeared numerous times in court, without charging any fee, making the government bite the dust.

After seven months, I resumed work in the office. Meanwhile, the policemen were arrested, the FIR quashed and my tenure in the Union ministry of sports came to an end.

12

Cooling Off in Haryana

In 1988, I was required to return to Bengal after a nine-year period, during which time I had worked out a peaceful arrangement of living at home and motoring down to office during the day and to the club in the evening. Urvashi had settled down in the United States. So the prospect of leaving Delhi was painful as Mother, eighty years old, would have to live alone.

Over the years, I had built up a cordial relationship with V. C. Shukla and we would sometimes discuss the political configuration of the national sports federations. After the death of Mrs Gandhi, this impressive Congressman found no favour with the new political dispensation. Shuklaji represented the old order and had served as a Cabinet minister for years. The new prime minister appeared to feel uneasy with him and relied instead on the coterie that had formed an invisible cordon around him. One got the feeling that V. C. Shukla was being 'tolerated'. He was given a ministerial rank and allowed to continue living in his official bungalow situated in the vast acreage of the president's estate. He was officially designated chairman of the SNIPES, the Society for the National Institute of Physical Education and Sports.

During a visit to Shuklaji's residence, I told him of my dilemma and briefly outlined my domestic circumstance. With the clarity of one who has wielded power for long, the former minister told me: 'Why don't you spend the cooling off period in Haryana? You could be posted to Gurgaon and keep a watch on your house. You must not leave your mother unprotected.'

This sounded unbelievable, though I had heard of the change of cadre of civil servants and intra-state deputation of officers who had never left Delhi for decades. ICS and later IAS officers were considered to be a superior class who could be made to fit into any organization in Delhi. I was yet to learn that a civilian could serve with the Union Government and, thereafter, to avoid returning to a provincial capital or to the mofussil, be posted to head an organization such as the Archaeological Survey of India, the Trade Fair Authority, or be appointed chairman of a bank or vice chancellor of a university. There was no consideration of past experience or merit; it was a question of having the right connections at the right time and lobbying on Raisina Hill, where the North and South Blocks faced each other with their serried ranks of mandarins who sat in the four great ministries—home affairs, defence, external affairs and finance—as well as the office of the prime minister.

This was the citadel of power, and I reminded myself that the concept of the civil service and of district administration had been imported from China, where the mandarins were required to submit

poetic compositions that were brought to the notice of the Imperial Court before the appointments of officers were formally announced. The Chinese emperor was never given any unhappy tidings and the state of the provinces, where brigands held sway, was unknown to him—a stationariness prevailed, which led to the capitulation of that great civilization. To my mind, contemporary Delhi paralleled the Forbidden City. Looking at the imposing secretariat building from where India was governed, I wondered if India would emerge into economic freedom if the capitol complex were bombed.

Cutting through my reverie, Shuklaji said, 'Robin, I will speak to the Haryana chief minister this evening and get back to you. There should be no problem.'

The next morning, he telephoned me: 'Chaudhary Sahib has agreed to take you on deputation in Haryana. Please go and meet him in Chandigarh.'

There was no letter of introduction, no telephone call made in my presence. With apprehension, I took the highway to Le Corbusier's city which, in 1988, had had an ancestry of three decades. As the small Maruti car edged past the negligible traffic of Ambassadors and Fiats, I found to my amazement that we were travelling towards Ambala on a narrow highway with tall eucalyptus and poplar trees standing sentinel between the silent fields, amidst the sound of birds returning to nest for the night.

'This is Lalru Mandi,' said Divya Monga, my friend who was at the wheel. 'A busload of Hindus was recently massacred here by Sikh militants.' He handed me a hip flask. With a few rapid draughts of whisky, the distance dissolved. We checked into the Mountview Hotel, the only resting place I had heard of, in the ghost town where I was to live for two decades.

Chaudhary Devi Lal, the Haryana chief minister, was in his office and the corridors were thronging with visitors and a line of menacing security personnel. I found the chief minister surrounded by politicians and village elders. The overall ambience was that of an agitated panchayat, where ballot boxes were being unlocked. Some presenting officers were selectively permitting the public to meet Mr Devi Lal.

When I appeared before the chief minister, in a blue pin-striped suit, he waved me away with the admonition: 'Yehaan airline pilot ka kya kaam hai?' What was an airline pilot doing there? At that, Rati Ram, a personal assistant who had spoken with Shuklaji's aide from Delhi, told Chaudhary Sahib that I was not from the airlines, I was the IAS officer from Bengal sent by Mr V. C. Shukla from Delhi to assist the chief minister. 'Come with me,' said the Chaudhary, drawing himself up to his full height of 6'4". He had a loosely tied parrot-green turban on his head and I was told that he had just had his morning dose of opium and was in top form.

We moved out into a balcony where the Chaudhary lay down on a string cot to enjoy the winter sun. A bowl of kheer was placed before me, along with a plate of laddoos, as a welcome repast. When I asked for a cup of black coffee, a bottle of flavoured milk arrived on a tray. Puffing on his hookah, the chief minister said: 'Shuklaji talked to me about you. It is good that you are coming here. We need the services of our own men. Where will you be joining?' It was clear to me that Chaudhary Sahib was not a man of procedure.

'You will have to write a letter to Delhi conveying your acceptance of a deputationist,' I said to him.

Devi Lal was suddenly seized of the idea that I should join the Haryana Government before the day was out. He had taken an instant liking to me. Fortunately, V. C. Shukla telephoned him from Delhi for an important political consultation and the Chaudhary thanked him for sending him a 'padha-likha afsar'—an educated officer—as a confidante.

'Yes, Robin will prove an asset to you,' said Shuklaji, capitalizing on the unpredictable chief minister's favourable mood.

An officer on special duty was called in; he explained to the chief minister that a letter from him to the Union home ministry would be necessary to requisition my services. Hurling a volley of expletives at Mr Buta Singh, Devi Lal turned to me: 'All intellectuals come from Bengal. Draft the letter yourself. I will sign it.'

Rati Ram summoned an 'English-knowing' stenographer who could barely follow my handwriting and stared at me with a total lack of comprehension. Then, finally, the letter of acceptance was signed and dispatched by courier. Rati Ram handed a copy to me in an open envelope. The Chaudhary gave me an affectionate pat on the shoulder, saying: 'Come back soon.' From outside the chief minister's office, two police commandos attached themselves to my person and we were driven in a white limousine to the state guesthouse and served a sumptuous lunch.

'How was the interview?' enquired my mother, sipping her evening drink, on my return to Delhi. Reminiscing, she said: 'My friend Khalid resigned from the ICS when he was posted as deputy commissioner at Rohtak. His petitions to the Privy Council were turned down on two occasions. I met him, at Burdwan House, many years ago. He is a big man in a foreign company and can still lead with perfection on the ballroom floor. . . Are you sure that you want to go to Haryana? Why don't you take some more leave and study Churchill's *The Second World War* , volume by volume? That should take up to a year, then you can rejoin one of the Central ministries.'

I had heard of the tremendous progress made in Haryana while posted in Raiganj in 1976. Then engaged in trying to get two rows of streetlights sanctioned for the small Bengal border-town, I had learnt that unlike the rest of India, where there was six per cent rural electrification, Haryana shone bright in all its villages and towns. The new state was carved out of Punjab, in 1966, and there was a general misconception that it was culturally a backward area. As my posting in Haryana appeared imminent, I spent some time looking up the history of the state. While letters were exchanged between the state governments of West Bengal and Haryana, and till such time that the Central Government approved my transfer from Calcutta to Chandigarh, I remained at home in Delhi, making brief visits to the National Museum to better acquaint myself with my next destination.

The process of moving to Chandigarh took a long time, and it was only on 2 May 1989 that I took charge as joint secretary to the Government of Haryana in the department of health, ayurveda and medical education. My vision of being posted to Gurgaon, as its commissioner, and driving back and forth from Delhi, lay buried under heaps of files that were placed on my office table.

The steel frame of the Indian Administrative Service, over time, had converted itself into a provincial instrument and the Haryana cadre officers viewed my entry into the state with suspicious resentment. I had to prove myself.

Chandigarh, despite its curious architecture and a concrete capitol complex, was full of landscaped gardens, wide boulevards and rows of large mansions that exuded complacent well-being. The city was a centre for offices and the residential quarters of officers. While the governors, chief ministers and the chief secretaries of Punjab and Haryana operated out of Sector 1, the township concluded its journey in Sector 25, the cremation ground.

I was terribly lonely there and would leave from office at 7.30 p.m. for the guesthouse and, immediately after a wash, pour out a stiff drink and place my chin on the gate and stare into the capacious houses that seemed uninhabited. On the third day, I found two college boys toasting me with bottles of beer from their entrance gates. I asked them what they planned to do. 'We will leave for Canada as soon as our visas come through,' they replied, in unison. I invited them to the guesthouse. As the senior-most member of a newly formed drinking club, and with an apparently credible career, I would send for a bottle of Solan No. 1, peanuts and tandoori chicken. The subtle

ways of Delhi and Calcutta were not known to these youngsters; they were intent on finishing the bottle, offsetting its effects with roasted meat, while tinkering with salad. The healthy habit of eating slices of cucumber, tomato and radish along with whisky was introduced to me by Vicky and Randy. There would be some ribald talk, the boys told me about their hopes and their dreams and mentioned that Chandigarh was a town of 'safed daris and hari jharis'—white beards and green hedges—darkened by a spiralling suicide rate.

The health department was large and the health minister and the administrative secretary were required to closely superintend the statewide network of hospitals, medical colleges and dispensaries, along with a parallel structure for the ayurvedic system. There was a large medical college, with specialists and super-specialists, at Rohtak, and this vast institution too was under the aegis of the government.

It was ironic that I had to deal with doctors and medicine, for I had a squeamish stomach. My father was amongst a handful of Indians who after years of study and living out the harsh climate of London in Spartan conditions had qualified as a surgeon. He had put in a request to the headmaster of Bishop Cotton School in Simla to have me trained in the sciences to enable me to become a doctor. This did not happen, for the minute I began dissecting a frog, clouds of nausea overtook me and I was carried out of the laboratory. Now, I found myself sitting in the state secretariat, with rows of doctors waiting for an audience. The secretary, who had been in charge of the department for years, had delegated most of the administrative powers to me. A thorough gentleman, Mr Raghbir Singh was, in essence, a country squire. A Jat Sikh, he had opted for the Haryana cadre in 1966 and was addressed as Chaudhary Sahib. In fact, anyone who was anything in Haryana was addressed as 'Chaudhary', the equivalent of 'Sardar' in Punjab.

Mr Raghbir Singh was knowledgeable about the department. He virtually laid down the health policy for the government and knew almost every doctor personally. His notings on file, the clarity and vision with which he gave guidance and advice, were informative and based on sound foundation. An objective and honest man, the secretary had inherited vast tracts of land from his family—his grandfather had owned a thousand buffaloes in undivided Punjab. He was also a scholar of Persian and Urdu and, in between discussions on the purchase of medicines or the recalcitrant behaviour of doctors and nurses, would quite unexpectedly recite apt couplets which made me sit up and think. Here was an officer who was in the job for public service and honour!

Inspired by the secretary's commitment to public good and the gentle encouragement of the minister for health, I worked practically round the clock. I would walk to the secretariat, sending ahead in the staff car the bundles of files that I had disposed of the previous night or at dawn. Once I reached office at 9 a.m., a constant stream of visitors engaged my attention. I found, to my surprise, that the requests made to the government were generally reasonable. I sat as an administrative court for two days a week and within the first month reinstated dozens of employees who had been suspended or dismissed without sufficient cause—in most cases, the actuating motive was petty vendetta.

One morning, a driver appeared in the administrative court. Somnath, a tall Gujjar, came to the point straightaway. 'I hear that you have come from Bengal and that you are a kind person. Will you help me out?' he queried. I was taken aback at such a direct approach, for, in India, the manner of making a request is to edge towards the point by talking first of disparate and irrelevant matters. I was told that the driver had been dismissed for being involved in an accident. I called for the papers and

on reading between the lines from the devious notings it was revealed that Somnath used to drive a jeep that was attached to a previous secretary-commissioner. His only duty was to ferry fodder for the officer's cow and to remain on call at his residence. One evening, when the health secretary was having a dinner party at his house, the driver was detained till midnight in the depth of winter. The lady of the house, while releasing him from duty, asked Somnath to report the next morning at 5 a.m. for domestic chores, including getting fresh fodder for the cow. The driver lived in his village at a distance of eighteen kilometres or so; as there was no bus service available at that hour, he had driven home in the official jeep. En route, he had met with an accident.

Having studied the facts and circumstances of the case and exercising my powers, I reinstated the driver—any person driving a motor vehicle could meet with an accident, I reasoned. There was a clamour of protest and no one was willing to take Somnath on duty. I volunteered to do so, noting the silent gratitude in his eyes. We became friends, and he showed me around Chandigarh and the hills around Kalka. Eventually, when I moved out of the guesthouse, he helped me to set up house.

Thereafter, there was the case of a nurse who had been dismissed for getting married a second time without the first marriage having concluded. Bending the rule on the side of compassion, she too was put back into her job, for which I had to overrule several pages of notings in which her character had been painted in the colours of a rainbow.

The most difficult case was that of Mahipal Singh. This official, who was in charge of the cash box at the Ambala Civil Hospital, had been dismissed for taking some money out of it one evening. After looking into the case, I discovered that he had done so to arrange for firewood for his mother's funeral as the lady had died quite suddenly. On returning from the cremation ground, he had returned the money. The man was reinstated, and I was given a show-cause notice for the misuse of government power. I had to later to explain the case in the State Legislative Assembly.

I felt a sense of personal humiliation when cases of medical practitioners being charged with unethical practice and moral turpitude were widely reported in the newspapers. My mind wandered back to my childhood, when the general practitioner was worshipped as God.

My first tour at the start of my tenure in Haryana was to the holy city of Kurukshetra. There was a proposal to construct a referral ayurvedic medical college and hospital there; though many favoured the Indian system of medicine, it had, despite its proven efficacy, come to rely on steroids adulterated with ayurvedic drugs and palliatives. Untrained and unethical practitioners prescribed remedies concocted out of stale herbs and drugs in incorrect proportion, reminiscent of Chinese cuisine at a village fair. Such medicine had adverse results that sometimes proved fatal and there was an immediate need to scientifically disseminate the science of ayurveda and to regulate the sale of drugs with an iron hand.

A drug inspector was posted in each district to supervise the sale and purchase of drugs and prevent expired or substandard medicines from being sold to the public. The inspectors were in tandem with the dispensing chemists and, in 1989, I found that their illegal monthly income ranged between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1 lakh. I tried to crack the whip and felt like a circus master disciplining animals who were creatures of habit. About my actions, it seemed to me, the audience would clap or complain at intervals and return home, reserving comment for the village square.

In my presentation to the government, I suggested that the proposed new institution be upgraded to include testing laboratories and lecture halls. While looking at the building plans, I found that half of the ground floor had been reserved for the director's office and a retiring room, with a chamber for

his ministerial staff. I asked the architect to permit the head just a cubicle, making room for a lecture hall and a laboratory in the rest of the area.

Having been brought up in the aftermath of the British Raj, I was suspicious of hakeems and the prescriptions that made no mention of the ingredients that had been put together in the paper packets they handed out. It was only slowly that the understanding of the Indian system of medicine and its firm foundation came to me. Ayurveda spoke of eating each meal with one lightly cooked green vegetable, for the intestinal enzymes could easily work on a singular intake. The problem arose when the enzymes had to welcome several guests. Each meal was to be accompanied by yoghurt, wholegrain cereals and quantities of milk, buttermilk and fruit. All problems arose in the stomach, and ayurveda concentrated wholly on a healthy digestive system. Eating the flesh of animals was anathema to the practice of ayurveda. Even fish, considered highly digestible, full of calcium, high in protein, light on the stomach, good for the heart, the eyes and the bone structure, confronted the Hindu psyche as Matsya, the first avatar of Lord Vishnu, who had delved into the ocean and placed the Rig Veda before mankind.

The Sri Krishna Ayurvedic College was housed in an erstwhile princely home by the side of a sacred lake. The medical practitioners were a law unto themselves. Most of the hakeems wore an avuncular mask and directed the patients to their shops located in the former stables of the crumbling palace. The historic spot where Lord Sri Krishna advised Arjuna about the objects of war and the duty of a warrior before the epic battle of Kurukshetra was under an old banyan tree. Close by, there lived a Bengali priest well-versed in the classics. He showed me a few temples of recent origin and a courtyard that had just been constructed and pointed towards the vast green where the Pandavas defeated the Kauravas in battle in some timeless past and laid down the principles for a good life.

It was an uninspiring experience, for imagining that such sublime valour had been displayed on these unremarkable grasslands left me feeling tired. Recalling the magnificent panoramic recreation of the Battle of Waterloo during a recent visit to Belgium, I wondered why a panorama of the epic battles of the Mahabharata had not been attempted. I wrote out a white paper on the subject, which was brought to the notice of the government the next year. Then I drove out of Jyotisar and Kurukshetra and to a Haryana Tourism Complex at Pipli. In the air-conditioned comfort of a large suite, I poured myself several stiff drinks.

While touring in the districts and interacting with the public, I felt energized again. I recorded inspection notes and outlined remedial action within fixed time schedules. Problems that needed government clearance were brought to the notice of the chief minister. It soon became apparent that there was a remarkable disinterest at all levels in administering the vast network of hospitals and medical units, besides the chasm between field units and the secretariat. While routine problems of promotions, release of salaries or grants were sorted out in my office, for policy matters, I found that my considered proposals gathered dust in the minister's office—until an epidemic broke out or a disaster was flashed in the newspapers.

After sixteen years in service, it fully dawned on me that IAS officers were no longer rulers. Unlike their predecessors in the Indian Civil Service, who were tribunes of an imperial power, today's civil servants were, at best, advisors and facilitators. They could only exercise power through intellectual dominance over the elected government in power. The political imperative based wholly on populism was essentially tangential to objective administrative action. The chairmen, parliamentary secretaries and ministers had come into power by making a series of commitments to their constituents, most of which were unworkable owing to shortage of funds, incorrect prioritization and misplaced loyalty. Directly recruited IAS officers from distant states tried to implement policies

formulated by the government and generally gave the impression of being greenhorns. Those who stood their ground, against the inclination of elected authorities, were shifted to insignificant positions. A few resigned and joined the corporate sector; some took long leave and went abroad; the adventurous started businesses of their own.

The time of the thoughtful civil servant was over. The dhoti-clad legislator, full of tall promises, perpetually greeting all and sundry with a smile, was the fountain of decision-making. Some IAS officers too changed over to safari suits or to Indian attire and became visible partners in the rampant misrule that was visible everywhere. They spent their time interpreting rules for largely illiterate political masters to allow the government in power to retain a facade of constitutional decency.

Haryana displayed an administration run on the basis of tribal loyalties. The feudal functioning was the outcome of the traditional mindset of master and slave, landowner and landless, reminiscent of the zamindari system that prevailed in Bengal before 1956. Village areas represented by a Cabinet minister got their work done on priority. The rich continued to rule, from within and without, in the complacent understanding that wealth and power are interchangeable commodities. Therefore, the Haryana experience revealed a composition of landed Jats in command, followed by the Aggarwals (who had held the populace of Haryana in fiscal bondage for centuries), the Bishnois, the Sainis, displaced persons from Pakistan, members of the scheduled caste communities, and a floating population of outsiders who had yet to find their compartment in a directionless train.

Post 1947, the relation between a minister and a secretary determined government policy; while the politician-turned-'statesman' decided on the country's future, the secretary was responsible for executing government decisions. The minister was not accountable to the public who had elected him and all governmental orders were made under the seal and style of the secretary to the government. This made for a curious arrangement that often worked against public interest.

The minister in charge of health, ayurveda and medical education, an elderly lady who was a trained ayurvedic doctor, was well-disposed towards me and we would often go touring on inspection together. Surprise checks invariably revealed that doctors and paramedical staff were absent from duty while lines of patients waited on the verandas of ill-equipped hospitals and dispensaries. The minister would order the suspension of delinquent doctors, compounders and nurses. No sooner had I made out the orders and our cars were ready to leave than the entire staff—doctors, nurses, compounders and dais—would appear in a row, bouquets in hand, and fall at our feet, while a row of peons laid out roasted cashew nuts, pistachio barfi and savouries—sometimes on a table, at other times on a stretcher draped in clean white sheets. The staff always had valid reasons for not being present on duty: a funeral, the birth of a baby boy, a ring ceremony, a marriage proposal that had suddenly been finalized, and so on. The story was repeated at every port of call. The minister would sadly nod her head and say: 'They will now complain to the chief minister that I have disturbed their afternoon rest, that I am vindictive, that I rejoice in their discomfort.'

Most doctors and officers who were punished for dereliction of duty and had been suspended pending enquiry were put back in their jobs at the same place of posting, with a minor warning or just a reprimand or advice to be careful in future, by the chief minister's office or by Mrs Verma herself, within a week or ten days. Noting my astonished look at the volte face, the lady said once with a kindly expression: 'They have so many family problems, and just see how the Congress in Delhi is making money with both hands.' She passed me a plate on which she had peeled apples with a knife. 'Have these. It is true that an apple a day keeps the doctor away.' She, however, disagreed with the Western practice of eating apples with the skin intact.

The health department was considered a money-spinning racket since it superintended the food

inspectorate and the office of the drug controller in addition to a spidery health network all over the state. And, during my many tours into the interior districts, I found that the entire health cover operated through the government was dysfunctional and dishonest. In the small state of Haryana, every doctor or nurse had a godfather at the state headquarters, protecting the interest of his ward.

The government hospitals at Karnal and Faridabad smelt of human excreta, with patients huddled or stretched out in the corridor, while corpses were carried away, invoking the hand of destiny as the final arbitrator in man's journey.

I suggested that the government lease out the facilities, built on prime properties, to professional medical administrators such as the Fortis or Apollo groups of hospitals. The idea was to let these companies have the land and premises of the department and to equip and operate them in an efficient and modern manner, at a reasonable rate, under the overall superintendence of the government.

When a presentation was made before the chief minister, he gave me a penetrating look. 'Yeh vilaiti tareekon mein humaare liye koi jaga nahin rahegi? Aap ko acchhi department deni chahiye hai ya koi commissionery!' In these newfangled foreign systems, we will be left with no role? Who will be in control? You should be given a better department or appointed as commissioner of a division.

The proposal was laid to rest for a few decades.

The grind went on, for the health department had innumerable units manned by thousands of employees. On paper, it was picture-perfect, complete with an extension wing equipped with films and the facility to see them in remote corners of the state. When the deputy director in charge was not engaged in filming the marriage of a colleague's offspring, he would spend time on disseminating the need for family planning and birth control through modern methods, which was done mostly at village fairs and preceded by slapstick comedy.

The medical college at Rohtak was the premier referral institution in Haryana. It was built on a vast acreage, with beautifully landscaped gardens, and with the benefit of very good doctors and specialists. It was, however, ridden with caste politics: the doctors and administrators from the dominant Jat community would take the others to task over matters that could have been resolved through logic. Doctors from other communities, who were at the receiving end, viciously chanted: 'Sola duni aat, hum sab Jat'—the double of sixteen is eight, as per the Jats.

Appointment of medical officers and paramedical staff was made on the basis of caste; merit was a passing consideration. Members of the reserved classes had a fixed quota—in years when a scheduled caste doctor was not available for posting, the vacancy was carried forward since the process of de-reservation was akin to the impeachment of a judge of a High Court. On one occasion, I cut short the procedure, as the momentum of necessity overtook all other considerations: there were hundreds of patients who were unattended each day for want of medical staff and the cries of those in pain drowned the dictates of the reservation policy. There were orchestrated protests and cases were filed in the High Court against my decision. The Haryana government filed its reply in my support through the advocate general. I had merely gone by the performance of candidates and quite by chance selected a member of the chief minister's family. Chaudhary Devi Lal came to learn of this and told an audience of petitioners gathered in his office: 'Mein is kabil afsar ko Bangal se khaas chun ke laya hoon'—I have especially handpicked and brought this able officer from Bengal.

After a few months, I felt weary of the daily tedium, for I found myself poring over files for close to ten hours every day. This apart, I had yet to come to terms with the suspicion—bordering on hatred—with which different communities viewed each other. The displaced Punjabi population who had crossed the border from the newly formed Pakistan were derisively termed refugees. Most of them had come from the economically developed areas of erstwhile Punjab; they soon established their

credentials and, with the benefit of educational qualifications, became prosperous, disturbing the settled equilibrium of an agrarian society where khap panchayats and primeval social practices had kept the winds of change at bay.

After the fall of the Congress government, in 1989, Chaudhary Devi Lal was elevated as deputy prime minister of India while his son, Om Prakash Chautala, succeeded him as Haryana's chief minister. This was a marvellous achievement for the strident Jat community which, apart from its dominance over the fledgling state of Haryana, formed a sizeable population in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Chautala Sahib was a strict disciplinarian, and I had been warned about his violent temper and fits of uncontrollable rage. He was known to physically assault legislators, insult senior officers and once, in the legislative constituency of Mahem, he had ordered police commandos to subjugate his political opponents. However, I found in him a good administrator who worked late into the night, never leaving files pending for the next day. He passed clear orders after studying the records and respected hard-working officers. The chief minister was appreciative of my advice and if I happened to be in his chamber around noon he would request me to stay back for lunch. He wrote to the Central Government for my permanent absorption into the Haryana IAS cadre and his father, the deputy prime minister, in turn wrote to the prime minister, describing my work in glowing terms.

Chaudhary Devi Lal was a towering personality. His temper, buttressed by the fabulous family wealth, was awful. While chief minister, he reportedly called the state chief secretary to Morni, a resort where he was camping, and said: 'Teri chamri udhed doonga'—I will skin you alive. The officer in question had taken deviant decisions under the previous government, and this apparently was the cause of Devi Lal's fury.

To me, it was unthinkable that the lynchpin of the administrative machinery should be abused. I recalled that in Bengal, the state that I had left behind, a Punjabi police officer had once used the word 'nonsense' while berating the driver of his staff car; this had caused the vehicle to be gheraoed outside the state secretariat and its quaking occupant tendered an unconditional apology, repeatedly, under the threat of his car being torched.

To function as an officer in Haryana, one had to understand the psyche of the dominant Jat community, for it was imperative to exercise sufficient power over the life and circumstance of a subordinate, with the ability to pulverize him, to get orders executed. Quoting rules and regulations or focusing upon merit rarely guided a decision and, in the absence of absolute power, one could only tinker with regulations, at the cost of having them disobeyed or jeered at.

It would take many generations, I thought to myself, for the Haryanvi farmer to scale the heights of *Dhrupad-Dhamar*, the preserve of an ancient pandit tradition. However, the local raginis sung in Haryanvi in hair-raising decibels were extremely popular at cattle fairs as they addressed fundamental village concerns of love, hate and loyalty, skirting the finer scales of human relationships.

One drunken evening, while on tour to a remote forest resthouse in Tajewala, I made an advance to a wayfarer. There was some success and some failure. 'What about my fees?' was the deliberately loud demand at the end. 'Fees!' I exclaimed. 'Are you a doctor or a lawyer? Or have you been giving me tuition?' Never again, I swore to myself, would I take such an initiative. The misadventure left me depleted and despairing—all I had wanted was to share some tender moments, to reach out, to try and build a relationship, the disparate situation notwithstanding.

Kurukshetra, Dharamshetra, Thanesar, Manesar; the tradition of Harshvardhan; the Ashokan pillar

at Hisar; the ancient tenth-century reservoir at Surajkund; Gurgaon of Guru Dronacharya; the ancient town of Pehowa on the left bank of the sacred Saraswati river; Ambala dedicated to the goddess Amba Devi, renowned for its mango groves and in 1859 the district and divisional headquarters under the Punjab administration; the Pinjore gardens planned during the reign of Emperor Jehangir; the medieval towns of Bhiwani, Sirsa, Fatehabad, Sonepat and Hansi—Haryana was steeped in myth and legend. Numerous historical places would suddenly emerge out of the green fields of the state. But this heritage had no bearing on the local people I encountered—I generally found them avaricious, involved in meaningless politicking and thoroughly transactional.

There seemed to be a gaping hiatus between such religion and historical efflorescence that the area may have witnessed and the present social order. This was an agonizing revelation, for I had always imagined Hindu civilization to be the oldest continuous civilization in the world. However, in Haryana, I discovered a perceptible cathartic break in the levels of human search and achievement. The spiritual tradition of the Mahabharata and the concept of exercising power and authority envisaged by Samrat Harshavardhana, to my mind, were totally alien to the Haryanvi society of 1990.

I talked about this with my friend Siddhraj Sinhji, the knowledgeable prince of Dhrangadhra, who told me to consider the movement of people through the Haryana area, which served as a corridor between the Hindukush Mountains and Delhi. Quite possibly, the contemporary Haryanvi had nothing to do with the Bhagavad Gita or the renunciation of Harshavardhana; at some point in time, some forgotten diaspora of people who had lived in the hallowed tracts around Kurukshetra had moved thousands of miles, carrying away with them their luminosity of thought.

In an unexpected reshuffle in the council of ministers, the kindly Mrs Verma was replaced by a young woman with high educational credentials and a remarkable belief in her superiority. She was a granddaughter of Babu Shravan Kumar, who had served as a Cabinet minister at the Centre for long years and had the reputation of being an astute politician.

The newly installed health minister was constantly ringing the office bell and calling for officers, doctors and paramedical staff. She made surprise checks in the corridor to assure herself that her personal security officers were alert; she would threaten them with suspension for not standing straight or presenting arms in a slipshod manner. She also started calling me frequently for discussions that ought, by rights, to have been conducted with the secretary-commissioner or the director general of health services. She did not bother to read the painstaking advice recorded on government files and constantly sent acerbic notes and reminders calling for material that had been sent to her office long ago. Visiting the minister for a cup of tea or flavoured milk meant wastage of valuable office time. So, after a while, I stopped visiting her chamber and started sending written information instead.

On a black Monday, while I was holding administrative court, the health minister called me on the internal office telephone and asked to see me urgently; I promised to present myself after court work. When I arrived at her chamber, she was pacing her cavernous office like an infuriated tigress. ‘Where are the files I called for ten days ago?’ she demanded.

‘They were in your personal section,’ I replied.

‘You are on deputation from the poor state of Bengal. You have yet to learn the ropes and understand Haryana’s administrative culture,’ observed the minister.

‘Madam, the rules that bind this country together are uniform in all the states. It is important to follow administrative channels and procedure to prevent jumping the queue and chaos. Why don’t you

have a word with the secretary? Before that, we can check with your PA whether the files are on your table.'

'I have a very poor impression about your official style of functioning. Do you think you are a member of the Indian Civil Service on your way to Raj Bhawan? Don't you know that my family was lodged in British jails for long years so that India could see the dawn of freedom? And dozens of IAS officers wait outside my grandfather's door in Delhi—they are bootlickers!'

'Madam, shall we discuss the matter in hand?' I suggested, controlling my temper with difficulty.

'Yes, yes, why not? At the Tiliyar Forest Motel, after 8 p.m. tonight.'

'The secretariat is the repository of records, and the venue you have suggested is for tourists, mostly for honeymooning couples,' was my acid reply.

'But where are the files?' asked the minister.

Just then, Girdhar Gopal, who had been counting out the crisp bribe money handed over to him by a doctor who wanted the file containing a charge sheet against him dealt with 'favourably', rushed in with the files that the minister was referring to.

'When were they received in my office?' asked the deflated minister.

'A few weeks before Holi, madam,' said the man. 'You had desired that they should be put away for discussion only with the new joint secretary.'

I got up to leave.

'You will hear from me shortly,' said the health minister.

'I don't think so,' was my reply. Turning on my heel, I added: 'You should ask the chief minister to locate another officer to work in my place. I have overstayed a reasonable tenure in this department.'

The Haryana government of the day comprised a coalition of the Lok Dal, with the BJP as a junior partner. With my mentor Devi Lal having moved to Delhi, and political tremors at the Centre and the attendant changes in the chief minister's office, I did not know whom to turn to for a fresh posting. It had dawned on me that the Haryana had introduced a new dimension to politics through the concept of 'Aaya Ram, gaya Ram', a syndrome that soon spread its contagion to other states in the country. The governor of Haryana, in 1966, had observed that the state legislators changed their parties more often than they changed their clothes, and I was told of a legislator who had changed his party thrice in one day.

I had also understood by now that there was no question of a principled stand being taken for me, a rank outsider, by any person in authority. Haryana, except in the rarest of rare cases, pursued the politics of 'soot kasoot'—the dictates of expedience. Further, I had spent all my time in office or on tour and had built no other support system. This, I discovered at the end of my career, was both my strength and my weakness. While on the one hand colleagues maintained a respectable distance from me owing to my unpredictable reactions—sometimes referring to me sarcastically as 'Laat Sahib'—and I was largely left in peace, on the other hand I lacked the requisite 'connections'. Dwelling on the past, I find that throughout my years in office, in the different provinces that I served, I had made it a point never to visit the rooms of officers or ministers to engender bonhomie. Therefore, in this crisis too, I could consult no one. The men in authority were bereft of any commitment to any ideology, much less the good of the people—self-interest and self-preservation were the only guiding lights that determined their path.

In the shifting chiaroscuro of Haryanvi politics, I walked into the room of Mr Raghbir Singh, the

health secretary, where there was always a cup of coffee and the officer's aristocratic welcome. The secretary gave me a broad smile as I entered his chamber. He was fully apprised of the exchange of compliments in the health minister's room. (I had, in fact, become the subject of conversation between officers and ministerial staff that day, over the internal telephone. I had not realized that the minister had off ended so many persons during her short tenure of six weeks, and I was taken by surprise when several strangers vigorously shook me by the hand at the exit gate.)

Raghbir Singh held out a box of cigarettes. 'You see, Haryana is only now realizing its statehood. The culture here is a little different and we must learn to adjust to the extent possible.'

I could not make out whether I was being reprimanded. Confused and anxious about my situation, I blurted out: 'Will you help me to get a posting? I do not know a soul here!'

Raghbir Singh escorted me to the door of his office. 'Thank you, Robin. You have done a marvellous job. Let me see what I can do about your next portfolio.'

I later learnt that the secretary-commissioner, with whom I had worked from the time that I was deputed to serve in Haryana, immediately after my departure, walked upstairs to the room of the minister for revenue and rehabilitation and got me appointed as chief settlement commissioner—custodian general, Haryana.

13

The Custodian

My appointment as chief settlement commissioner, Haryana, was announced in the newspapers. Looking out of the window, I saw a sparkling white Ambassador, bedecked with a red beacon and an antenna. A red board on the bumper announced my new designation in metallic letters that shone in the sunlight.

The composite Punjab Province was a vast administrative division, with Lahore at its centre. It included the present-day Indian and Pakistani Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, along with the North West Frontier Districts bordering Afghanistan. Much of this region had been part of the Sikh kingdom ruled over by Maharaja Ranjit Singh until his death in 1839. A decade later, the area was annexed by the East India Company. The settlement of persons displaced at the time of the partition of India, those who had lost their lands, homes and pastures in the new state of Pakistan, was the dispensation of the chief settlement commissioner in his capacity as custodian of evacuee lands in the Punjab, left behind by Muslims who had crossed the border into Pakistan.

The custodian derived his powers from the East Punjab Displaced Persons (Land Settlement) Act of 1949 and could make an allotment to a displaced person or lease land to an eligible allottee. In cases where the evacuee property comprised shares of an evacuee in shamlat deh (common) land, the custodian was empowered to appropriate land by order, out of the shamlat, according to the share of the evacuee. Till the allotments were made, all such lands vested in the custodian. The chief settlement commissioner also paid compensation to entitled persons after determining the extent of the award. The custodian could put allottees in possession of evacuee land and, by and large, there was a bar on legal proceedings against his decision.

The partition of India was perhaps the greatest tragedy resulting from a cavalier political decision. Muslims turned against Hindus and Sikhs in Lahore and, throughout Pakistani Punjab, knives, axes, rifles and bricks were used by them to chase people out of their ancestral homes. Sikhs and Hindus left behind their properties, their wealth, their temples and gurudwaras, and escaped with only their lives to East Punjab and Delhi—hopeful, like children who had lost a toy, that they would return when the crisis had passed. Delhi, till 1947, had had a population of Muslims and Hindus almost in equal number. The city where the British rulers had started constructing their imperial capital to rival Rome, over the graveyard of the Mughal Empire, now witnessed scenes of unimaginable butchery, with Muslims being hounded and put to the sword, in the streets and in their

houses, murdered in broad daylight in Connaught Circus and the old city of Shahjahanabad.

In Punjab, the settlement of displaced persons was carried out from a newly set up office in Jalandhar. At one time, N. K. Mukarji of the ICS had an army of 20,000 patwaris to assist him in the gargantuan operation of attempting temporary rehabilitation. The brilliant formula devised by Mr Tarlok Singh, also of the ICS, contained in his Land Resettlement Manual of 1952—which became an authority for the Supreme Court of India in subsequent judgments—conformed to the 'figure of eight' through which persons displaced from Pakistan were proportionately allotted lands in Punjab and Haryana, taking into account the environment and category of the lands that they had left behind. It was Tarlok Singh who defined a standard acre, grading the highest yielding land, which yielded three harvests in the year, as 'sola aane ki zameen'.

After 1966, Haryana had an independent settlement commissioner, for by that time Punjab had by and large completed the process of making allotments to displaced persons. Suddenly, I became the arbitrator, under law, of the destiny of thousands of tortured souls, for in Haryana the settlement operation was far from complete. The English that I had been taught was of little help and I had to hire the services of retired patwaris, tehsildars and kanungos to help me in understanding the records: all records from the Mughal times were maintained in either Persian or Urdu, written in the Arabic script, and was totally alien to Devnagari and Gurumukhi. Rich landlords with turbans askew would stand in rows with folded hands, genuflecting outside the offices of lowly clerks and record keepers.

I would work late into the night from my office above a 'furniture palace' in Chandigarh. It was only after a week that I looked around at the plush courtroom decorated in beige and brown. There was an attached bedroom and an executive office. Scores of attendants, in khaki uniform, stood at attention. Most of them were venerable gentlemen in their sixties, some in their seventies; on the muster roll, though, not a single employee had crossed the age of fifty. There was no way of verifying anyone's age or antecedents as the relevant records had been destroyed or deliberately burnt. The routine reply to my queries was: 'All is lost.'

On returning home on the first day, I discovered ten liveried retainers being interviewed by my mother. 'Robin, well done!' she said. 'They are like my father's household staff in Gujranwala. Both these chaps are cooks. Ram Prasad knows how to turn out snowball pudding, fish mayonnaise and crumb chops. He tells me that he can try his hand at fricassee, meringues, mixed grill and cob cakes. The other chap used to do a shepherd's pie and tells me that his roast and mint potatoes were transported to Sheikhupura by carriage.' Having witnessed pre-partition India through rose-tinted glasses, Mother was convinced that the good old days were back again. Continuing with her monologue, she pointed to two other members of the staff : 'They will serve as abdars, and there are three gardeners. I must talk to Nirmal Mukarji to allot you a proper bungalow in this godforsaken place.' Pointing to my government house, she sighed. 'These are half-houses, clerks' quarters. No civilized officer would be caught dead in them.'

The staff of the custodian-commissioner comprised only eight or ten tehsildars and a few kanungos and patwaris. Therefore, the evacuee lands largely remained unprotected and were open to blatant misappropriation. Encroachment on custodian land was common. IAS and IPS officers, government employees, politicians and local panchayats had made it a habit to fence off valuable parcels of land at will—often in connivance with the tehsildars. Nobody cared to listen to any complaint since all concerned were happily placed, except for the homeless and displaced people, many of whom were widowed ladies who had been running from pillar to post for forty-three years, in search of a shelter.

The imperative to guard and husband these priceless evacuee lands that were contained in largely

unmapped tracts and spread out through the length and breadth of Haryana kept the chief settlement commissioner on the road for several days in the month. The custodian led an army in which the generals and the foot soldiers had been bought over—the tehsildars had become a law unto themselves. While being managing officers of these lands under law, they had in reality become property agents and facilitators and, for a hefty percentage for themselves and their supporting staff, gave the official stamp of approval to illegal transactions, handing over parcels of land in their charge to those who could pay for it. There was no check or accountability; the settlement staff had become millionaires and after permitting non-entitled persons to construct palatial unauthorized houses had also likewise allowed commercial units and factories to be raised on land meant for homes for the homeless.

The prime location at that time was Faridabad, a new township conceived of by the Central Government specifically to resettle people in line with Nilokheri and Chandigarh. In Faridabad, on the periphery of Delhi, strapping police guards would summon the tehsildar to a 'sahib's' camp office and, after a brief exchange, on the veranda of the guesthouse or at the site of a scenic tourist bungalow, the tehsildar would undertake to get the requisite documents fashioned into an 'award' declaring the concerned officer a displaced person who had been in possession of the plot since 1947. Though the tehsildars dealt with matters involving hundreds of crores of rupees, they carried out their nefarious business activities out of ramshackle, unlit buildings that were difficult to locate within the municipal limits.

All the settlement tehsildars had powerful political links with the government in power. They knew sufficient Persian and Urdu and had mastered the art of perverting revenue law. They converted lies into truth with such finesse that the lower courts and administrative authorities generally upheld their orders. With few exceptions, the tehsildars were fat and bulbous, with wealth oozing out of their countenance. Strangely, all of them had settled down in Hisar, constructing homes for their retirement in the back of beyond, owing possibly to the fear of the long arm of the law eventually catching up with them. They were well-versed in theatrical performance and would bend over to the ground on seeing the chief settlement commissioner passing by, saluting his car. On the rebound, they would straighten themselves to their full height and treat poor refugees who came to them for shelter like dirt. Many displaced people had died with hands outstretched outside the settlement office and their descendents had lost hope of resurrection.

The custodian presided over the court in Chandigarh, Ambala, Panipat, Rohtak, Faridabad and Gurgaon by rotation. He also dealt with administrative work at the headquarters. At times, there was a change in the court schedule that had been announced in advance, but I rarely allowed this, for rows of displaced persons would be waiting outside the courtroom, expectation writ large on their faces. The non-appearance of the chief settlement commissioner, however, made the tehsil staff, the reader of the court and the lawyers happy. Another date meant wielding the stick over supplicants. One morning, I arrived late to find two lawyers embracing each other at the happy tidings that the presiding officer would not be able to reach Panipat in time. They were talking to their clients, indicating that a nearby bar would be the appropriate venue for further discussion.

Unlike in Bengal, where touring was akin to undertaking a pilgrimage of penance, when one had to carry bottles of boiled water and parcels of packed food to the regal circuit houses built in the days of Lord Clive or Warren Hastings and take into account snakes hanging silently on drapes or crawling on marble floors under four-poster beds, touring in Haryana was a pleasure. Officers were welcomed by bucolic waiters in freshly starched uniforms and were immediately escorted to the VIP suite. The rooms were provided with television sets and a refrigerator and looked out over undulating

manicured lawns. Tea and sandwiches were followed by the day's newspaper and a discreet knock on the door. Tomato soup, fried fish and chips was one alternative, the other being butter chicken, mixed vegetables or palak paneer, lentils and yoghurt with tandoori roti. Both menus were followed by fruit salad topped with layers of fresh cream. The service was prompt and the food was reasonably good.

Haryana tourism operated a large number of units, all of which were named after local birds: parakeet, black partridge, red robin, hariyal, and so on. The concept of highway tourism was introduced to the state by S. K. Mishra of the IAS, a visionary administrator who later served for long years as principal secretary to the prime minister.

The flat lands of Haryana, along the central arteries of the state, had been landscaped. An enthusiastic manager told me that the concept of beauty had to be 'created'—all that was necessary was to dig up an area and create mounds which were covered with Calcutta grass, while the ditches were converted into lakes and waterways in which sailboats were set afloat. I was astonished at his thought process.

At the end of a long day of court work and meeting dozens of sorrowing individuals, I would stop over for the night at one of the tourism motels. While on duty, I was charged the admissible rate of ten rupees per day for accommodation.

Early one morning, as I was pacing the lawn in the biting cold of winter, I saw an old lady leaning on a stick. Despite her age and ragged apparel, she was fair and handsome. She told me that she sought an audience with the commissioner as she wanted to take possession of the house allotted to her and die in it.

I invited Mata Dayawanti to join me for a cup of tea. Hers was a tragic story that reminded me of the phrase 'It must be the fury of God'. She had been living in the Kanch Ghar locality, in a jhuggi colony, on the outskirts of Ambala since leaving Lahore in 1947.

Dayawanti's father, a wealthy contractor, had lived in a grand haveli, where the ladies of the house lived in purdah. Dayawanti had been engaged to be married; she had never seen the prospective groom, as was the custom in those days. Her brother was posted as an engineer in the irrigation department, was married and lived with his children in the family mansion. Her sister was married to a police officer then posted in the North West Frontier Province. Rampaging crowds of Muslims attacked the family mansion at night on the eve of India's partition and trusted servants and retainers tried to smuggle out the family. The last glimpse that Dayawanti had of her mother was of her tugging at a Sri Krishna temple made out of silver and washed with gold, trying to carry it away to India lest it be defiled by the thugs who had entered a portion of the house. In the process, the lady suffered a cardiac arrest and breathed her last. Dayawanti's father was murdered when he insisted on leaving through the main entrance of the house.

Dayawanti got on to a train from Lahore station and never met her family again. About her brothers and sisters she did not have any knowledge and had been searching for them for over forty years. 'Though I spent my childhood and youth behind the veil,' she said, 'life has been a painfully strange experience. I have spent all my days circling the corridors of courts for justice.'

From elderly ladies of my mother's family, I had heard stories about the inhuman atrocities committed in Lahore at the time of the partition. Islam translated as peace, and in fine manners, language, dress, cuisine, dance, music, architecture and poetry, it is difficult to find a parallel to the culture of the Muslims in India. I had never been exposed to the cruelty or vulgarity that I was told of.

'Will you help me to meet the custodian-commissioner?' asked the old lady, sensing my empathy.

'Mataji, I am the chief settlement commissioner,' I said.

The old woman expressed neither belief nor disbelief. She looked at me with vacant eyes. After a long pause, she said, 'And what can I give you, son? I have got nothing.'

'Perhaps you will give me your blessings!' I said as I got up to dress for court.

I heard the case that morning, placing it first on the day's list, taking down notes for two hours. At noon, a battery of lawyers appeared for the other party, as the subject property in Ambala was quite valuable.

'Your Honour, we have not been heard!' they cried. 'We seek a postponement. We wish to bring in senior counsel from Chandigarh, perhaps from Delhi! It is well-known that the petitioner is an insane old woman. She has just been released from the asylum.'

I had stirred a hornet's nest in my straightforward attempt to put Dayawanti in possession of the house allotted to her some forty years ago. The reader of the court cautioned me: 'Your Honour, the other party has powerful connections. You may receive a call from the chief secretary or the chief minister, in their favour. Shall I give a long date?'

The court staff had been heavily bribed over the years and the case had not been heard for close to two generations. I gave a short date of one week to the other party to place additional documents on record. Afterwards, exhausted and deep in thought, I adjourned further hearing of other cases and sat in the silence of the retiring room, listening to pigeons punctuating the passage of time. The staff, in the meantime, started giving out dates for other cases; a beaming clerk announced: 'The judicial mind of the court has been disturbed.'

I returned to Chandigarh late in the evening to find a shining new car parked outside my bungalow. The guard enthusiastically informed me that I had visitors who appeared to be VIPs. Asking him to firmly lock the gate, I walked into the house and looked into Mother's anxious eyes. 'What is the use of killing yourself like this? Government is a machine! Shall I call for a small drink?' The limousine reappeared at 9 a.m. the next morning, bearing panniers of fruit and sweets. 'Send them to the senior citizens' home,' I told a deflated domestic.

There were requests and threats and much else. 'That madwoman may harm your career! Your deputation may be curtailed!' became a frequently repeated chorus.

The next week the other party did not attend court, either in person or through their counsel. I wrote out a brief order in my own hand as the reader had been taken ill. Mata Dayawanti was standing in the courtroom, leaning on her stick. Calling for the staff car, I asked the old woman to sit in the rear seat. Driving to the house allotted to her, I got the locks broken in my presence and put her in possession. Placing two policemen on duty to ensure that the possession was confirmed, I returned to court and continued the day's business with a feeling of restful satisfaction.

A Sunday later, Mata Dayawanti came to visit me in Chandigarh. My mother asked her to stay back for lunch. I later heard that the old lady had passed into history after leaving the house allotted to her to a nearby temple.

In Faridabad, land meant to be allotted to displaced persons, on both sides of the highway leading into the township, had been allowed to be encroached on by the settlement department. Within the town, a slew of cases came to my notice. One hundred and seventy-six large plots of land had been taken charge of by officers of the IAS, IPS and political persons in authority. While factories and commercial establishments had been established on the wide strips of land, other plots had been

cordoned off and on most of them houses were under construction. The offices of the deputy commissioner and the police superintendent, which were situated not far away, seemed to be unaware of the continuing daylight robbery conducted under the public gaze.

I walked along the encroached areas, with the hulking tehsildar and his staff showing me the way. 'What can we do about this, Your Honour?' he said. 'It is with the blessings of Delhi and Chandigarh that this backward area is being developed.'

'Do these houses belong to displaced persons? Were they allotted these lands as compensation for the property they had to leave behind in Pakistan? Do they have an award from the settlement office in Jalandhar to prove their claim?'

The lingering silence to my routine queries was sufficient to call for papers and look into their details. 'This will be a Mahabharata,' I thought to myself, 'for there is no satiation of pleasure, lust or arrogance. The criminals have the sanction of governmental power and are intoxicated with it, oblivious to the demands of justice.'

After convincing myself that the 176 allottees in Faridabad were non-entitled categories, and after getting this confirmed from an experienced settlement officer, with a single stroke of the pen I cancelled all the fabricated allotments.

I was unaware of the pulverizing effect this order would have. It immediately caught wind, enhancing the aura of unacceptability and dislike that I had been able to surround myself with in less than two years of working for the Haryana government. At the same time, there were strong cross-currents in the planetary configuration governing my life: the case for my permanent absorption in the Haryana cadre, recommended by the state government, was awaiting the prime minister's approval in South Block.

Had I built a house or two for myself in a prime area under my charge and permitted the loot to continue, the indulgent administrative milieu would have taken the view: 'He is a commissioner without any shelter. After all, he is a displaced person from "Bengal", he must live somewhere!' But, given my actions, I was declared perverse and mentally unstable. The 'displaced persons' aggrieved by an 'unjust order' moved the High Court of Punjab and Haryana at Chandigarh, demanding that the order of the chief settlement commissioner be quashed.

The district attorney attached to my office to defend my orders was known to be a man of integrity. Suddenly, he switched sides. For a handsome consideration, he told the court that the custodian-commissioner had gravely erred in cancelling the allotments without affording an opportunity to the allottees to put forth their case. Thereafter, he resigned from service and left for Australia.

I held to the stand that when one is privy to open larceny and murder of the law there is no occasion to permit avoidable endless litigation. The High Court ruled that the aggrieved persons be allowed an opportunity to be heard by the custodian-commissioner.

I was filled with rage. But, looking into the Bhagavad Gita at dawn the next day, I realized that anger makes one completely blind and that it is intellect alone that can show the mind the difference between right and wrong.

One of the great joys of serving in Haryana is the ability to make visits to the capital, at will, for the state is on its periphery. I locked the official bungalow in Chandigarh and Mother moved to her house near Connaught Circus. I issued notice to the gang of 176 to present their case in court at Faridabad, where I would hear their objections to my order of cancellation on a day-to-day basis. This daunting task could have taken years, but I rolled up my sleeves and got down to the task of continuous court work in Faridabad. At the end of an arduous month, I had completed hearing the

objections.

Sitting by an ancient pond, dedicated to the sun god Martand Dev, at the Surajkund Resort, I worked out the broad outlines of my judgment. 'Dictating such a long order will take over a month,' I thought to myself. 'I will be shifted by then, and this festering wrong will flower into a hydra-headed monster, consuming the lives of thousands of displaced persons.' Walking back to my desk in the camp office, I wrote out a two-page order, taking into account the averments made before me during the past four weeks. I concluded that the 176 allotments made by the settlement department were illegal and had, therefore, to be cancelled in order to allow the state to shelter the homeless.

The judgment withstood the scrutiny of the Honourable High Court.

Shortly after assuming charge of the custodian's post, I had realized that the Haryana government, after settling displaced persons in accordance with their claims, could dispose of the vast acres of valuable land that remained to the advantage of the state exchequer and utilize the funds for infrastructural development. Also, important institutions could be built in the Faridabad-Gurgaon area, along with shopping plazas to rival Connaught Place in Delhi. If these proposals were executed in a sustained manner, the state government would no longer have to seek financial assistance from the Central exchequer or from international funding agencies. The expansion of Delhi depended on the availability of land in Haryana. Accordingly, I made specific recommendations with the advice that the services of top-class legal counsel be taken on to get the lands running parallel to the highway leading to Faridabad, as also within the new township, vacated and cleared of encroachments.

The revenue minister invited me for a cup of tea, and I explained the manner in which the plans could be executed. 'You are truly an able officer,' said the minister. 'I will fix a meeting with the chief minister to discuss these proposals. You are a pillar of strength for our government. I will bring your good work on official record.'

On returning to my office in Chandigarh, I found the plump tehsildars of Gurgaon and Faridabad sweating profusely, waiting to convey an urgent message. The governor's house had indicated that His Excellency wanted a suitable plot of land in Faridabad for constructing his post-retirement house. 'Your Honour, what good fortune for this backward area! Just eight acres have been indicated, close to the Delhi border,' gushed Mr Hingorani, the managing officer.

'It should nearly suffice to build a gubernatorial mansion. Alas, in man's sad journey, at the end there is a state of fanaa—nothingness. The Muslims understand this well. The Upanishads declare that life is but a dream, all this will pass,' was my reply.

'What shall I record?' asked the perplexed revenue officer.

'Please write down in black and white what I have just told you. You may now return to Faridabad.'

Shortly thereafter, the government of Om Prakash Chautala lost its majority and was replaced by the largely unlettered Bhajan Lal, one time a peddler and trader, and now a wily politician who would hold the reins of power in Haryana for long.

About a week after the new government assumed office, as I sat in the courtroom, studying the cases to be heard the next day, a clerk rushed in with the tidings: 'Your Honour has been transferred to Bengal! I have seen a copy of the order.' This was not unexpected or worrisome, for there was still some time to go before the deputation period in Haryana ended.

The clerk returned with a retired settlement officer whose pension I had got released after twenty years. 'It is time to take pre-emptive action,' they both advised. 'Your Honour must immediately obtain a stay from the High Court.'

The new political dispensation in power, both at the Centre and in the state, curtailed my

deputation period and returned my services to my parent state.

I called on the chief secretary, who suggested that I meet the new chief minister of Haryana. Mr Bhajan Lal very politely told me that he knew nothing about governance or administrative matters and that it was the chief secretary's job to find me a posting and sort out these problems. 'We win votes and form the government; it is IAS officers who operate the machinery. Meet the chief secretary, surely he will show you a way out.'

Since the sudden turn of events had caught me off-guard and I was faced with the gloomy prospect of winding up my establishment in Chandigarh where I had come to stay for the rest of my career, I shut down the Delhi house and removed with Mother to Calcutta.

I obtained the services of S. S. Nijjar, a London-trained barrister, who obtained a stay from the Central Administrative Tribunal. The presiding officer heard the case in his chamber.

'You yourself are a court. Have you received the transfer order?' he asked me.

'My Lord, the commissioner has not handed over charge,' interjected my counsel.

The repatriation order was stayed, allowing me a break.

It appeared that the storm had passed. For a month or so, I continued as custodian-commissioner. However, I was soon transferred as director, science and technology, Haryana. With a sense of nausea at the tribal reflexes of the state government, I walked into the chief minister's room and told him that a commissioner could be posted as a secretary, not a director.

'You are a commissioner from Bengal. Why don't you return there?' was the response.

I thought it time to force the issue. 'A general posted in Assam does not become a colonel when posted to Madras,' I pointed out.

'In running a government, anything is possible,' said the chief minister, eyeing a plate of pistachio barfis that stood in for a paperweight on a sheaf of representations.

A director in the state government is administratively head of the department. He is required to report to the government through the secretary and the minister.

In 1991, the Haryana Directorate of Science and Technology was laughably unimportant, and I had no interest in the subject at the time. Indeed, I agreed with Bahadur Shah Zafar's philosophy; with penetrating clairvoyance, on seeing a railway engine on its trial run outside the imperial palaces in the Red Fort, he had uttered the ominous words: 'Is manhoos janwar ko dafa kar do, sada ke liye!'—banish this dreadful monster, forever. I was aware that the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain and the advent of information technology in the United States of America had transformed man's thought process and improved his material standard of life. Nonetheless, I was convinced that the thoughtless march of science, without vision and compassion, without religion or mercy, could destroy the world with the click of a button—very fully demonstrated during the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Zafar Shah's utterance was a cry to save a richly textured way of life from succumbing to a world of transactional interaction.

The miniscule department that was placed in my charge was housed in a hired showroom, happily located above a popular eating house. I quickly discovered that Haryana's social milieu largely lacked the scientific temper and the best we could do was to talk about creating gobar gas, promoting solar cookers and erecting street-lamps in some 'model' villages. The solar cookers, I found, were mostly used for storing shoes. This was to be expected in a state where khap panchayats had nearly murdered the concept of independent thought.

Research revealed to me that India had, since the ancient times, had a tradition of scientific

thought and progress. I read about Nalanda University in Bihar, reputed to be the oldest and richest centre of learning in the world. I learnt that the university, at one time, attracted students from China, Korea, Japan and Turkey—at its peak, the university had ten thousand students studying various. I was astonished to learn that the university pursued analytical and scientific subjects within its campus.

Determined now to make a difference through my department, I wondered how best the fundamental principles of science and technology could be sufficiently simplified so that they could be understood in the villages. The heavy hand of superstition made the task daunting. In civil service, one must retain a childlike innocence—a spirit of continuous inquiry and an understanding of the absurd, for it is these ingredients of thought that come to one's aid when irrefutable logic fails to be understood.

The directorate of science and technology had been placed under a financial commissioner and clubbed together with the departments of agriculture, irrigation and power. The well-intentioned lady IAS officer seemed to have forgotten that the director, science and technology, reported to her, and it was her personal assistant who conveyed the government's advice.

One day, I was summoned to explain my tangential suggestions regarding the promotion of gobar gas and solar energy in rural Haryana. I entered the sepulchral room of the personal assistant, Mr Aneja, and with other civil servants was made to sit on a rickety round-bottomed chair. Mr Aneja was simultaneously applying telephones to both his ears, conveying the commissioner's directions. The department of irrigation and power was a part of Mr Aneja's jurisdiction and a row of pale-faced engineers were in attendance, waiting to present their credentials. As we were waiting, an assistant commissioner on training politely enquired from me about the governmental hierarchy; in natural reflex, I said, 'The secretariat is the only madhouse run by its inmates.'

Shortly thereafter, there was a strong fragrance that preceded the learned financial commissioner's arrival. When I finally gained entry, I noted that the hall was large—and I was reminded that during the Raj, officers represented the paramount power, operating out of cavernous chambers, where supplicants quaked as they approached the presiding deity. The lady barely acknowledged my presence and in stern tones told Mr Aneja: 'Look here, I have just fifteen or twenty minutes. It is my turn to host this month's luncheon at the golf club and I have to be there on time.'

Mr Aneja then drew himself up to his total height of 5' 2", puffed out his chest and submitted with practised humility: 'Your Honour, who understands better than me the onerous responsibilities that burden your shoulder?'

'Mr Aneja, there are heaps and heaps of files,' retorted the commissioner. 'How shall I deal with them? Who will dispose of them? Why have they been permitted to gather dust? Do you not know that my officers are somewhat raw?'

'Madam, I have read the files and sorted them out. There are just four bundles. Your Honour may now sign and pass final orders. I assure you that you will reach the club before the guests arrive.'

The financial commissioner sighed with relief and proceeded to affix her signatures to the first heap of files, which concerned officers placed under suspension. The second heap was disposed of as well—the officers were promoted. So too the third heap, containing the fate of officers who had been charge-sheeted. Then, declared Mr Aneja exuberantly: 'Madam, the fourth heap concerns miscellaneous matters such as the development of science and technology. These can await Your Honour's convenience. And now, madam, the day's work is over.' So saying, he escorted the financial commissioner out of her chamber.

As I marvelled at the fiduciary relationship between the commissioner and her personal assistant, the last I heard, amidst the trail of vanishing perfume, was: 'Mr Aneja, thank you ever so much. What

would I do without you?'

I found the persona and administrative functioning of the financial commissioner engagingly comical. It was a caricature, in my view, of how a civil servant, so highly placed and with so much accountability, should conduct herself. There was never any exchange of compliments between me and the officer, but I intuitively sensed that she understood my assessment of her calibre and wayward objectivity. I vented my ire on Mr Aneja, telling him plainly that he was the tambourine in a dance of clowns. The personal assistant immediately cycled to the madam's residence.

A few weeks were left for my deputation with the Haryana government to end and, happily, I spent them as joint secretary, department of administrative reforms—the assignment which Mr Aneja had arranged for me. I was almost done with Haryana but still retained an official bungalow and my red sports car; it flew regularly over the road between Chandigarh and my home in Delhi.

My new office chamber, containing an opiated personal assistant, was sandwiched between several tailoring establishments in a shopping plaza in central Chandigarh. I wasted no time in getting my clothes altered and repaired, and a new set of uniforms for Mother's personal attendants was ordered. The haberdashers were a lusty lot and many an afternoon was whiled away sharing a drink with them. There was a row of music shops on the ground floor and the libations and the bhangra beat made for a fitting requiem to the state where I was an artificial transplant.

K. C. Singh, who was then heading the zonal passport office, had introduced me to Peter Scot, a richly flavoured Indian whisky that first appeared in the market in the guise of a bride, wrapped in red and golden wrappers. KC knew how to grasp an opportunity. 'Why don't you stay on in Chandigarh?' he said to me one day. 'Put in an application to the prime minister, on behalf of your mother, to transfer you to Punjab. The same logic that brought you to Haryana holds good.'

The Haryana government, taken aback by my insouciance, wrote to the Chandigarh administration to get the bungalow vacated. The might of the Haryana government was unleashed on an officer whom the state had taken on deputation and recommended for permanent absorption on grounds of meritorious performance. An eviction order was pasted on the gatepost at night. Consigning the paper to the dustbin, I got the order quashed by the High Court. All this happened after Mr Chautala was replaced by Bhajan Lal as chief minister.

One day, Mother asked me to shift a Persian carpet from the Delhi house to the drawing room in Chandigarh. 'If you must stay on in this dreadful place, I will have a word with someone next week,' she said.

To change from one province to the other was not unknown in the 200-year-old civil service. The fundamental principle while allotting a state cadre to IAS officers was to send them to distant parts of the country and not to their home state. In the understanding of the Central Government, giving immense power, prestige and facilities to new entrants to the service was adequate compensation for their posting in alien circumstance. Thus, the Punjabi would find himself in Bengal, the Bengali in Punjab, the Kashmiri in Tamil Nadu, the Oriya in Maharashtra, the Tamilian in Uttar Pradesh. It was in the rarest of rare cases that an officer was posted to his home state during the period of service. Though there was a discernable cultural unity throughout India, it was the IAS officers who were responsible for executing the law of the land evenly, without fear or favour—they played a vital role in binding together a disparate subcontinent with steeply uneven levels of socio-economic development and markedly diverse sociological patterns, customs and languages. The Central Government did not want an officer to return to his home state and become vulnerable to the demands

of kith and kin. The cadre transfers had been permitted during the British Raj in a few exceptional cases. In 1947, however, in the twilight of the Raj, there was a sizeable exodus of officers to their parent states. Thereafter, there were two other cadre transfers to the Punjab: the first, on grounds of marriage; the second, on grounds of administrative exigency. I was the last officer to be transferred from Bengal to the Punjab cadre.

The prime minister accepted my mother's petition and ordered my cadre change. The Governments of West Bengal and Punjab gave their consent: one, as the relieving authority; the other, as the accepting authority. The mandarins in the Union home ministry and the department of personnel opposed the transfer as if they had a personal axe to grind. The orders of the prime minister notwithstanding, it took almost ten months for the cadre transfer to be effected, for the discussions on file appeared interminable. Meanwhile, I remained on leave, shuttling between New Delhi and Chandigarh in my car.

The Right to Information Act came into force on 13 October 2005. In 1991-92, however, information, particularly information that was marked 'secret', became 'public' almost simultaneously. Officers and clerks alike would run their mouth at private parties and in coffee houses. Some IAS officers in Punjab having caught wind of this move were incensed, possibly owing to their seniority being affected: I was, at that time, in the rank of secretary-commissioner in the state government and a joint secretary at the Centre. In tandem, a group of powerful bureaucrats got the national newspapers to flash articles on the great wrong that was being committed. *The Indian Express*, known for its pungent style, brought out an article titled 'PMO Flexes Its Muscles', in which my entry into Punjab was made out to be some kind of interference in the state government's autonomy.

Uncertain about my future, I called on the prime minister to explain my plight: I had been without any salary during the waiting period. The prime minister picked up a telephone and tersely passed on verbal instructions. 'Please go to Chandigarh and report for duty to the Punjab government,' was his advice. Then he went back to studying his files.

I drove to Chandigarh along silent roads at night and reached my house near the Rose Garden. Bats hung from a rusted clothesline on the veranda. There was no letter, no message. A day passed, and my restlessness made me uncomfortable.

Waking up with a start, well before 4 a.m., the next day, I paced the terrace to discover an ethereal silver light in the skies. Walking through the Rose Garden, it appeared that every flower, tree, bush and blade of grass had been painted in silver hues. There was a large moon in the firmament. It was a magical experience.

I slowly made my way back to the bungalow to find a police sergeant from the secretariat's control room waiting for me with an envelope bearing a seal of the Punjab government. I enquired about the urgency of the visit, given the early hour.

'Sir, I have received repeated orders and reminders over the walkie-talkie to hand over this letter to you personally. Will you please sign the receipt register?

I opened the sealed envelope—it was the presidential notification permanently transferring me from West Bengal to Punjab.

It was the Gurpurab of Baba Nanak Dev.

14

The Jewel in the Crown

Punjab enjoyed the highest standard of living in India. Its population was known to be hard-working, outgoing and full of enterprise, with superstition and religious ritual generally circumvented when they came in the way of progress. A popular ditty sung in villages: 'Bari barsi khatan gaya si, khat ke liyanda?'—for twelve years the youth have been away, what will they bring home?—conveyed the state's inherent quest for wealth and the good life. The simple singing was followed by vigorous bhangra, danced to the rhythmic beat of a dholak. This was the clarion call of the Punjabi diaspora to seek a future in other parts of India and foreign lands.

The partition of India truncated the state and drastically reduced its land area. Later, the Punjabi Suba movement to achieve a Sikh majority converted this great province to the status of a suba. Captain Amarinder Singh, Maharaja of Patiala and at one time chief minister, has held that it was perhaps for the first time in history that a political party chose to demolish the state to enable the Akalis to form a government occasionally. With the creation of the Punjabi Suba, the state lost its mountains to Himachal Pradesh and its industrial belt of Faridabad and Gurgaon to the new state called Haryana carved out of it, along with eighty lakh acres of prime agricultural land. The magnificent palaces, fortresses and artefacts of erstwhile princes and nawabs that remained behind were woven into the tapestry of development.

In 1939, there were fourteen princely states in the Punjab Province, of which Patiala was the largest in the matter of population and Bhawalpur the largest in area. But it was Kapurthala whose name was most familiar in England since its ruler made annual visits to Europe. The Jagatjit Palace at Kapurthala, inspired by the Versailles, had glittering chandeliers and candelabra, rare statuettes, Italian fountains, golden and silver goblets, Belgian glass, dazzling jewellery, Persian carpets, rows of gargoyles on its exterior terraces and a herd of elephants which raised their trunks in salutation to the royal family. However, the king of Faridkot was the wealthiest, with prime estates in Delhi and properties spread over the length and breadth of northern India, with several investments in foreign lands. The family's wealth was in evidence in Qila Mubarak, the sprawling Raj Mahal, the private aircraft, the gun carriages, the five birs for the royal hunt, a fleet of specially designed Rolls-Royce cars and an entire hillside in Mashobra, adjoining Simla, the summer capital of India, where His Highness spent a better part of the year, with two or three private bands to keep him from depression. The Faridkot rulers also had the dubious distinction of having locked up Giani Zail Singh, later

president of India, for sedition against the throne. The states of Jind, Nabha, Kalsia and Malerkotla were amongst those that remained a part of Indian Punjab and each had their share of romance, largesse and royal eccentricities. I once witnessed the raja of Faridkot standing at a large window in Kenilworth, his retreat in Mashobra, raising a toast to the setting sun as he gazed into the plunging valley where, on a hanging wooden bridge specially constructed between two ridges, uniformed bagpipers crossed each other while playing Scottish melodies.

In the Punjab Province, the British rulers and, before them Maharaja Ranjit Singh, had laid out effective irrigation canals that connected its five rivers—Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Jhelum and Chenab—turning the land into a paradise of green fields and the state into India's granary. In its villages and towns, it was known for its warmth and hospitality, straightforward communication and the exuberance of its people. One could rarely leave a household without partaking of food and drink.

I had myself partaken of this hospitality many years ago, when during a trip to Jalandhar I had visited the home of my old friend Vikram Singh in Ladowal. Vikram's parents had been gracious hosts and time had passed quickly, with drinking, feasting and conversation about Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his vast empire, the phenomenal energy and gallant initiative of his generals and the bravery of the Sikh armies. The meals cooked by the ladies of the house had been fulsome, delicious and had the unmistakable flavour of love. Though I had been almost a stranger to the family, for Vikram had not been present, I had been introduced to each member of the household and received blessings and a shagun from the elders.

I had also heard a lot about Punjab from my mother and her relatives, though it was the city of Lahore that they spoke of in glowing terms; there is a saying in Punjabi: 'Jine Lahore nahi vekheya oh jameya nahi'—he who has not seen Lahore has not yet been born.

Among the Sikhs, I discovered, there are marked divisions, just as in the case of Hindus. Apart from the Jats, there are the Sodhis and the Bedis, who claim descent from the Gurus, the Khatri Sikhs, the Ramgharias, the Majbis and the Kukas. In addition to the princely families and royal houses, there are rich jagirdars and landholders, all of whom belong to the Jat community and cite *The Golden Book of India* for confirmation of their lineage. I was perplexed on learning recently that the Jats had represented for being included amongst the scheduled tribes of India since they form the aristocracy of present-day Punjab.

Following the Indian army's attack on the militants lodged within the Golden Temple, which substantially destroyed the hallowed structure, and immediately after the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, Punjab remained under President's Rule and was directly administered by the governor of the state between 1987 and 1992. During this period, IAS officers and, much more than them, police officers at every level had had a free hand. With the police calling the shots, the civilian authority deriving its authority from Delhi had only a shadowy control of the state.

It was the brilliant strategy of K. P. S. Gill that at first contained and then ended terrorism in Punjab. He cauterized the nerve centres of the terrorist network through the state by bombing their outfits in the swamps of the Mand area near Ferozepur. Right up to 1992, one would cross the borders of Chandigarh into Punjab at the risk of death, for Mohali had several terrorist hideouts and a pall of gloom spread its cloak over the city.

In 1992, a new government had been formed, with twenty-four per cent of the electorate casting their votes. The Akalis refrained from participating in the electoral process. Mr Beant Singh, a panchayat-level politician, became the chief minister, heading a nervous Congress government that had yet to find its feet. The police chief was the principal actor amongst the dramatis personae of the

day and both politicians and civil servants were careful in their dealing with the police. One police officer, it was said, kept the Cabinet minister for industries in the newly formed government waiting on his veranda while he was jumping on a trampoline as a part of his evening workout.

At the close of my tenure with the Haryana government, Mother thought deeply before affixing her signature to a petition to Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. 'Must I sacrifice you to this terror?' she said. 'I have had a long innings and I shall accompany you to Calcutta this time.'

'Mother, there is no terror in Chandigarh,' I told her. 'It is an awfully dull place but will gain colour with time. The greenery and fresh air are good for your asthma.'

'All right, we shall stay here if this is what you really want,' said she, signing the representation as if it were a death warrant.

Rai Bahadur Gobind Ram Bhandari, my maternal grandfather, had retired from the civil service in 1913 after a career of distinguished service all over the Punjab Province. Thereafter, he had taken up an assignment as prime minister of the kingdom of Sheikhupura, close to Lahore. His son, D. P. Bhandari, topped the Indian Civil Service examination in 1933 and was the first Punjabi to do so.

My permanent transfer to the Punjab in 1992 thus continued a tradition that had started in 1878.

Though I reported for duty on 12 November 1992, when the leaves wore autumnal hues, my entry into the secretariat bore the welcome of basant, for it was an open secret that I had been sent to Chandigarh by the Prime Minister's Office.

I was still living in the wilderness of neglect that the Haryana government had left me in. I had been stripped of every facility, including the house telephone. There was no gateman or gardener. The house looked like an air-raid shelter; between May 1991 and November 1992, it had been kept locked except for my brief visits to Chandigarh to enquire about the progress of the cadre transfer.

An officer on special duty from the Punjab government knocked on the door of my house at 9 a.m. to escort me to meet the chief minister. I told the officer that I would be ready at 10.30 a.m. and he should send transport and someone to show me the way through the unending corridors of the secretariat.

Dressed in formal attire, I called on Mr Beant Singh, the Punjab chief minister, at 11 a.m. The office was luxuriously appointed, with wall-to-wall carpeting and Victorian-style furniture. I will always remember the warmth of the man and his direct approach. 'Welcome to Punjab,' he said. 'I have been told of your difficulties. We will do our best to make you comfortable. You should now bring your mother to Chandigarh immediately. The PGI has very good doctors and this is an unpolluted city.' Mr Beant Singh then advised the chief secretary to arrange for a suitable posting for me and told his aide to send a reliable car to Delhi to escort Mother to Chandigarh.

One of the senior colleagues from Punjab, whom I had known earlier, told me that I should meet the cadre officers over lunch and thereafter watch a cricket match at the stadium close to my residence. That it was a working day was of little consequence—the aftermath of President's Rule seemed to be continuing in Punjab.

I. S. Bindra, then posted as principal secretary, industries, and an internationally recognized sports administrator, took me aside and said: 'Despite our messages to the Bengal government, we have yet to receive confirmation of your promotion as secretary in the parent state.' He was very cordial and told me that to ensure I had the requisite facilities and powers of a head of department the government had decided to post me as managing director of the Punjab State Leather Development Corporation, popularly known as Leathera. 'Please spend two or three months settling down, and we

will work out a proper posting for you when the papers are received from Calcutta. Kindly make it a point to wind up the corporation quickly, for it has been a loss-making unit for many years.'

As I left the chief minister's office, two armed Sikh policemen, wearing turbans with a jhalar on one side, reported for duty as personal security officers. When the doors of the lift opened, several 'black cat' commandos formed a cordon to make a corridor for the Haryana chief minister. When they tried to prevent me from entering the lift, the two sardars shoved them. 'Hato, hato, Commissioner Sahib neeche jayenga.'

Bhajan Lal, emerging from the lift, greeted me warmly. Folding his hands, as if our spirits had merged, he asked me: 'Aap kaise hain?' How are you?

To which I blandly replied: 'Ab theek hoon, ji.' Now, I am all right, sir.

The Haryana chief minister was a seasoned Congressman—the goings-on in the common secretariat building of Punjab and Haryana may not have been lost on him entirely.

Boards and corporations—taking their cue from the Nehruvian model, according to which the state should take the initiative in developing the economy and controlling its commanding heights—had been set up in different sectors, mostly without comprehensive market survey or taking into account the cost-benefit analyses of the projects. As a result, almost without exception, sooner rather than later, every unit turned into a loss-making enterprise—the cumulative effect of which was a continuous blood-letting of the state exchequer.

The corporations were not manned by professionals but by clerks, ministerial staff and conniving officials, who quickly realized the advantages of sitting in carpeted, air-conditioned offices, with staff cars at their disposal and free air travel to pilgrimage spots and tourist destinations. There was the further lure of sampling luxurious hotels at the expense of a dying corporation. This was in marked contrast to the rigorous discipline and niggardly hospitality of the secretariat and its subordinate offices.

The Punjab State Leather Development Corporation was set up in 1984 to organize the leather industry for the weaker sections of society engaged in the leather trade so that manufacture, sale and export could be well-orchestrated, under government protection. The skinning of animals and curing their hides was a customized skill and could not be engaged in on a large-scale or routine manner.

Punjab had vast potential to develop the leather industry since the state possessed large quantities of hides and skins, from milch cattle, which was being exported to other parts of India in the absence of manufacturing infrastructure. Therefore, the corporation was charged with the mandate of setting up production facilities to use the valuable renewable natural resources for giving an economic boost to downtrodden sections of society traditionally engaged in the trade.

The corporation had two public sector industries—Punjab Tanneries Ltd and Punjab Footwear Ltd—functioning in Jalandhar. Alongside, about twelve extension centres for the development of tanning and footwear industries were functioning in Jalandhar, Malerkotla, Kotkapura, Patiala and Sunam. The Punjab State Leather Development Corporation had several emporia that were successfully marketing its products, and the trademark Leathera had become a prestigious tag.

The corporation also developed production facilities to meet the requirements of government departments, primarily the Punjab and Chandigarh police force, the transport department and departments of the Delhi government. However, my orders were clear. I was required to wind up Leathera and give its employees voluntary retirement as a part of the state government's disinvestment policy. There were also other corporations that were not doing well; however, the axe was poised to

fall on Leathera.

The managing director of the corporation enjoyed vast administrative powers and the facilities of a general. I felt like one of the later Mughal emperors enthroned in the Red Fort, presiding over an empire that had rotted away. As a tangential initiative, I worked out a model to revive the corporation. I visited the defunct units of the Punjab Tanneries Ltd and footwear production units at Jalandhar and realized the vast potential of these extensive properties, now within the municipal limits of the city; if disposed of through public auction, they could earn substantial monies for the corporation. Thus, if properly husbanded, the heavy losses could be offset and a turnaround of Leathera into a profit-making enterprise effected.

To test the waters and survey the market, I visited small footwear production units hidden away in the narrow lanes of Agra where, to my astonishment, I learnt that the internationally renowned Bata shoes and leather products were, in fact, manufactured not in large factories but by small shoemakers —the company merely added its label to the products. The shoemakers of Agra had been turned into the minions of an industrial empire.

To tide over the deep financial crisis that had gripped Leathera and keeping in mind the look of despair on the faces of its employees, who would be sent home jobless, I thought it worthwhile to attempt trading as an interim measure. Recalling the Morocco leather office trays and accompanying articles on my father's office desk, I placed orders for some samples of similar products. These beautifully handcrafted items were then sent to tourism outlets, to the foreign office and to North Block. Some items were carried abroad by Indian dignitaries, where they were presented as gift items and were well-received.

Fresh orders that were received were met in a timely manner through the new method of trading, and we used the brand name of Leathera to give credibility to the products. Money started coming into the empty coffers of the corporation, and I got the steps leading up to the office, the chambers of officers and cubicles of ministerial staff carpeted in green, the colour of hope. I requested the state finance department to allow me a few months to try and revive the dying corporation. With an indulgent smile, the finance secretary agreed to my apparently quixotic venture.

The corporation had been a sinking ship for long; so, in the manner of rats which abandon such vessels, the undisciplined union leaders, led by one Mr Gulab Chand, would regularly storm into the managing director's room, making all kinds of demands. The union leaders had gheraoed a previous incumbent and it was the norm to regularly hurl insults at the chief executive, disallowing any meaningful dialogue regarding the dismemberment or revival of the corporation.

Gulab Chand decided to browbeat me within the first week of my appointment. The minute he sat down opposite me, irked by a bilious mustard golf cap that he wore above his brinjal-coloured face, I called one of the security men and asked him to take the union leader for a cup of tea to the canteen. Thereafter, I forgot about him for a few hours. Around 4 p.m., realizing that he had come to create trouble, I allowed him five minutes. As I descended the stairs, I found a mob pelting stones at the staff car. I charge-sheeted the union leader, allowing him twenty-one days to explain why he should not be dismissed. When he refused to accept official communications, I got them delivered through a substitute service. Realizing that I meant business, the process server pasted the notices on the headboard of a double-bed, belonging to Mr Gulab Chand and his spouse, in their house at Jalandhar at midnight; the notices were then photographed, sans the couple. The man was dismissed, the union tamed and I decided to call reasonable representatives to the negotiating table to fully familiarize them with the grave financial situation that faced the corporation and make them partners in the revival plan.

While the financial position showed a glimmer of hope and the indiscipline amongst the employees had been temporarily contained, yet another missile was hurled at the corporation, in the shape of a political chairman. Fortunately, this 'luminary' was of a gentle mien and the government had left the financial and administrative powers with the managing director. A day after Mr Hazuri Lal, a member of the Legislative Assembly, assumed charge as chairman of the Punjab State Leather Development Corporation, he ordered laddoos for distribution amongst his supporters, who had gathered in large numbers on the pavement outside the corporation's office. I was asked to sanction a bill of Rs 13,000 for these sweets—I refused to do this. Hazuri Lal came across to my office for a cup of tea, looking astonished. 'Commissioner Sahib, is this not a moment to celebrate?' he asked me. 'Yes, indeed,' was my curt reply. I offered him a cup of black coffee, held out a packet of Gauloise and told him to pay the bill. I discovered that in Punjab MLAs aimed at becoming ministers, parliamentary secretaries or, at the very least, chairmen. These were titles that carried high social status. Mr Hazuri Lal belonged to Jalalabad, which is on the border of Ferozepur Division, about 300 miles away from Chandigarh. Every Friday, he would climb into the new staff car that had been acquired for his official use to travel to the constituency, with a red beacon atop the vehicle as his guiding light. After two or three weeks, he sent me a note asking for reimbursement of petrol charges for these wayward meanderings. I sent back the file quoting the rules, to which was attached a financial statement for the current year. With the chairman held temporarily in check, I was hopeful that the corporation would be given a new lease of life.

After eight months of my stewarding the Punjab State Leather Development Corporation, late one evening, there was a call from the Prime Minister's Office. 'Robin, is this a proper posting? Are you happy? Would you like a change of portfolio?' I assured my mentor that I was happy and had accepted a challenge and told him that I would prefer staying on till the corporation came out of the red.

Five minutes later, I received a call from the Punjab chief secretary. 'Robin, I think you have settled down in the cadre now,' he said. 'Why don't you take charge of the Punjab Financial Corporation?'

I pleaded that I be allowed to complete the unfinished tasks that lay ahead. However, the next day, a government notification was issued, posting me as managing director of the Punjab Financial Corporation which, at that time, was considered the most prestigious post for an officer at my level.

In the afternoon, I called on the chief secretary, explaining to him that finance was not my subject and that I was rather poor with figures. Further, I told him that I had made promises to the employees of the dying corporation and it went against the grain to leave them in the lurch. 'Robin, go and take charge of the Punjab Financial Corporation. It is an excellent assignment. If you insist, you can keep the leather corporation as an additional charge,' was his advice. The next day, another notification was issued by the finance department, allowing one month's time for the Punjab State Leather Development Corporation to be wound up.

With a heavy heart, I called the employees and enquired about how best I could rehabilitate them. While three or four officials availed of the golden handshake, for the majority I made personal visits to offices and wrote a series of letters, having discovered a redeployment cell in the Punjab government. Before my handing over charge, practically all the employees had been transferred to regular government posts. In fact, their best hopes had been bettered for they had become permanent government employees. The chairman too, on the rebound, got a promotion. When I next met him, he was flying the national tricolour, for he had been promoted as a minister of state.

I had grown up on legends of civil servants holding sway over large land areas; their crossing wide rivers in howdahs on elephant back; their living in sprawling mansions with ballrooms and elongated wall mirrors; dispensing justice in cavernous courtrooms where the podium and railings were fashioned out of Burma teak, while old punkah-pullers, half-asleep on the veranda, cooled the air above the court of objective justice. These images of the predecessor service were stored in memory from portraits of Bengal that I carried with me to the Punjab.

For me, IAS officers were torchbearers and custodians of impeccable integrity, people who worked with missionary fervour at maintaining the peace and executing the law. And, where required, they would be responsible for introducing visionary initiatives, built upon tradition, in line with the dictates of the prevailing social milieu. That the government should establish banks or corporations or operate hotels made little sense to me. Trade, business and industry, to my mind, were not a part of the government's mandate or role. This inherent streak of being unable to reconcile my ideals to the actual work that I was required to do condemned me, from the start of my career, to remaining a permanent outsider in the somersaulting circumstance of independent India.

The managing director of the Punjab Financial Corporation was a much-feted officer, for he held the reins of aarthik shakti and could make poor men rich and rich men richer. He had the ability to advance easily repayable loans, defer payments that were required to be paid within a stipulated time schedule. He could lower recovery rates and turn his head the other way when a loan taken to build a warehouse or a hospital was utilized to purchase a fine mansion or a gleaming limousine.

When I took charge of the corporation, in 1993, I was stunned by the luxurious office of the chief executive. It was a hall the size of a large living room, fitted with five-ton air-conditioning, plush carpeting, a capacious sitting area with leather sofas and a round dining table at the far end of the chamber. A florist would regularly visit in the mornings to supervise fresh flower arrangements in the chamber. There was a housekeeper who ensured that the MD's office, with its beautiful wall murals, and the large marble lobby remained sparkling—doubtless to engender hope of success.

My posting as managing director of the Punjab Financial Corporation was the envy of my colleagues. It was the beginning of a meteoric rise in my career in Punjab, which ended on a rather low octave owing to my failure to grasp the dynamics of success. Also, I would take a rigid stand on issues, particularly matters concerning default, turning potential support systems for the future into sworn enemies. Many MLAs who made specious statements or unusual demands on the corporation were cut to size by my biting replies. I would not accept telephone calls during the lunch hour; this caused a great deal of heartburn, for the politicians came to office—in soporific good humour after a hearty meal of paranthas, yoghurt and butter milk—only around noon and started meeting visitors after 1 p.m.

The Punjab Financial Corporation, established in 1953, was India's first development bank. Its primary objective was to fund small and middle-level industry and assist in modernization, expansion and diversification of existing units. In its earlier years, it had played a significant role in bringing about decentralized economic development as well as the setting up of industry in backward regions. The primary role of the corporation was to give chances to young entrepreneurs to establish viable industrial units. During the years of its existence, it had helped in setting up 18,000 industrial units, generating employment for over 200,000 individuals.

The corporation was funded by the state government as the leading partner, along with the Industrial Development Bank of India, other banks, insurance companies and private shareholders. The corporation was also dependent for refinance on other banking institutions. However, the cycle

of industrial development and growth could only be maintained if borrowers repaid their dues in time. This was not the case; landed gentry, ministers, erstwhile princes, MLAs, officers of the IAS and IPS—through their wives, children and relatives, or through 'the old boys' network', or over a drink at a prestigious club—garnered loans, without any serious market survey having been undertaken and with no intention of repaying them to the corporation. Unfortunately, there was also a provision in the rules for the waiving of 'bad debts'. Therefore, the idea of developing industry illustratively in areas such as Goindwal in Amritsar or Jagraon in Ludhiana was not seriously entertained—the money meant for economically backward regions had been siphoned off by wealthy persons in authority. A defaulting industrial unit could be auctioned off by the managing director. Here also, there was a tradition of twisting the law and many managing directors, in tandem with political persons, sold such properties to friends, relatives and important persons at throwaway prices.

The corporation had become hollow from within owing to constant indecision, deliberate under-assessment of properties and mala fide deferment or rescheduling of payments, aided by fleet-footed peons and clerical staff who had developed expertise in the selective presentation of files and records.

Initially, however, financing by the corporation had helped in the industrialization of Ludhiana, particularly in the hosiery sector. The well-known Hero cycle group too owed its development to the corporation. The carpet industry in Amritsar, successfully replicating Kashmiri, Persian and Bokhara designs, had made a name for itself internationally. In Patiala, modern photographic laboratories and fine hotels were financed by the corporation.

I enjoyed working in the Punjab Financial Corporation. Most of its officers were intelligent chartered accountants and I had a legal section to assist me in taking difficult decisions. However, I noticed soon that these officers had an unwritten rule of shielding each other while making a quick buck—they would only bring pleasing facts to the managing director's attention. The chief executive played a pivotal role in disbursing finance after loans had been approved by the board or the executive committee, in the rescheduling of payments, in permitting bridge loans or taking a decision to lock up industrial units. The managing director also guided the sales committee in auctioning off properties to financially strengthen the corporation's cash reserves.

The day was small and the workload endless. I never had time to meet friends and could scarcely sit with my mother for more than an hour in the evenings. My love for gardening, books, reading and writing was buried under heaps of files dealing with financial enterprise. The telephone rang constantly and the operator engaged petitioners with half-truths and lies, until I advised him to be straightforward and tell callers that I would be available only between fixed hours. Several well-appointed cars and liveried drivers were placed at my disposal. However, I would walk through the Rose Garden and send the bundles of files that had been disposed of by car.

We started a newsletter in the corporation to disseminate information about loaning schemes to entrepreneurs; it had a literary flourish and its publication was stopped at the end of my tenure. I took the initiative of touring extensively in backward areas to engender the idea of new enterprise through 'camps', where we would meet potential entrepreneurs at their doorstep. This proved an exercise in futility, for it is difficult to make a poor man who lacks hope and confidence to set up a successful industrial unit. Naturally, the officers accompanying me did nothing to dispel this belief.

I tried to get the functioning of the corporation computerized, an initiative that was opposed by the entire hierarchy, from the peons to the chairman; computerization was a waste of money, I was told. When I started the exercise on a limited scale, some peons cut the cable wires—they feared that their

grease money for presenting files or hiding them would dry up. My attempts at modernizing the corporation's functioning through leasing and merchant banking did not take flight either, for there was no desire for improvement or staving off the imminent disaster of bankruptcy.

Reflecting on this fatal flaw in the Indian character—this resistance to change or progress—I concluded that a nation that had lived in bondage for over a thousand years would have its character done in quite naturally.

I came to learn that twenty-nine per cent of Punjab's population lived below the international poverty line. Sadly, however, the corporation never seemed to have funds to develop industry where it was most needed. I tried to get hospitals and essential facilities set up through loans as a part of public enterprise.

Meanwhile, the hawks in the secretariat had been watching me closely and repeatedly made complaints to the chief secretary and the chief minister about my 'negative attitude'. My time with the corporation came to an end when I locked up industrial units belonging to recalcitrant defaulters related to the chief minister.

I travelled to Bombay in 1994 to meet the directors of the Industrial Development Bank of India to get sufficient capital released to continue the cycle of finance. As I descended the stairs at Santa Cruz, accompanied by a senior manager, we encountered quite a melee. My tour coincided with a shubh tithi and we had to carefully weave our way through newlywed couples, dodging travel bags and cases that were rapidly being lifted from the conveyer belt.

'I do hope the car is air-conditioned,' I said to the senior manager, for it was a hot sweltering evening. Since I was now in the corporate world, I had packed my suitcase with summer suits, cigars, a silver hip flask, sharp English cheddar and crackers, and a first-aid box, which was secured between joke books and risqué literature.

In about forty-five minutes, I found myself in the lobby of the Taj Mahal Hotel. Surveying the sophisticated elegance of the crème de la crème in their haute couture attire and the many celebrities reflected on granite floors, I thought to myself that I had arrived—for a middle-level civil servant, surely this was a lifetime's achievement. The thought of my colleagues in safari suits, chasing shifty-eyed ministerial staff, potbellied policemen and patwaris, sent a shiver of distaste down my spine. Vowing to banish these phantoms forever, I entertained myself with images of shapely women leaning against their macho companions and meandering towards the cocktail lounge. Such moments are to be savoured, I thought, for life, after all, is just moments.

I entered my suite with a sigh of satisfaction. The senior manager carefully placed my bags on the rack and coughed nervously. He was seeking an upgrade of his hotel accommodation; he petitioned that the permissible rates would lodge him in a 'choultry'.

Shutting the heavy door behind him, I looked out at the majestic ocean and, with an eye to the future, invited the vice president of the bank with whom I had business to dinner. As there was still some time, I studied the points for discussion and, pouring myself a generous drink, I carried it to the Roman-styled bathtub.

As I started getting dressed to receive my guests, I reached out for a formal jacket and tie. I drew out instead a firmly moulded, wired brassiere. Mesmerized, I delved deeper into the suitcase. Out tumbled a golden and red sari, followed by a blouse and petticoats. Frantic by then, I rummaged through the suitcase: it revealed more bridal wear, the finest Italian lingerie, a vanity case, a jewellery box, silver idols of Radha and Krishna, perfume, incense sticks and an address book.

I summoned the manager to return the baggage to Santa Cruz, where he found its legitimate owner: a weeping bride with swollen eyes was parked on my suitcase, with cigars, whisky, joke books and

the literature scattered around her as her bemused spouse looked on.

The next morning, turned out in an elegant light suit, now playing role of a seasoned Wall Street banker, I got released a substantial tranche of money for the Punjab Financial Corporation. The Industrial Development Bank of India, impressed by the revival of the corporation, advised the state government to continue my services as managing director for at least three years more. The chairman's office handed me a copy of the message sent to the secretariat at Chandigarh.

But that evening, as I lit up a cigarette in the Sea Lounge of the the Taj Mahal Hotel, along with the drink that I had ordered I was handed a sealed teleprinter message by a liveried waiter. Pushing it away, I introspected over a perfectly mixed gin and tonic, wondering whether to contemplate the beauty of the Queen's Necklace or leave for Delhi the same night.

A s it happened, I left the Punjab Financial Corporation as suddenly as I had joined it—the political patronage from Delhi had been withdrawn, and the Punjab government shifted me.

I was posted as secretary to the Government of Punjab, department of administrative reforms, and moved to a compact office in the secretariat, overlooking a car park with rows of white staff cars and drivers leaning on their bonnets, gossiping and puffing at cigarettes with abandon. A private secretary, a personal assistant and two peons reported to me for duty, wearing abnegatory expressions.

The work of the department was indeterminate, which made me wonder. In a disintegrating system of governance, the department of administrative reforms alone ought to have been actively charged with ridding the secretariat of the accumulated deadwood and showing the door to the behemoth resting therein. I thought about the matter and spent some time studying a replica of an Egyptian hieroglyphic, the transliteration of which is in the British Museum. Through this, the pharaoh of Egypt, some ten thousand years ago, advised his vizier about the manner in which a minister ought to conduct himself while in office. In the process, the ruler enunciated principles which constitute the basic structure of civil administration: 'The office of the minister is the mainstay of the entire land. . . . He is one who is not partisan. . . You should see that everything is done in accordance with what is in the law. . . The magistrate's safeguard is to act in accordance with regulations. . . Do not judge unfairly. . . Regard him whom you know like him whom you do not know, him who is near you like him who is far from you. Do not pass over a petitioner before you have attended to his pleas. . . Inspire respect for yourself, so that men may respect you, for the magistrate who is respected is a real magistrate. The real worth of a magistrate is that he does justice. Do not do your own will in a matter or matters whereof the law is known.'

I recalled my governess who, in my early years, would never tire of repeating the maxims 'One learns through knocks' and 'Discretion is the better part of valour'—words I rarely heeded, for, despite well-intentioned initiatives, I would blurt out my mind like an innocent, without diplomacy, well into adulthood.

As I left office on the first day, I overheard one of the peons lamenting: 'He seems like a decent officer. What will he do here? There is nothing to do in this office.'

Within the next few days, I wrote to the chief secretary that the department of administrative reforms should immediately be wound up, along with others that had outlived their relevance—they were unnecessarily draining the exchequer and obfuscating governmental functioning. There were several departments that had been wrapped in cotton wool by the state exchequer for officers who had to be placed in posts 'commensurate with their seniority'. The departments of co-ordination,

programme implementation, planning, archaeology and archives et al were in the same genre. I suggested a prototype whereby the departments could be clubbed with the appropriate office. Illustratively, archaeology, archives and culture could become part of the department of education.

I called on R. I. Singh, a celebrated colleague in the IAS—the only one in the 1974 batch of officers to be awarded the prestigious Padma Shri—for advice. His views on administration, I found, were well-formulated. Self-government, he said, was no guarantee of good governance which, simply put, merely means the effortless delivery of state services to citizens. In the developing world, poor governance promoted non-inclusive growth, tardy service delivery, missed opportunities and, worse, tension and conflicts in society. I carefully thought about R. I. Singh's words. He had accurately diagnosed that in developing democracies, particularly in pluralistic, divisive and fragmented societies with feudalistic lineage such as in India, conflicting interests constantly attempted to push each other out.

The enduring principles of the constitutional law of ancient India were propounded around 2,300 years ago by Kautilya, prime minister of the Mauryan Empire, in the *Arthashastra*. He emphatically declared the right to happiness of all individuals and the duty of the ruler to protect that right. Regarding financial management, Chanakya emphasized that foremost attention be paid to the treasury, since all undertakings depend on finance. The power of the government, he said, comes from the treasury. During the course of discussion, R. I. Singh held that while the state has enormous powers to make its citizens unhappy it also has the powers to make them happy. Therefore, the crux of good governance is the manner in which authority is exercised. While governments are based on political compulsions, democracy is essentially governance by politics—wherein decision-making is actuated by the desire to build and preserve the vote bank, even if it involves division and deprivation of vast sections of society; it is imperative that that basic services and administrative dispensations should be delivered to all alike, in a transparent and efficient manner, free from political arbitrariness or bureaucratic bungling.

I recorded Mr Singh's edifying suggestions regarding the simplification of procedures, reduction of avoidable delay and time-bound disposal of citizen's requests, particularly in areas such as obtaining certificates, verifications, copies of land records, urban and civic services, police service delivery, police station reforms, driving licence and vehicle registration. The effort was to set in place a system that limited official discretion in public decision-making, allowing for transparency and predictability in government responses. I sent up detailed proposals to the state government on these lines; as expected, it was to no avail.

I was able to complete what work I had at the department of administrative reforms quickly and effectively, for I discovered that the private secretary, Mr Chuni Lal, the son of a tehsildar in British India, was a multi-splendoured personality. He had been markedly tactless, in a long career, and had the habit of pointing out grammatical errors committed by civil servants not trained in public schools. 'One must have a foundation in Latin and Greek to understand the architecture of the English language and French to the requisite degree, to understand its nuances and embellishments,' he told me. No officer was willing to have Mr Chuni Lal, just as he was unwilling to put up with the reflexes of an average mind. He had assessed himself thus: 'I am a hard-boiled egg in a world of half-baked officers.'

Chuni Lal was an incisive man of few words, with a wry sense of humour bordering on the caustic. He possessed a command over English and Urdu and would never circumvent logic. He believed that an idea was central to thoughtful expression. Chuni Lal paralleled my own ability to revel in solitude and I discovered that he understood the finer cadences of Hindustani classical music.

We worked together for several years and, after his retirement, the private secretary travelled with me to the commissioner's offices in Punjab—Faridkot, Ferozepur and Patiala—where I was posted. One evening, as I sat under a shade tree, sipping a glass of whisky, I had a drink placed on his table. On finishing it, Mr Chuni Lal, who had been listening to a rendition of the legendary vocalist Kaiser Bai Kerkar, suggested that I replay it. On a slip of paper, he wrote out the two words of a bandish that encompasses life's yearning, which the vocalist had been rendering in different octaves: 'Kaise samjhaoon?' How shall I put it?

Work came to the defunct department in the shape of a questionnaire comprising 136 precise questions. The Punjab government had been ordered by Delhi to comment on economy and reform in administrative functioning and to provide an honest transparent public delivery system by which government departments could be effectively made functional—there was the full realization that no department or corporation of the government was delivering results. The Union Government had requisitioned the services of an expert consultant firm and the questions were penetratingly incisive.

By then, the state government was headed by a chief secretary known for his poetic temperament, wayward moods, erratic reactions and repetitive statements. He would call in freshly recruited lady stenographers to give dictation, to enquire if they had learnt the ropes and then display phantasmagorical disinterest in his office work, pushing aside files that urgently required study and considered decisions.

A t sixes and sevens, I strode into the chief secretary's chamber for guidance since the questionnaire had to be answered within a few hours.

'What are you doing these days? And what has brought you to my office unannounced?' demanded the officer.

Without bothering about permission, I planted myself firmly in a chair in order to fix the chief secretary's wandering mind. 'This questionnaire is to reach Delhi in the forenoon tomorrow. You have asked me to reply to 136 questions which pertain to eighty departments and their subordinate offices. Kindly get the departments to comment and I will coordinate the exercise,' I said to him icily.

The chief secretary, who had marked the papers to me in red ink in a routine reflex, had not read a word of the Central Government's directives. He leant back in his chair, put on his reading glasses, told the nubile stenographer to leave and returned to his original avatar—the kind of civil servant he may have been thirty-five years ago. We sat in silence for half an hour as he studied the voluminous document.

'Robin, I have nothing against you personally. You are a likeable fellow,' he said. 'Please answer all these questions yourself and send them to Delhi by tomorrow. You may send a forwarding letter informing Central Government that I have approved the answers.'

I came out of the grey secretariat building that, to my mind, resembled a Russian prison. I picked up Mr Chuni Lal and a bottle of whisky and drove to my residence. By dawn, the replies had been drafted. The private secretary settled the grammatical errors. I had a second look. The answers, though based on imagination and my dreams for the emergence of India as an economic power, appeared logical. The plethora of documents were sealed and sent to Delhi through a clerk who carried them in a valise.

I informed the chief secretary's office of compliance and drove to the Mughal Gardens at Pinjore at the foothills of the Himalayas. Taking in deep draughts of chilled beer, I went to sleep inhaling the fragrance of the mango blossom in the all-too-brief Indian spring. Lying amidst the flowers, I recalled a Punjabi verse which translates as follows:

Not forever does the bulbul sing
Not forever lasts the spring
Not forever does happiness reign
Not forever do voices in a majlis ring

Shortly thereafter, the chief secretary, who had earlier disliked me, had a change of heart. He had received a communication from the Government of India, stating that Punjab was the only state that had replied to the complex communiqué accurately, in a timely manner and with viable proposals. So I was, yet again, transferred.

15

The Wilderness Within

Capitalizing on Mr Chuni Lal's luminosity of mind and typing skills, along with his unique ability to comprehend my long and abstruse sentences, I resorted to the only exit route to rationality that I knew to quell the fits of depression that had started overtaking me. My pieces started being accepted by a local daily, which traditionally had a credible reputation and large readership in northwestern India.

It was time for me to take a break from musty files and walk in the Lodhi Gardens in Delhi, perhaps the most beautifully landscaped park in the world. It was there that I commenced on a love affair, during an evening walk, amidst tall bamboo bushes, with a stranger from the city of Lucknow. My partner was a blue-blooded aristocrat, consigned to deprivation and poverty by the winds of change. We walked together, languorously inhaling the perfumes of youth intermingling with the heady sweet pea blossom. I thought it was time to give love another chance.

The affair-la-amour cannot be recalled here in its totality, for it is another story worthy of its own exposition. But as I journeyed alone in life, unaided by railings of acceptability or encouragement, I leaned upon hopefulness—improper to those contemplating success, I later understood. Then, however, I clung then to an essential goodness that I perceived. But even as I reached out for reassurance, I realized that our journey would never be together. Tidal fits of madness overtook my trained reflexes, leaving me exhausted and suspect in her eyes. A single relationship was not in my destiny, I concluded, for the continuous nurturing of love, to keep it green and alive, is exacting.

I know now that it is preferable to fall at least a little short of perfection, for then one may still stagger, reel and recover. But in any perfection, unconscious of form or time, one is too vulnerable and precarious, as in the case of kites flying across a flooded river—unable to sustain the height for long, unable also to accept the rapid descent and disintegration into the waters. I know now that it is not unrequital that is frightening or causes despair; rather, it is the limitation within which requital must operate. And I try always to think about that love in the silences of my room, as I fear that the distraction of livelihood and humdrum association may dilute the intensity of it.

By 1995, I had served in four provinces and at the Centre for twenty-years. Weary of the turbulent instability of an IAS officer's circumstance, I looked forward to my next assignment as secretary, department of forests and wildlife preservation. Finally, I thought to myself, I would be free from the

spectre of generals being cashiered for thievery in place of being honoured for gallantry; police chiefs being jailed for murder and corruption; nocturnal couriers, delivering wads of currency for favourable judgments, being apprehended by guards at the gates of judicial officers; chief secretaries being dragged to jail for looting the countryside; bombs being thrown at Parliament while legislators debated the country's development; Naxalites kidnapping district collectors and threatening to slit their throats; caricatures of 'Indian statesmen' swinging on hammocks on the French Riviera, en route to Swiss banks to augment their accounts—while forty-two per cent of the population in India gasped for sustenance, on the edge of starvation.

Recalling the dense forests in Jalpaiguri, I thought I had arrived at a destination where I could introspect and work to increase the green cover and obliterate the frightening antics of mankind. This posting, however, was yet another trick that the state of Punjab was to play on me.

Punjab had the lowest forest cover in India, with eighty-five per cent of the land under agriculture. The scarce medium forests did not exceed three-point-five per cent of the land area and were situated in the districts of Rupnagar, Hoshiarpur, Nawanshahr and Gurdaspur, having escaped decimation owing to their distance from Chandigarh. Even the desert state of Rajasthan and neighbouring Haryana had performed better than Punjab when it came to the total area under forests. Officially, however, we let it be known that Punjab had a forest cover of six per cent, with a total area of 1,763 square kilometres.

The foresters, under the circumstances, had nowhere to go. The administrative hierarchy, nonetheless, paralleled the structure in Madhya Pradesh, where nearly one-third of the land area was under forests. The forest department of Punjab had a large menagerie of officials, many of whom did not have a tree to shelter under. It was headed by a wealthy Cabinet minister, who had survived eighty winters and travelled in an expensive limousine. Mr Bagicha Singh was allocated the forest portfolio as he was engaged in the timber business and, in a sense, was a subject matter specialist. He was assisted by a minister of state and a parliamentary secretary, who kept enquiring of me about the powers that they possessed and why new cars sanctioned to them had not reported for duty. 'We will fly the national flag above our houses and work from there till we have new office cars to ride in,' was their refrain. The department had a secretary, an additional secretary and a joint secretary to superintend the functioning of a serried hierarchy of forest officers who represented to my office: 'We too are members of an all-India service and should be given postings in the secretariat and ranked appropriately in the warrant of protocol.'

The forest directorate was headed by a principal chief conservator of forests, three or four additional principal chief conservators, several conservators, additional conservators, deputy conservators. The entire state had thoughtlessly been demarcated into forest divisions headed by divisional forest officers, irrespective of the lack of forest cover. They justified their existence by touring patches of scrub jungle in an arid wasteland, often without encountering a blade of grass for miles together. The law of the jungle governed the forest department, and its officers engaged in internecine warfare, for the cake was too small to be passed around.

The forest department had the sole authority for implementation of legislation to protect the forests and to regulate activities within its jurisdiction. It was urgently necessary to increase the green cover through extension services to offset the effects of cultivation for decades. There were well-considered schemes and perspective plans concerning joint forest management, seeking to involve village communities in the protection of forest areas. There were schemes for watershed management since lack of moisture was a major cause for the failure of new plantations.

While small initiatives were being intermittently considered by the state government to increase

the forested area, there was growing concern in the developed world about the adverse climatic impact of an increasing population and development on environment. In consequence of two presentations that I had made in Delhi before international funding agencies, after my first tenure was over, in 1997, the Punjab government received Rs 440 crores from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation for increasing afforestation in the state by a stipulated percentage within a specified period. However, the structure of the forest department worked at cross purposes and was unable to absorb the generous foreign assistance. Large sums of money were siphoned off or diverted, and the state government declared the project unrealistic as it had no provision for agro-forestry. The abject failure in implementing the targets agreed upon pointed the needle of suspicion at the entire department—a matter that is still being enquired into by the vigilance bureau of Punjab.

The forest department was also concerned with the management of zoological parks in the state. Here, again, the dismal picture left me sorrowing. Meat for the lions and tigers was substandard owing to embezzlement by zoo officials in cahoots with suppliers. The embankment of the world-renowned Chhatbir Zoo, contained in 500 acres of land inherited from the maharajas of Patiala, had not been repaired for decades. My irate dialogue with the irrigation department, headed by a complacent secretary, finally provoked the engineers into action; as a result of this, the renowned lion safari, that would most likely have met a watery end in the Ghaggar River, was saved.

Strangely, the onus for implementation of government policy fell to the lot of a lowly paid Grade III employee, the forest guard, who had a multiplicity of functions: preventing the illicit felling of trees and encroachment on forest land, preventing forest fires and, most importantly, looking after superior officers and their families. It was a topsy-turvy set-up.

In the stillness of the forest, I marvelled at the vision of the British Raj in enacting the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA) in 1900 to protect a narrow strip of land with its fragile ecosystem in the lower Shivalik Hills. The British surveyors had detailed villages where land could not be constructed upon. With the growth of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh, political leaders, civil and police officers, members of the judiciary, the media—indeed, anybody—who could lay their hands on land in the PLPA areas did so in the hope of garnering swift profits. A piquant situation arose when I discovered that the chief executive owned several thousand acres of land, while the state's first law officer had parked himself on a substantial chunk. It was, therefore, a matter of time before the Punjab government sought the Central act to be lifted and new legislation enacted to prevent the forest department from denying poor settlers in the area the right to development.

The Union Government considered the proposal of the ageing chief minister to scrap the act as 'it had outlived its utility and was serving as a tool of the forest department to inflict hardship and sufferings on the affected people'. The Punjab government argued that though the objective of the ancient legislation was to conserve sub-soil water and preserve land erosion, no status report had ever been prepared, which meant that the act had been enacted without any survey having been conducted.

In fact, the chief minister and his coterie wanted to quickly free the land around Chandigarh from custodian legislation and put it to commercial use, unmindful that healthy cities are required to have a n average tree canopy of forty per cent to ensure their ecological, economic and social sustainability. The political dispensation was determined to cut down the forest in the Shivalik area. For their edification, on file I drew attention to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and cited his words: 'Humankind has suddenly entered into a brand new relationship with the planet Earth. The world's forests are being destroyed; an enormous hole is opening in the ozone layer. Living species are dying at an unprecedented rate. . . The climate crisis is not a political issue; it is a moral and

spiritual challenge to all of humanity. It is also our greatest opportunity to lift global consciousness to a higher level.'

However, I had to contend with a different view: developed countries such as the United States of America cut down their forests centuries ago and benefited greatly from this deforestation and it was hypocritical to deny developing countries the same opportunity—the poor should not have to bear the cost of preservation when the rich created the problem.

My opinion was sought on repealing the PLPA and I wrote in unequivocal terms that the rhythm and cycle of nature are not under the control of man—if the act was repealed, far from developing the peripheral areas of Chandigarh into modern housing estates, the deforestation caused would lead to uncontrollable floods as waters from the higher reaches of the Himalayas would run over the subject area, the town of Chandigarh and the whole of Punjab, resulting in the merciless destruction of man and beast, city and town.

The chief minister and his advocate general did not put an incontrovertible legal wrong to rest. Instead, they trained their guns at the secretary. The advocate general telephoned me, recommending that I reverse my opinion. 'You are being dramatic. I understand you are a poet, a writer, and occasionally an administrator. Be practical. And may I suggest to you, as a supporter of our government, to get hold of some land in this area for your retirement home? It is close enough to the golf course and the clubhouse has a good watering hole.'

My first assignment as forest secretary ended curiously. One night, I received information that valuable khair trees were being rapidly felled in the interior forests of Hoshiarpur. The officers involved in the illicit felling were charge-sheeted for a major penalty. The morning's newspapers announced that the secretary had charge-sheeted 27 Class I forest officers and their subordinates.

The trees were saved. But, in the evening, I received a telephone call from the chief secretary. 'Robin, would you mind if we shift you out of the forest department? Please see me in the morning and we can decide your next posting.'

After handing over charge the next morning, I walked into the chief secretary's room. Oblivious of my presence, he was passing instructions over the telephone to my successor: 'Do not easily finalize those charge sheets. Do you understand what I mean?'

During my second tenure in the forest department, thirteen years later, I was able to take the initiative of promoting ecotourism in the state. This was a new concept: getting tourists to visit pristine and protected areas in order to sensitize them to the need for ecological conservation. In the process, we allowed them to experience the tranquillity of wilderness and directly understand the need for economic development and political empowerment of local communities. In Punjab, we started this endeavour late—for over a quarter of a century, ecotourism had been considered of paramount importance by environmentalists, so as to enable future generations to experience destinations relatively untouched by human intervention.

Ecotourism parks were identified at the Keshopur Wetlands, Ropar, Kaushayalya Forest, Nangal, Mirzapur, Harike, Abohar and Chhatbir Zoo. Happily, this project was widely supported at different levels of society, and I discovered an astonishing interest in people to understand the rich biodiversity of the river systems and the myriad species of migratory birds and wildlife.

Searching for a definition, I concluded that ecotourism is the concept of taking man back to nature and to mirror to him, as a psychoanalyst might do, the beauty of the jungle in its variegated hues. It is an attempt to bring about the understanding that the universe, its mountains, forests, river systems and

the wondrous animal kingdom are based on a natural rhythm and balance, the constant or substantial disturbance of which can result in terrible consequences for mankind. Ecotourism tends to educate people about the pattern of the ecosystem; human beings can begin to understand the role of the tiger as the king of the jungle, that uprooting trees loosens the mountainside, resulting in landslides that choke marine life in the blue waters of rivers.

To better acquaint myself with the subject, I joined a team of officers to visit the Kabini Jungle Resort in Karnataka, which had gained renown for its success. In this ecotourism village, there were simple cottages, their roofs held together with wooden rafters and covered with thatch. Television sets, radios or telephones, motor cars and motorcycles were left outside the vast jungle, and we too were divested of our telephones and electronic devices.

Our initial reaction at this village was one of having been trapped in nothingness, without any escape route. We could not communicate with friend or foe and the world we knew had been left far behind. But, slowly, the essence of peace overcame us. Thus is the eco-tourist, parted from all forms of urban accoutrement, drawn into the life of the forest and inhales the fragrance of nature's magnificence. We were sorry to leave the sanctuary where we saw a large dog looking after orphaned kittens with the eagle-eyed superintendence of a diligent mother.

As financial commissioner, forests, and by then one of the senior-most officers in the state, I was appointed ex-officio chairman of the Punjab State Forest Development Corporation. This unit, which had dealt in the timber business for long, had thrived on corrupt practices sheltered by successive political dispensations. When I was advised by the minister in charge of forests to renew an annual contract to known timber merchants as a practical measure, I refused, insisting on open tenders and a transparent public auction. The minister then tried to get the contract renewed through subordinate officers in the corporation, all of whom were immediately placed under suspension by my office.

The forest department, at that time, was headed by a gentleman from the forested area of Hoshiarpur. He generally wore a large tilak on his forehead and a deadpan expression. He was a lawyer by profession and tried often to supervene my orders. However, long years of tackling provincial politicians had made my responses iron-cast. When the minister called me for 'a friendly discussion' to sort out the matter, I pushed aside a plate heaped with pakoras and plump gulab jamuns and told him that if we did not hold an open auction an FIR would be lodged against him.

'Then let me be arrested!' shrieked the minister, who had taken a portion of the bribe money in advance to arrange for his son's wedding.

'This will happen in the natural course if you continue with this criminal exercise,' was my calm reply.

'I do not bother about police and arrest,' yelled the minister.

'Naturally. You must have been to jail many times to reach this office. It will be another feather in your cap.'

The minister spoke to the chief minister over the telephone in hushed tones, as lovers whose romance has narrowly escaped discovery might. At the end of the call, he got up. 'This cannot go on. Either you will stay in office or I shall continue here.' He looked into a mirror and carefully applied another daub of tilak on his furrowed forehead. Then, tripping over his dhoti hung around the legs, he hastened his step towards the chief minister's office. Within half an hour, he returned, waving my transfer orders in both hands, while I sat sipping coffee in his chamber.

On seeing his triumphant grin, I remarked: 'What a relief!'

'For whom?' asked minister.

'Both of us,' was my reply.

‘Yes, yes. Change is the rule of life.’

With no desire to work in the forest department any longer, I broke into peals of ringing laughter, for the end was in sight.

I was satisfied: my tenure had ended with the principles of ecotourism having been understood, established and disseminated in Punjab. Also, the underhanded practice of continuing contracts through special arrangements was stopped and replaced by the system of public auction.

16

Faridkot
The Last of Vintage Wine

In 1996, I was posted to Faridkot as commissioner of a newly created division comprising the districts of Mansa, Bathinda and Faridkot. It was a backward but politically alert region. The chief minister at the time was a wealthy landowner with a clipped accent. He had studied at Chief's College, Lahore, and exuded the aura of aristocracy. Harcharan Singh Brar owned several hundred acres of land and bred horses in one of the renowned stud farms near Mukatsar. He was appointed chief minister after Beant Singh was assassinated by suicide bombers outside the state secretariat. Owing to his mild demeanour and non-controversial image, Brar Sahib became the acceptable replacement in a badly shaken Congress government still engaged in battling militancy.

A refined gentleman, Brar Sahib rarely reacted strongly to situations; neither did he force matters or take a stand on contentious issues. It appeared that he had only a passing interest in administrative matters and governance. Delegations and litigants in an Emergency-ridden state were turned away from the chief minister's gate after 5 p.m., in marked contrast to his predecessor, who had heard grievances of the public from dawn to late in the night. The difference in persona and style of functioning was reflective of the vastly different backgrounds that both the leaders belonged to: Beant Singh had risen from the post of sarpanch, while Brar Sahib had lived all his life in a state of princely inaccessibility. We are, after all, prisoners of our past.

One afternoon, Mr Brar called me to tea and advised me to make a detailed inspection of a strip of forest land to verify whether one of his Cabinet colleagues had ever owned it. I protested: 'Sir, this matter has been looked into times without number.' The chief minister patted me on the sleeve 'Robin, I know about this case. Won't you help me out by making a short chukker? I can then tell that pestiferous gentleman that the forest secretary has made a site inspection and found his averments untenable.'

The chief minister's ineffective style of functioning soon provoked dissent in the turbulence-ridden Congress. Mr Brar was regularly summoned to Delhi by the party high command in an attempt to restore cohesion in the newly elected government by consolidating the hard-won peace in Punjab.

My sudden transfer to Faridkot was a surprise. I was charmed by the medieval princely town dotted with heritage structures that exuded regal charm. The Raj Mahal, the Qila Mubarak, the Darbarganj, the secretariat building, the clock tower, the royal samadhis—they all spoke of an era of

kings and princesses.

Though once rated amongst the well-governed states, Faridkot was now a backward region with brackish water that was dangerously close to the surface. From the baradari in the grounds, the palace appeared to be sinking. The Faridkot kings were known to keep a magnificent table and the incumbent raja would spend hours in the morning discussing with Benjamin, one of the better chefs in the royal kitchen, the presentation of cuisine at luncheon. Invitations were sent out well in advance as the bagpipers who would serenade the guests, in the lawns, had to be recalled from their villages; the numbers that they would play required royal approval. The king was, however, selectively careful with money. He would ride an old BSA motorcycle flying the state pennant on its handlebars, with his aide-de-camp riding pillion, despite the many Rolls-Royces gathering dust in the royal garages.

The ruler's only son had died before he was married and the sorrowing king had made a trust of his properties, the corpus of which was said to be a thousand crores. The chairperson was his daughter, Deepinder Kaur, the maharani of Burdwan. In this manner, my posting to the fairytale kingdom at one edge of Punjab, completed an old relationship with the royal family—Henry, the prince of Burdwan, friend of my youth, was the son-in-law of Faridkot, a matter that he had never discussed in the follies of Calcutta's midnight jaunts.

While I was at Faridkot, at 8.45 a.m. one morning, an elderly Sikh gentleman with a courtly bearing called on me and introduced himself as Lieutenant Sardar Lal Singh, aide-de-camp to the former ruler of Faridkot state. He had come to convey an invitation to lunch from Her Highness. After my personal assistant confirmed our acceptance, the ADC enquired about an acceptable menu. Mother indicated a cold consommé, cheese soufflé, fish mayonnaise and a trifle.

Darbarganj, a royal property, had been taken over by the state government and converted into a circuit house. The sprawling mansion, the upper façade of which was shaped like a crown, was constructed in the late-nineteenth century. According to legend, it was built in a matter of days to accommodate a baraat from Bharatpur, as a marriage had been contracted between the two kingdoms. The mansion comprised large semicircular drawing rooms, a rectangular dining room and twenty-six bedrooms arranged around courtyards. The entire complex was surrounded by deep verandas with arcades overlooking sprawling gardens on either side. The driveway was lined with ancient trees on whose trunks large bats had attached themselves, a sepulchral sight that converted me to vegetarian fare for years.

There was no commissioner's kothi in Faridkot. When I mentioned this to Mr Brar, he declared that Darbarganj would be my residence. 'This should do for a commissioner's house,' he said.

Work started on the conversion of the mansion from a circuit house into an official residence. A platform and podium came up in the central drawing room which was to serve as a courtroom and the dining room became an executive office. There was no shortage of retiring rooms. Meanwhile, I continued living in a small inspection bungalow nearby. Early in the morning, I would run several rounds in the park in front of Darbarganj, dreading the sedentary schedule of the day that lay ahead. In the process, I got to know several youths who regularly exercised on the lawns while elderly gentlemen walked in the driveway.

On the day that the boundary walls of the palace were being sealed to prevent public entry to the newly designated commissioner's residence, the absurdity of a single person and his elderly mother causing such deprivation and anguish to the public struck me, for Faridkot did not have playgrounds or public parks. I telephoned the chief minister's office, requesting permission to continue living in the inspection bungalow. I suggested that Darbarganj remain a circuit house.

The official work of a divisional commissioner is indeterminate. By the time I was posted to

Faridkot, such assignments were not coveted by civil servants, owing to their having to vacate the official bungalows allotted to them in the state capital and the constant political interference in routine matters. Besides, no one wanted to preside over an insidious army of patwaris, kanungos, naib-tehsildars and tehsildars—revenue functionaries who had direct access to the state chief minister. Though they formed the non-gazetted ranks of officialdom, they were wealthy—despite the fact that they were poorly paid. They adjudicated on the demarcation of land and its gradation, they were empowered to mutate ownership and register sale deeds, and they were authorized to execute a dead man's will. Revenue officers openly accepted bribes and the department had over time systemized corruption.

The patwaris had unparalleled expertise in matters relating to land and an impressive understanding of the Persian language in the Arabic script. It was unwise to cross their path, for a revenue official could easily twist facts and do a petitioner out of his patrimony. The more backward the region, the more easily was the bribe money laid out openly on the official's table. While the commissioner was empowered to appoint, regulate and dismiss naib-tehsildars in his division, it was the financial commissioner and secretary, revenue, who wielded the whip over the tehsildars vested with magisterial power under minor sections of law.

In Faridkot town, there was a humungous tehsildar who had been ruling the roost for long. His accelerating wealth made him oblivious to his duties and disrespectful to superior authorities. When I caught him red-handed accepting Rs 5 lakhs as a bribe, after a tip-off from the vigilance department, and placed him under suspension pending enquiry, he threw the order into a dustbin and told the process server: 'I will be back in office after lunch tomorrow.' The gentleman then motored down to Chandigarh, paid a hefty bribe to the revenue minister and got my order supervened. He also got instituted a departmental enquiry against me for passing orders without jurisdiction.

The commissioner was, in a manner of speaking, akin to a constitutional monarch. Apart from hearing revenue appeals in court against the orders of deputy commissioners, additional deputy commissioners and subdivisional magistrates, etc., he could also look into the working of any department or office in the division—of these, he was the first officer, representing the government, but without the authority to command or take decisions.

Thus powerless, the commissioners worked at will and rarely for more than two hours in the day. They sat in court, drowsily listening to the repetitive arguments preferred by disinterested mofussil lawyers and signing judgments drafted by crafty readers of the court. Looking over the railings of the podium, on a sultry afternoon, I found a lawyer arching his brow at the reader of my court.

The post of the divisional commissioner, however, was replete with pomp and show. A flag fluttered over the official car, which was preceded by a pilot jeep decorated with red beacon lights—a posse of armed policemen travelled in it, waving red flags that announced that the commissioner was on tour. Likewise, another police jeep drove at a set distance behind the commissioner's car. Wailing sirens pulverized the traffic, driving it to one side of the road. For many years, the commissioner's cavalcade, as he visited forest bungalows or went on fishing expeditions, had been viewed by an awestruck peasantry from afar.

Any attempt by the divisional commissioner to assess progress made in developmental initiatives was met with resistance by deputy commissioners and resulted in criticism and complaints to the chief minister. The post of the divisional commissioner, like the post of the governor of a state, had largely become redundant.

There were certain officers, however, who looked forward to an assignment as commissioner of a division since the palatial official houses, a legacy of the British Raj, were situated in large

compounds and bowing and scraping officialdom addressed the commissioner as 'Your Honour', treating his personal requirements as their bounden duty. I was told by a personal assistant in the office that most of my predecessors had passed instructions to the deputy commissioners that they were not to be bothered with routine administrative problems of the division. The commissioner was feted by the army and a lot of mail on his desk contained invitations to dinner parties, weddings and the inauguration of new government ventures that never got off the ground.

In 1995, I had met Princess Devinder Kaur of Faridkot when she called on me at my residence in Chandigarh. She had a small problem that I was able to help out with. Since we were in the depth of winter and it was well past 7 p.m., I asked her to stay back for a drink. The princess became a close friend and would often come across to spend the evening at my residence. She had an incisive intellect, a commendable knowledge of history, a love for the Scottish bagpipes, an infectious sense of humour born out of her uncanny understanding of the human condition and a weakness for drink. A strong, silent friendship, bordering on love, built up between us. It grew with the years and we would see each other quite regularly.

Wendy's father was the younger brother of the king of Faridkot and always walked a few steps behind His Highness. He lived alone in the Council House, a large structure with gilded ceilings. A man of few words, he spent time walking through his farmland and orchards with rare grapefruit trees. He dressed formally at all times and was a contemporary of the chief minister at college. He kept his own counsel and, estranged from his wife and son, spent time looking after his large establishment and playing cards with the servants.

On learning of my close association with his daughter, Kunwar Sahib invited me to his house for elevenses. He was sitting alone in the hall when I entered. Getting up to welcome me, he signalled to a couch next to him. A turbaned retainer came forward with a glass of fresh orange juice, the cover of which was held in place by a border of pearls. A moment later, a bottle of fine scotch whisky was placed on a side table.

'I hear Wendy and you get on well,' said the prince. 'She is a bit headstrong and has made a mess of her life by marrying an American national of Greek extraction while she was in New York. The man was a plebeian and the relationship disintegrated. I am getting on, you see, and I worry about her.'

'Maharaj, royalty ought not to marry outside royalty,' was my considered reply.

'Though times have changed, I have always held to this view,' said Kunwar Sahib.

He got up as the interview ended. Then, breaking with protocol, the prince saw me to the car. The bottle of whisky had been placed on the seat.

'Enjoy yourself, young man. And look after yourself. I find you are the last of vintage wine,' said the prince, as he waved me goodbye.

Wendy's mother had shifted out of the Council House many years ago. She lived in the gurudwara in Faridkot Fort. Born in 1916, in Pipri State in the United Provinces, Jagdish Kaur was a direct descendant of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A beautiful and highly educated lady who was fully conscious of the change that had upturned the tranquillity of the past into a democratic urge struggling to find its feet, she stepped out of the palace zenana to enter the political arena. She was elected as member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1957. A powerful orator, she popularized the salutation: 'Wahe Guruji ka hhalsa, wahe Guruji ki fateh'—the pure belong to the Lord, may victory be His alone.

Commenting upon independent India, she told me that life's paces had collected more anger in her

than the waters in a desert well. One evening, she quoted Ishfaquallah Khan:

Wo gulshan kabhi aabad tha guzre zamaane mein
Main shakh-e-khushk hoon, haan, haan, usi ujde gulistan ki

Yes, indeed, I am a dead branch from that tree
In the devastated garden of paradise.

Most poignantly of all, Jagdish Kaur would recall the inscription incised on the tomb of Padishah Begum, Noorjehan, one-time empress of Hindustan, at Lahore:

Bar mazhare ma gari ban
Ne chirage ne gule
Ne pare parwane suzad
Ne sadai bulbule

Upon my grave, when I shall die
No lamp shall burn, nor jasmine lie
No candle with unsteady flame will serve as reminder of
my fame
No bulbul chanting overhead shall tell the world that I
am dead

Jagdish Kaur had many facets to her personality. Generous to a fault, she kept nothing for herself and progressively gave away all her worldly possessions. When taken seriously ill and admitted to a nursing home, she would insist that the attendants share her dinner. Her responses to life's situations, nonetheless, were aristocratic in the extreme. On witnessing two silver cocktail jugs being presented to me by her daughter, she bemoaned the fact that they had not been crested with the Faridkot coat of arms. She revelled in the happiness of others. At a party a little before her final illness, she eyed me tapping my feet and insisted that I dance: 'You dance well, Robin. I wish I could still take the floor.'

Towards the end, we tried to resuscitate the dying kunwarani through the latest techniques of modern medicine. Jagdish Kaur thought otherwise and told me firmly that all she would like was banaksha and enquired from me whether I knew what it was. When I looked uncertain, she changed from Urdu to English. 'My dear, it is nothing but dried violet flowers.' The kunwarani was concerned about her daughter. Sadly, she told me: 'Wendy knows very little about banaksha and Indian medicine. You see, she was brought up by the English ladies who lived in the Raj Mahal.'

It was eventide when the kunwarani was fading away, and her exquisite countenance was chiselled against the setting sun. I asked her whether she had seen the books I had left by her bedside —she had wanted to have another look at Jane Austen, Ezra Pound and the Brownings' love letters. She responded in a strong voice: 'I want to listen to shabads rendered by Sardar Darshan Singh.' He was the huzuri raagi at the Faridkot gurudwara. 'Do remind Wendy to read from the *Guru Granth Sahib* each morning.'

When the kunwarani was being cremated, the proud sardars of Faridkot thronged the royal samadhis.

Engulfed in a kaleidoscope of memories and the present refusing to conjoin with the past, I leaned

against a pillar for support. Searching for a handkerchief, I found instead an old wristwatch that the kunwarani had given me for repair. I looked at its dial and the rising flames of the pyre. The hands of the clock had stopped.

Devinder Kaur was the one friend in whom I could confide during my moments of sinking despair in a career that had increasingly distanced itself from the government. The princess, magnolia-complexioned and with dark, expressive eyes, had travelled to Europe with the late rajmata and was well-informed about America, where she had had an assignment with the United Nations. She had married an American citizen, left behind the marriage and, after the death of her grandmother, retired to a quiet life of studying history, classical literature, listening to Scottish bagpipes and sitting alone in the drawing room, with old servants for company. When the palace retainers retired or passed on, Wendy replaced the chowkidars with a street dog whom she named Sher Singh. Averse to electronic devices, the princess would press a tonga horn when she was ready for another drink.

What we shared was our seclusion, and on an extended evening, I brought to her notice a poem that I had penned.

> In all other matters there is disparity
> of interest between us, except in this one—
> in our loneliness and utter alienation,
> in the octaves of madness that visit us,
> we are not at variance at all;
> and we hold together, in the desperation
> of having to leave behind
> the shared experienced of each day
> at the doorstep of twilight.

Wendy spoke of the well-ordered calm of a settled society and the justice of yore, when a commoner could purchase a slip for twenty-five paise to obtain an audience with the ruler and receive immediate relief. She was understated in her comments and had compassion for those with limited means. I often found her driving ailing retainers to the hospital or standing in queue for their medicine. Wendy had a remarkable understanding of human nature and accepted change, sorrow and the slings and arrows of tragedy with grace.

With a fabulous inherited collection of jewellery, Wendy was occasionally short of liquidity. I discovered that she had been selling gold ornaments, including anklets. ‘The Columbian emeralds, pigeon-blood rubies, Belgian diamonds, sapphire and Basra pearls have been stashed away in eight lockers. Gold, we always wear on the feet!’

Wendy had a fascination for the thickly forested pine-scented mountains and often recalled her vacations at Faridkot’s summer retreat in Mashobra. She loved birds, animals and flowering trees and never had an unkind word for the people she met.

Oftentimes, the princess would dwell on past situations. She spoke about her great grandmother, Rani Suraj Kaur of Manimajra, who sometimes dressed like Lord Krishna, replete with peacock feathers in her crown, and was carried in a gilded palanquin from the fort to the palace of public audience.

In the autumn of 2009, Devinder Kaur fell seriously ill. She had come to lunch and my efforts to

get her to eat a small portion of fish soufflé were unsuccessful. Instead, she requested a stiff Bloody Mary. As we walked in the garden, I noticed that her eyes had turned dark yellow. With a chilling sense of fear, I looked at Wendy and told her: 'This is your last drink, princess.'

'Perhaps,' was her guarded response.

Thereafter, I drove her to the hospital and the head of the department of hepatology told me to admit her into the emergency ward immediately. 'The rajkumari has no liver left,' was the doctor's diagnosis.

As I helped Wendy's maidservants to pack her bags, the princess gave me a penetrating look. 'I don't think I am going to peg out just yet. What do you think?'

Aghast, I put on a brave front. 'Well, let us get on with the job. You may be a state guest at the PGI for two or three days.'

'Robin, I will get admitted tomorrow. I must put my papers in order,' remarked Wendy. Calling for the maid, she got a cupboard opened and, pulling out a maroon cashmere scarf, presented it to me. 'This should keep you warm in winter. I bought it in London for my uncle. I shall be grateful if you accept it.'

On the eighth day of January in 2009, the body of Devinder Kaur, draped in the golden-green flag of erstwhile Faridkot State, was placed on a gun carriage for her final journey. Grieving at the absolute nature of finality, I recalled the life of the princess, in flashes, for I had shared so many of her hopes, travelling long distances with her over the years. When the flames leapt around the pyre, I noticed the maroon scarf around my neck and held on to it for strength, unwilling to let go of remembrance.

Now, as I sit in the hall of memories, listening to house pigeons and measuring time in an hourglass, my eyes drift to the salvers, ice buckets, tongs and peg-measures that Wendy had left behind in Villa Kalighat.

My tenure in Faridkot ended quite suddenly. It was election time and the chief minister's daughter was engaged in parliamentary battle against Sukhbir Badal. I would tour the vast land areas to ensure that no electoral malpractices took place.

The Darbarganj circuit house was flooded with small-time politicians and Cabinet ministers who were camping in Faridkot. There were bitter exchanges, abusive language and fisticuffs that were witnessed on the wide verandas. Cash and liquor bottles were distributed freely by both parties to woo voters. There were some gruesome scenes and false police cases were lodged and registered by candidates against the opposition's supporters. The ruling Congress had the upper hand, despite which, Badal won the parliamentary seat.

In a democracy that plays the game outside the rulebook, triumph, joy and sorrow assume alarming reactions. The small inspection bungalow, which was the commissioner's residence, was inundated with 'leaders'. Of the two bedrooms that were occupied by me and Mother, one was suddenly allotted to the chief minister's daughter. When I returned from office and walked into the room, the lady queried: 'And what is a charming man like you doing in the back of beyond? Where do you stay?'

'Madam, I am the commissioner, Faridkot Division. I sleep in the bed that you will now occupy.'

Homeless in the division of which I was in charge, I went out and sat in the drawing room. My mother turned to me and said, 'Robin, would you really like to work in this place, where you have no shelter?'

‘Let us see what tomorrow has in store,’ was my careful reply.

As there was no room to which I could repair, I walked under the trees till midnight, with the bats viewing my distress. I knocked on Mother’s door and enquired whether she would mind returning to Chandigarh for a few days and how much time would it take her to get her bags readied.

‘I am ready to leave this minute. I had my bags packed earlier in the evening. Shall we make a move in half an hour?’

I asked for the cars to be brought to the porch and, with a sigh of relief, at 1 a.m., we left Faridkot.

17

Ferozepore
Lahore's Weekend Retreat

The principal merit of the civil service in India, it would appear, is the facility with which an IAS officer is posted to superintend a vast administrative department about which, quite often, he knows nothing at all. And he is expected to quickly learn the ropes and guide experts to go through technical formulae and successfully execute governmental policy.

The administrators of yore had done well. A. L. Fletcher of the ICS, for instance, gave Chandigarh the Sukhna Lake. This outstanding civil servant was said to stand with the engineers late into the night while the spectacular water body, the showpiece of Le Corbusier's city, was being excavated. He then established the Haryana Agricultural University at Hisar and guided the newly formed state of Haryana to excel in agriculture and livestock development.

It was incumbent upon civil servants to master the subject that their department was concerned with in a few weeks and bring the department in line with the mandate of the government. However, in post-independence India, by the time they had familiarized themselves with the working of a department and were effectively able to give guidance to the government, far too often, in a cavalier manner and without any substantive reason or cause, they were transferred out to another department that was engaged in an unrelated area of development.

From the office of the Faridkot commissioner, I landed myself as secretary in charge of the departments of animal husbandry, fisheries and dairy development. At this point, I was working on a paper that focused on the scintillating genius of Nijinsky and Nureyev in *Le Spectre de la Rose* and had been hoping for a posting in the department of education and culture. The prospect of encouraging milk production, through the artificial insemination of buffaloes and cows, was traumatic. My well-wishers in Punjab, however, had a dim view of the education department. 'In kitaabon mein kya hai?' It was their constant refrain that there is no largesse in books and tomes. I received several telephone calls congratulating me on the vast empire that had come my way and overheard my personal assistant telling the private secretary: 'Arre wah! Yeh to khaati peeti department hai'—this is a well-provisioned department.

In Punjab and Haryana, animal husbandry is the second arm of agriculture and I was told that it contributed significantly to the state's gross domestic product. The objectives of the department were to provide effective health cover to livestock, improve its genetic potential through scientific

breeding and provide improved feeding management practices. The fisheries directorate was engaged in promoting pisciculture in available water resources. Fish farming proved particularly remunerative in low-lying areas and village ponds and, with very little effort, a farmer could reap a bountiful harvest, in addition to his agricultural income. The object of the dairy development department was to provide profitable marketing to milk producers and encourage the overall development of dairying in the state.

The animal husbandry wing had a huge infrastructure similar to the department of health and family welfare. It was headed by a director who, in turn, was assisted by four or five joint directors, several deputy directors, assistant directors, agriculture development officers, veterinary inspectors and ministerial staff at the headquarters; each district in the state had a deputy director, animal husbandry, who would report to the department and also to the deputy commissioner. The department had a network of several thousand veterinary dispensaries and hospitals through the state.

The infrastructural hierarchy in the directorate of dairy development and its sister department of fisheries was a skeletal replication of the animal husbandry wing and my office spent at least two-thirds of its time on administering this department. Most of the effort was expended on making posting orders, ad hoc transfers or adjusting 'couple cases'.

Quite often, important decisions concerning technical matters were taken in a thoughtless manner, out of pique or vendetta. Many of the epidemics and disasters that had so far occurred could have been averted had the veterinarians taken guidance from the rulebook instead of glossing over problems while presenting cases for decision to the government.

The chief minister, himself a large landowner, evinced special interest in dairy farming. He would frequently call me to discuss new developmental initiatives. When a serious foot-and-mouth epidemic started spreading rapidly in the Moga-Zira belt, Mr Badal, who was then hospitalized for a serious ailment, invited me for discussion to his room and told me 'Secretary Sahib, tusi khud ja ke sambhalo, ihna de bas da nahin hai'—Secretary Sahib, kindly visit the afflicted areas personally and organize the relief operations, things seem to have gone out of hand.

When I decided to allow free vaccination of the entire cattle population in the area, without having obtained prior government sanction, the chief minister confirmed my decision, despite the displeasure of the minister in charge, who felt that he had been bypassed.

A polite and soft-spoken gentleman, Parkash Singh Badal was a shrewd judge of men and had an indefatigable capacity for work. Many a time he would surprise sleepy field officers when his helicopter landed in remote parts of Punjab as early as five or six in the morning to meet the public or make a field inspection. On two occasions, while posted at Ferozepore, I reached the airstrip to receive Mr Badal on schedule, only to learn that the chief minister had already inspected the site, heard the villagers, received their petitions, given assurances and taken off for his next destination, leaving agape the officers with their freshly starched clothes and fixed smiles. Mr Badal got along well with the rural masses and he knew most of the panchayat leaders, secretaries, party workers and officers by name. It is little wonder that he rose to head the Punjab ministry on five separate occasions.

During my tenure, the government laid great emphasis on increasing milk production through artificial insemination of local cows and buffaloes and the lead was given by the chief minister, who visited Israel with a delegation of experts to familiarize himself with the latest technology in the matter. On his return, he informed the department that Holstein Friesian cows yielded up to eighty litres of milk per day while the best that the local buffalo could do was sixteen litres. After cross-breeding was introduced in model farms, the local breed started yielding as much as forty litres of

milk daily. Soon, farmers who owned milch cattle and easily understood simple mathematics saw a manifold increase in their income. The chief minister then activated a defunct dairy development board which monitored the progress of these programmes to ensure that the 'white revolution' was sustained.

The problem with Mr Badal's style of functioning was that he wanted to directly administer the state and his public meetings—sangat darshans—in different districts, held at regular intervals, caused disruption in governmental functioning and protocol and, in the process, left officers demoralized.

The minister for animal husbandry, Dr Rattan Singh Ajnala, was a medical doctor and a well-meaning gentleman without the knowledge of administrative functioning. His second in command was Nusrat Khan, the state minister for animal husbandry, who had resigned from his job as deputy superintendent of Malerkotla Jail to enter politics. The latter had no role in the functioning of the department and would often recite baneful couplets in Urdu to depict his unenviable plight. Since I had a working knowledge of Hindustani, the minister became a friend and would sometimes draw me to a side to enquire how best he could make arrangements for a secure future since he had left behind a pensionable job. For many months, I had to walk the tight rope between the senior minister and the heads of the three departments—animal husbandry, dairy development and fisheries; the minister was apparently hell-bent on rooting out corruption and cracking the whip over the dungar doctors mired, like most government employees, in unethical practices. But Dr Rattan Singh was unable to penetrate the solidarity of the veterinarians. Despite my excellent equation with the minister, I found it difficult to get his orders executed, for he had utopian ideas and was a general waging a war against the army he commanded. Matters came to a head when, at the height of an epidemic, at a time when thousands of cattle were dying, the minister sent me a list of 186 veterinary doctors who were to be transferred immediately.

In the curious dichotomy of governmental functioning, while power is vested in the political government—that is, the minister—all orders are made under the seal of the secretary in charge who, in law, is accountable for the failures of the department. Strangely, the success stories invariably attach themselves to the ministers.

Two or three days passed, and I did not issue the transfer orders since they would have disrupted the entire functioning of the relief operations. Late one evening, as I was poring over files and papers, the minister's aide stormed into my office and demanded an explanation about why the transfer orders had not been executed. Livid, I got up from my chair and virtually pushed the man out of the door. Chasing him down the corridor, I tore up the list of transfer orders and threw the shreds at his retreating form.

The next morning, I called on the chief minister and requested a transfer to Patiala, as commissioner, since it was close to Chandigarh and would facilitate my ageing mother's treatment. 'Why do you want to leave this vast charge which is normally given to a financial commissioner?' asked the astonished chief minister. 'You are doing a good job and there is an epidemic afoot.' I told the chief minister that it would not be possible for me to work with Dr Rattan Singh, and since a minister could not be transferred, it would be in order for me to leave the department before my relationship with him disintegrated any further.

The chief minister listened to me silently. Then he said, 'Secretary Sahib, may I then suggest that you go to Ferozepore as commissioner? You are a good officer and it is my area. There is a nice official bungalow and I think you will like the place. It is peaceful and the people are straightforward.'

Ferozepore, the oldest British district of the Punjab Province, was established in 1833. Its strategic position in the northwest made it pivotal to several military expeditions. In 1838, Ferozepore was the base camp for the British attack on Kabul during the first Anglo-Afghan war; in 1845, the Khalsa army crossed the Sutlej River unopposed during the first Anglo-Sikh war owing to negligence of the military commander at Ferozepore. The cantonment was part of considered strategy of British army commanders to position their armed forces close to the borders of India and in the midst of a cluster of princely kingdoms ruled over by Indian princes.

The Ferozepore Club, primarily an army institution, had been a showpiece in its time and I was told that only the 'twice-born' could aspire for its membership. Since the commissioners had administrative work on their desk and sufficient 'entertainment' on their table, the civilian head of the division never visited the Ferozepore Club, much to the army general's relief.

I had been dreading the posting to Ferozepore, which was 280 kilometres away from Chandigarh. However, to Mother, who swore by military etiquette and discipline, it was a return to civilization. 'You know, darling,' she said, looking at my morose countenance, 'till the forties, they had an excellent band in the club. Many naughty couples escaped Lahore's penetrating gaze and sought refuge in Ferozepore for the weekend. I was told they had a cabaret girl in residence from Hakman's in Mussourie and some officers told your father that they felt like they were in Paris for the night. Those Anglo-Indian women put up a jolly good show and preferred dancing with British Tommies rather than confirmed Indian captains.'

Ferozepore had rows of stately mansions along the Mall. Most aristocratic families owned vast acreage and led well-regulated lives, visiting lawyers, putting in court appearances, meeting over cocktails and at dinner parties, while the ladies had regular rounds of card sessions.

The descendants of the Sikh gurus append the surname Bedi or Sodhi to their names. While I was able to determine that Bedi is the Punjabi pronunciation for Vedi—one who has read the Vedas—I could not determine the etymological roots of the title Sodhi. Ferozepore was inhabited by more Sodhis than Bedis and had a sizeable number of tight-lipped whisky-drinking sardars who wore bowties, cummerbunds and danced the foxtrot on well-sprung parquet floors. Ferozepore's upper class was a fine example of people who spent life doing nothing apart from remaining on the plateau of reasonable comfort and lack of disturbance. Many members of the 'old families' would not read the daily newspapers since India attained independence. 'I hear of the goings-on of these bloody dhotiwallahs from the household staff and from the snippet or two placed by my daughter-in-law in the study. I shudder to think of the future of India. These chappies should be administered buckshot to their backsides,' exclaimed an agitated Bedi, sitting on a Victorian settee in his panelled drawing room bordered by polished silver photo frames reflecting rare Bokhara carpets.

The commissioner's residence was adequate, though small compared to the residences of the commissioners in Ambala, Jalandhar and Patiala. However, it had in the front a sizeable apron-shaped garden tended to by four gardeners, fourteen staffrooms, a cowshed, a separate building to house the commissioner's camp office and, best of all, a small swimming pool behind the bungalow. Over the period of two or three decades during which the inspection bungalow had been turned into the commissioner's kothi, it had acquired the accoutrements of high office, with swings in the garden, a bugler and guards at the gate, a flag stand, an armed policeman circling the boundary wall throughout the day and—since the problem with Ferozepore was its intemperate heat and constant electricity failures—punkah-pullers to agitate the hot air into a soporific rhythm and a back-up

generator over which two wizened operators kept vigil.

In a sense, my posting to Ferozepore was a homecoming. A score or two of boys from the Bishop Cotton School in Simla belonged to this cantonment town and lived in bungalows off the Mall Road. At the beginning of my tenure, I visited a few colonial homes and revived old associations, mostly to alleviate Mother's lonely existence. Later, I found it more prudent to invite guests to dinner in the evenings.

The day divided itself into long walks at dawn, sometime as early as 3.45 a.m., accompanied by two boys who looked after Bobby and Coffee, the Labradors who would shake their tails in tandem as they preceded the cavalcade. I was escorted by four guards who, depending on my mood, would put in a request or two in favour of friends or relatives. At 9 a.m., the commissioner's convoy started for office, which was a few kilometres away from the kothi. Wailing sirens and hyperactive policemen announced my availability for public audience. The mornings were spent in the executive office, meeting visitors, studying files, disposing of administrative matters and dictating judgments. After lunch and an hour's siesta at home, I would return to the court to hear arguments pertaining to land disputes.

I was amazed by the pendency of matters. In the overall stasis, litigants, petitioners, lawyers and the commissioner's staff were given to postponing the hearing of final arguments in cases that were ripe for decision. It was like a play in which the curtains would never come down. A little shuffling of papers, a lame excuse here and there and the wilful absence of one of the parties or their counsel made it impossible for matters to progress.

When there was a call to the commissioner's office from the chief minister's secretariat, an MP, an MLA or a wealthy landowner, the reader of the court would suddenly appear in the retiring room and, bowing his head, reverentially submit: 'Your Honour, this case needs to be quickly decided!' Inevitably, my response was: 'Leave the file for study.' The court official would then return and, with another bow, attach a sticker to the volume, stating 'Urgent'.

No one spoke to me directly owing to the language barrier and lack of familiarity. I had not grown up from the junior levels in Punjab's administrative milieu; I was an artificial implant that had arrived, out of the blue, from distant Bengal, with a long innings at Delhi, a brief tenure in Central India, followed by a three-year run in Haryana.

Ferozepore Division bordered Pakistan and, during my tenure, there was a serious threat of war with the neighbouring country. There was some shelling on the border and the villagers started loading their worldly possessions on bullock carts and vacating their homes, fearing bombardment and enemy attacks. I started touring the border regularly, passing through the cotton-rich areas of Fazilka and Abohar. When we made a halt at the BSF outpost, there was eyeball contact with the tall Pakistani rangers on the other side. I presented them with baskets of fruit and sweetmeats. At dusk, during the requiem, I stood on a red carpeted platform to accept the traditional salaami shastra—the presentation of arms—from the Indian guards. To my astonishment, I heard a vigorous clicking of boots from the Pakistani rangers and heard a loud stentorian command in Urdu; the enemy too, at sunset, were presenting arms and a full guard of honour to the commissioner. Such was the legacy of this historic office in the Punjab, on either side of Radcliffe's line.

Guru Har Sahai, close to Ferozepore, was the ancestral home of Guru Haresh Sodhi, a descendant of Guru Ram Dass, who had got constructed the Harmandir Sahib, better known as Amritsar's Golden Temple. Guru Sahib, who had inherited the gaddi of his illustrious ancestors, was a slim middle-aged gentleman with princely decadence writ large upon his countenance. He too had schooled at Bishop Cotton and made it a point of telling everyone that the divisional commissioner had been in school

with him, though we had studied in that institution at different points of time and I had not known him earlier.

Guru Sahib lived in an annexe next to the palatial Pothimala Palace, a pink and white structure that was in a state of total disrepair and had since long been declared uninhabitable. He was seen strolling in the corridors of the commissioner's court almost every day: he firmly believed that a few thousand acres of ancestral land were to be urgently mutated in his name and had been making quixotic efforts to regain a patrimony that had been wrongfully denied to him owing to the corrupt ways and recalcitrant attitude of revenue officials. No one could convince Guru Sahib, who was the spiritual head of a large sect of committed followers and custodian of the Pothimala of Guru Ram Dass, that the times had changed and old notifications and laws had lapsed.

On my first visit to Guru Sahib's residence, I was taken aback at the feudal ambience in the lobby, where we were received by a liveried guard, a sword hanging from his belt. Within seconds, Guru Sahib escorted me and Mother into the drawing room. Before I could sit down, he said, 'Commissioner Sahib, what will you have to drink and what will Her Ladyship prefer? I have a reasonably well-stocked bar. It is difficult to come by good stuff in these boondocks.' I noticed that he held a tumbler of whisky in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

We were introduced to Guru Sahib's son and successor to the gaddi and allowed to see the holy relics. The guruyani made us comfortable while the three daughters of the house served up a splendid seven-course meal that ended with snowball pudding. Mother was delighted—she had found people after her own heart.

I later came to learn that, over long decades, kings, princes and jagirdars had donated vast tracts of land to the family of Guru Ram Dass, presumably for the upkeep of the ancient Pothimala building. As happens with families who have exhausted the urge to live through disciplined labour, this family too had sold off most of its estate and lived the good life, spending a better part of the year in fashionable hill stations. And now, apart from memory, there was nothing to fall back on.

Unfortunately, I could not help out Haresh Sodhi, though I scrutinized his case in depth. His claim had extinguished itself in the changed circumstance.

Near the entrance of the commissioner's residence, there was the shrine of Baba Hazrat Sher Shah Wali. This was the last resting place of a revered Sufi sant said to possess extraordinary spiritual powers. I was told that a police superintendent of the district, whose bungalow shared a common boundary wall with that of the shrine, had tried to break down a portion of the dargah with the aim of straightening out the wall; there were, at night, howling sounds, awful storms and whirlwinds that upturned the furniture and every object in the police officer's house and the entire family was swept out of the door. A Hindu pandit suggested to the police officer that he restore the broken wall of the shrine, after which there was calm. At dawn each day, I found old fakirs lighting earthen diyas in the hollow of an ancient tree outside Baba Hazrat Sher Shah Wali.

A historic attraction in Ferozepore town is the memorial to Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Raj Guru, who were cremated at Hussainiwala in 1931. A large number of visitors were drawn to the retreat ceremony at the border check post at sunset. The Pakistani rangers on the one side and the tall soldiers of the Indian BSF on the other displayed their marching skills in a manner similar to the ceremony at the Wagah border near Amritsar. Despite the warlike stance and the electric atmosphere that prevailed, during festivals and special occasions, gifts were presented by soldiers from both sides of the border to the 'enemy'.

The drive to Hussainiwala from Ferozepore was through a narrow, forlorn road bordered by kikar trees. Mother, then nearing her ninetieth year, took it into her head to go for long, lonely drives to the border at sundown. Noticing me pacing up and down the driveway, agitation writ large upon my countenance, when she returned half an hour late one evening, she wistfully observed: 'I wish I could drive on to Lahore. That is my hometown. My family lived there for as far back as I can remember.'

'Mother, you should be more careful. It is a dangerous area and the border is heavily policed,' I said.

'I do not know what you are talking about. These tall, wonderful Punjabis are my people. Did I not tell you that the only person that your grandfather trusted me with when I was a child in Gujranwala was an old khidmatgar from the deputy commissioner's office? His name was Mir Baksh. That Pathan would have laid down his life for me, unlike the wretched staff who run your household.'

Ferozepore boasted of the Battle of Saragarhi, commemorated in the gurudwara close to the commissioner's residence. I was deeply moved on learning about the battle. Saragarhi was a small picquet near Lockhart Fort in the North West Frontier Province. Several such small fortresses had been built by the legendary Maharaja Ranjit Singh to safeguard the North West Frontier Province from the tribes of Pathans and Afridis, who were said to be excellent warriors but terribly cruel. On 12 September 1897, twenty-one Sikh soldiers of the then 36th Sikh Regiment were besieged by 10,000 Pathans and tribesmen. The Sikh jawans were offered safe passage on the condition that they surrender without resistance. But these soldiers, true to their religion and their commitment to duty, spurned the offer—they had been posted to Saragarhi to safeguard its battlements for the motherland. The military action lasted all day, and the soldiers, under the leadership of Havilder Isher Singh, ferociously defended their post. Even though many Pathans fell to their bravery, they were steadily overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the enemy. One by one, they gave up their lives for their country. Finally, when twenty of the twenty-one soldiers lay dying, Gurmukh Singh, who was at the heliograph, sought permission from the British commander to shut it down and join the battle. Fixing a bayonet to his rifle and loudly proclaiming 'Wahe Guruji ka khalsa, wahe Guruji ki fateh', he charged out of the picquet and killed more than twenty intruders, before making the supreme sacrifice in what appears to have been a miraculous act of courage.

While most of the Sikhs who engaged the Pathans in battle were from Ferozepore District, a few were from the princely riyasat of Faridkot. Raja Balbir Singh of Faridkot had paeans of praise incised on the walls of the Saragarhi Memorial Gurudwara, built out of personal funds made available by Queen Victoria. Memorials were built to the heroes at Ferozepore and Amritsar and an obelisk was raised in their memory by the British at Saragarhi. The military action was officially brought to the notice of the British monarch and members of both the House of Lords and the House of Commons gave a standing ovation in recognition of the bravery of the martyrs. It is not without reason, then, that this military action is taught to students the world over.

The Battle of Saragarhi has been rated by military experts as an epic example of collective bravery, which has few parallels in the history of the world. What inspired these men to raise themselves to these unbelievable acts of courage, well beyond the call of duty and man's natural instinct for self-preservation, is beyond one's imagination.

Often, the lilting shabads rendered at dawn in the Saragarhi gurudwara would draw me in, reminding me of the ability of the human spirit to free itself from the traditional limitations of thought. One evening, I was informed by Manpreet Badal—a young legislator, deeply committed to the economic uplifting of India's citizens, whom I had befriended in Chandigarh—that the great litterateur

Mr Khushwant Singh would be visiting Ferozepore. I hosted a dinner party in his honour, which he recalled many years later while writing the preface to my book *A Bouquet of Thoughts*. The friendship has continued and on many occasions I have joined the venerable gentleman and his son, Rahul Singh, for a drink, at their residence in Delhi.

Though initially I had been reluctant to take up my assignment as commissioner, Ferozepore, when I was transferred back to Chandigarh after a fairly long tenure, I quietly made enquiries about the cost of a small bungalow on the Mall Road for me to settle down in after retirement.

Such was the sentiment in the small, sleepy border-town that, after my new posting was announced, there were more farewell parties than we could accept. I therefore invited home the gentlefolk of Ferozepore and we had a rumbustious evening at the commissioner's residence, with the barber who shaved me daily bringing in a troupe of singers.

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The Commissioner's Last Stand

On returning to Chandigarh from Ferozepore, the aura attached to the office of the commissioner vanished. The red-brick bungalow I had occupied for years seemed too small and I was perpetually attempting to enlarge rooms and widen windows, for I found Le corbusier's architectural style unsightly. I started imagining a posting to Lutyens' Delhi and living in one of its colonial bungalows. To make matters worse, I was posted as secretary to the Government of Punjab, in charge of resettlement, a department which ought to have been wound up a long time ago. With time hanging heavy on my hands, I got into the habit of taking long afternoon siestas instead of striding into office purposefully and working till late in the evenings, as had been my practice.

On an uneventful day, as I was climbing up to my room, Mother called out: 'Chin up! You will be posted as commissioner again very soon.' Within a few minutes, Shuklaji, who had been managing the house for two decades now, knocked at my door. The governor's notification had just been delivered at the gate. I was posted as commissioner, Patiala Division.

Thus the prediction made in 1975 by the purohit at the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta came to pass, for with this new assignment I became commissioner for the seventh time.

Patiala Division was large and diverse. With its headquarters in the royal city, it spanned the districts of Barnala, Sangrur, Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib, the undulating forested areas of Rup Nagar and up to the Nangal barrage. In another direction lay the thickly populated city of Ludhiana.

By 1809, Ludhiana had been lost by Ranjit Singh to the British and the Lahore sarkar was kept away to the north and west of the Sutlej River. Therefore, though the city had a rich past, it had lost the graceful reflexes of royalty. Accumulating gold and freewheeling enterprise called the shots now. A study of the monthly reports received from the police department revealed that the rate of crime had increased substantially during the harvesting season, with the seasonal influx of migrant labourers, primarily from UP and Bihar, for they were birds of passage, with no accountability. They laboured in industrial units, committed larceny and transmitted money to their homes in distant villages. In Ludhiana, therefore, the crime graph had accelerated manifold.

The princely kingdom of Malerkotla too was under the administrative control of the commissioner, Patiala Division. I had heard of Malerkotla, for it was known the world over for its zardosi work. The intricate embroidery which used golden and silver threads, beads, sequins and stones, created magical patterns on fabric and had found its way into the wardrobes of kings and

emperors. Indeed, the insignia and flags of the Punjab government, my own school badge and the badges used by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were fashioned in this medieval town founded around 1600 AD. Though a Muslim-majority state, Malerkotla had a unique history of secularism: during the riots in 1947, when northern India, and the Punjab particularly, were up in flames, Malerkotla did not witness a single incidence of violence and remained a solitary oasis of communal equilibrium.

At the time of India's independence, the nawab of Malerkotla migrated to Pakistan. He died intestate, leaving behind three begums in palaces at a distance from each other. The third queen, Saajda Begum, was extraordinarily beautiful. She joined the Congress party, was elected legislator of the Punjab Assembly and, for many months in the year, lived in the Rashtrapati Bhawan during the tenure of President Zail Singh. She was known in some quarters as Mallika-i-Hindustan, owing to the enormous power that she wielded.

Saajda Begum visited the commissioner's residence on several occasions. She got on well with Mother and, often, I found them engaged in conversation in Punjabi replete with Farsi and Urdu phrases. This was new for me: at home, English was the lingua franca; also at school and at college, with my friends and associates; Mother's card playing group, the mahjong ladies and my parents' golf and tennis partners, all spoke in English with the odd French phrase.

The begum lived at the Sheesh Mahal palace in Malerkotla when she was in station. She was mostly engaged in fighting a series of convoluted land cases and property disputes. Not on a single occasion, however, did she seek my assistance. 'Aaj to walida mohtarma ki sehat ke barey mein poochhne aayi hoon main,' she would say—she had come to enquire after my mother's health. Sometimes, the begum stayed back and had lunch or dinner, which she partook of separately, with Mother invariably opting for vegetarian fare.

I have rarely enjoyed myself during the innumerable garden parties that I hosted over the years, for I was perpetually engaged in looking after guests. Nonetheless, to infuse joie de vivre in Mother's solitary existence, on my birthday, I organized a large gathering to enable visitors to listen to a group of qawwali singers from Malerkotla. The residence was tastefully illuminated with lights in the trees and hedges. The party ended late, disturbing our tranquil routine. Such an event usually brings depression in its wake. However, the next morning, I found that a singing bird had perched itself on the windowsill. The sunlight played on an exquisite silver-chased cigarette case, engraved with the coat of arms of the last nawab of Malerkotla, on my bedside table.

The town of Fategarh Sahib has great historical significance in Sikh history. The local gurudwara is the site of martyrdom of the two sons of Guru Gobind Singh. Sirhind is famous for the mausoleum of Sheikh Farooqui, a Sufi saint. It is located 200 metres away from the Gurudwara Fatehgarh Sahib and revered as the second Mecca. Close by is the Aam Khaas Bagh, where the Mughal emperors would camp en route to Lahore. The village of Sanghol near Ropar has revealed an ancient site of Harappan culture, where artefacts datable to 2,000 BC were excavated.

The kingdom of Patiala was founded in 1763 by Baba Ala Singh, a wandering soldier of fortune who led an 'army' of unemployed peasants during the twilight of the Mughal Empire. Therefore, Patiala's story is recent, a wink in the eye of India's timelessness. Nonetheless, the magnificence of the Patiala princes admits no doubt and, apart from the buildings, the grace of the social milieu under the Phulkian dynasty speaks of bejewelled elegance.

I had visited Patiala on several occasions earlier and had had a brief stint at the Yadavindra

Public School, where strapping, over-aged classmates from 'junker' families would peer into the partially walled bathing cubicles, with thinly concealed doubt about their intentions, making me walk out of the school one winter evening. From the Patiala railway station, I entrained for Jalandhar and arrived at my father's spacious bungalow in the army cantonment early in the morning to find my complacent parents being served chhota hazari on the veranda.

Father raised a brow, displeasure reflected upon his countenance—this was not the first time that I had run away from boarding school. The previous year, my sister and I had fled Sanawar, a prestigious school in Kasauli, appalled at being handed out recycled uniforms from a fumigator that resembled a metallic bumblebee. I hugged Mother and, taking shelter behind her pallu, declared: 'I am not going back to school.'

My Punjabi grandmother emerged, her dupatta held up by Basant Kaur, her companion who had accompanied her from the Lahore house when she had married. She said, 'I told you before, the joy of living at home cannot be discovered in distant lands. What do they teach in that school which my child cannot study here? He is a born ruler. The bloodline should be good. The rest falls in place. All that is required is nourishment. My child will grow tall like the rai bahadur.'

' I must now leave for the office,' said my father. 'I suppose the boy will learn something eventually. We all grow up picking up bits and pieces.'

I did not return to Patiala till three decades later, as an inspecting officer from the Union department of sports, to visit the Moti Bagh Palace which, like everything relating to Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, was larger than life.

Bhupinder Singh had carved himself a niche in the portrait gallery of Indian history as an outstanding cricketer and equestrian who formalized the practice of sports in the state. But I was also struck by the titles that the ruler had accumulated: 'His Highness Farzand-i-khas-i-Daulat-i-Inglishia, Mansur-i-Zaman, Amir-i-Umra, Maharaj-Adhiraj Rajeshwar, Sri Maharaja-i-Rajagan, Lieutenant General Sir Bhupinder Singh, Mahindar Bahadur, Maharaja of Patiala'—a peculiar cocktail of Hindu, Persian, Mughal and British appellations, in marked contrast to Samrat Ashok, who had ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent for forty years and used titles such as Dharmaraja—upholder of the law, Devanampriya and Priyadarshi. The splendour, wealth, glamour and pomp of Patiala were practically a one-man show orchestrated by Bhupinder Singh, who lived between 1891 and 1938, with three maharanis, several ranis and a harem of 365 ladies who were lodged in the Dikotia Mahal. By contrast, the maharanas of Udaipur, head of the thirty-six clans of Rajputs and the oldest ruling family in the world, with over sixty-seven recorded generations, were somewhat understated, and Udaipur was a kingdom of restrained majesty, renowned more for the valour of its people.

I took charge of my new assignment in July 2000. A car had been sent for me from Patiala with a police escort, and Mother and I were received at the circuit house, at one time the residence of Liaquat Hayat Khan, prime minister of the Patiala kingdom during the reign of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. There was much fanfare, including pipers and a band that played melodies ahead of and on either side of the car. After the traditional presentation of arms by the district police, we were escorted into a large drawing room. Everywhere, the stamp of decaying royalty was in evidence: chipped crested bone china, beautifully carved teak furniture that had withstood five decades of termite-infested democracy and worn-out carpets. Much to my delight, Wendy Faridkot had motored down from Chandigarh to attend the reception ceremony. She subsequently visited Patiala and stayed with us on several occasions.

Throughout my years in the government, Mother and I had made it a point to continue with our personal staff, including a cook who turned out Anglo-Indian fare for supper and one who served Indian food at lunchtime. Mother and I were lonely souls. In 2000, she had been widowed for twenty-seven years, and both my sister and I continued to remain single. The domestics, over long years, had become our family. They would often regale us with tales from the past, comment upon the new generation of officers and keep us abreast of the bazaar gossip. Here too, Mother did not disturb the existing staff as we were birds of passage in the mansion contained in about ten acres of parkland, large enough to accommodate several families. One of my predecessors had got the mouldings on the ceiling painted in gold and maroon, so the house and the overall circumstance inspired princely hallucinations in the most ordinary commoner. An adjoining building housed the room of the personal assistant, the stenographers, the peons and the runners.

I spent most of my time in the camp office at the entrance of the house, receiving official visitors, disposing of files and dictating court judgments. The commissioner's residence had a large semicircular drawing room with gabled windows that faced a lawn edged by bottlebrush and weeping willow trees. The adjoining dining room with its fireplace seemed far too large for mother and son, more so because we rarely entertained guests—in Patiala, as in all provincial towns, everyone knew everyone else and almost without exception indulged in small talk often bordering on malice. Two bedrooms were turned into a bar and study.

Mother decided to occupy a small dressing room, declaring: 'Darling, I am as old as the hills. I feel secure when I can see walls, feel them and seek their support.'

I was cut to the quick. 'Why, Mother? I am just a call away, and all the staff is in position to look after you.'

'Robin, it is not you who are looking after me, it is the other way around. I carry on only to look after you.' Mother sighed. 'Is life worth living at my age, with each day bringing new jolts and aches, with dark thoughts criss-crossing my mind? I do not wish to leave this world, though I must. I worry about you. Whom will you turn to after I am gone? You are all alone. These flags and bugles will vanish into thin air. Be strong, for no one should penetrate your armour. Keep your own counsel and remain healthy—the slightest physical pain or disability detracts from happiness, making life burdensome.'

Seeing me distraught at her words, Mother smiled disarmingly. 'Run along now! Try and have an early night. Wendy has returned from Faridkot. She just telephoned me and has promised to join us for lunch tomorrow. Please tell Michael to present something palatable for a change. Let us meet tomorrow at noon for a drink in the front lawn.'

I walked out into the garden with a stiff drink in one hand. Taking in the moonlit beauty of my surroundings, I sat down on an iron bench under the willow tree. A tall and athletic policeman, light-complexioned and with chiselled features and blue eyes, walked up and saluted me. 'Jenaab, koi sewa daso?' Can I be of any assistance?

'Who are you, young man?' I asked. 'Where do you belong to? Would you mind fetching me another drink from the bar?'

Dalip Singh returned with a Patiala peg. 'My village is close by. We are Jat Sikhs. I am a national-level rower, recruited under the sports quota. My aim is to leave India and live in Canada.'

Some bonhomie built up between us. The guard commander on his round was taken aback to find the commissioner engaged in conversation with a security guard close to midnight.

Dalip was sent to America, where a Californian blonde spent no time in marrying him. He got a Green Card and eventually became an American citizen.

A few months later, the former security guard's widowed mother, back bent over with age and disability, called on me. 'What have you done, Laat Sahib? You have robbed me of my son. I had planted a tree to shelter myself—to whom shall I turn now?' she asked, tears flowing down her cheek.

'Mother, I will get a pension sanctioned for you and ensure that no one puts you to any discomfort,' I replied.

'I want Dalip back, that is all,' said the old lady. 'If he does not return, you will be responsible for my death.

Two years later, Dalip called on me in Chandigarh. He was staying at the Mountview Hotel with his American wife. He had become bloated and misshapen, and his countenance florid.

'Are you happy in America?' I asked.

'With your blessings, I am living in paradise,' was his reply.

'And how is your family in the village?'

'Some of my batch-mates are on security duty, others have left for Canada. Mother died suddenly after I left.'

The small township of Nangal had grown around the Bhakra Dam, which was on the periphery of the Patiala Division. One of the earliest multipurpose river valley development schemes, it was conceived of in 1946, work commenced in 1955 and the 'New temple of resurgent India', as Nehru described it, was completed by the end of 1963. Bhakra Nangal is a concrete gravity dam, one of the highest in the world, across the Sutlej River on the border between Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. I was told that its reservoir, known as the Gobind Sagar, stores up to 9,340 million cubic metres of water, enough to inundate the whole of Chandigarh, parts of Haryana and Delhi. The dam is three times taller than the Qutub Minar and attracts flocks of tourists.

We made a tour of Nangal, where we lodged in a stately guesthouse overlooking the dam. I was accommodated in a room which had been used by Prime Minister Nehru. The view was magnificent, with a necklace of lights reflected in the clear waters at night.

An early riser, I heard the kirtan from a local gurudwara resonating over the wide spaces. As I walked past the guards at 4 a.m., I came across an elderly gentleman also out on his constitutional. 'What a peaceful place!' I said to him. 'How many people live here?'

'The population has grown enormously. Over 5,000 people reside here,' was his reply.

'I would like to live here after I stop working,' I said.

'Sir, this place is no longer worth living in. It has become overpopulated.'

In Patiala, the contagion of ennui had long afflicted the working of the commissioner's office. There were hundreds of court cases pending decision, but the commissioners would rarely sit in court and would soon weary of hearing averments. The insidious practice of calling for written arguments had taken deep root. After submissions had been made, the case file was placed on a shelf-marked 'For orders', where it gathered dust, at the court's discretion. In cases where orders had not been made by the commissioner hearing the case, the entire matter was reopened and taken up afresh with the posting of his successor. I came across matters where orders had not been made for as long as four decades and both applicant and respondent had meanwhile crossed over into Hades.

In Ferozepore, the crisp ambience of military discipline had somehow pervaded through the boulevards of the cantonment and into the commissioner's office, energizing it. In Patiala, the decadent luxury of lingering splendour and unaccountable authority had become a tradition. I was told about a lady commissioner who started sneezing whenever court files were placed on her office table

for study. 'Remove them immediately. Don't you know I suffer from dust allergy?' were her standing orders. Thereafter, she rarely heard cases or read files. She was told about their contents by some wily reader or peshkar.

Another commissioner spent his evenings in the palace of the erstwhile rulers with a coterie of friends. A gentleman of aristocratic mien, with a fragmented interest in the classics, he once confided in me that he was able to read the unabridged version of Gibbons's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, volume by volume, back to back, during his tranquil assignment at Patiala. Yet another predecessor had expended his energies in restoring the grandeur of old buildings, his focus being trained on the commissioner's mansion, unmindful of his official mandate or life's transience.

A little further back in time, a commissioner had spent his time neatly filing bundles of the love letters received by his estranged wife from her paramour. 'All this will help during the annulment proceedings that are in the High Court. One must always maintain papers meticulously, ad-seriatim.' Then there was the case of a commissioner who took to acquiring valuable lands bordering Chandigarh for herself. She faced a plethora of inquiries against her and was unconcerned when she was superseded for promotion for the rest of her career. She told her counsel: 'I have left my destiny in the hands of God.'

Therefore, I inherited a legacy of cases that had to be decided immediately. To the discomfiture of the staff, I started sitting in office for long hours, hearing cases on three days in the week, while the rest of my time was spent in looking into developmental schemes, touring and correcting judgments. Soon, word got around that the commissioner's office was functional, that cases would be heard and decided. The court staff, who had become a permanent obstruction in the dispensation of justice, were aghast when I started entertaining urgent petitions from elderly persons on the veranda and staying proceedings on the bonnet of the car.

One afternoon, a lady from distant Sangrur tapped on the windowpane as I was leaving. 'I have missed the first bus. My daughter-in-law ensures that I am delayed on each date. I have been told you are a kind man. Will you give me justice during my lifetime?'

I returned to the retiring room and looked at the case file. Thereafter, I dictated a petition from Gurdarshan Kaur, addressed to the commissioner, Patiala Division, and fixed a date for hearing. I asked her to affix her thumb impression and to be present in court a week later at 11 a.m. sharp. It was a clear-cut matter.

'Will you be in the office and decide my case?' implored the old lady.

'Yes, Bibiji.'

When the court sat a week later, I looked out for the petitioner. She did not reach at 11 a.m., or at noon, or even an hour later. It was a particularly busy day and my head was resonating with the repetitive falsehoods preferred before me, from which there was no escape. At 1.30 p.m., the old woman was espied at the entrance, unable to enter the packed courtroom. I signalled to a policeman on duty to escort her to the railing of the podium.

Calling for her case, I announced: 'Accepted'.

'Congratulations, Bibiji', said the reader. 'Finally you have won the case'.

'I won my case. . . I won my case. . .' was all the lady could utter. Then, addressing the court, she softly chanted: 'Wahe Guruji ka khalsa, wahe Guruji ki fateh.'

As I was descending the steps of the office, Gurdarshan Kaur told me: 'You are my son. I must offer you something sweet.'

I told an attendant to explain to the lady that her blessings would suffice, but Bibiji was unrelenting. 'I will not let you go home till you tell me your preference'.

'Mataji, when it is wintertime, I will try some sarson ka saag cooked in an earthen pot.'

One winter afternoon, when I was posted back to Chandigarh on promotion, I returned from office to find Gurdarshan Kaur at the gate. 'I have brought the saag. It was cooked overnight in an earthen pot.' Pointing to a dolu, she added: 'This is homemade makkhan, they must be eaten together. It is the butter that brings out the flavour.'

I invited Gurdarshan Kaur in and introduced her to Mother. The old lady then instructed the cook on how to heat the saag and serve it with large dollops of butter. Afterwards, I drove her to the bus terminal.

While the commissioner's office was primarily concerned with hearing appeals and revisions under different acts of the Punjab government, the commissioner was also vested with the authority to inspect district offices and subordinate revenue courts in the division. On an instinct one afternoon, I made a diversion to a tehsil to find the officer in charge counting wads of money that had been 'collected' for registering land deeds and entering mutations in the land records. The naib-tehsildar, with his back to the wall, pleaded for mercy. He was placed under suspension and charge-sheeted for the major penalty of dismissal.

When I returned to the commissioner's residence, a perspiring personal assistant met me at the gate, his forehead furrowed with anxiety. 'Several VIPs have been telephoning repeatedly. They wish to talk to you at once.'

'Kindly maintain silence during the lunch hour,' was my advice, rendered in an unusually authoritative tone.

In the midst of lunch, there was a call from the chief minister's office. I stuck to my guns and told the operator: 'I will return the call shortly.'

'These people lack breeding. It is unheard of to make telephone calls in the afternoon!' rued Mother, sitting at the head of the table.

The naib-tehsildar had important connections. 'He is a new recruit from my village, a good boy, though a bit brash,' said the Cabinet minister espousing his cause.

'Let his explanation come, and I will see what I can do to help him out,' was my polite reply.

'We are the political government,' said the minister. 'Why are you applying a sledgehammer to kill a fly? Don't you understand? We are answerable to the people. . . We must have a sitting together. I have a number of other cases to discuss with you. Let it be over a drink and dinner at my residence.'

The naib-tehsildar was proceeded against. The minister never called me again.

One evening, I received a call from the New Moti Bagh Palace. 'The maharaja has invited you to dinner this evening.'

'You should not barge in without a week's notice,' said Mother. 'It is indecorous to jump at an invitation. Send word that you have a prior engagement. Do make an appointment and call on the maharaja for fifteen minutes on Saturday morning. My brother was the development secretary of Patiala State in the time of this maharaja's grandfather. You could call for a copy of the sanad from the archives and bring it to his notice.'

I was indeed preoccupied that evening, for I had to complete writing judgments relating to the cases that had been decided. I informed the palace that I would like to make a courtesy call on the maharaja, for which a date should be indicated. There was no response, despite one or two reminders. 'Well, he is a prince, after all. He may have been misinformed and taken it to heart,' said Mother. I thought things would sort themselves out, but that was not to be—the royal scion of Patiala,

who became the next chief minister of Punjab, never allowed me an official appointment in the five years that he held power, though I did receive two dozen crested invitation cards that were routinely sent to IAS officers to dine at the palace. I could therefore never visit the New Moti Bagh Palace.

There was a practice in Bengal, whereby the divisional commissioner saluted the national flag at his residence, in the mornings and at sunset. I revived it in Patiala, for the sound of the bugle was a clarion call to duty. This matter was reported to the chief minister, who was often in Patiala. 'Does he think that the British have returned?' the old man was reported to have said angrily. 'Why does he not receive me at the circuit house when I visit?' I checked the protocol manual: the commissioner of the division was required to receive the state governor on his first visit to the station. The chief minister thought otherwise.

I called on him at the circuit house during his next visit. There were dozens of officers, platters of sweets and roasted cashew placed on coffee tables, while the aromatic fragrance of chicken curry and pilaf floated over the turbanned heads vigorously engaged in discussing the betterment of people in backward areas of the district. 'So you have finally found the time to meet me!' observed the chief minister.

Taking the opportunity of talking to him when he was alone for a few minutes, I explained that by not coming to the circuit house during his visits and instead sitting in court to complete pending cases, I was in fact trying to progress the government's business. 'The easiest thing for me to do is to sit in the circuit house for the entire day. I get saluted by all the other officers, partake of the state government's hospitality and, most importantly, have the opportunity of getting close to you. In the office, I have only litigants for company.'

'All that is very well, but can you imagine my loss of face when the divisional commissioner is absent when I visit?' was the chief minister's frosty reply.

I had managed to successfully offend the incumbent political dispensation.

On the upper floor of the commissioner's house, there were wide terraces on which I would sometimes stroll at dawn. Thunderclouds were visible in the foreseeable future and I was faced with two terminalities, Mother's superannuated old age and my imminent transfer from Patiala. 'I think I should build a place for myself where I can introspect undisturbed and look after Mother in her twilight years,' I thought. The farmland I had bought at the edge of Panchkula, in 1989, at a sufficient distance from Chandigarh, became the logical location for my retirement home.

And so work was started on the rather large house now known as Villa Kalighat, owing to the temple that was constructed and consecrated there. The pandits from the Kalighat Mandir at Patiala presided over the installation of the statue of Chaturbhuj Kali amidst Vedic chanting by seven priests.

As I remained immersed in the office, Shuklaji and a personal security officer superintended the construction of the buildings, which I patterned upon photographs and legends of my mother's house in Lahore. Some of the living areas had been completed before my transfer and the house held out a welcome amidst the surrounding jungle of kikar trees.

The splendour of Patiala had extinguished itself much before I left the town, for I could not accept its fatuous caprice. When my transfer orders were received, I relinquished charge with the satisfaction of a job completed within my best lights. Most of the pending cases had been decided and layers of accumulated paint had been scraped off the exquisite carved railings facing the podium of the court.

Studying the government notification, I marvelled at the manner in which members of the civil service were promoted by virtue of the years they had survived in office. There was no visible calliper, no heroic deed or achievement, merely the tracery of shadows on the sundial of time.

Without a backward look, I stepped into the car to continue the journey. No one was informed, no one was in sight. Mother stepped into her car, the personal staff into a station wagon and, exiles in the kingdom, our cavalcade left the streets of Patiala at midday.

19

Villa Kalighat
Requiem to a Dream

On promotion, I was posted as principal secretary, programme implementation—yet another post reserved for officers whom the government did not know what to do with. For long, I had been made acutely aware of the discomfort that my presence in the state secretariat provoked since I was not in line with the official circumstance. My colleagues distinguished me as a WOG—Westernized Oriental Gentleman. I spoke the Punjabi language haltingly and, for me, the Gurumukhi script—indeed any Indian script—was rather alien. Had I been asked to learn Sanskrit or Latin, Greek or Persian, I would have made the requisite effort, for the classicist in my persona ever grasped at ancient, richly textured literature, which further distanced me from my colleagues.

Also, I did not have the support of a wife which, I believe, was a great disadvantage—the spouses of IAS officers tended to be well-connected or belonged to rich and powerful families, continuing the tradition of matrimonial alliances being contracted between ICS officers and princesses in the Punjab. There were also a flock of IAS couples in the state, who buttressed each other through wedlock. In any event, the better half of a civil servant took charge of his career with the confidence of a field marshal. While walking my dogs one evening, I came across a principal secretary's wife; during the course of a cheerful exchange, I mentioned: 'Madam, you have made a brilliant analysis of the situation.' The lady smiled mysteriously: 'After all, I am an IAS officer's wife.'

A bachelor officer was always suspect. 'What does he do by himself in the evenings?' was the concern of everyone. 'How can he be a capable officer if he cannot look after a woman or set up house?' a lady told her husband. 'He appears to live on the fringes! Why does he always take a ringside seat? Is there a problem? Why not get him medical assistance?' pitched in a porcine dowager.

Till 2009, when section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was struck down by the Delhi High Court in the matter titled Naz Foundation versus the Government of Delhi, the word 'gay' was unutterable. On the grounds that I was single, kept my own company and owing to my propensity for drink and the fine arts, though subtle nuances it was insinuated that women were not my cup of tea. Especially since I would entertain guests with thoughtful finesse, pay minute attention to sartorial detail, and since Wendy and I almost never visited hotels or public eating houses and completed our existence in each

other's homes, with Mother joining in, from time to time. 'Well! He could always give marriage another chance. He is an IAS officer, appears to be in good health and has a worthy family background. I knew someone who used to swing both ways, yet he married and spawned offspring to continue the family line,' observed another person.

The erratic ingredients in my persona, which oscillated between self-destruction and sporadic attempts at self-preservation, made for intermittent postings to inconsequential assignments. I lacked the will to socialize with people who, I felt, spoke another language. I recalled Bahadur Zafar Shah's words: 'Yeh majboor haath, yeh jhukhi hui gardan.' These helpless hands, this hapless vision.

Perhaps, the problem lay in my irresolute public interactions and my inability to build bridges, rather than my single status, for in Delhi bachelor officers were made much of and were the toast of town. At one time, there were as many as thirty-five secretaries to the Government of India who were single and at the top of the social register.

The department of programme implementation was required to coordinate and monitor all economic programmes in the state, including the 20 Point Programme, and to liaise with the economic departments of the Central Government as well as state governments. In reality, very few files were placed on my table and there were almost no visitors to my office. The telephones were used by the personal staff, who converted the private secretary's chamber into a tearoom for other ministerial staff during their frequent breaks. Meanwhile, with the help of a moustachioed lady, the computer assistant, deputed to my office, I delved into a miraculous treasure of information—the Internet. The search engine escorted me to everything that I had always wanted to know more about and I marvelled at this wizard who knew everything and travelled with him into different worlds, at will, in an air-conditioned chamber. The academic tenure suited me well, for I required time to complete the book that I had started writing in Patiala. From time to time, I would consult the computer for reassurance. All this changed when I searched for a translation of the last Mughal emperor's renowned ghazal: 'Lagta nahin hai jee mera, ujde dayar mein'. The computer presented me with a senseless translation, in puerile verse, which hopelessly failed to convey the piercing tragedy of Bahadur Shah Zafar. The desktop and the laptop, with their accoutrements, were shown the door, while the services of the assistant were dispensed with.

The household resumed its paces in the government bungalow and Mother went about sorting the silver and furniture that would remain in Chandigarh from the items that would be sent to the house now under construction in Panchkula and the artefacts that were to be returned to our home in Delhi. I busied myself with completing *A Bouquet of Thoughts*, which took me another year to finalize. I published it in haste, having promised Mother that I would dedicate the book to her. The book was well received in certain quarters, though some of my colleagues declared: 'This is no book at all, merely a compilation of musings.'

The book was released by the governor of Punjab in 2002. During the course of my lengthy address at the Punjab Bhawan, Mother's voice was heard in the pin-drop silence: 'Bas bhi kar! You are going on endlessly.' Manpreet Badal, the guest of honour, made several kind remarks and described the book as a personal diary through which I had honestly portrayed my life in the public domain.

I put in a request for an appointment with Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi; it was given the next day for the day after. I was advised that I should not disturb her schedule for beyond ten minutes, which was all I required because I just wanted to present the lady with a copy the book. However, I was with her, in her book-lined study, for close to forty minutes. The gracious lady was interested in matters relating to the Punjab. She had a look at the book and enquired if I could send a copy to the

Rajiv Gandhi Foundation Library. I gladly passed on another copy. I found Sonia Gandhi an unusually elegant and intelligent individual, straightforward in her demeanour. She invited me to see her again within a few days. However, caught in our respective trajectories, another meeting never materialized.

The Congress government had come to power in Punjab and Captain Amarinder Singh took charge of the state. Had India not attained independence in 1947, the captain would have been crowned the maharaja of Patiala. Amarinder Singh spoke with the authoritative confidence of thirteen generations of his family having ruled over vast tracts of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. I was told that he was deeply interested in horticulture and that his special area of interest was military history. I had read one of his books, *Lest We Forget*, and was enthused about a cerebral leader being appointed chief minister. However, I was not permitted to meet him officially for the five years that he remained in power. This was a cruel denial, for the Patiala scion's style of functioning was endearing and effective.

Life continued in the pattern set after my posting to the department of programme implementation. I was transferred to the department of redressal of public grievances and pensions, where I stayed till the fall of the Congress government. This department was charged with the duty of determining effective means of removing public difficulties, for which committees headed by the deputy commissioner had been constituted in every district of Punjab.

It was an interesting though insignificant job, for no one in authority was seriously concerned with redressing public grievances. While hearing complaints, distinct patterns revealed themselves. The category of crimes committed in Malwa and Majha arose from land disputes and derivative criminal action. In the prosperous Doab, non-resident Indians could not make up their mind whether to reap a richer harvest and revel in their newfound wealth at home or to return permanently to foreign climes and accept a thinly veiled second-class citizenship coupled with first-class health cover. A large number of males, while on vacation in India, married unsuspecting maidens and, after promising them the earth, left them stranded at the end of a honeymoon. I also found the different enactments to protect women from extortion of dowry or atrocities were being misinterpreted by semi-literate ladies to emasculate their husbands and to destroy the house they sought to protect. This raised questions in my mind about the validity of marriage as an institution in contemporary society.

The department I presided over was a recommendatory body and I was not empowered to take corrective action or award penalty. Astride a toothless tiger, the best that I could do was to suggest remedial action to the police and to other departments.

Early, one Saturday morning, Mother found me slipping out of the house and enquired: 'Where are you going to at this early hour on a holiday?'

'I thought I should spend the weekend supervising the construction of the house,' I told her.

'I wonder if it will ever be completed within my lifetime,' observed Mother.

On 18 February 2004, we moved to the farmhouse which was built according to Mother's requirements and approximately in line with her aesthetics. With the release of the book behind me and with four years of service left—and with the inability to and a lack of interest in getting into another powerful driving seat that would have taken up most of the day—I trained my energies on setting up my retirement home.

Villa Kalighat was meant to be a retreat from Chandigarh, a town that I disliked for its concrete architecture, lack of ancestry, misplaced complacence and fledgling cerebral engagement. To date, I

have not understood why Patiala was not made the capital of Punjab after 1947, or for that matter, Jalandhar, with its central location in the Doab. I, therefore, planned to live in the farmland at Panchkula, where the two thousand trees that had been planted many years before on a large tract of land now stood tall. During summer, the cicada punctuated the heat, and the low hills of Morni, visible almost at the stretch of a hand, held out the reassurance of cooler climes. On clear nights, the lights of Kasauli were visible from the terrace.

Rooms were added according to Mother's requirements and my own understanding of how to infuse hope and encourage her to live. There was no comprehensive plan or design. Neither was any architect or engineer employed, apart from advice regarding the essential requirements for laying the foundation, locating support pillars, pipes and drains. The house initially comprised two bedrooms, a kitchen and a dining room placed along a large veranda, in the manner of a military barrack. There was no drawing room or living area. One could sit out and look into the kikar forest, while the reflection of glow worms wove patterns in a glass of whisky.

It was a jolt for me when the entire land, with its private forest, was acquired by the Haryana government to build police lines. Since it was the case of the state that an important public institution was being constructed on the land, my best efforts in the High Court and the Apex Court to get the acquisition proceedings quashed failed. A few days later, I sat on a wooden bench and, in a miasma of self-flagellation, watched the forest being hacked. The nesting birds flew away, so also the yellow butterflies. I chafed at the injustice, for there was no public purpose involved. The state had all along misled the court, for the land was to be used to build a gazetted officers' mess, the central feature of which would be a large bar where oversized policemen drank themselves silly and danced to loud music on the graveyard of the trees.

When the revenue officials—armed with the High Court's order and accompanied by a posse of policemen—came to Villa Kalighat to take over the land, their supervisor stopped a few feet short of the Devi Temple, declaring: 'Our requirement for the police lines has been met.' Prostrating himself before the goddess, he left the site with his team.

The temple and the entire area behind it, on which the house was coming up, were left out of the acquisition proceedings.

After this divine intervention, another storey was added to Villa Kalighat, with two large bedrooms overlooking spacious marble terraces. On the ground floor, another bedroom and lobby were constructed while the veranda was converted into a large hall which became the formal drawing room behind a lobby.

There was now the problem of funding the unplanned construction. When I put the matter to Mother, who all along had been careful with money, she suggested that I draw the requisite amount from her bank. 'There is nothing I desire any longer. But be sensible!'

Work started on a pantry, new staff quarters, a laundry room and a guardroom. Separately, a wing was built to house an office-cum-library, a caretaker's room and a garage. I bought a chunk of land from a neighbouring farmer and, after its deep ditches were filled and levelled, Calcutta grass was planted, bordered by rows of ficus trees. A fountain was constructed in the centre of the lawn while a waterfall was installed near the boundary wall to dilute the raucous sound of marching jackboots.

One morning, Mother declared that she would perish in the wilderness. 'Why can I not return to Delhi and play paploo and canasta in the club as before? My mahjong group would be delighted. Enough of this folly!'

I was aghast and hard put to remind her that her movement was now restricted, that Delhi had changed and most of her friends had passed away. 'Mother, this house is being built for you. Please

stay on and help me till it is completed,' I pleaded.

'Very well, I shall take charge. I want no interference whatsoever. And, remember, between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m., there should be pin-drop silence.'

The construction of the house gave Mother fresh impetus to live. 'The ceilings should be high and there must be grills on the skylights,' she commanded. Marble was imported from Makrana, white for the hall, the bedrooms, the patios and terraces, dun for the bathrooms. The construction, despite the afternoon ban, started at an accelerated pace. Green blades of grass in the lawn and tender leaves on the trees were the first sign of hope that the house would eventually become habitable. 'Plan the garden for winter,' said Mother. Her knowledge about plans was formidable, and bulbs of exotic flowers were planted amidst the flying debris.

The building was largely completed by late autumn in 2004. The next year, the gardens at Villa Kalighat displayed thousands of stunningly beautiful blooms. There were chrysanthemums, roses, pansies, petunias, red salvia, larkspur, Californian poppy, gaillardia, geranium, stalk, lupin, nasturtium, English daisies, sweet peas, gladioli, evergreens, red poppies and cannas, and so on. Rows of potted araucaria were placed in front of the house to create the illusion of a hillside.

Having got involved in its construction, Mother started liking Villa Kalighat and refused to live in the large official bungalow at Chandigarh. 'There is too much traffic! The cars weave patterns instead of keeping to their side of the road. Are there no traffic rules any more? I used to drive to Kinnaird College in a small Vauxhall. Do you know that I got a driving licence from Mr Kingsley, the motor vehicle inspector at Lahore, after three attempts? I have never had an accident in sixty years. One must understand the car and hear its protests and have it cleaned with chamois leather and serviced regularly.'

On cold winter mornings, draped in a shahtoosh, Mother sat in the garden silently. She could read without spectacles till the hundredth year of her life and would go through several newspapers, marking out the articles she thought I should read.

Mother told me about Lahore and the Punjab before its partition. 'Do you know the Central Province and the United Province were not always noticed? However, the British were circumspect about this region and addressed it as "the Punjab".'

'I did not witness the dreadful riots during the partition,' she told me on one occasion. 'Your father was then posted at Ambala, and we were living comfortably in a bungalow in the army cantonment. I have fond memories of my Muslim friends in college and of the Muhammadans whom we knew. They were known never to betray a person whose salt they had partaken of. What a tragedy partition was!' After a long pause, she continued: 'I do not know if there is a God or not. However, while at prayer, one tends to think well of humanity. I really wish temples would remain open during the afternoon.'

Mother was a compendium of knowledge, with a sense of history, an understanding of tragedy and the comic aspects of human interaction. She did not visit temples or gurudwaras. However, she felt deeply for people in distress, particularly oppressed women. 'Educate a mother, and you educate several generations,' she exclaimed one day.

On another occasion, she told me: 'I almost married Khalid of the ICS. There was a storm in Lahore since his parents as well as the rai bahadur—my father—decided to end matters at the incipient stage. After he resigned from service, Khalid joined a British company and then died in London. He used to drink and smoke too much.' Mother turned to look at me directly. 'Smoking is worse than drinking. Do you know what I mean?'

At Mother's insistence, I was made to dress in a suit to office each day, through the hot summer

months and the muggy monsoon thereafter. When I pleaded that I had become a laughing stock, Mother ruled: 'There are winter suits and there are summer suits. Do not be a disgrace to the service!'

During her last years, I spent most of my time with Mother, for I had fallen in love with her helplessness. Sometimes, close friends would join us and admire the garden. Whenever her mind started wandering, I would loudly exclaim: 'Your garden looks like the Shalimar!' 'It is better than Shalimar, Nishat and Pinjore put together,' Mother would say, 'you have created it for me.'

The days passed into months. There was no sign of a functional department coming my way. I had put in a request for a change of portfolio to the chief secretary and called on him in his office to remind him that I was wasting my time in the department for redressal of public grievances and pensions, at a level of seniority at which I could make a tangible contribution.

The officer stood up and greeted me warmly. 'You must realize, Robin, that good breeding, logic, experience, merit, honesty, hard work and sincerity are worthy medallions in themselves. Times have changed. Ministers want officers who do their bidding without too much of questioning about rules, officers whom they can "trust", men who are from their area, with whom they share a rapport. I have sounded one or two Cabinet ministers for your posting with them. For some reason, they feel uncomfortable with you. Don't take this to heart. Take a cue from some of your successful colleagues and get close to the ministers in charge of the departments you are interested in. You may also like to go in for a bit of dinner diplomacy. And make sure that you get robust Indian fare placed on the dining table—the vapid Anglo-Indian fare has the flavour of a watercress sandwich.'

I kept my own counsel about this.

One evening, while we were having a drink in the hall, Mother confronted me: 'Why don't you socialize a bit? In the old days, the ICS men spent their evenings purposefully when it was necessary. Remember: nothing ventured, nothing gained.'

'I am happy and at peace,' I told her. 'I really cannot go from door to door, seeking a posting. Let us step out into the garden.'

Mother was lost in thought. 'You are a good boy. You are making this sacrifice for me.'

'Not at all, Mother. I am learning about the past, without which the present lacks meaning. Besides, I have the pleasure of your company all to myself.'

The gardeners switched on the lights in the flowerbeds and in the pool around the fountain and the waterfall. In the deepening dusk, I introduced Mother to a pug dog. 'Look at this little one. He is a present for you.'

Mother took to the pup instantly. 'What is his breed? He seems to have no nose.'

We would sit out in the garden on winter mornings amidst the fountains, waterfalls and singing budgerigars, savouring the flowers and taking in their fragrance, through a mild haze of pink gin. Raja, the little pug dog, would sit at our side.

The day that my mother suffered a cardiac arrest, in the hundredth year of her life, I had promised to return from office at teatime. At 5 p.m., I was called to the Military Hospital, where Mother lay lifeless. There were Belgian diamonds in her ears and on her fingers; her hair was beautifully coiffured. The nurse on duty told me to remove the jewellery. I froze. From some distant past, I could hear Mother's voice: 'Darling, when I go, please see that all this is consigned with me.'

There was a heavy downpour that evening. Amidst thunderous skies, patches of red and orange emerged. I returned home choking. R. I. Singh, who had come from Delhi, stood by my side and exhorted me to tears: 'Robin, you must cry.'

For years, I remained inconsolable and went through *The Autobiography of a Yogi* to engage time's vacuity. The Divine Mother is eternal and appears in different forms, writes Paramhansa—a

postulate that I found unconvincing, for I had lost my only friend and companion.

20

Finale

After 7 July 2006, the day when my mother crossed over, I continued living alone at Villa Kalighat. The domestic staff moved about silently with tonsured heads. As the days passed, the corn ripened in the fields, the gardeners started pruning roses and, to my amazement, after years of encouragement, quite suddenly, one morning, a bird of paradise flower bloomed outside Mother's room, while a blue jay circled over my balcony. The trees along the driveway reached out across the road to each other to form a green corridor. It was a heartening sight to witness this harmony in nature's perfection. Without Mother in the house, the sprawling villa and its gardens quite naturally turned into a memorial.

'What shall I do with this place?' I asked a member of the staff.

After some thought, Shuklaji suggested that it could be turned into a marriage palace. 'The baraat will follow the groom on a mare through the driveway. There is enough space for dancing the bhangra when the party enters. The jaimala should take place at the inner entrance gate and the couple will be escorted into the temple for divine blessings by a pandit. The havan and pheras can be held on the large marble platform where the cars are parked. The bride can rest in one of the ground floor bedrooms, the groom in another. The cocktail party will be held in the hall and then spill over into the lawn. The bar can be next to the waterfall. The dancing can take place in the patio outside your office. The shagun could be presented and recorded in the lobby.'

I was impressed. 'Do you suggest my bedroom be turned into a nuptial chamber?' I said. 'It could be a complimentary gesture!'

'Not at all,' said Shuklaji, a bit deflated by my retort. 'That would be sacrilege. You have lived the life of an ascetic throughout.'

'We are not discussing morals. The success of your project is my only concern.'

Ignoring my sarcasm, Shuklaji continued: 'After the drinking, dancing and dinner in the lawn, the marriage party will exit through the rear gate. I shall see that they pay two-thirds of the amount in advance.'

I turned the proposal over in my mind. 'Shuklaji, Mother will not approve of this. Can you imagine painted women and hopeful grooms strutting into this hall, with old men waving money over bridal heads and dancing to the drumbeats of an illusion, cutting through the silence of our grief?'

Shuklaji left me alone, sitting on the garden bench, patting the little pug for reassurance.

He returned after a while, perhaps sensing my distress. 'You are right, sir. We shall use this place for spreading ishwarta—godliness—in the area. When the weather is good, the audience will sit near the temple, under the trees and in the lawns to hear pravachan—religious sermons. In the summer, during the monsoons and in the cold season, I will turn around the large bar in the hall; the pravachika can shelter behind it, use it as a lectern and carry the audience to spiritual heights.'

This second model underscored to me the interchangeability of reality, of purpose.

'And where shall I live, Shuklaji?' I asked.

'Mr Badal is coming to power soon. You should call on him and move back to the official bungalow in Chandigarh.'

The Akali party scraped past the Congress with a few additional seats in the newly constituted Legislative Assembly. They teamed up with the BJP, and Mr Badal returned as chief minister, Punjab, for the fourth time. R. I. Singh was appointed chief secretary to the government, and Manpreet Badal became the state's finance minister.

The azure skies held out hope. The flowers were in full bloom at Villa Kalighat when the new government took charge. The Cabinet was sworn in on a cricket pitch in the stadium at Mohali. The ceremony was held according to time-honoured procedure, with the chief secretary inviting Mr Badal to take the oath of office, which was administered by the governor of Punjab, a retired army general who looked visibly ill at ease outside the Raj Bhawan. His Excellency, who belonged to Goa, had been witness to many a match between the alliance partners.

After the elections, with my well-wishers in seats of power, quite suddenly I became a much-feted officer. A financial commissioner pumped my hand vigorously: 'Boss, ab mazaa aayega!' Another colleague saluted me with both his hands. Then, cocking his head to one side, he whispered: 'I will visit your farmhouse this evening. For a long while, I have been keeping aside a special gift for you.' I was greeted with smiles and bows as I walked through the corridors of the secretariat—it was almost as if I had fought and won the elections and taken charge of the government myself.

A very large chamber with green wall-to-wall carpeting was allotted to me. A shining white staff car bedecked with a red beacon and a siren stood outside my gate. A black flag, embroidered in golden zari, fluttering on its bonnet. Glancing at the pennant, I enquired from the driver: 'Is the use of this colour permitted.'

Inderjit, an ex-serviceman, said: 'Your Honour, now who can stop us from marching ahead?'

A month passed. There were no posting orders apart from the appointment of a chief secretary.

Then, one morning, I received a call. 'The postings and transfers are being finalized. Please indicate your preference.'

Demoralized by the years of neglect and sorrowing over Mother having gone away, I replied: 'None in particular.'

However, I did recall Mr Badal telling me while in the opposition: 'Tusi te panj chhey commissioneriyan kiti huian ne, tuhada te FCR da hak banda ve'—you have been commissioner five or six times, you should rightfully be the financial commissioner, revenue.

Till the late-nineteenth century, the financial commissioner, revenue, took precedence over the chief secretary, for it was the collection of land revenue that the British Raj was primarily concerned with. Therefore, the incumbent ranked just below the governor and was termed 'chhota laat'. At the turn of the century, he had moved down to the second position. By 2007, however, the office was a historic relic since the collection of land revenue and abiana—the tax on the use of canal water—had been waived. The sovereign power of the state was vested in the home department and, de facto, in the director general of police. The departments of development, industries, agriculture, indeed all the

departments of the government reported to the chief secretary.

The second option I indicated was a posting to the department of local bodies, for there appeared to be scope for imaginative work in the burgeoning townships and municipalities of Punjab.

Around lunchtime that day, I was informed that the government had posted me as financial commissioner, forests and wildlife preservation, an assignment that I had held thirteen years earlier. I was also appointed chairman, Punjab State Forest Development Corporation, which—like most public sector undertakings in the state—was defunct.

I was not particularly surprised at this turn of events, for I had just about a year and a half left to retire. The chief minister and his Cabinet were interested in officers who had a long innings before them rather than candles that had practically burnt out. The concept of recognizing merit, seniority and loyalty had vanished over the years.

Having already explored the scrub jungles of Punjab and being familiar with the Chhatbir Zoo—for which I had taken major initiatives a long time ago—it was a well-beaten track that I was travelling again.

Back in the wilderness, I engaged myself in routine office work. Apart from trying to develop ecotourism in Punjab, I also got work started on a showpiece forest complex to house the different branches of the forest department scattered all through Chandigarh and Mohali.

About the personality of the forest minister, who strutted about like a stuffed partridge with a tilak on his forehead, I have spoken earlier. I could almost hear Mother's reaction to him: 'What an awful specimen of humanity!' He would mouth homilies about honesty and development while immediately swinging into action to create a small mafia of officers through whom he could garner money for transfers, postings and awarding contracts. Our chemistry was antithetical and, within five months, he asked the chief minister to transfer me—much to my relief, for I could now concentrate on the final touches being given to Villa Kalighat.

At the end of my long career, I was posted as financial commissioner, revenue (appeals). For the districts allocated to me, I became the final appellate authority in revenue cases. It was an honourable job—a halfway house between being powerful and being sidelined—and a reasonable preamble to my exit from the IAS.

I continued working from the same office in Chandigarh and, for judicial functioning, would descend to the third floor to preside over court in a chamber fragrant from the frying of jalebis and pakoras, for it adjoined a noisy government canteen in the secretariat.

Unlike in the army, where an officer is given a glamorous farewell followed by a volley of parties, on the day of my retirement, a notification was issued, listing out some misdemeanours said to have been committed by me while in service.

Fortunately, I was in the dwindling minority of civil servants who left behind many powerful assignments for a life of retirement, with a clean chit. The notification disturbed no one. Neither did my departure.

It was almost as if nothing had happened in thirty-six years.

On the last day in the court that I had presided over, I called Shuklaji to tie up my personal papers in a red basta used to carry government files. And, without a backward glance, I descended the lift of the secretariat and left for my house in Panchkula.

I reached Villa Kalighat with a sense of relief, as if a heavy burden had rolled off my shoulders. Mother had died. I was single. I had no one to answer to, no one to please.

With the job behind me and nothing to look forward to—apart from walking the dog, maintaining the house and its gardens and dwelling over the years that had passed—I thought to myself that a retired officer would be hard put to justify his presence at home. This was particularly so in Chandigarh, a small city planned around the secretariat.

One is made acutely aware of retirement in myriad ways. 'Your Honour has just a month left,' the reader of my court had announced one day, 'after which you will become a public man'. My secretary had ominously added: 'It is not possible to enter the secretariat in a private car.' While I was still taking this in, a colleague had informed me: 'Did you know that our batch-mate in Gujarat died just after his farewell party?'

I had never imagined that retirement, like birth or marriage, is a major event, and that it takes precedence over death.

In Le Corbusier's city, Sector 1 claims the secretariat, where the elected chief minister and the chief secretary preside over the government; while Sector 25, the last of the original sectors, houses a well-maintained cremation ground. All other habitat before and after these two terminal points are outside the pale of that which is understood or acceptable. Therefore, a retiree loses his relevance and becomes a liability, one who is best acknowledged in absentia.

In retirement, a civil servant experiences abiding silence. Quite suddenly, the telephone and the doorbell stop ringing. The letterbox reveals a bunch of bills and unpleasant reminders. Official invitations and greetings cease. The skeletal security personnel suddenly forget to wear their boots and start matching their khaki trousers with red and magenta shirts. Their salutes become indecisive.

Mulling over these matters, I contemplated Manu's vanaprastha ashram—when a person is expected to repair to a forest, clad in deerskin, far away from worldly affairs. Finding this as terrifying as despatching widows to Vrindaban, I turned to Shakespeare's understanding of ageing.

> The sixth age shifts
> Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
> His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
> Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
> And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The Shakespearean presentation of age too I found starkly grim, for it was sans the concept of moksha or spiritual release.

In my own view, retirement heralds the golden years of life—when one is free to build upon such structures as one wishes and to traverse pathways that one merely caught glimpses of earlier. If, indeed, one experiences vacuity within, owing to the lack of a defined schedule, this is reflective more of the emptiness of experience during the years of regimented activity.

After more than sixty years of disciplined living, I hasten toward the river before daybreak each morning to hear the birds rejoicing in the stillness of creation. I look across the calm waters to

witness the restless city poised to take off in awkward leaps. And I pray with folded hands to the rising sun for the gift of another day.

Shortly after her first death anniversary, I envisioned a cenotaph for Mother. It is not a small structure and has tall pillars that hold together a wall of Agra stone bearing Mother's bust in bronze. There are birdbaths and water bodies on either side. On marble tablets between red latticework screens are incised words that encapsulate the quest for life.

> And what remains in the end?
> It is the beauty of space—
> freed from strife and sorrow;
> from the anguish and pain
> of evolution;
> from the veil of miscalculation;
> from the checks and balances
> of judgement, and merging
> with the cleansing breeze
> of the limitless desert.
> The soul is filled with understanding,
> with the equipoise of silence.

And, often, when the moon is at its meridian, I sit on the steps of the memorial, with my little dog by my side, a tear in my eye.

Epilogue

As one enters New Delhi's North Block through Gate No. 4, one often misses a maxim incised in golden letters by the British rulers: 'Liberty will not descend to a people. A people must raise themselves to liberty. It is a blessing that must be earned before it can be enjoyed.' These are, in the present circumstance, ominous words. One must diagnose and amputate the cancerous malaise of corruption that will not allow India to progress.

The vast Indian population, even now, may be likened to a directionless herd—innocent about their rights or duties under the law. Frequently we are privy to news of people being subjected to the supercilious and cruel behaviour of undisciplined, politicized and disorderly governance. In Punjab and Haryana, as many as six police chiefs have been arrested for corruption and moral turpitude; at least one senior police officer has been held for murder. In Uttar Pradesh, a chief secretary serving a jail term for indulging in practices to the detriment of the state exchequer has been classified by her former colleagues as the most corrupt officer ever.

It is, unfortunately, almost entirely true that India is governed by a corrupt and largely insensitive civilian administration, where the trained civil servant, the best inheritance of independent India from the British Raj, has been turned into a robot who operates in tandem with politicians mired in corrupt practices and communalism. No one in authority is concerned about good governance, and the civil servant has fallen victim to the post-independent political dispensation, where his power and postings are determined by his pliability and loyalty. Merit or expertise very rarely has anything to do with an officer's career graph.

The incumbent minister of finance once said that India needs a new generation of patriots. After close to four decades of service, I can attest to the veracity of that statement. Where has the endless galaxy of men and women who laid down their lives to secure India's freedom gone? Where are men of the genre of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Netaji Subhas Bose, C. R. Das, Tagore, G. K. Gokhale, Bhagat Singh, Maulana Azad, Abdul Gaffar Khan, Sardar Patel, Lajpat Rai and Udham Singh? Where, today, are the men and women committed to improving the lives of their peers?

While the primary purpose of these memoirs has been to record for perpetuity the experience of a single life, I have also written in the hope of presenting to the reader a mirror to India—the ethical and moral degradation that we have fallen prey to, and its concomitant ills. I have attempted, through the story of my life, a cursory survey of the tragedy of India today as I understand it, for I fear that democracy in this country needs no external foe.

As I look to the future, to the twilight years of my life, I end this book with the sincere prayer that a solution be found to India's problems; with the yearning that there is, soon, the emergence of an Indian who is passionately committed to the cause of socio-economic betterment of his fellow citizens, so that we may finally emerge into a state of true freedom.

Hope, as they say, springs eternal.

In Gratitude

I n 1998, Mr Khushwant Singh, the greatest literary legend in contemporary India, graced my residence at Ferozepore, while I was posted as divisional commissioner. He encouraged me to keep writing in a disciplined manner and wrote the preface to *A Bouquet of Thoughts*, a compendium of poetry and prose published in 2002. Mr Khushwant Singh has remained a constant inspiration and an intellectual support system, to which I have turned in my moments of depression and inability to write.

I thank Urvashi, my brilliant and gifted sister, resident in distant America, the legatee of my memoirs, who has ever been at my side, during every crisis.

Some years ago, Rahul Singh, the son of Khushwant Singh and a renowned literary figure in his own right, accepted the hand of friendship that I offered; without his support, these memoirs would have been impossible.

Though it was important for me to write the story of my life, it would have never been written but for the constant prodding and guidance of R. I. Singh, a distinguished civil servant, my batch-mate and friend since 1974. Over the years, he has had great faith in my sporadic attempts at creative writing, for which I am grateful. For his steadfast contributions to my endeavour at finishing this book, I should really dedicate it to him, but he has positively disallowed this.

Pandit Brij Nath Shukla, who has looked after my estate and has been a child of the house for over twenty years, has ever rejoiced in my good days and bolstered me during the reverses that I faced. For my sake, Shuklaji learnt some rudimentary functions of the computer, so that I was able to continue working on them even in the isolated environs of Goa. Shuklaji has been a source of strength for many years, and I owe him a deep debt of gratitude.

I thank Sunil Dogra, who is possessed of perhaps the most luminous and understanding mind that I have encountered in a lifetime, and with whom I have been friends for close to five decades.

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Mr Aditya Arya, in 1985, presented me with the best photograph that I have of myself. The sketch on the front cover is based on that photograph. My thanks to him.

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About three years ago, I met Nirupama Dutt, a well-acknowledged figure in the world of Punjabi literature, as well as English; Nirupama, and later her brother, Vimal Dutt, helped me in giving shape to this book. While Vimal did the preliminary editing and proofreading, Nirupama, with the precision of a surgeon's knife, marked out the chapters, giving them titles. I owe Nirupama and Vimal a debt of gratitude.

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And, finally, my most enduring thanks to Delhi—my hometown, the city to which I have returned after a lifetime of service, the city that has given me so much.

Born in Delhi on 1 October 1948, Robin Gupta decided on a career in the civil service early in his life. After a brief stint with the Indian Police Service, he was accepted into the Indian Administrative Service in 1974. His deputations included challenging assignments throughout the country, and he was posted as commissioner in the field on seven separate occasions, a record in the history of Indian civil service. His final posting before retirement was as financial commissioner, Government of Punjab.

Alongside judgments and notings on bone-dry official files, Robin Gupta has been writing through his life poetry and prose on diverse subjects, ranging from nature, history, art, music, culture and Sufism, to profiles of men and women he has admired. A selection of his best writings, *A Bouquet of Thoughts*, was published in 2002.

He currently divides his time between Chandigarh, Delhi and Goa, with his pug, Raja, as his constant companion.

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