

# States of the Union

## TRAVELS IN AN EDGY INDIA

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



GENERAL ARUN VAIDYA

**W**HILE DIANE AND I were in India this summer, the former chief of the Indian Army, General Arun Vaidya, was gunned down in broad daylight by four Sikh terrorists astride a pair of motor scooters. The 60-year-old retired general and his wife had been shopping at a neighborhood market and were returning home in their white, chauffeur-driven Maruti, an oddly conspicuous target for a man who had been receiving very convincing death threats. A police bodyguard in the back seat "could do nothing as the assailants rode away," noted the *Hindustan Times*.

The assassination was another incident in the apparently endless chain of

vengeance and violence that afflicts this huge, fragile democracy. The struggle for national unity is real enough, but so are the castes, cults and sects with which most of the country's 780 million inhabitants still fiercely identify, and through which they seek salvation. It sometimes seemed to Diane and me—admittedly secular samplers of India's many gods—that for most Indians the pursuit of salvation matters most. The question is whether it could best be achieved through nationalism or through what the Indians call "communalism."

On the nationalist side are arrayed all the instruments of state and finance: Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's dynastic Congress Party, the Army, the government bureaucracy, the big corporations, the universities, and the technocrats. As their rhetoric makes clear, the new religion for these heirs to the British Raj is mystical patriotism. A characteristic banner displayed over gas stations by the Bharat Petroleum Corporation, one of India's major private enterprises, tells the story. It names the country's holiest rivers:

VINDHYA, HIMACHA, YAMUNA, GANGA...

LET'S PURIFY THE SOUL OF INDIA.

PROUD TO BE INDIANS.

On the communal side we find all the templars and tribes who one way or an-

other have been trying to purify the soul of India for more than 5,000 years. The Sikhs are a relatively recent entry. They appeared about 500 years ago in reaction to what they perceived to be a corrupt Hindu hierarchy. Like the Jains and Buddhists who preceded them, the Sikhs wanted no castes and no priests, but unlike their predecessors they also eschewed idolatry and all forms of materialism. Their one God was a formless abstraction.

Over the centuries, however, Sikh practice has taken on a distinctly Hindu coloration, including idols, elites and a priesthood that can be as grasping and opportunistic as any in India. The upshot has been a new, virulent strain of communalism that promotes terror and preaches secession. It is one more dagger in the side of national unity.

General Vaidya was in part a victim of that communalism and in part a victim of the central government's inability to prevent it. Neither the administration nor the bodyguards it trained and deployed proved capable of deflecting the dagger. Indeed, none of the political institutions created over the past four decades to replace the British Raj have so far been equal to the task of enforcing a civil, democratic peace—of assuring a pluralism without violence. Consequently, the Indians' relentless search for salvation continues to be drenched in blood.

The General's name had been near the top of the terrorists' lengthy hit list—just below that of their most illustrious victim, Indira Gandhi—for the role he played in Operation Blue Star two years earlier. It had been his rotten luck to have given the fateful command that sent Army tanks crashing into the 72-acre Golden Temple compound, the Sikhs' "Holy of Holies," in the Punjabi city of Amritsar. Much blood was spilt; many sacred shrines were destroyed.

It is fair to say the General had no choice: The assault came directly from Mrs. Gandhi. By then Mrs. Gandhi herself did not have many options either, for she had procrastinated too long and allowed Sikh extremists to dominate the conflict. They were following their own false prophet, one Sant Jarnail

Singh Bhindranwale, a deadly guru, a Tartuffe with a gun. His list of nonnegotiable demands featured a separate Sikh nation.

Mrs. Gandhi inadvertently anointed this man by failing to negotiate with his enemies, the more moderate Sikh leaders. They had been seeking the settlement of some territorial and water disputes with the neighboring Hindu state of Haryana, the designation of Chandigarh as the Punjab's capital alone (it is currently the capital of Haryana as well), and an amendment to the Constitution that would officially recognize Sikhism as a distinct religion. Now Bhindranwale was using the Golden Temple as a terror base, whence his thug-disciples sallied forth to murder policemen and political enemies at leisure. In a room below the Holy Pool Bhindranwale's prisoners were routinely brutalized. Torture in the Golden Temple had become almost as commonplace as prayer.

The terrorists, moreover, had fortified the temple as lethally as the Moghul emperors had once fortified their red forts in Agra and Delhi. There was no shortage within the gates of grenades, rifles and machine guns. According to the BBC journalists Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, whose *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* is considered the most reliable book on the subject, the Sikh arsenal even included a few armor-piercing rockets.

When the smoke finally cleared in Amritsar, Bhindranwale was dead and India was a different country. Its 15 million Sikhs (only 2 per cent of the total population) had long resided amicably among the Hindu majority, but now they were both frightened and angry. The living Bhindranwale, for all his charisma, had never attracted a large Sikh following; a dead Bhindranwale, killed by an invading army, was another story: He became a fallen prophet, a martyr to the cause. And the cause itself, Sikh autonomy, grew suddenly dear to rank-and-file Sikhs who previously had been loyal to the notion of Indian unity.

Four months later, after Indira Gandhi was slain by her Sikh bodyguards, Hindu mobs in Delhi and elsewhere fully justified Sikh fears. It was a case of rape,

pillage and murder; local police coped with the riots by looking the other way.

The turmoil in Delhi lasted more than a week. Prudent Sikhs locked their doors and barricaded their windows. An Indian friend who lives in Delhi told us he was walking home from the grocery store one evening when he saw a hand reaching toward him over a wall. "Bread for my children," a voice pleaded from behind the wall. "We have not left the house for six days." Our friend gave the man his groceries. "It was a terrible time," he recalls. "In India the violence is always just beneath the surface. Any spark can make it erupt."

**I**NDEED, wherever we went we found people on edge. The papers in Delhi were full of rumors of Sikh uprisings that never materialized, and of violent crimes gratuitously committed against Sikh merchants and taxi drivers. (It is easy to identify a Sikh male: He wears a turban and a full beard.) In Varanasi, where Hindus prefer to die so that their ashes can be carried down the Ganges toward Nirvana, protesting university students set up roadblocks that prevented our tour bus from entering the campus. We asked our guide what the students were protesting against. "They are very angry because of that general's assassination," he said, "and they want the police to capture the miscreants." (Educated Indians often talk the way we write.) The Indian mind is a puzzlement. For Nirvana, the soul's final emancipation, it can wait through any number of reincarnations; for political results it can hardly wait till supertime.

Government security frequently reflects the people's impatient side. The measures seem panicky and ponderous. We were told, for instance, that to take a train from Delhi to Srinigar, the capital of Kashmir, one had to obtain an official pass because the state of Punjab, the Sikh heartland, lies between the two points. Yet one could return to Delhi on the same train without a pass.

As it happened, Diane and I chose to reach Srinigar by air, an easy one-hour flight. Getting out of the Srinigar airport proved more difficult. On five dif-

ferent occasions we were required to show our passports and give our names to uniformed officials. "What is your good name?" a policeman would inquire, and then he would carefully write down our answers on small scraps of white paper. What the state of Kashmir and the government of India did with those thousands of daily notations is anybody's guess.

"These are meaningless exercises," our Kashmiri host informed us. "In Srinigar security is just an excuse for giving jobs to the unemployed." But who would begrudge them such jobs in a country where the per capita income is less than \$100 a year?

One comes away from this astonishing land with mixed feelings of affection and discouragement. Can India ever achieve prosperity, if not Nirvana? In doing so, will it be able to promote liberty and keep the peace? The same questions, it is true, apply generally to much of the Third World, and in most instances the answer has been a lugubrious no.

India, though, could be a special case. To an American the country may seem held together by baling wire and beetle gum, but as Indians kept reminding us, there is considerably more there than meets the Western eye. For all its soulfulness and well-advertised sense of fatalism, India has a practical side that may finally turn out to be its real salvation. In some respects it is as materialistic as Manhattan and as bourgeois in its aspirations as the good burghers of Berne.

The Indian middle class is rapidly expanding, and so are its residential suburbs, where a building boom is under way; 25 million Indians climbed out of poverty during the past decade. The bazaars seem at least as crowded as the mosques and temples, and the streets are filled with all manner of conveyances on the move—bicycles, rickshaws, buses, trucks—everyone honking horns, blowing whistles, ringing bells.

As we made our way through those incredibly busy streets, it was easy to believe that the people of India had a fair idea of where they were heading, even if the rest of us remained perplexed. We wished them Godspeed.