The Age of Kali

PATNA, 1997

On the night of 13 February 1992 two hundred armed Untouchables surrounded the high-caste village of Barra in the northern Indian state of Bihar. By the light of burning splints, the raiders roused all the men from their beds and marched them out in to the fields. Then, one after another, they slit their throats with a rusty harvesting sickle.

Few of my Delhi friends were surprised when I pointed out the brief press report of the massacre, buried somewhere in the middle pages of the *Indian Express*: it was the sort of thing that was always happening in Bihar, they said. Two thousand years ago, it was under a bo tree near the Bihari capital of Patna that the Buddha had received his enlightenment; that, however, was probably the last bit of good news to come out of the state. These days Bihar was much more famous for its violence, corruption and endemic caste-warfare. Indeed, things were now so bad that the criminals and the politicians of the state were said to be virtually interchangeable: no fewer than thirty-three of Bihar's State Assembly MLAs had criminal records, and a figure like Dular Chand Yadav, who had a hundred cases of *dacoity* and fifty murder cases pending against him, could also be addressed as Honourable Member for Barh.

Two stories I had first noticed in the news briefs of the Indian press give an idea of the seriousness of the crisis in the state.

The first was a tale of everyday life on the Bihar railways. One morning in October 1996, the Rajdhani Express from New Delhi to Calcutta made an unscheduled stop at Gomoh, a small station in southern Bihar. Mumtaz Ansari, the local Member of Parliament, got

in to the first-class compartment. With him were three security guards. Neither Ansari nor his henchmen had tickets, but they nevertheless turfed out of their seats four passengers with reservations. When one of them, a retired government official, had the temerity to protest at his eviction, Ansari answered that it was he who made the laws, so he had the right to break them. When the old man continued to protest, the MP waved his hand and ordered the guards to beat him up. At the next stop Ansari was received by a crowd of supporters, including another MP and ten of his armed retainers. They dragged the retired official out of the carriage and continued the work begun by Ansari's guards. As the train pulled out, the old man was left bleeding on the platform.

The second story was a tale of life in the Bihar civil service. In October 1994, a young graduate named G. Krishnaiah received his posting as District Magistrate of Gopalganj, a remote and anarchic district of northern Bihar. It was not exactly a dream assignment: Gopalganj was renowned as one of the most lawless areas in India, and only two weeks before, Krishnaiah's predecessor as District Magistrate had been killed by a bomb hidden in a briefcase in his office. Nevertheless, Krishnaiah was energetic and idealistic, and he set about his new job with enthusiasm, giving a brief interview to Doordashan, the Indian state television network, in which he announced a series of measures intended to turn the area around: to control crime, generate employment and uplift the Untouchables of Gopalganj.

Watching the clip now, with the young official speaking so blithely about his intention of rooting out violence, the manner of his end seems all the more horrifying. Two months later, Krishnaiah was driving along a road at dusk when he ran in to the funeral procession of a local mafia don who had been killed in a shoot-out the day before. The procession was being led by the local MP, Anand Mohan Singh, who prior to entering politics had spent most of the previous two decades as an outlaw with a price on his head: in that time the police had registered nearly seventy charges against him, ranging from murder and criminal conspiracy to kidnapping and the possession of unlicensed arms. According to statements

collected by the police, Singh 'exhorted his followers to lynch the upstart official', whereupon the mourners surrounded Krishnaiah's car, and one of Singh's henchmen fired three shots at him. Krishnaiah was badly wounded but still alive. So, encouraged by Singh, the mourners pulled him from his car and slowly stoned him to death.

That a sitting MP could be arrested for ordering a crowd to lynch and murder a civil servant was bad enough, but what happened next reveals quite how bad things have become in Indian politics in recent years. Anand Mohan Singh was arrested, but from his prison cell he contested and retained his seat in the 1996 general election, later securing bail to attend parliament. He recently distinguished himself during a parliamentary debate by snarling, 'Say that again and I'll come and break your teeth' at an opponent on the other side of the Lok Sabha debating chamber. Justice in India being what it is, few believe that the police now have much chance of bringing a successful prosecution.

Over the years, my friends explained, violence had come to totally dominate almost every aspect of life in Bihar. It was said that in Patna no one bothered buying second-hand cars any more; instead armed gangs stopped vehicles in broad daylight, then forced the drivers to get out and sign pre-prepared sale deeds. As the Bihari government was too poor to pay the contractors who carried out public works, the contractors had been compelled to start kidnapping the government's engineers and bureaucrats in order to get their bills paid. Other contractors, desperate for business, had taken to wreaking violence on each other: one report I had seen described a shoot-out in Muzaffarpur between the *goondas* of competing engineering companies after tenders had been put out to build a minor bridge in an obscure village. In some upper-caste areas, the burning of Untouchables had become so common that it was now almost an organised sport. Various lower-caste self-defence forces had formed in reaction, and were said to be busily preparing for war in villages they had rechristened with names like Leninnagar and Stalinpur. There were now estimated to be ten major private armies at work in different parts of Bihar; in some areas the violence

had spun completely out of control, and was approaching a situation of civil war.

Bad things went on in Bihar, my friends told me: that was just the way it was. But the singularly horrific nature of the Barra massacre stuck in my mind, and a year later, when I found myself in Patna, I decided to hire a car and go and visit the village.

The road leading to Barra from Patna was much the worst I had ever travelled on in five years of living in India: although it was one of the principal highways of Bihar, potholes the size of bomb craters pitted its surface. On either side, the rusting skeletons of dead trucks lined the route like a succession of *mementi mori*.

As we drove, I had the feeling that I was leaving the twentieth century far behind. First the electricity pylons came to a halt. Then cars and trucks disappeared from the road; even the rusting skeletons vanished. In the villages, wells began to replace such modern luxuries as hand-pumps. We passed the odd pony trap, and four men carrying a palanquin. The men flagged us down and warned us about highwaymen. They told us to be off the roads by dark.

Eventually, turning right along a dirt track, we came to Barra. It was a small, ancient village raised above the surrounding fields on an old earthen tell. Its population was entirely Bhumihar: Brahmins who had converted to Buddhism at the time of the Emperor Ashoka, around 300 BC, and who had then been denied readmittance to the priestly caste when Indian Buddhism was wiped out by an aggressive Hindu revival a thousand years later. Bhumihars were still high-caste, but they had never quite regained the top place in the caste pyramid they had lost 250 years before the Romans first arrived in Britain.

I was taken around Barra by Ashok Singh, one of the two male survivors of the massacre. He walked me over to an embankment where a small white monument had been erected to the memory of the forty-two murdered villagers. A hot wind blew in from the fields; dust-devils swirled in the dried-out paddy. I asked: ‘How did you escape?’

‘I didn’t,’ he said. And pulling off a scarf, he showed me the lurid gash left by the sickle which had sliced off the back of his neck. ‘They cut me then left me for dead.’

Ashok began to describe, in detail, what had happened. He said that, as normal, he had gone to bed after eating his supper at eight thirty. The week before, there had been an atrocity when the Savarna Liberation Front, the (upper-caste) Bhumihar militia, had gang-raped and killed ten *Harijan* (Untouchable) women in the next district; but Barra was far from there, and no one was expecting trouble. Ashok, his brothers, father and uncle were all asleep on their *charpoys* when they were woken by the sound of explosions at ten thirty. They were frightened, and went to the women’s part of the house to alert their wives and mothers. The explosions and the sound of gunfire came closer. Then a burning splint was thrown on to the thatch of their roof. At the same time there was a shout from outside that everyone should come out and give themselves up, or else burn to death.

‘As soon as the roof caught fire my uncle and I began trying to put out the blaze. We didn’t take any notice of what was being shouted, so eventually these low people had to break down the door and drag us all out. There were hundreds of them, armed with guns, spears, bows, *lathis* and sickles. They left the women by our house, but they tied the men up with lengths of cloth.’

‘Did they say where they were from? What militia they were part of?’

‘No, but they were local men. We could tell by their accents. At first they left us lying where we were as they destroyed all the village houses with fire and dynamite. Then they said, “There is a meeting,” and they dragged us men to the edge of the village. There they made us sit in the middle of a circle. Then, one by one, they started killing us, right there where we were sitting. A great crowd was watching, but only two people were doing the killing, so it took a long time. I was very frightened. My mind went blank.

‘They killed all my brothers. They killed my father and they killed my uncle and my cousins. Eventually my turn came. One of the men pushed me forward and the other got his sickle and took three

swipes. It made deep cuts on the back of my neck and head. I was senseless. The next thing I knew I woke up in hospital in Gaya. It was three weeks before I could get out of bed.'

'You were very lucky.'

'How can you say that? I lost eight of my kin.'

Ashok's face crumpled, and he looked down. After some time, he again met my eyes: 'I would like to take revenge,' he said quietly, 'but I don't have the capacity.'

Ashok showed me the houses he and the widows of the village had erected with the compensation money they had been awarded by the government. They were miniature castles: tall and square, with no windows except for thin arrow-slits on the third storey. Unwittingly, they were almost exact miniature copies of the Peel Towers erected across the Scottish borders in the sixteenth century, when central authority had completely broken down. There could be no better illustration of Bihar's regression in to the Dark Ages.

Ashok rubbed the huge scar on his neck and said: 'Now the *Harijans* refuse to work on our fields, and there are not enough Bhumihar men left to till them ourselves. When the *Harijans* pass us on the road, they pass comments at us: "We have not finished with you yet," or "You will meet the same fate as your brothers." These low people are enjoying what has happened. They have grown fat and behave like they are Brahmins. But us Bhumihars, every night after sunset we are frightened. Every night I have nightmares. They may come again. What is to stop them? The police and the [Bihari] government of Laloo Prasad Yadav are on their side. This massacre was his handiwork.'

'In what sense?'

'Laloo is from a low caste,' said Ashok. 'He is always encouraging these *nichla* [oiks] to rise up against us. When Laloo came here after the massacre we threw stones at him. Every day we pray for his downfall.'

'But don't your new houses give you some protection?' I asked.

'Our houses are strong,' replied Ashok, 'but we are vulnerable. We cannot stay in our houses all day. We have to move around.'

Cowherds were now leading the buffalo back to the village for milking. Around where we were standing, women were lighting dung fires and beginning to cook supper. The afternoon was drawing in. I thought of the warnings we had received to be back in Patna and off the roads by the fall of darkness.

'The government will not protect us,' said Ashok as we walked back to the car, 'so we are left at the mercy of God. This is the *Kali Yug* [the age of Kali], the epoch of disintegration. The lower castes are rising up. Everything is falling apart.'

After living in India for five years, I finally left Delhi in 1994. I dismantled my flat and set off to write a book in the Middle East. Returning to the subcontinent two and a half years later, I found that a quiet social revolution had taken place in my absence, with lower-caste politicians seizing power in state after state across India. This process seemed to have started in Bihar, in the person of Laloo Prasad Yadav, the man the villagers of Barra had blamed for their massacre. Laloo in many ways seemed to personify much that was happening in India, and I decided to return to Bihar to try and meet him.

Although a similar revolution was taking place at the same time in Uttar Pradesh, when he first came to power in 1991 Laloo was still a relatively unlikely figure in north Indian politics. The Indian establishment was then still firmly dominated by the higher castes: Nehru, his daughter Mrs Gandhi and her son Rajiv were all Brahmins, as was Rajiv's successor as head of the Congress Party and Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao. Brahmins had ruled India for forty-four of fifty years of independence. Kshatriyas (the second rung in the caste pyramid) ruled for two more years, in the persons of V.P. Singh (1989–90) and Chandra Shekhar (1990–91). Lower- or

intermediate-caste Prime Ministers had been in power for fewer than four years of the half-century since the British left India.

Laloo was the son of a low-caste village cowherd. In the Bihar of the 1960s and seventies it was against all the odds that a man like him would manage to get educated and attain even a foothold in politics. Despite the fact that the lower castes, the Untouchables and tribesmen together formed a full 73 per cent of the population of Bihar, in the 1962 Bihar Legislative Assembly over 60 per cent of MLAs were from the top two castes, while less than 7 per cent were from low-caste backgrounds. But from the early 1980s onwards the lower castes had been on the rise, while the upper castes were in rapid retreat. In the 1984 general election, Bihar returned twenty-five upper-caste MPs to the national parliament, including seven Brahmins. By 1989 this number had sunk to eighteen, with the Brahmins still retaining their quota of seven. In 1991, the year Laloo came to power, replacing a Kshatriya Chief Minister, the number of upper-caste MPs had shrunk to ten, with only one Brahmin among them. From 1989 to 1991, the Congress Party was unable to field even one Brahmin who could win a parliamentary seat in Bihar. In the Bihar Legislative Assembly there has been an equally dramatic shift. Today only 10.2 per cent of Bihar MLAs are from the top two castes, while 52.5 per cent are from low-caste backgrounds.

Laloo's political views were formed by his childhood experience of being kicked around by the higher castes of his village. From the beginning of his career he spoke out bitterly against the Brahmins and the Hindu revival that in many areas was bringing about a new hardening in the caste system. 'Our fight is against the wearers of the Sacred Thread [i.e. the Brahmins],' he told his audiences. 'For centuries the priests have made fortunes by fooling villagers. Now I tell them they should learn to milk cattle and graze them, otherwise they will starve.' On other occasions he publicly voiced his disbelief in the Hindu gods: 'Ram should punish these murderous fundamentalists – if he exists, that is. But he is nowhere. If he was there, so many poor people would not have died, there would not have been such poverty, such fights …'

In a country as obsessed with religion as India, such brazen anti-Brahminical atheism was a completely new message, at least in the north. But, to many people's surprise, it worked. In the 1991 general election, Laloo – supported by the combined votes of the poor, the casteless and the oppressed Muslim community – was swept in to power with an unprecedented majority. Since then, in the 1996 election Laloo's vote fell back slightly, but he managed to retain his hold on power, despite increasingly clear evidence that his government – and indeed his own family – were deeply corrupt, and were presiding over the looting of the state treasury. One act had brought him in to particular disrepute: the alleged embezzlement of vast sums of agricultural subsidies, referred to in the Indian papers as 'the multi-*crore* fodder scam'.

Yet, notwithstanding the fall in his share of the vote, Laloo had gained greatly increased national power, as he now formed part of the ruling coalition government. For what had happened in Bihar in 1991 happened elsewhere in northern India in the 1996 election, with the rural lower castes seizing control of state governments across the country, and candidates from the upper-caste élite losing their seats *en masse*. H.V. Deve Gowda, a middle-caste farmer from Karnataka, was sworn in as Prime Minister to replace the Brahmin Narasimha Rao, propped up by a variety of regional parties, many of whom represented the lower castes. Where Bihar had led, the rest of the country had followed.

There are two theories about the effects of this social revolution. Pessimists point out that while the Anglicised Brahmin élite produced leaders of the calibre of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the rise of the rural lower castes has resulted in the emergence of a cadre of semi-literate village thugs, men like Laloo and his counterpart in Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, a small-time wrestler and alleged mafia don who has now risen to become India's Defence Minister. Many such rustics can barely write their names, and they certainly have no hope of mastering the finer points of international diplomacy and economics.

On the other hand, the last decade of Brahmin rule brought to power a man like Rajiv Gandhi, who for all his polish was barely

able to speak Hindi, and certainly had no grasp of the realities of life for the 80 per cent of Indians who lived in villages. Ten years ago every second person at Delhi drinks parties seemed to be either an old schoolfriend of the Prime Minister or a member of his cabinet. Now, quite suddenly, no one in Delhi knows anyone in power. A major democratic revolution has taken place almost unnoticed, leaving the urban Anglicised élite on the margins of the Indian political landscape. As Mulayam Singh Yadav put it on his elevation to the national cabinet, 'For the first time, power has come to the underprivileged and the oppressed, and we will use it to ensure that their lot is bettered.'

This is also the stated intention of Laloo. So far his political success may have done little in concrete terms to boost the welfare of the lower-caste poor, but what it certainly has done is to boost their confidence. The lower castes are no longer content to remain at the bottom of the pile and be shoved around by the Brahmins. Laloo has given them a stake in power and made them politically conscious: exactly as the Civil Rights Movement did for American blacks in the 1960s.

The rise of lower-caste politicians has also done something to slow the rise of the Hindu revivalist movement, by demonstrating to the masses how little they have to gain by voting in a Hindu theocracy dominated by the same castes which have oppressed them for millennia. In the dying days of 1992, when India was engulfed in the bloody chain of Hindu-Muslim riots that followed the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya, even the previously peaceful commercial capital of Bombay was burning. Yet Bihar remained uncharacteristically – indeed almost miraculously – peaceful. With a series of unambiguous threats to the more excitable elements in the Bihar police force, Laloo had been able to contain the anti-Muslim pogroms which elsewhere in India left two thousand dead.

Indian politics are rarely predictable, but it was certainly one of the more unexpected developments in modern Indian history that led to the low-caste and semi-literate Chief Minister of India's most

corrupt and backward state becoming the custodian of the crumbling Nehruvian ideal of a secular, democratic India.

The more I read about Bihar, the more it became clear that Laloo was the key to what was happening there. But ringing Bihar proved virtually impossible from Delhi: it was much easier to get through to Britain, ten thousand miles further away. Unable to contact Laloo, I was forced to take pot luck and book a flight to Patna without having arranged an interview. But by remarkable good fortune, it turned out that Laloo had been speaking at a rally in Delhi, and was returning to Patna on the same flight as myself.

The first I learned of this was when the Bihar flight was delayed for half an hour while it waited for Laloo to turn up. When he eventually did so, striding on board like a conquering hero, he brought with him half his cabinet.

Laloo turned out to be a small, broad-shouldered, thick-set man; his prematurely grey hair was cut in a boyish early-Beatles mop. He had reserved the whole of the first row of seats for himself; his aides, MPs and bodyguards filled up the next seven tiers. They were all big, slightly sinister-looking men. All, including Laloo himself, were dressed in white homespun cotton pyjamas, once the symbol of Mahatma Gandhi's identification with the poor, but now (when synthetic fibres are far cheaper) the unmistakable insignia of political power.

The delay, the block-booking and the extravagant manner in which Laloo sprawled lengthwise along the first row of seats like some degenerate Roman Emperor, graphically illustrated all I had heard about Laloo being no angel of political morality. To get to the top, he had had to play politics the Bihar way: at the last election, one MP had gone on record to declare: 'Without one hundred men armed with guns you cannot hope to contest elections in Bihar.' To

become Chief Minister you would need to have more toughs and more guns than your rivals. Laloo was no innocent.

Yet, in the most ungovernable and anarchic state in India, his government had been at least relatively effective. A retired senior Bihar civil servant quoted Chanakya, the ancient (c.300 BC) Indian Machiavelli, when he described the administration of the new Chief Minister: 'Chanakya said that to rule India you must be feared. Laloo is feared. He likes to play the role of the simple villager, but behind that façade he is nobody's fool. He is a violent man. No one would dare ignore his orders.'

Certainly the entourage at the front of the plane seemed bewitched by their leader. They circled the Chief Minister, leaning over the seats, squatting in front of him on their haunches and laughing at his jokes. When I eventually persuaded one of the MPs to introduce me to his leader, the man literally knelt down in front of Laloo while he explained who I was.

Laloo took it all in his stride. He indicated that I should sit down on the seat beside him – leaving the MP on his knees to one side – and asked how he could help. I asked for an appointment to see him. With a nonchalant wave of his hand he called over a secretary, who fixed the interview for five thirty that afternoon.

'But,' he said, 'we could begin the interview now.'

'Here? In the plane?'

'Why not? We have ten minutes before we arrive.'

I asked Laloo about his childhood. He proved only too willing to talk about it. He lolled back against the side of the plane, his legs stretched over two seats.

'My father was a small farmer,' he began, scratching his balls with the unembarrassed thoroughness of a true yokel. 'He looked after the cows and buffaloes belonging to the upper castes; he also had three acres of his own land. He was illiterate, wore a *dhoti* and never possessed a pair of shoes in his life. My mother sold curds and milk. She was also illiterate. We lived in a mud-thatch cottage with no windows or doors: it was open to the dog, the cat and the jackal.

'I was one of seven. I had five brothers and one sister. There was never enough money. When we were old enough we were all sent

out to graze the buffaloes. Then my two elder brothers went to the city [Patna] and found a job working in a cattle farm near the airport. They earned ninety-four paise [five pence] a day. When they had saved enough money, my brothers called me to Patna and sent me to school. I was twelve. Until that time I did not know even ABC.'

I asked: 'How were you treated by the upper castes in your village?'

Laloo laughed. The other MPs – who had all gathered around and were listening reverently to the words of their leader – joined in with a great roar of canned laughter.

'All my childhood I was beaten and insulted by the landlords,' said Laloo. 'For no reason they would punish me. Because we were from the Yadav caste we were not entitled even to sit on a chair: they would make us sit on the ground. I remember all that humiliation. Now I am in the chair and I want those people to sit on the ground. It is in my mind to teach them a lesson. I don't hate them,' he added. 'But their minds have to be …' He paused, searching for the right word: 'Their minds have to be changed. We have been an independent country for fifty years, but there has been no alteration in the caste system, no social justice. I want to end caste. I want inter-caste marriages. But these Brahmin priests will not allow it.'

'But how can you hope to destroy a system that has been around for three and a half thousand years?' I asked. 'Isn't caste the social foundation of Hinduism?'

'It is an evil system,' said Laloo simply. 'It must go.'

The plane was now wheeling above Patna. Below I could see the grey ribbon of the Ganges threading its way along the edge of the city, past the *ghats* and out in to the fertile floodplains of Bihar.

'Go back to your seat now,' said Laloo curtly. 'I will talk to you again this afternoon.'

No one has ever called Patna a beautiful city; but revisiting it I found I had forgotten how bad things were. As you drive in through the outskirts, the treeless pavements begin to fill with occasional sackcloth shacks. The shacks expand in to slums. The slums are surrounded by garbage heaps. Around the garbage heaps goats, pigs, dogs and children compete for scraps of food. The further you go, the worse it becomes. Open drains line the road. Beside them lie emaciated migrants from famine-hit villages. Sewer-rats the size of cats scamper among the rickshaws.

Bihar is in fact one of the last areas of the subcontinent which really conforms to the image of India promoted by well-meaning Oxfam advertisements, all beggars, cripples and overpopulated leper hospitals: 'Send £10 and help Sita regain her sight …' For the reality after fifty years of independence is that India is now the seventh industrial power on earth, with a large, prosperous and entrepreneurial middle class.

Yet while much of the south-west of India seems to be surging purposefully towards a future of modest prosperity, health and full literacy, Bihar has begun to act as a kind of leaden counterweight, dragging the north of the country back towards the Middle Ages. One of the state's few really profitable industries is the manufacture of counterfeit pharmaceuticals – salt pills dressed up as aspirins, sugar tablets pretending to be antibiotics – a field in which it apparently leads South Asia. Recently an enterprising Bihari counterfeiter expanded his operations to include the manufacture of great quantities of a fake chalk-based toothpaste called Colfate. Otherwise, despite exceptionally rich mineral deposits and fertile soil, the state remains the poorest in India.

Not only is the economy stagnant, crime is completely out of control: 64,085 violent offences (such as armed robbery, looting, rioting and murder) took place between January and June 1997.

This figure includes 2,625 murders, 1,116 kidnappings and 127 abductions for ransom, meaning that Bihar witnesses fourteen murders every day, and a kidnapping every four hours. Whatever index of prosperity and development you choose, Bihar comes triumphantly at the bottom. It has the lowest literacy, the highest number of deaths in police custody, the worst roads, the highest crime, the fewest cinemas. Its per capita income is less than half the Indian average. Not long ago it even had a major famine. The state has withered; Bihar is now nearing a situation of anarchy.

The day I flew back in to Patna, there were six stories vying for attention on the front page of the Bihar edition of the *Hindustan Times*; each in its own way seemed to confirm the collapse of government in the state.

The paper led with a report about a group of tribals who were demanding an independent state in the hills of southern Bihar. They had just carried out a raid on a mine and successfully got away with 'almost six hundred kilograms of gelignite, over a thousand detonators and fifteen hundred metres of igniting tape'.

Below this was a report of a shoot-out in which the Patna police killed 'a notorious criminal wanted in several cases of *dacoity* including the kidnapping of the Gupta Biscuit Company's proprietor'.

Next, a political piece carried a statement from the Congress opposition accusing the Bihar government of 'ignoring the famine-like situation prevailing in the state'.

Another report, headlined 'Crime on the Rise in Muzaffarpur', detailed the arrest over the previous three months of '1,437 criminals' during the '116 riots' that the town had apparently suffered since the New Year.

At the bottom of the page was an item announcing an initiative to resuscitate the moribund Bihar tourist industry: a paramilitary Tourist Protection Force was to be set up, providing a heavily armed escort for any Japanese tourists wishing to brave a visit to the site of the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodh Gaya.

But the most astonishing story concerned the goings-on at Patna University. There angry examinees had 'torched a police jeep and

damaged the car of the Vice Chancellor'. What had caused this? A cut in student grants? Nothing of the sort. 'According to reports, the Vice Chancellor, in a surprise visit to the [exam] centre found all the examinees adopting unfair means. He ordered a body search and seized two gunny bags full of notes, chits and books from the examinees … In a brazen move the examinees then walked out of the examination hall and resorted to wanton vandalism.'

That afternoon I called on the Vice Chancellor, to see if the reports were exaggerated. Professor Mohinuddin was a small, wiry man with heavy black glasses. He maintained that, on the contrary, the press had played down the violence. On being caught red-handed the students had attacked him, hurling desks and chairs, and forced him to take shelter in a sandbagged police post. There, despite a valiant defence by the six policeman on duty, the mob had succeeded in driving the Vice Chancellor from his refuge with the help of a couple of crude firebombs. Later, for good measure, the students had issued a death threat against him. 'It is lucky I am a widower,' said the Professor. 'I only have my own safety to worry about.'

Not far from Professor Mohinuddin's house was the home of Uttam Sengupta, the editor of the Patna edition of the *Times of India*. Like his academic neighbour, Mr Sengupta had had a somewhat upsetting week. Two days previously, someone had taken a potshot at him with a sawn-off shotgun. The pellets had lodged themselves in the back door of his old Fiat. Sengupta had escaped unscathed but shaken.

According to Sengupta, what was happening in Bihar was nothing less than the death of the state. Much of the problem, he said, derived from the fact that the Bihar government was broke and unable to provide the most basic amenities. The National Thermal Power Corporation, the Indian national grid, had recently threatened to cut off Bihar's electricity supply unless its dues were paid. In the Patna hospital there were no bedsheets, no drugs and no bandages. The only X-ray machine in the city had been out of order for a year; the hospital could not afford to buy the spare parts. Patna went black at night, as there were no lightbulbs for the street lamps.

(According to the writer Arvind Das, who researched the problem in some detail, the city apparently required six thousand bulbs. On one occasion during Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, the administration managed to muster as many as 2,200; but normally only a fraction of that number were available. Occasionally businesses clubbed together to light a single street; otherwise, every day at sunset, Patna, a city of over a million people, was plunged in to medieval darkness.)

What was bad in Patna, said Sengupta, was much, much worse in rural areas. Outside the capital, electricity had virtually ceased to be supplied – this despite the fact that Bihari mines produce almost all of India's coal. Without power, industry had been brought to a grinding halt. No roads were being built. There was no functioning system of public transport. In the villages, education had virtually packed up and literacy was rapidly declining: since 1981 the number of adult illiterates had actually risen from thirteen to fifteen million.

There were two principal effects of this breakdown, Sengupta told me. Firstly, those who could – the honest, the rich and the able – had migrated elsewhere. Secondly, those who had stayed had made do. This involved a sort of unofficial wave of privatisation. As the government no longer provided electricity, health care or education, those who could had had to provide them for themselves. Middle-class residents in blocks of flats had begun to club together to buy generators. There had been a mushrooming of private coaching institutes and private health clinics.

This privatisation had not been limited just to the towns. In rural areas, the richer villagers had begun to build their own roads to link them to the markets. In the absence of state buses there had even been a revival of the use of palanquins. The four men I had met on the road to Barra on my last visit were brothers, who were returning from carrying a woman to her relatives in a nearby village. They had made their palanquin themselves, they said, and were now bringing in more money from it than they were from their fields.

All this was very admirable, but the situation became more sinister when people took in to their own hands the maintenance of

law and order. It was the landlords who were the first to recruit armed gangs, initially to deal with discontented labourers. In response, the poor had fought back, organising themselves in to amateur guerrilla groups and arming themselves with guns made by local blacksmiths. Great swathes of countryside were now controlled by the private armies of landlords or their rival Maoist militias.

When Delhi newspapers publish articles on Bihar's disorders and atrocities, they tend to make a point of emphasising the state's 'backwardness'. What is needed, they say, is development: more roads, more schools, more family-planning centres. But as the ripples of political and caste violence spread from Patna out in to the rest of north India, it seems likely that Bihar could be not so much backward as forward: a trend-setter for the rest of the country. In a very real sense, Bihar may be a kind of Heart of Darkness, pumping violence and corruption, pulse after pulse, out in to the rest of the subcontinent. The first ballot-rigging recorded in India took place in Bihar in the 1962 general election. Thirty years later, it is common across the country. The first example of major criminals winning parliamentary seats took place in Bihar in the 1980 election. Again, it is now quite normal all over India.

So serious and infectious is the Bihar disease that it is now throwing in to question the whole notion of an Indian economic miracle. The question is whether the prosperity of the south and west of the country can outweigh the moral decay which is spreading out from Bihar and the east. Few doubt that if the 'Bihar effect' – corruption, lawlessness, marauding caste armies and the breakdown of government – does prevail and overcome the positive forces at work, then, as Uttam Sengupta put it: 'India could make what happened in Yugoslavia look like a picnic.'

Everyone I talked to that week in Patna agreed on one thing: behind much of Bihar's violence lay the running sore of the disintegrating caste system.

One of the worst-affected areas was the country around Barra: the Jehanabad District, to the south of Patna. There, two rival militias were at work: the Savarna Liberation Front, which represented the interests of the high-caste landowning Bhumihars, and the Maoist Communist Centre, which took the part of the lower castes and Untouchables who farmed the Bhumihars' fields. Week after week, the Bhumihars would go '*Harijan* hunting', setting off in convoys of jeeps to massacre 'uppity Untouchables', 'to make an example'; in retaliation, the peasants would emerge from the fields at night and silently behead an oppressive landlord or two. The police did little to protect either group.

Similar battles take place across the width of Bihar, and this caste warfare has provided great opportunities for criminals wishing to gain a foothold in Bihar's political arena. Anand Mohan Singh first made his name as the protector of the upper castes against a rival low-caste outlaw-MP, Pappu Yadav. In the same way, Pappu Yadav first gained his seat in parliament by leading a low-caste guerrilla army against high-caste landlords and attempting a Bihari variant of ethnic cleansing, emptying his constituency of Rajput and Brahmin families. In June 1991, whilst he was engaged in this work, three cases of murder were lodged against him, and he was also booked under the National Security Act for creating a 'civil war situation'. In the current parliament he remains the MP for the north Bihar district of Purnea.

The closer you look, the more clear it becomes that caste hatred and, increasingly, caste warfare lie at the bottom of most of Bihar's problems. The lower castes, so long oppressed, have now begun to assert themselves, while the higher castes have begun to fight back in an attempt to hold on to their ground. Moreover, job reservations for the lower castes have begun to be fitfully introduced around the country, reawakening an acute awareness of caste at every level of society. The proportion of reserved jobs varies from state to state – from 2 per cent in Haryana to 65 per cent in Tamil Nadu – but all

over India a major social revolution is beginning to take place. This is particularly marked in institutions like the Indian Administrative Service, where prior to the introduction of reservations the Brahmins, who make up just 5 per cent of the population, filled 58 per cent of the jobs.

In the 1960s and seventies most educated Indians believed that caste was beginning to die out. Now it has quite suddenly become the focus of national attention, and arguably the single most important issue in the country's politics.

Later that afternoon when I turned up at the Chief Minister's residence I found Laloo sitting outside, his legs raised on a table. He was surrounded by the now familiar circle of toughs and sycophants. Their appearance reminded me of the incident on the train when the civil servant had been beaten up by one of Laloo's MPs, and I asked him if the press reports had been accurate.

'Why don't you ask the man responsible?' replied Laloo. He waved his hand at one of the MPs sitting to his left. 'This is Mumtaz Ansari.'

Ansari, a slight, moustachioed figure in white pyjamas, giggled.

'It is a fabricated story,' he said, a broad grin on his face. 'A baseless story, the propaganda of my enemies.'

'It was only his party workers who beat the man up,' explained Laloo. 'Ansari had nothing to do with it.'

'So the man *was* beaten up?'

'A few slaps only,' said Ansari. 'The fellow was misbehaving.'

'What action have you taken?' I asked Laloo.

'I told my MPs: "You must not behave like this. A citizen is the owner of the country. We are just servants." '

'That's all you did?'

‘I have condemned what happened,’ said Laloo, smiling from ear to ear. ‘I have condemned Mr Ansari.’

Both Laloo and Ansari burst out laughing. Laloo then finished the cup of tea he was drinking, threw the dregs over his shoulder and dropped the cup on the grass, calling for a turbaned bearer to pick it up. ‘Come,’ he said, standing up and indicating that I should do the same. ‘This was a small incident only. Let me show you my farm.’

Before I could argue, Laloo had taken my arm. He led me around what had once been the neat rose garden of the British Governor’s residence. Apart from a small patch of lawn at the back of the house, the whole plot had been ploughed up and turned in to a series of fields. In one corner stood Laloo’s fishpond and beehives; in another his dairy farm, rabbit hutches, cattle and buffalo sheds. In between were acres of neat furrows planted with chillies, spinach and potatoes. ‘This is *satthu*,’ he said. ‘Very good for farting.’

‘Who eats all this?’ I asked.

‘I do – along with my wife and family. We villagers like fresh produce. The rest we distribute to the poor.’

While we examined a new threshing machine manned by one of Laloo’s cousins, Laloo talked of the Brahmin political establishment.

‘The BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] and the Congress are both Brahminical parties,’ he said. ‘The backward castes have no reason to vote for them. Already they have realised this in Bihar. In time they will realise this everywhere. The support of these parties will dry up like a dirty puddle on a summer’s day.

‘The backward castes will rise up,’ he said as he led me back to my car. ‘Even now they are waking up and raising their voices. You will see: we will break the power of these people …’

In the darkness of the porte-cochère, Laloo was declaiming as if at a public rally: ‘We will have a flood of votes,’ he said. ‘Nobody will be able to check us.’

The driver was itching to be off: it would soon be dark, and he wanted to be back at the hotel before sunset. Even in Patna, he said, it was madness to be on the roads of Bihar after dark.

Postscript

Despite many of the key witnesses suffering mysterious fatal 'accidents' before the police could interview them, the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation gradually closed in on Laloo during the spring of 1997, as the full scale of the amount embezzled by his administration in the 'Fodder Scam' became clear: around a thousand *crore* rupees, or £180 million – a large sum anywhere, but a truly colossal figure by Bihari standards. In May 1997 Laloo was finally arrested, but when pressure on him to step down became insupportable, he pulled off a *putsch* of characteristic audacity: he resigned as Chief Minister of Bihar, only to hand over the reigns of government to his illiterate wife, Rabri Devi. She continues to rule Bihar at the time of writing.

Despite these scandals, in the 1998 general election Laloo's party performed much better than anyone had expected. Indeed, he was one of the few senior Janata Dal figures not to suffer electoral disaster, proving once and for all (if it still needed proving) that the Indian electorate regards all politicians as equally dishonest, and thus remains oddly immune to revelations of misconduct, however damaging. Standing for election while on bail awaiting trial, Laloo was returned to his seat with a reduced but comfortable majority, while his – or rather, technically, his wife's – government returned to power in alliance with the Congress.

During polling, despite the deployment of whole regiments of the Indian Army, violence in Bihar reached spectacular new levels, with mortars and landmines being deployed to assist the ballot-stuffing manoeuvres, prompting the memorable *Statesman* headline 'Many Dead in Bihar: Police Party Blown to Smithereens'. The true scale of the fatalities will probably never be known, but certainly well over fifty died on polling day, including one of the candidates. The accused in the murder, one Brij Behari Prasad, was rewarded with the post of Power Minister in Laloo's government, though there are reports that he has recently 'absconded' in order to avoid arrest.

Meanwhile, the anarchy in Bihar grows worse month by month. This winter, a friend of mine tried driving from Patna to the north Bihari district of Purnea to inspect a series of obscure Moghul monuments. On the first day of his trip, in broad daylight, his car

was stopped on a national highway by *dacoits* armed with an assortment of spears, swords and automatic weapons. My friend was robbed of everything he had with him – money, cameras and baggage. He had, however, anticipated just such an eventuality, and bravely continued on his journey with the dollars he had secreted in his socks. Twenty miles later he was stopped by a second hold-up, and in the ensuing strip-search his dollars, shoes, socks and car were taken too. He was forced to return to Patna barefoot.