

## The Age of Kali

*Indian Travels and Encounters*

W. Dalrymple

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According to ancient Hindi Mythology, time is divided into four epochs, the present one being the age of Kali. Kali is a destructive god, and sure enough India during the 90's seemed to have been caught in a destructive mood. On the other hand we always tend to exaggerate our own times, for good or for worse, our memories being so short. India is a big and populous country, and violence if rare in relative terms always is present in abundance when absolute numbers are concerned.

The author spent the decade traveling in India. For a large chunk of the time in residence in New Delhi, for the rest making excursions. While he has written at length as a historian, especially about the Moghul times, this time he writes as a reporter and a journalist, and as such the pace is harried and differ little from the fares you usually are served by fast-moving intrepid reporters sky-diving into some trouble zone, making a few quick assessments for the benefit of a jaded news-addicted readership. There is indeed plenty of violence and corruption going on in India to fill not only one book, and as usual you find yourself fired by indignation, but as the latter has no constructive outlet it simply peters out and you turn to the next story.

Dalrymple has the ambition of being all over the place. He reports from local governments in decay in the north, being taken over by criminals and thugs, enjoying immunity and the support of large and resentful masses. In particular the state of Bihar is in great trouble, yet another failed state which fails to provide the basic services, run by a low-caste criminal bent upon enriching himself and his entourage, while intimidating and killing his adversaries. Is this not what Plato and Aristotle warned against as one of the dangers of democracy, namely that power may be taken over by the rubble led by demagogues? The caste system in India is prevalent and obviously a source both of social stability and unrest. Stability, as it structures society and provides rules for interaction; unrest because it is inherently unjust, in fact egregiously so, and clashes with democratic values. With the advent of modern and independent India there was imposed from above an effort, if not to abolish caste altogether, at least to moderate its injustices. The dalit, i.e. the untouchables, were given quotas for government service and encouraged to enter politics. Such measures led to resentment, not necessarily among the highest castes who no doubt would consider themselves above that, and may have played a role in the recent political revival of Hinduism as manifested by the BJP, which did briefly come to power. This rather new political movement was an umbrella organization including under its protection, various extreme right-wing movements, responsible for acts of mayhem against their prime object of hate - the Muslims.

The common technique of the high-powered reporter is the interview. Such opportunities to meet and talk are highly prized, and although in terms of exchange of information,

they tend to be meagre, they give the reporter a chance to make at least a brief sketch and thus to inject his reportage with elements of human interest. One obvious thing that strikes most people is the disparity between the private and the public persona. As in the case of Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia, a former wife of a Maharaja. Privately she gives a very gentle grandmotherly impression, but publicly she is the leader of an extreme Hindu revivalist movement, not only responsible for tearing down mosques but also for massacres on Muslims. How can you reconcile those two sides? I guess it is impossible, but being impossible means not that it is not common. Most dictators are very charming figures when you meet them in private and your interests are not conflicting. Another disparity, although of a different nature, is that of the private and public Benazir Bhutto. A very beautiful woman, westerly educated at Radcliffe and Oxford. Speaking English better than Urdu. Now wonder a darling of the West, a woman standing up for democracy against military rulers. However her taste is undeveloped especially her intellectual, thus very kitschy, being that of a spoiled rich girl, whose interests are shopping and hairdressing. As a political animal she is however ruthless, married to a playboy, and running a racket as Prime minister of the country, so deeply mired in corruption that she was dismissed by the President. In a region of the world where corruption is rampant, this means something. Now a few years after the encounter Bhutto was killed during a rally. This along with other updates are to be seen in the intermittent post script.

His journey takes him to the rural areas where time in many ways have stood still. To an outsider, especially a casual one, this is very charming and reassuring, yet it means that for people trapped in it, life can be very difficult indeed. Sati is still being practiced, and so ingrained in the tradition that young widows may voluntarily climb the funeral pyre. A case of a young beautiful widow being burned to death is coming to the attentions of the authorities. Legal measures are taken, many villagers are being charged with forcing death upon the hapless, in the end the case results in a dismissal to the unbelief of the many. How could a young woman voluntarily submit to her death. On the other hand why should that be less credible than young women becoming suicide bombers, and of the latter there are enough cases to prove the voluntary nature of their actions.

Violence perpetrated by guerillas tends to be romantic. One thinks of Che Guevara. In Sri Lanka for many years there were the Tamil Tigers. A small group of men and women, in fact many of them still children, fighting a much bigger force and often routing them. Now this might not be entirely surprising, the point of guerilla warfare is to exploit the weakness of large forces and the advantages of small harrying ones. And children are usually more efficient as soldiers than adults. As Kapuscinsky has remarked, they know no fear nor do they have any empathy. And in fact the Tamil Tigers had neither, carrying poisonous ampules they were never to enjoy the option of being taking captive, and thus motivated to fight until the very last. A kind of heroism a Hitler urged his soldiers to adopt. Of course Dalrymple is young and adventurous and not adverse to entering the den. He is lucky enough to meet and talk to some of the key players, and even to get a glimpse of the famed jungle camps, where the youngsters are fed on Western Rambo films as a substitute for proper military training. The result of his endeavors is of course a journalistic scoop.

Sri Lanka is not the only excursion out of India proper, Pakistan is another, where he

travels to the lawless frontier to Afghanistan, where tribal life still continues and family feuds are the norm. This area in which the government no longer can take the responsibility for visitors, is also an area where the density and availability of assault weapons is at a peak. The pointless emptying of ammunition is a common past time. Dalrymple survives his forages, not everyone is as lucky, as we know kidnappings of western journalists are not unheard of, ending up more often than not with the decapitation of the ransom. The author describes the land as stark and forbidding, yet further on he waxes about the beauty of the landscape. The most intriguing part of which may be the Hellenistic legacy left by the retreating armies of Alexander the Great. Greek architecture fused with Buddhist religion, and created a unique blend of civilizations, surviving that of the Ancient Greeks with many a century. In fact India itself with its Hindu practices is now really the only direct link we have of ancient civilizations. The gods of the Greek only live on in literary recollection, in India the idols and sacrifices make up a living tradition that allows you to gaze literally through the millennia. One would suspect that a Plato would find himself rather at home around a Hindu temple.

The strangest report is from the French Reunion island. Superficially it is French, with French wine and cuisine and croissants, as well as trendy surfing clubs, but scrape at the surface, and penetrate into the forbidding interior of the island, dominated by stark and steep, and another lost world opens up. As usual to make it come alive the human interest has to be evoked and some interesting local inhabitant has to be sought out.

This is journalism. It means that although there is plenty of word-painting, very little of it sticks in the mind afterwards. The true literary journey manages to convey images which will live in you and for ever make you think of certain regions in a special, often enchanted light. None of this will be found in the very many vignettes of Indian life. The pace is too brisk, the attitude too matter of fact and unreflective. Dalrymple is a professional, an efficient one, and one may sense in all his travel an impatience to get on with the next assignment. As Cartier-Bresson dismissed film compared to the still image. In the moving picture, the next picture is always more interesting than the one at hand.

March 2, 2011 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se