

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## DELHI : A NOVEL

Khushwant Singh

(1990)

### Story

Although often hailed as an 'historical novel,' this is not an historical novel in the ordinary meaning of that term. Instead, this is an erotic, sometimes vulgar, Rabelaisian romp through some of the major events in Delhi of the past six hundred years that freely mixes fact and fiction. As the novelist himself explains in his 'Note, 'History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid into it.' In addition, the story does not move forward in a linear fashion but shifts back and forth in time. We also have an alternation between first-person narration, mostly by the historical figures (Tamerlane, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, the scribe Mussadilal, the Persian king Nadir Shah and the Urdu poet Meer Taqi Meer), who describe events that took place in Delhi during their various lives.

Using a traditional Indian storytelling technique, this sprawling tale is also framed by a narrator in the present day, which appears to be the early 1950s. He is a journalist, who resembles Singh in some respects, and who has just returned from a trip to England, where he became tired of his sexual exploits. He has fallen on bad times, it seems, in terms of his career and love life and is glad to be back in Delhi, a city that he loves. Very soon, he resumes his 'whoring' ways and picks up a hermaphrodite prostitute (a *hijra*) named Bhagmati. She/he has just been released from jail and literally has no place to go. Bhagmati accompanies the journalist through his booze-filled days, infusing him with hope and energy. Although they separate after a few years, she returns in the final chapter set in the 1980s.

Long before that, however, the novel shifts time and goes back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. With the journalist as narrator, we are introduced to Mussadilal (an historical figure), a young Hindu man, who meets the great Islamic saint Nizamuddin (another historical figure). Through the character of Nizamuddin, the journalist/author is able to express his humanistic ideas, criticising the religious fanaticism, ignorance hypocrisy of religious leaders of the past and present. The message is harmony between Hindus and Muslims, which is represented by a marriage of a Hindu man and a Muslim woman. We also meet princes of the Sultan, who die in battle while fighting against the invading Mongols.

We then return to the present-day, for a short, humorous episode in which the narrator goes to hospital for treatment for bee-sting. Swinging back to the days of the Delhi Sultanate, we witness the cruel actions of various rulers, Turks and central Asians (Tughluks), who plunder India and terrorise its population. Back in the present, the narrator makes fun of pious Hindu wives, especially the supposedly timid ones, who turn out to have an enormous sexual appetite, which the narrator is only too happy to satisfy.

Next, we take a tour through the excesses of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who was the son of Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb had a lust for power that led him to eliminate his brothers and their sons as rivals to the throne. Having become emperor, Aurangzeb then turns his fury on the Hindu population, imposing heavy taxes on the 'infidels'. At the end of his life, however, the cruel emperor realises the futility of power and declares that all his wealth should be distributed to the poor.

We next learn about the Persian king Nadir Shah, who raided Delhi in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It is a tale of betrayal and court intrigue. Here the author exposes the petty nature of Delhi's rulers, their selfish concerns and lack of character, and also (very graphically) the cruelty of the invaders, who conquer the city by killing thousands.

This is followed by an episode, which occurs earlier in time, about a poet named Meer Taqi Meer, another historical figures. He is seduced by an older, married woman, and Meer, in turn, later cheats

on his wife. When Nadir Shah raids Delhi, chaos ensues and Mer desperately seeks a patron. He goes from Muslim to Hindu to European nobles, not caring about their politics or religious creed.

The next section, set in 1857-58, the time of the Mutiny/Rebellion, follows the life of Alice Aldwell, an English woman married to Alexander Aldwell, who works for the post office in Calcutta. Alice, who is half the age of her husband and from a mixed English-Indian parentage, dislikes Calcutta and wants to move to Delhi. Eventually, they do move there and then we see the incompetence of the new rulers of Delhi, who drink themselves into a stupor, and engage in sexual affairs.

Next comes the bloody but brief battles fought between mutinous Indian soldiers and the British Indian army, mostly in north India and with the greatest bloodshed in Delhi. Alice, afraid that the mobs will kill her, flees to a neighbour's house dressed as a Muslim woman. She even goes through a conversion ritual to Islam, in which the author mocks the stupidity of the Muslims and the English alike. Alice and her two children are not, however, saved just yet. Alice is raped by her supposed helpers and then delivered to the prison in Delhi's Red Fort, where they are, at least, reunited with their father. But he is then shot by a firing squad

Next, we are given an episode detailing the last days of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah, who is finally deposed by the Mutiny. Other chapters take us through major events of the twentieth-century, as played out in Delhi. The coronation of King George V (1911), the building of New Delhi (1920s), Gandhi's campaigns (1930s and 1940s), Independence (1947), Partition (1947-1948), the Nehru years (1950s) and, finally, the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. At this point, Bhagmati, the narrator's hermaphrodite lover, reappears and helps him escape the rampages of an anti-Sikh mob.

In the end, this ambitious novel, with its mixture of fact and fiction, is both a cultural biography of Delhi and a disguised autobiography of its author (ventriloquised by the narrator).

## Themes

Unity The themes of this sweeping and magisterial novel are likewise ambitious and grand. The single idea that underlies the whole six-centuries of the story is that human history has a unity, just as humans share a common identity and history has a continuity. Throughout the historical sweep of the novel, the author condemns any kind of sectarianism, whether it be Muslim vs Hindu, Sikh vs Muslim or Indian vs British. Looking back at Indian history, the author/narrator does not have to search very hard for figures who spouted religious hatred and ethnic bigotry and caste prejudice. At the same time, the book celebrates those people, mostly historical, who expressed ideas of commonality, the most frequent being variations on the statement by Nizamuddin, a medieval Sufi saint who appears in the novel, that 'all people are children of God.' While these voices are represented, power seems to lie with those who advocate what today we would call 'identity politics,' whether it be a 14<sup>th</sup> century Delhi Sultan or an early 20<sup>th</sup> century leader of the RSS (an extreme Hindu nationalist group). The fact that these sets of ideas, both the repellent sectarian ones and the admirable communal ones, criss-cross the centuries makes the related point that history does not change in its fundamentals. The author suggests as much in one of the last chapters, entitled 'The Builders', which is narrated by the son of construction worker who helped to build the new city of Delhi in the early decades of the twentieth century. His story helps us to fit the pieces together of this jigsaw puzzle that is Delhi, just as every generation must tell its stories so that later ones can carry on the mantle of being citizens of one of the most important cities in the history of the world. This grandiloquent and brilliantly realised idea must be the *raison d'être* for writing the book.

Diversity A second, and related, theme is that of diversity. Despite the underlying unity, the history and people of Delhi have a rich diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures. Any attempt to bulldoze that mixture into a false notion of purity is a denial of historical reality. The novel celebrates many examples of this diversity, which at the same time blur categories that might divide us. The best example, of course, is the figure of Bhagmati, the hermaphrodite or *hijra*, who has crossed gender lines. She may be a sexual libertine, but beneath her behaviour, she represents an ambiguous mixture of male and female identities, which have caused so much stress, not to say violence, in Delhi (and elsewhere). Another similar figure is Mussadilal, an historical figure from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, who represents another kind of cross-dressing, this time between Hindu and Muslim identities. He is, apparently, born a Hindu but becomes so assimilated to the culture of his Muslim patrons that he no longer knows to which community he belongs. The third example of India's admixture is Alice Aldwell, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Indian, or half-caste. As the child of miscegenation,

she fits into neither British nor Indian society and suffers as a result, only escaping certain death when she disguises herself as a Muslim. This is the coherence, and the genius, of this sometimes exasperatingly chaotic novel: this second theme is the corollary of the first theme. The divisive lines drawn by religious fanatics are the same lines that are blurred by the ambiguous figures of Mussadilal, Bhagmati and Alice.

Cynicism As a minor, third theme, we can point to the cynicism which defines Delhi's history. Certainly, the author portrays the history of Delhi without sentimentality or taking sides. Every ruler, from every ethnic group—Afghan, Persian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, British—is shown to be ambitious, corrupt and cruel. The blood shed in the Mughal court, it is often said, was even greater than that spilt by the contemporaneous Tudor court in England. But there are other villainous rulers and leaders who appear in this novel, including greedy merchants, traitorous princes, god-fearing religious fanatics and ordinary crooks who, together, lead India to its moral collapse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its spiral into violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, the man who assassinated Gandhi, a Hindu man, revels in his act, crying wildly, 'Yes, I killed him. Killed him with my own hands.' And then, at the close of the novel, during the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi (following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard), a Sikh night watchman says to himself, 'What is this talk of freedom? Freedom for what? Better loot and kill. Everyone talks freedom, but no one knows what it is.' And so, the great historical wheels of oppression, injustice and cruelty turn until the great civilisation is plunged into yet more moral crises.

### **Characters**

The narrator The narrator, who resembles the author, is a journalist and a sensualist. He returns to Delhi after years in England, where he began bored with his sex and professional life.

Bhagmati Bhagmati is a *hijra*, which usually refers to a man who dresses as a woman and is often a dancer and a courtesan. However, Bhagmati is truly a hermaphrodite because she has both male and female anatomical parts. She is a major character in the novel, representing (it seems) the appetites, desires and dangers of Delhi itself.

Mussadilal Mussadilal is an historical (possibly legendary) Kayastha, or a scribe, born in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, who serves at the courts of the Delhi Sultans. He is an important early voice of humanism and a symbol of the mixture of identities that the novel celebrates. He appears to be a Hindu but is so assimilated to the Muslim rulers, that his identity is ambiguous.

Aurangzeb Aurangzeb is an historical and infamous Mughal Emperor, who ruled in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, expanded the empire and treated the Hindu population with cruelty.

Nadir Shah Nadir Shah is the historical Persian king who sacked Delhi in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and proved himself to be an erratic and incompetent ruler.

Meer Taqi Meer Meer Taji Meer is an historical and beloved Urdu poet, who wrote a memoir detailing the turbulent events in Delhi in the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Alice Aldwell Alice Aldwell is a fictional English woman, married to a man who serves in the British colonial administration in Calcutta. She is half-caste, that is, the product of British and Indian parentage.

Nihal Singh Nihal Singh is a fictional Sikh soldier in the army of the East India Company during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He joined the army of the 'foreigners' because he was fed up with the Mughal Emperors who had waged war against the Sikhs.

Bahadur Shah Zafar Bahadur Shah Zafar is the historical, last Mughal Emperor, who is deposed by the defeat of the Mutiny in 1857-1858.

## Alice Aldwell (Determined)

**Character** The most important thing we need to know about Alice Aldwell is that she is the product of a mixed-race marriage, an English woman and an Indian father. Even her foreign mother had, having been born in India, assimilated almost completely to the local culture. Because Anglo-Indians were so despised by both sides, Alice is desperate to 'pass' as pure English, a desire that is at least partially achieved when she boards a ship to take her from Bombay to London, with her two daughters. Alice is a clever woman, who speaks Hindustani, Persian and Urdu, in addition to English. She is also resourceful, devising ways to escape the murderous riots of the Mutiny in Delhi in 1857-1858. Unlike her husband, she survives the horrors of those months, when rebellious Indians, civilians and soldiers, turned on the British and killed them in large numbers. She does not, however, escape unscathed, as she endures continual raping by Indian guards in a dark prison. In this respect, Alice represents the very many British women who were actually treated this way during the Mutiny. This does not mean, however, that Alice, like every other female character in this sprawling novel, embracing Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, English and Chinese women, does not at some time enjoy erotic or illicit sex. And like most of these other women, Alice uses her body to obtain what she wants in life.

**Activities** While married to Alex Aldwell in Calcutta, Alice had to endure a succession of events beloved among the British in India, including weddings and christenings. She attended these gatherings, but mostly stayed on the side-lines as her Anglo-Indian background did not admit her to the inner circles of colonial society. After moving to Delhi, she again goes through the memsahib's (English woman's) routine, even joining her husband on a tiger shooting expedition. But most of her time is spent in the women's quarters of high-ranking Muslim families, as a spy for the government, attempting to pick up gossip or solid information about the rebellion that everyone knows is in preparation. She brings baskets of fruit as a gift, sits down in a scrum of ladies and listens to music or singing, or watches the dancing of *hijras*, the eunuchs. After these visits, Alice is very fond of insulting her hosts—'All Indians are liars,' she says. 'They learn to lie even before they can talk.'

### Illustrative moments

Determined Alice Aldwell is a determined woman. She knows that she must put herself first if she is to get anywhere in life. For that reason, she is constantly sizing up situations, looking for opportunities and then seizing them with ruthless determination. A good illustration of this talent occurs when she is trying to get her husband to move away from Calcutta after his retirement from working in the post office. She has her heart on moving to Delhi. Living in Calcutta, then the capital of British India, did not appeal to Alice because it was full of 'Eurasians', or Anglo-Indians. Alice is herself Anglo-Indian, but she hangs on to the fact that her mother was 'pure English' and does not want her daughters to grow up among Anglo-Indians. Alec, Alice's recently retired husband, has no intention of moving because as he says, 'Living is cheaper here, in Calcutta.' Alice then takes matters into her own hands, quite literally. She goes to see Mr Atkins, who had been Alec's boss, and asks him to find him a new job in another part of the country. Mr Atkins was forty, a bachelor, and no match for Alice's womanly wiles. Within days, she has treated him to unforgettable bouts of love-making, after which he miraculously finds a job for Alec in Delhi. These events, narrated by Alice in the first-person in a few paragraphs, are presented like a business negotiation. It is frank, brisk, efficient. There is a goal and there is a strategy. There is the implementation of the strategy and the realisation of the goal. No sentiment, no emotion, not even a scintilla of guilt on the part of Alice, who is determined to get what she wants. Fortunately, Alec has no idea how he landed such a plum job in Delhi.

Patriotic Alice feels a deep connection to England through her mother and, because of her half-caste status, is more prejudiced against Indians than the normal British person. For this reason, she is more than happy to act as a spy for the British authorities. She has a chance to do just this after she and her husband settle in Delhi. The year is 1857, when the political situation is tense, with rumbles of rebellion in the air. Mr Metcalfe, the British governor, is afraid that the native soldiers in Delhi, and other cities, might mutiny and launch an armed attack on the British. Metcalfe then asks Alice, because she speaks Hindustani, to find out what the 'native' women are saying in the *harem*. Alice feels proud that she can, as she puts it, 'do something for the Old Country.' Feeling as if she has been given a 'dangerous but important mission,' she visits the palace of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the soon-to-be-deposed Mughal Emperor, and spends time in the women's quarters. On one occasion, while listening to poetry recited in Urdu and Persian, which she also speaks, she thinks she hears coded messages in the verses. She discusses the poetry with others, including some young men

who are in the audience, trying to prise out any hidden meanings, all the time pretending to be interested in the beauty of the images and the music of the recital. Through a combination of her linguistic competence, her personal charm and her dedication to her 'country,' Alice is able to understand that a group of rebels are about to attack the British population of Delhi. When she takes this message to Metcalfe, the governor, she is praised as a 'true patriot.' This makes Alice, the half-caste who had been taunted when a young girl, very happy.

**Clever** Like many people who are not born into luxury or privilege, Alice Aldwell has had to rely on her own talents to get where she is in life. Unlike many of those same people, she is also clever. Not only does she speak three languages (Hindustani, Urdu and Persian) in addition to English, but she is quick-witted and able to extricate herself from difficult situations. One such situation develops when the Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the colonial army turn against the British and begin to fight the short war known as the Mutiny or Rebellion of 1857-1858. Alice, who had forewarnings of the mutiny (see the illustrative moment described above), could not have imagined the extent of the killing and barbarism that was unleashed on the British population in Delhi. From the terrace roof of her house, she watches as large groups of horsemen gallop through the city, screaming, 'Death to the foreigners. We will kill them all!' With mobs roaming the streets, threatening to kill her, her husband and her two daughters, Alice quickly acts. She tells her husband that they should split up (so 'as not to put all our eggs in one basket') and that she will take her daughters to the house of a Muslim friend. Alec is to go to another house. Then she dresses herself as a Muslim and does the same for her daughters, grabbing the *burqas* of her servants. Having reached the Muslim's house, she then undergoes a quick conversion ceremony. Alice is now Ayesha, who says that her mother was a Muslim and that, although her father was a 'white man,' she has remained a pious Muslim. This invented ancestry and the dialect in which it is spoken are enough to convince the mullah, or religious leader, who comes to inspect the household, checking that no foreigners are hiding there. Alec is later killed, but clever Alice is able to escape detection, survives and takes her daughters to England, thus fulfilling her life's dream.

**Bhagmati** (Loyal)

**Character** Bhagmati is a hermaphrodite, a eunuch, known as a *hijra*, who is the mistress of the narrator. But she is not a man cross-dressing as a woman, as the reader first imagines. In fact, Bhagmati was born with both male and female anatomical elements and was given by her perplexed father to a troupe of itinerant *hijras*. As a young teenager, her voice broke, like a boy's, but she also began to menstruate. As such, she is sterile; no matter how much sex she has (and she has a lot in these pages), she cannot conceive. As the author himself explained in an interview, 'I thought that sterility was a wonderful symbol for a city in which so much has happened...but still has not produced what one would have expected of it.' Bhagmati is described as unattractive, pock-marked and uncouth, and she steadily grows fatter. The narrator frequently compares her to Delhi, at one time making the comment that she must have once been beautiful 'just as the ruins of Delhi are evidence of its past splendour.'

Despite her appearance, she has tremendous sexual energy, which appeals to the narrator. And, more important, she is loyal to him and to her family. She also has a husband, to whom she returns whenever she needs a roof over her head; he pays the fines whenever she is jailed for soliciting. She is also genuinely fond of the narrator, loving him with a non-possessive love and sheltering him in times of need. Like Delhi itself, she has been through a great deal of abuse, exploitation and suffering; she has been 'conquered' many times and not always treated with respect. With the narrator, she shares an instinctual candour, a willingness to see things as they are—often squalid and corrupt—without relying on illusions to mollify her. She herself is perhaps the only character in the novel who is not morally compromised by her behaviour. Her work as a prostitute is both for financial gain and occasional pleasure, and she never presents herself as anything but a prostitute. The narrator, and the reader, however, can see that she is a rock of stability in the midst of chaos and a person with a good heart.

**Activities** Before she enters the story, Bhagmati performed in a troupe of *hijras*, dancing and singing at special events, especially weddings. In her spare time, then and later, she works as a prostitute, mostly visiting clients in the international hotels of New Delhi. Once she begins to live with the narrator, however, she becomes more like a domestic servant, although not forswearing love-making. In her leisure time, she likes to sit around smoking cheap cigarettes and flicking through magazines. Sometimes, she rides around Delhi in the narrator's car as he visits various parts of the city.

## Illustrative moments

Loyal Bhagmati is steadfastly loyal to the narrator throughout the novel. It is telling, for instance, that, when he first finds her unconscious on the road and takes her home, she calls herself 'your slave' and 'your servant.' She is a prostitute, of course, but usually her loyalty to a man ends when she receives his payment for her services. With the narrator, however, she begins a deep and long-lasting attachment. Her loyalty is best illustrated in the final pages of the novel, when she returns to protect the narrator from the anti-Sikh rioters who are taking revenge for the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard. The narrator has not seen Bhagmati for months, but when he is in danger, she comes to protect him. While the narrator is blasé about any potential danger to himself, she is adamant that the threat is real. She takes him to the roof terrace, from where he can see the fires burning and the mobs roaming the streets below. She then persuades him to cut his hair and beard (obvious signs of a Sikh man), to yank the nameplate off his front door and to hide in the garden. The mob goes from house to house, apartment to apartment, asking neighbours who are the Sikhs and then setting fire to any place where they live. Crouching in the garden, guarded by Bhagmati, the narrator looks on in horror as his own male servant is torn to pieces by the mob. Bhagmati keeps him from yelling out in protest and grief, and then she leads him away, explaining that no one will harm a eunuch and her customer as long as he does not have the long hair of a Sikh. In this final and moving scene of this long novel, Bhagmati shows her loyalty and saves the narrator from certain death, just as he, in the very beginning, rescued her while lying on the road.

Desperate Bhagmati lives on the margins of society, in more ways than one. As a *hijra*, she is beyond normal categories, and as a prostitute she is constantly stepping beyond moral codes and laws. Her desperation is obvious when she is picked up off the road by the narrator, and her condition is illustrated a little later when he tries to take her back to her home. The narrator wants to get rid of her, having described her as 'uncouth' and the 'ugliest whore in Delhi.' She belches, she swears, she picks her teeth and her hair is greasy. But when it comes to the moment when he is to drop her off at her home, she begs him to let her stay with him. 'Please, sir,' she says, in tears, 'I will be your slave for life. You need not pay me. You need not make love to me. Just please let me be your slave.' We know that she has been abused by many of her customers, made to do degrading things, often beaten and sometimes thrown out without any remuneration for her services. In this moment, when she pleads with the narrator, all that suffering 'was written on her desperate face.' Eventually, after more tears and pleas, the narrator relents, even though he doesn't want 'to be seen with her in public.' She immediately falls at his feet and kisses them, which is the traditional gesture of obeisance in Indian culture.

Scheming Although Bhagmati has been abused and is desperate, she still has her wits about her. She knows how to make money, how to spot a likely customer and how to approach him. The foreigners are the best, she says, because they are the kindest. Perhaps that's what she saw in the narrator, when she played on his sympathies to 'take her in.' But that does not mean she is out of trouble, and she soon has reason to employ her scheming talents with him, too. The situation is that the narrator has tired of her, and she of him, so they have parted. Then, she is desperate again, in need of money, and has no customers. Surely, she thinks, I can get Mr Singh (the narrator) to part with a few thousand. It wouldn't be for sex—he never paid her for that—but just as a loan to a friend. The problem is that the narrator has taken up with a German woman, who is demanding all his attention and living in his apartment. Bhagmati, however, is up to the task. She chooses a time when she knows that the two of them will be home, probably eating in the beautiful kitchen, and then knocks loudly on the door. When the German lady opens it, Bhagmati says, 'Oh, you're his latest, are you? Well, don't mind me. I've just come back to collect my things. Been away in Paris and had no time.' These words are spoken by a bedraggled woman, who is obviously a prostitute, reeking of garlic and sweat. The German woman is aghast and promptly leaves the apartment, just as Bhagmati had hoped. The narrator, who has been silently watching her performance, begins to applaud. She bows and gives him a sly smile, which he returns. The crafty Bhagmati has achieved her objective.

## **The Narrator** (Realist)

**Character** The narrator is a retired or retiring journalist, who has seen it all. He has no illusions, or principles, it seems, except to enjoy himself and not to be played the fool. He is a Sikh named Mr Singh, which confirms our suspicions that he is a fictionalised version of the author himself. He is in his fifties when we first meet him, sometime in the late 1950s, and lives by himself with a cook and a servant named Budh Singh. The narrator is a member of the 'old cock network,' which appears to be a group of older men who chase after women and girls. He is an intelligent man, who knows a great deal about the history and architecture of Delhi. Unmarried, he is a licentious fornicator and supreme libertine. However misogynistic he may be, he is kind and treats (most) women with respect. In this way, he is a male counterpart to Bhagmati, the prostitute whom he takes up with, since both of them love sex and have no moralistic qualms about their predilection. This is the most prominent part of his character—he is a realist, not a moralist. He has no illusions or pretences, no desire to see things as they should be or as he might like them to be. This is why, although he appears to be self-centred and obsessed with sex, he is a sympathetic character. He does harm to no one, is often generous to friends and kind to strangers. We might want to condemn him as immoral, as corrupted by his enormous sexual appetite, but that is precisely the kind of moralising that he has no time for. Like his beloved Delhi, and like his partner Bhagmati, the narrator tries to live life to the fullest.

**Activities** As a member of 'old cock club,' the retired journalist spends most of time seeking out sex partners, many of whom belong to the two hundred foreign embassies in India's capital city. His other, equally passionate pastime, is learning about the architecture and history of Delhi. He frequently drives his car to some monument from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and spends half a day admiring the building and trying to read the old inscriptions. Back home in his apartment, he enjoys his whisky and his well-stocked library of academic books and biographies.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Realist** The narrator is a world-weary realist, a journalist who harbours no illusions about the world around him. This does not mean, however, that he is devoid of sentiment, only that he does not particularly value such feelings. A good illustration of this point of view is presented in the opening pages, when the narrator has just returned to Delhi after some years in England. He goes on a quick tour of the city, to acquaint himself with its distinct nature. As he drives through the streets, he mocks the simple-minded political slogans he hears chanted by mobs, who are paid to demonstrate for this corrupt official or that hypocritical party leader. Then he visits a coffee house where he meets old friends, including a politician whom he mercilessly satirises, saying, 'He made a name for himself during the last famine by his "skip-a-chapati-a-week" campaign. Then, overcome by depression, the narrator visits the steps by the river, where corpses are burnt. He looks at the faces of the grieving relatives of a young girl who has died of a mysterious disease. He describes how 'a man takes a sharp-pointed bamboo pole, prods the flaming, crackling pyre to locate the dead girl's head and then lunges into her skull [in order to free her soul].' Driving back to his comfortable apartment in his nice car, he thinks that it could have been him mourning the death of his daughter. 'But what are my cares and frustrations,' he says to himself, 'compared to those of the millions who are starving in this country?' He goes back home and drinks some whisky. 'That's Delhi,' he says. 'When life gets too much for you, all you need is to spend an hour watching the dead being put to the flames and hearing their kin wail. Then back home for a peg of whisky. In Delhi, death and drink make life worth living.' The narrator is not without sentiment—indeed, he is moved by the grief of those he sees at the cremation ground—but he keeps it all in perspective.

**Licentious** As the narrator himself announces in the prologue to this book, it could be called 'A Fornicator's Guide to Delhi.' Certainly, the narrator spends a lot of time making love with a lot of different women, just as other characters (mostly historical figures) from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries very frequently indulge their sensual appetites. Whether we regard the narrator's sexual exploits as self-aggrandising exaggerations or as misogynistic bluster doesn't matter because the point seems to be that Delhi and its population have always enjoyed bodily pleasures. A typical illustration of the narrator's twentieth-century sexual appetite occurs in a short chapter midway through the book. The narrator meets a middle-aged woman from south India, who wants to write a book about the historical monuments of Delhi. She is Kamala, mother of three and wife of a Brigadier General, but also bored and very attractive. The narrator proceeds slowly, first taking her out for coffee, but then manoeuvres her into bed, where he enjoys the 'southern taste of her body,' with 'breasts as round and firm as coconuts [typical of southern cuisine].' There is a lot more erotic description of their love-making,

which would probably qualify for the 'bad-sex' writing award, but it seems to fit the atmosphere of the book, the dissipated city of Delhi and the directionless life of the narrator.

Kind The narrator is a man who rarely hesitates to satisfy his desires, sexual or otherwise, and yet he is still a kind person. The clearest demonstration of his kindness comes in the scene in which he first meets Bhagmati, the eunuch who becomes his lover, confidant and advisor, the only person who accompanies him through the many episodes of this novel. He is driving along a road in outer Delhi that is considered risky because it is the location for crime and scams, including car-jacking. It is a dark, windy night. He sees a body lying on the road and stops. The body is female, spread-eagled on the tarmac. Dark skin, too dark to be considered attractive, and dressed in cheap clothes. He revives her, and it turns out she has had an epileptic fit. 'I wiped the bloody froth from her mouth with her own sari and helped her up,' the narrator tells us. 'She smelled of sweat and urine.' When she asks him to take her to a bus-stand, the narrator is suspicious—this might be a scam in which a person pretends to be injured as a means of robbing a naïve person who tries to help. But then he realises that she is genuinely desperate. Where to take her? To a hospital? To the police? He rejects both these options because then he would have to answer awkward questions, and possibly pay a bribe. He could also leave her on the road, where he found her. He cannot do that, however callous or cynical he might be. He takes her home, gives her a meal and a bed, and this is the beginning of their life-long companionship. The narrator does not present himself as a philanthropist or any kind of humanitarian, but he has the normal human reaction to another's suffering. He may be a licentious libertine, but he is also caring.