On the Grand Trunk Road: A Journey into South Asia

Steve Coll
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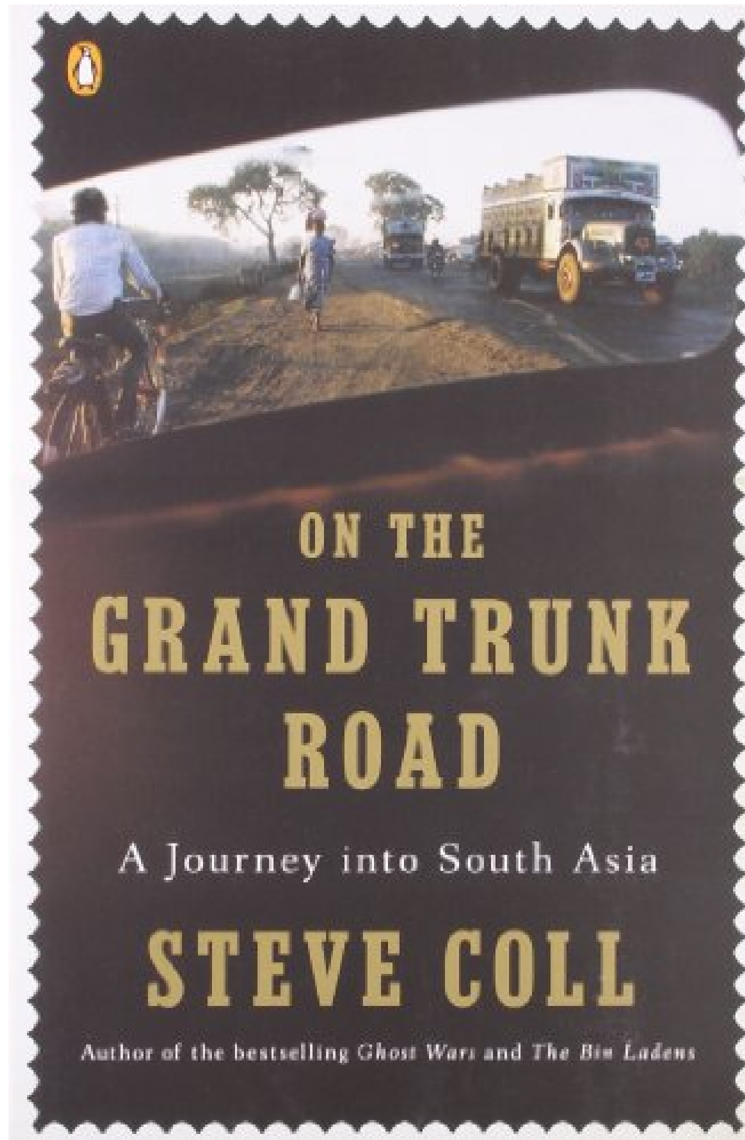

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#1275693 in Books Coll, Steve 2009-03-31 2009-03-31Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.40 x .70 x 5.50l, .64 #File Name: 0143115197352 pagesOn the Grand Trunk Road A Journey into South Asia | File size: 29.Mb

Steve Coll : On the Grand Trunk Road: A Journey into South Asia before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised On the Grand Trunk Road: A Journey into South Asia:

17 of 17 people found the following review helpful. A Fascinating Story with Historical SignificanceBy Bruce E. McLeod Jr.Steve Coll's book "On the Grand Trunk Road" reads like a Robert Ludlum novel interlaced with intrigue, deception and brute force. His investigative reporting and personal interviews with military generals, politicians and

clerics, amid the violence, corruption and backstabbing were vividly described. He recounted the internecine wars that were being fought in villages and towns along the "Grand Trunk Road" where innocent people were its victims.India's multifaceted culture, including dialects, religion and ethnicities, was damaged by British colonialism and, in 1947, by the partitioning and its aftermath. The physical grouping of Hindus and Muslims, into two separate countries, continues to fester with religious and ethnic hatred spewing across borders, in all directions, which accounts for much of the animosity and venom depicted in his book.The book also describes the history of the Taliban and its relationship with the ISI and the Pakistani military, as well as the involvement of the CIA. Tribal sentiments account for the kindredness between groups in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tribal laws were established in north Pakistan, where Afghan fundamentalist groups reside, conducting raids against other tribes with impunity, notwithstanding the sovereignty of the state and its military presence. In an effort to support the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan was used as a "staging area" for US military weapons, which were being moved secretly over the Peshawar trail.Steve Coll's biographical and historical report of India and Pakistan political leaders was very enlightening. He cited other events taking place in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, which provided pertinent information on the condition of life in these South Asian countries. He also presented detailed descriptions of child soldiers and separatist groups, who conducted insurgent plots against the Sri Lankan government. Readers will gain insight into the precarious and volatile political environment that exists in South Asia and its impact on the economy and the domestic life. The picture he "paints" is not pretty. The average citizen in South Asia faces a world of poverty, uncertainty, violence and a political system that has run amuck.The scope and magnitude of the demographic and geopolitical spectrum of South Asian countries makes it an interesting and exciting book to read. However, at times, it was difficult to comprehend the complex issues involving deep-seated emotions and the mind-set of those with political and tribal connections. I was also disappointed that maps were not included for easy reference--even with this updated edition. To follow the story better,I retrieved a detailed map from a National Geographic Magazine article, issued in May 1990, entitled "Searching for India: Along the Grand Trunk Road" which, after reading it, was the basis for my interest in purchasing his book.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Important but not so easy to get through.....By gtAs a long-time New Yorker reader, I was familiar with Steve Coll which was why I gravitated toward this book. I chose it for book club when it was my turn to pick. Because I knew it would be hard to read and I probably wouldn't get through it by my self.Still didn't quite manage to finish it -- maybe 25 pages to go. I think it was educational, but people complained that it was depressing, not current, and it was a bit of a drudge to read. It just felt long and repetitive. Not that there are repetitions, but once you've read the first 50 pages you get a feeling for the book that doesn't change.Nonfiction fans might have an easier time with this book. Our book club is a bunch of educated, fairly well-read women who like to read historical fiction. I think learning about how terrorism got to be what it is today is an important subject, and this book goes a long way toward filling us in, but it's no fun.6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Tour De Force of South Asia!By Kindle AddictThis book is a hidden gem and a must read for anyone interested in South Asia. What makes this book remarkable is the ease in which the author, Steve Coll, is able to blend broad macro-political trends with antidotal data gleaned from conversations with an array of businessmen, government bureaucrats, economists, and members of the local population. He is able to capture the trend lines of India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka and successfully brings the reader as close to the changing dynamics of the region as possible.What is also important to note is that this book was written in the early 1990's. The fall of communism, rise of islamic terrorism, civil unrest, and globalization were all sweeping the region, creating a tremendous amount of political and economic volatility. The author accurately forecasts the trajectories of the countries in South Asia, which in hindsight is no easy feat."On the Grand Trunk Toad" is a fantastic journey into South Asia.

Available for the first time in paperback, Steve Coll's trek across a socially and politically damaged South Asia Bestselling author Steve Coll is one of the preeminent journalists of the twenty-first century. His last two books, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Ghost Wars and New York Times bestseller The Bin Ladens, have been praised for their creative insight and complex yet compelling narratives-and have put him on par with journalists such as the legendary Bob Woodward. Now, for the first time ever, the paperback edition of On the Grand Trunk Road is finally available, revised and updated with new material. Focusing on Coll's journeys in conflict-ridden India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan as a bureau chief for The Washington Post, On the Grand Trunk Road reveals a little-seen area of the world where violence, corruption, and greed have had devastating effects on South Asians from all walks of life.Steve Coll's new book Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016 will be published in February 2018.

About the AuthorSteve Coll is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Ghost Wars and the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, and from 2007 to 2013 was president of the New America Foundation, a public policy institute in Washington, D.C. He is a staff writer for The New Yorker, and previously worked for twenty years at The Washington Post, where he received a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism in 1990. He is the author of seven other books, including On the Grand Trunk Road, The Bin Ladens, Private Empire, and Directorate

S.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Table of ContentsPENGUIN BOOKSTitle PageCopyright PageIntroductionSTATES OF FLUXChapter 1 - Sound and FuryChapter 2 - The Grand Trunk RoadChapter 3 - The Gravy TrainChapter 4 - Village on a HillSTATES OF MINDChapter 5 - EnemiesChapter 6 - Through the Looking GlassChapter 7 - RulersChapter 8 - Crossed LinesSTATES OF CONFLICTChapter 9 - Among the Death SquadsChapter 10 - The BoysChapter 11 - Riding the TigerChapter 12 - Inside OutChapter 13 - Secret WarSTATES OF PROGRESSChapter 14 - A Shadow Lifts, a Shadow FallsChapter 15 - DEM-o-crah-seeChapter 16 - Bombay and BeyondEpilogue: Time BombAcknowledgementsIndexPENGUIN BOOKSON THE GRAND TRUNK ROADSteve Coll is most recently the author of the national bestseller The Bin Ladens. He is the president of the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy institute headquartered in Washington, D.C., and a staff writer for The New Yorker. Previously he worked for twenty years at The Washington Post, where he received a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism in 1990, traveled widely as a foreign correspondent, and served as the Posts managing editor between 1998 and 2004. He is the author of five previous books, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller Ghost Wars and The Taking of Getty Oil.PENGUIN BOOKS Published by the Penguin Group Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) 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South AsiaEthnic relations. I. Title. DS340.C65 1994 915.40452DC20 93-1994 24689753The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the authors rights is appreciated.Introduction to the Paperback EditionBetween 1989 and 1992, when I served as a New Delhi-based foreign correspondent for the Washington Post and traveled to report the material in this book, I spent a great deal of time in Pakistan, often in the capital, Islamabad, an antiseptic planned city laid out on a grid. Almost invariably, I stayed at the Islamabad Holiday Inn, which later changed its affiliation to become the Islamabad Marriott Hotel. In that era of untroubled newspaper business models, I paid a little extra to book on the front-facing side of the fifth floor, where the rooms had vaulted ceilings and views of the Margala Hillssmall, morale-lifting advantages that eased the blues that come to those who live in a hotel room for weeks at a time. Downstairs, the lounges and restaurants were scenes of the sort of camaraderie peculiar to newspaper correspondents; here, the only palatable lubricant was bottled Murree Beer, which is officially available in Pakistans hotels to non-Muslim foreigners, provided they are willing to attest to their apostasy by signing their names in cloth-bound ledgers.On a Saturday in mid-September 2008, a large truck arrived at the hotel. When security guards, alert to potential terrorist bombers, approached to inspect the truck, the driver detonated a cache of explosives stuffed into the hold. The blast excavated a crater thirty feet deep, blackened the facade of the hotel, and set the building on fire. Ultimately, more than four dozen people died and more than two hundred were injured. In New York, I watched televised reports of the attack; they showed, over and over, an image of tall flames that burned brightly in the hotels forward windows. It was like watching your college dormitory burn to the ground.Pakistan has provided many such images of late; there is an air of violent transformation about the place, and an accumulating sense of loss. The country has survived many challenges and even cataclysms, including the severing of half of its territory in its 1971 war with India. If the past is any guide, the countrys resilient population and considerably less impressive politicians will muddle through the present crisesa vicious Islamist insurgency waged against the government by the Taliban and al Qaeda, compounded by accelerating inflation and economic stagnation. And yet it seems fair to ask what sort of guide the past may prove to be this time around. Pakistan may be passing into a particularly dark period, even by the measure of its own shadowed spectruma time for which there may be no entirely reliable maps.When I wrote On the Grand Trunk Road more than fifteen years ago, I hoped to describethrough particular landscapes, stories, and peoplethe texture of a profound transition on the Indian subcontinent, one shaped by the Cold Wars end and the opening of a new era of political and economic possibility. It was a time of both unusual optimism and intense violence. I wrote that the specific reference points of debate about South Asias past and future are the instances of its sound and fury: its explosions. The themes are what this sound and fury signifies, where it arises from, and where it will lead. It is easy to ask many of the same questions today, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The subcontinent of 1992 would be familiar to todays traveler, if he or she could find a way to move about safelyAfghanistan is still crippled by war, much of it waged covertly and influenced by outside powers; Kashmir is

still troubled by youthful Islamist insurgents; Sri Lanka is still gripped by extrajudicial killings, although on a lesser scale than before; Nepal is still searching for a plausible democratic constitution.There has been one profound change from before, however: Indias rise as an economic power. Unshackled from its Nehruvian-socialist economic model, the country has birthed a new elite of conspicuous rich; a large, confident middle class with money to spend; and a media-soaked culture increasingly permissive about a style of conspicuous consumption that would astonish, and presumably pain, Mahatma Gandhi. There were glimmers of this possibility in 1992, but only that. Shining India, as the Hindu Nationalist political slogans today have it, is partly a miragepoverty, illiteracy, profound income inequality, and backward infrastructure remain embedded behind the glare. Even so, India today is a markedly more stable and prosperous country than it was when I moved there to work fifteen years agoand it is also the only country in South Asia of which that can be said.If Indias success continues, in fifty years, the countrys more than one billion citizens may be transformed into a wealthy, innovative, and broadly prosperous society, much as the people of Korea and Japan were in the postwar period. A wealthy, democratic, pluralistic India could provide an important constitutional and even ethical anchor for the global politics of the twenty-first century. There is only one obvious strategic obstacle to Indias success: The potential failure of Pakistan, Indias ungainly colonial-era Islamic twin, an unruly sibling that has not grown up so well and bears considerable resentment about that fact.Pakistans unhappy, incomplete search for identity and sustainable politics is not only Indias weighted anchor, of course; it is also, arguably, the most important foreign policy problem confronting the United States. This too marks a change from the early years after the Cold War. In those days, from the reactions of editors, Washington Post readers, relatives, and friends it was possible to conclude, sincerely if a little facetiously, as I wrote, that the United States tended to view South Asia as one billion riotous and unfathomable poor people best left alone, disarmed if possible. September 11, 2001, changed all that. American investments in Afghanistan and Pakistanin blood and treasure alikeseem likely to deepen and to remain laden with risk for another decade or more. Americas best-informed specialists on the region are no longer limited to the handful of foreign correspondents, spies, and diplomats assigned there by accidental rotation; they now also include hundreds of military officers who have served three tours attempting to quell the Taliban and cope with Pakistans tribal areas, work that looks more daunting by the month.The Pakistan in these pages, thenthe culture of conspiracy, the problems of military rule, Islamist radicalism, and landed elitesremains, unfortunately, intact. So do many of the patterns of regional and guerrilla violence and environmental degradation, which the book attempts to describe. Because of the demands of journalism, my personal and emotional experience of South Asia has been too often connected with violence. Fifteen years ago, when I sat down to write, I began with this: During three years in South Asia, I shook hands with several men who subsequently exploded. There was no reason to suspect causality in this statistic. But the explosions were instants of intimate violence, and through their intimacy they demanded exploration. I can now extend that observation to be gender-inclusive. I was sitting in Londons Heathrow Airport in December 2007 when the first television bulletins reported that Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated by a suicide bomber who detonated himself beside her at the entrance to a park in Rawalpindi. To help connect the present with the past, I have added a new epilogue, Time Bomb, from work I recently completed for the New Yorker about Bhuttos murder and the ongoing insurgency from which it arose. It has been my privilege and my great good fortune to travel in South Asia for so many years with an open notebook, and yet my experience of the place remains one of intimate violence. Sifting through that sound and fury, and asking where it may lead, now seems more than a lifes work.IntroductionIf there is a better place for a journalist to work than South Asia, I would like to know about it. I say this not because of the Victorian romance of a New Delhi posting, which is surely part of the bargain, but because of contemporary factors: with the cold wars demise, the Indian subcontinent finds itself today in the midst of a transition from socialism to something beyond, a transition in which nearly all the earlier political and social arrangements are being fiercely contested. This has placed many of the most compelling and universal ideas of our timerevolution, counterrevolution, political religion, separatism, nationalism, and capitalism, to name a fewinto a kind of bubbling cauldron of subcontinental conflict and experimentation. Something like that could be said these days of other regions of a rapidly transformed world, such as the former Soviet Union. But in South Asia all this collective groping for the future seemed to me uniquely accessible and enlivening.Partly that is because South Asian societies are wide open, highly self-conscious, and for the most part deeply hospitable to Western outsiders. Time and again on my reportorial travels for The Washington Post, which sent me to New Delhi in 1989, I would wander unannounced to the forbidding iron gates of a princely palace or a seat of governmental power, pass my calling card to the guard on duty, and find moments later that I was sitting, astonished, in some grand but tattered drawing room, sharing milky tea and intense conversation with somebody I had longed to meet. With repetition, I learned not to be surprised by this sort of hospitality, but to be bolder about the access I sought.History, revolution, and politics lie around in South Asia like heirlooms and furniture in a cluttered guest room that your host has not had time to clean and sort. You are freeand privilegedto wander about, pick the heirlooms up carefully, dust them off, turn them over, and inquire respectfully about their origins. I did this quite literally one time in the old palace where a former Indian prime minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, was reared. I arrived without an appointment, and the guard responded by ushering a tour in which he climbed ladders to pull down old sepia family photographs from the walls. He then used the pictures as

exhibits while recounting all the scurrilous gossip he could remember about the family of a man who was at that moment Indias most powerful politician. The guard wasnt mean-spirited or disrespectful or politically motivated. Its just that they were such good stories, and really, he seemed to feel, there was no reason not to share them with a welcome guest from abroad. This was hardly an unusual attitude. Revolutionary guerrilla commanders, religious gurus, indentured laborers, nuclear scientists, charismatic national politicians, spies, criminalseveryone, it seemed, was more than happy to take time out for tea and an extended chat, even if they intended to lie boldly throughout.This book is the ultimate consequence of those travels and those conversations. It is intended as a piece of journalism, in the traditional sense. It is meant to be accessible, idiosyncratic, entertaining, and serious, though I dont mean to insist that it actually turned out that way. My point is that there are a few things this book is not meant to be. It is not meant to tell South Asians what to think about themselves or to compare South Asias present problems with the equally formidable challenges facing the West. It is not a work of scholarship, as will be obvious, but it does attempt to describe and explain questions that South Asian governments and outside specialists are wrestling with today. These include political violence, separatist and religious rebellion, social conflict, the corruption of public officials, the decay and abuse of state power, and the ongoing attempt on the subcontinent to construct, in a fast-changing global environment, a transition from socialism to capitalism. What these conundrums now have in common, it seems to me, is their relationship to epochal change in the region that once was Britains Indian empire. The sources of this change are the end of the cold war, the advanced erosion of the socialist states built by South Asian independence leaders after World War II, and the urgent need of a new generation on the subcontinent to build something of their own, without reversing what progress they have inherited.You will find here, then, if I have succeeded at all, a sense of what these challenges amount to, where they arise from, why they matterand, mainly, an account of what this change and conflict looks and feels like on the streets of South Asia today. There, in a variety of ways, the collective future of roughly one billion people too often ignored in the West is currently being decided.STATES OF FLUX1Sound and FuryWe who have grown up on a diet of honor and shame can stillgrasp what must seem unthinkable to peoples living in the aftermathof the death of God and of tragedy.Salman RushdieDuring three years in South Asia, I shook hands with several men who subsequently exploded. There was no reason to suspect causality in this statistic. But the explosions were instants of intimate violence, and through their intimacy they demanded exploration.One place to begin is Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, on March 24, 1990, in the sultry morning sun on a concrete jetty beside China Bay. Sweat drawn by the equatorial heat ran like tap water from the pores of those assembled. Three frigates had arrived to take home the last two thousand or so men of the Indian Peacekeeping Force, the dubiously named army dispatched by Rajiv Gandhi in 1987 to rescue the island nation of Sri Lanka from its years of gruesome fratricidal war between ethnic Sinhalese and ethnic Tamils. The army had failed in its mission and had achieved the improbable effect of making Sri Lankas problems even worse than before. Now the Sri Lankan government had arranged a celebration to mark the final departure of the Indian troops. Hostile civility filled the air. A ragged naval band with brass and bagpipes lined the dock. Sri Lankan honor guards in pressed olive uniforms and pink scarves pointed the way to the departing ships. Turbaned Indian soldiers with the Seventh Sikh Light Infantry stood gamely at attention, melting before our eyes as they waited for the ceremony to end. From unseen loudspeakers came a medley of popular songs, such as Oh, What a Feeling and Were Going to Have a Party Tonight. Whether these lyrics were meant as a message from the Sri Lankans to the Indians or vice versa was not clear.On the dock beside the last frigate stood Ranjan Wijeratne, Sri Lankas minister of state for defense, reputed leader of the islands notorious death squads and all-around hero of his countrys counterrevolutions. Dressed in flowing white khadi, and with a fine mane of silver hair, he looked nearly biblical that morning. Wijeratne was both a chilling and an entertaining figure as a cabinet minister. He managed vast tea plantations in the islands interior and donned unapologetically the airs of a nineteenth-century colonial master. After rising through planters and landowners organizations into politics, he was placed in charge of Sri Lankas official and unofficial armed forces and directed the beleaguered governments several counterinsurgency programs. That March morning, paramilitary pro-government death squads, which many on the island believed reported to Wijeratne, were winding up a months-long campaign of slaughter that had killed somewhere between twenty thousand and sixty thousand Sri Lankans suspected of involvement with the Peoples Liberation Front, a Maoist guerrilla group. It was difficult to keep count of the victims. The death squads drove around the islands lush jungles in green Mitsubishi Pajero jeeps, plucked suspects from their homes in the night, and dumped their smoldering corpses on pristine beaches in the morning. Wijeratne never admitted that he controlled the squads, despite considerable evidence that he sanctioned and perhaps even organized them. But he boasted of his sympathies. In his capacity as state defense minister Wijeratne met the press each week in a cool conference room in Colombo, Sri Lankas seaside capital. At these meetings he tried to exceed his previous achievements in murderous witticism. Once he called the International Committee of the Red Cross a terrorist organization. He offered to wring the necks of demonstrators with the Mothers Front, an organization of relatives of victims who had disappeared in the night. Threatening to attack the Jaffna peninsula on the north of the island, he advised an estimated one million civilians to vacate the area or good luck to them. Luck was a favorite theme with Wijeratne. One day in the conference room, he challenged any of the several guerrilla groups he was attempting to crush to go ahead and kill him if they didnt like his policies. He wished

these guerrillas, too, good luck.Wijeratne wanted the Indian Peacekeeping Force off his island. The reasons were complicated but one compulsion was that he wished to press more freely his own attacks on the countrys various insurgents. He had come to Trincomalee that March morning to wave the Indian soldiers off. As the Sikh infantry marched up the gangway, I asked him how it felt to see them go.They had a trying time. They came on a peace mission, but then something untoward happened, Wijeratne said in a patrician tone, referring to the combat deaths of twelve hundred Indian soldiers during their stay in Sri Lanka. They got bogged down.We followed the troops up the plank for a last round of speeches aboard the frigate. The Indian ambassador told the dripping soldiers that history would record their achievements in golden print and that a proud and grateful nation awaits your arrival in India, assertions that must have seemed ridiculous to all but the most patriotic infantrymen.Wijeratne took the microphone. You have made a great sacrifice, theres no doubt about that, he said. Then he offered this benediction: Those who sacrifice their lives will be born again as good men in a future world.The bomb that killed him eleven months later blew a thirty-six-square-foot crater in the asphalt of Havelock Road in Colombo. It was eight-thirty in the morning, rush hour on a busy thoroughfare. Wijeratne was on his way to the office from the airport, where he had seen his son off on a flight back to college in the United States. (Often a bond between counterrevolutionaries and revolutionaries in South Asia is the ambition that their children study hard in America to be doctors and engineers.) The minister rode in a Land Rover flanked by escort vehicles. When the assassin punched the car bomb detonator he or she set off a bang so loud it echoed in Colombos outskirts miles away. Who pushed the detonator remains a mystery, although guerrillas with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam head a list of suspects more numerous than any cast summoned to the drawing room at the end of an Agatha Christie novel. In any case, they were thorough. Pieces of flesh turned up 150 yards from Havelock Road. Besides Wijeratne, at least sixteen people died in the explosion and dozens of others were hurt. It took hours to pull the ministers body from his jeep. Buildings throughout the posh palm-lined neighborhood were damaged. Vehicles lay strewn in mangled heaps. One of the smashed cars bore a windshield sticker that said, Unite to Fight Terrorism.The Sri Lankan government promoted Wijeratne posthumously to the rank of general and put on a state funeral at Independence Square, a Colombo memorial to the end of the British Empire in South Asia. Army officers drew the ministers body through the streets on a gun carriage. Sri Lankan honor guards surrounded the square. Buddhist priests eulogized Wijeratnes accomplishments in service to the state. Soldiers fired a twenty-one-gun salute.One day after the funeral, the weekly security briefing went on as usual in the appointed Colombo conference room. General Cyril Ranatunge, Wijeratnes immediate successor, insisted on two minutes of silence in honor of the departed minister. Then he remarked that the detonation that killed Wijeratne was the most powerful bomb exploded in the country up to now, as if this were a final tribute to the departed ministers stature.Somebody asked if Wijeratnes violent end would lead the government to alter or soften in any way its gun-blazing approach to counterinsurgency.There will be no change in plans, Ranatunge answered. We know what the minister wanted.Political assassination in South Asia is an advanced art characterized by grandiose themes of betrayal, revenge, and collective struggle. As in America, murders of beloved leaders hang over the culture, and the spinning of assassination conspiracy theories is a vibrant cottage industry. One of the hottest videotape rentals in New Delhi in the summer of 1992 was Oliver Stones JFK. As they talked about the movie, many urban Indians, including some in high government office, seemed to find the depth of Stones paranoia oddly reassuring.Scan recent instances of violent political change in the subcontinental region bound for two centuries by British influenceIndia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistanand you will find the spectacle peppered with overloud explosions and exaggerated gunfire. One feature common to many of the political murders is the excess force employed by the killers. This may be partially explained by the imprecise technologies available to South Asian assassins. But there is another factor: violence of feeling. Political killers in modern South Asia often stalk their victims with fanatical commitment. They are willing to kill themselves and uncounted others in pursuit of their ends. They are men and women of determination, engaged in grand dramas played out in the murky extremities of social conflict and political change.They are also participants in mainstream politics. Sometimes, years after their work is complete, their supporters propose to erect statues to their memory, as occurred recently in India with Nathuram Godse, assassin of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Other times, they or their relatives become local heros and are nominated for political office, as has happened with nearly every Sikh in Punjab who has conspired to kill Rajiv or Indira Gandhi, the political (but not the familial) heirs to Mohandas. And of course, there are the more pedestrian cases of assassins committing or organizing murder to obtain office from a rival. Successful practitioners of this career strategy include such well-known names of recent South Asian politics as General Hussein Mohammed Ershad, president of Bangladesh for most of the 1980s; Babrak Karmal, who ushered the Soviet tanks into Afghanistan; and, at least in the view of some Pakistanis, the late cold warrior and military dictator General Zia ul-Haq, who ordered the hanging of the rival he overthrew, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto.There is in the details of these stories such genuine pathos as would embarrass even a producer of the most egregious Bombay masala cinema. Recall, as one example, Sikh subinspectors Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, bodyguards of former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi, who stepped from their sentry posts by a wicket gate behind the prime ministers New Delhi residence on the morning of October 31, 1984, to take revenge for a military assault against the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine in the Sikh

religion. The bodyguards approached Gandhi as she walked across the lawn in a peach sari, the prime ministers chief aide later recalled. Beant Singh blocked the prime ministers path, silently pulled a service revolver from his jacket, and aimed it at her.What are you doing? Indira Gandhi asked.The two assailants shot her twenty-nine times. They dropped their weapons and waited for nearby commandos to reach them. We have done what we wanted to. Now you can do what you want to, Beant Singh said grandly to his captors.In the aftermath, investigators found a note on Indira Gandhis desk, apparently written four months before her murder. If I die a violent death as people have been plotting, I know the [assassination] will be in the thought and action of the assassin, not in the dying, the prime minister scribbled to herself. No hate is dark enough to overshadow the extent of my love for my people and my country, no force is strong enough to divert me from my purpose.Another of South Asias modern empresses, Benazir Bhutto, echoed Gandhis tone several years later while recalling in an autobiography one of her last meetings with her doomed father, which occurred in a prison in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in 1978:We sit in the courtyard for a precious hour, our heads close together so that the three jailers under orders to listen to us cannot. But they are sympathetic this time and do not press in on us.You are twenty-five now, my father jokes, and eligible to stand for office. Now Zia will never hold elections.Oh, Papa, I say.We laugh. How do we manage it? Somewhere in the jail stand the hangmans gallows which shadow our lives.Interspersed with such melodrama there is farce. Consider the tale recorded by Raja Anwar, a former Pakistani leftist jailed for several years in Afghanistans Pul-i-Charki prison. During conversations with fellow political inmates, Anwar claimed to have pieced together the story of the murder of Hafizullah Amin, the Afghan revolutionary leader who died when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. Amin had taken power several months before the invasion by directing thugs in his employ to murder the countrys president, Noor Mohammed Taraki, by choking him to death with a pillow, or by shooting him in the head, or by some other means (there are several versions). One way or another, the task was accomplished and Amin moved into a grand palace on the southern outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistans mud-rock capital, from where he evidently expected to direct his countrys Bolshevik revolution for many years. Soviet military planners and rivals in Amins tiny band of leftist revolutionaries, however, wanted the new Afghan president out of the way. As their agents, by Anwars account (which some Afghans regard as credible, and some regard as incredible), the coup makers selected two Soviet cooks and a Soviet food taster whom Amin employed in his palace because he feared Afghan chefs might poison him.On December 27, 1979, the day tens of thousands of Soviet troops moved to seize power in Afghanistan, Amin, his children, his daughter-in-law, and two guests sat down for lunch in the palace. According to the account later provided to Anwar by Amins widow and surviving children, they all ate food prepared by the Russian cooks. No sooner were they finished than they fell over unconscious as a result of poisoning. The family members and guests remained stricken. Amin, however, awoke and blinked his eyes about two hours later. The reason, his relatives said later, was that the night before, Amins cooks had unintentionally given him a bout of dysentery, and because of this Amin had only nibbled at his lunch. Grumbling, the nauseated but alert Afghan president was taken to his bedroom. A general from the Soviet army medical corps soon arrived. According to Anwars account, translated from the original Urdu:The [Soviet] general must have been disappointed to see that the patient was well enough to greet him. Expressing his pleasure at Amins recovery, he left ... According to the Amin family, the first tank shell hit [the palace] at exactly six oclock in the evening.... At 6:45 P.M., the invading force was in front of Amins residence. The resistance being offered by his guards was petering out. Amin ordered his [military aide] to extinguish all the lights, then turning to his wife he said, Dont worry, the Soviet army should be coming to our rescue any minute. ... Suddenly, there were men outside shouting: Amin, where are you? We have come to your help. Abdul Rahman ran down the stairs screaming, This way, come this way. This is where Amin is. He [Rahman] was shot dead on the lower veranda. Amins youngest son and Mrs. Shah Wali [one of the lunch guests] were killed while they were still unconscious. One of Amins daughters was shot in the leg, but she survived, only to become a prisoner.... When they entered Amins office they found him in his chair, his head resting on the table with blood flowing from his temple. They are not sure if he had received a stray bullet or committed suicide.It might seem obvious to suggest that nations whose politics are shaped by violent, pathological dramas such as these are profoundly unstable, destined to careen between dangerous crises. To a degree, this is the impression of South Asia held today in the West, particularly in the United States: one billion riotous and unfathomable poor people best left alone, disarmed if possible. In response to this characterization, some South Asians have evolved a shrill and defensive outlook in which they see themselves as simultaneously victims and conquerors of Western imperialismthe imperialism of history, perpetrated mainly by the British between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, and the imperialism of culture, supposedly pursued today by the dominant if increasingly amorphous West. Those of us Westerners who move through this debate learn to recognize its caricatures: the white man haranguing locals because the phones dont work and the planes dont fly on time; the corrupt babu who blathers on about Western decadence, then segues into a rapturous account of his last trip to Disney World; the glassy-eyed Western hippie traipsing through the countryside in search of oriental enlightenment; the slick banker in Bombay or Karachi who predicts the imminent collapse of his society over a glass of black-market whiskey.Often, the specific reference points of this debate about South Asias past and future are the instances of its sound and fury: its explosions. The themes are what this sound and fury signifies, where it arises from, and where it will lead.Out of professional obligation and personal curiosity, I

wandered for several years across this landscape and this debate, drawn by the needs of the home office disproportionately to the sites of the sound and fury. There was time, too, for sojourns in quieter corners. One of the great privileges of this ultimately circular journey was the ability to cross national borders freely. That is something South Asians, despite common languages and threads of history, can now do only rarely, and even then, what they see of each other frequently seems limited by blinders of enmity, suspicion, and prejudice.It would be ridiculous to argue that the individual destinies of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are bound by what they have in common. Since even before the end of World War II, when Lord Mountbatten drew lines on the map of Britains collapsing Indian empire and scurried home from the subcontinent, these nations have defined and pursued their independence along sharply different paths, and with distinctive results. Yet forty-five years after the empire, South Asians remain in many ways a single people, united by history, culture, geography, and poverty. One of the most obvious features of South Asias sound and fury is that it often arises from conflicts in which the combatants know each other too well for their collective good. It is easier to make mischief with an intimate enemy. Not only the regions assassinations but also its ideological revolutions, counterrevolutions, covert wars, ethnic conflicts, class confrontations, and religious riots often contain a destructive abandonment possible only in a family feud.Some students of South Asia argue that the outside world ought not to be alarmed by this surface noise. They make their case most plausibly with reference to India, South Asias unwieldy, chaotic, but oddly stabilizing geographical anchor and the regions longest-lived constitutional democracy. Philip Oldenburg, an American scholar, wrote in 1901, The surface of Indian life is indeed chaotic, often violent, connected to the surge of deeper changes that move at a slower pace. Yet the surface chaos also indicates that the system can bend and be molded by those forces, and that the whole need not explode or crack up because of the rigidity of institutions or a powerful ruling class. There is no sense in which one can call the country stagnant. Indias very size and diversity and even lack of discipline ensure that its paths to the future are many.... Indias dark future may well be an ever-receding image.During my journey there were many ways in which I came to embrace the strength of this argument and similar ones, not only about India but about South Asia as a whole. Yet there are also reasons to be wary. While they need not explode or crack up, and while they have achieved much about which they are justly proud, South Asias indigenous governing elites have also demonstrated ample mendacity, foolishness, and brutality since achieving independence. The intellectuals among them have played a destructively disproportionate role in defining from above the purpose and structure of the postimperial state. Their extraordinary privileges arise from the ways in which the hierarchies of South Asias ancient feudal societies have been preserved and sanctified by twentieth-century state-dominated mixed socialist ideology, the model expounded by Jawaharlal Nehru during the 1940s and 1950s and implemented in varying forms in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.1 From their perches atop society these elites often express self-satisfaction. But states whose very legitimacy is continually challenged by armed insurgents can hardly afford to be complacent about their own righteous viability. This is especially true when, as now, South Asian governments are attempting to revise their basic structuretheir stated reasons for beingby shifting rapidly from planned, state-dominated socialism to an as-yet-undefined version of market capitalism.As the regions elites make this turn, dissenters bark at them noisily from the left and right and sometimes set off the explosions that rattle South Asias surface. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the insurgents include Islamic radicals and secessionists who rail against the whiskey-and-soda set that has managed and mismanaged national affairs since independence. In India, they are Hindu revivalists, unrepentant Communists, campaigners for caste justice, radical separatists, and cranky, idiosyncratic right-wingers. In Sri Lanka, they are fanatical revolutionaries who live in the jungles and communicate through pamphlets. What they have in common is contempt for the status-quo elites, even elites that are attempting to reform themselves.One of South Asias most interesting dissidents is Arun Shourie, a much despised and much admired Indian newspaper editor, neoconservative writer, investigative reporter, and religious nationalist. Shourie is a detached, soft-spoken man with a Hitlerian mustache and a penchant for repeating accounts of his early encounters with Robert F. Kennedy during the early 1960s. I sometimes visited him in his air-conditioned office and asked him to identify the ways in which South Asias elites have helped to fuel the sound and fury they sometimes seem to want to explain away. In response, he spoke of Nehruvian socialism as if it were Soviet bolshevism.We have converted socialism into just a device for centralizing patronage, Shourie said one afternoon toward the end of my stay. The state became those who occupy offices of the state at the momentit became their private property. We have yet good time to change, and the people will be the great allies. They are the ones who suffer every day from the inefficiency of the state and its owners.... These few persons in the elite have become so weak and so illegitimate, even in their own eyes, that ... they are always in dread that the testimonials on which they survived will be taken away.One point the elites and the iconoclasts agree on is that the explosions and gunfire erupting across the surface of South Asia today are symptoms and auguries of profound change. Faster than ever before, under immense and varied pressures, South Asia is shedding its past and groping for its future. One side of the debate sees modern India, and to a lesser degree its neighbors, as responsive to these forces of change and capable of withstanding and absorbing them. The other side blames the ruling elites of South Asia for fostering violence and predicts that they will not mend their ways in time to prevent swelling, convulsive bloodshed.As I wandered through the subcontinent, reporting on slum riots, insurgencies, assassinations, border wars, revolutions, and

counterrevolutions, it did not often seem necessary to choose between these analyses or dwell at length on their forecasts. Out on the mud streets and in the villages, the struggle for change, emancipation, social and economic opportunity, power, and revengethe struggle for possession of the futureseemed filled with such energy that trying to predict the outcome would inevitably be risky. But the faces, the voices, the pathos, helped point the way from the noise along the surface to the pressures rising underneath.Here is one face: dark-skinned, bespectacled, young, white teeth protruding from an overbite. She wore a green scarf and an orange salwar kameez, a draping gown. That morning, she had tied her tangled black hair behind her neck; it now fell below her shoulders. Clenched in her hands at chest level was a garland of white flowers attached to a sandalwood rod. She stood in a crowd next to a makeshift corridor built from logs and rope. Beside her was a young Tamil girl who held a sheet of paper containing verses of Hindi poetry composed in honor of Rajiv Gandhi, the former prime minister of India. The young poet planned to read the verses to Gandhi, who was approaching along the corridor dressed in white khadi and Western jogging shoes, smiling amid the commotion, chants, and shouts of joy that routinely greeted his orchestrated public appearances.Later, millions of Indians concentrated their imaginations on this freeze-frame: The bespectacled dark-skinned womans mouth was slightly agape and she seemed serene, respectful. She was memorialized at this moment by a photographer, so it was possible afterward to revisit the image again and again. By then, of course, scrutiny was enhanced by the knowledge that beneath the womans orange salwar lay a Velcro belt intricately wired to a nitroglycerine-based explosive, and that a moment after the picture was snapped, as the little girl prepared to read her poem, the bespectacled woman handed her sandalwood garland to Rajiv Gandhi, bent to touch his feet in respect, pushed a detonator on her Velcro belt, and set off a bomb that ripped her own body in half, obliterated most of Gandhis head, and killed the little poet and a dozen others standing nearby.The bespectacled womans nom de guerre was Dhanu. She was twenty-four, a Sri Lankan Tamil from Batticaloa, a picturesque city situated beside sandy beaches on the Indian Ocean. Her father was described by Indian investigators as an ideological mentor of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the radical separatist group also blamed by many for the assassination bombing of Ranjan Wijeratne, the Sri Lankan minister of state for defense. Little else could be discovered about Dhanu. She had a sister living in Paris. She had finished junior high school. She may or may not have been raped by Indian soldiers in Sri Lanka. Beyond this, what led her to Rajiv Gandhis political rally in Sriperumbudur on May 21, 1991, what may have passed through her mind as she stood with her garland beside the child-poet, is not known. A year after the assassination, India Today, the countrys leading news magazine, could muster only a three-paragraph biography of Dhanu. An enigma, the magazine called her.In some ways, Gandhis funeral was no less mysterious, because by the time it was held in New Delhi three days later, hardly anyone seemed moved by it, other than his immediate family and the thuggish politicians who dominate the rank and file of Gandhis Congress Party political machine. When Rajivs mother, Indira Gandhi, died at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, organized mobs poured through New Delhis streets, burning Sikhs alive at taxi stands and apartment houses, slaughtering at least several thousand of them in revenge. Fury begat fury begat fury. But in the aftermath of Dhanus explosion, fury evaporated. During those three tense days between the assassination and Rajiv Gandhis funeral, people speculated about why interest in the event was ebbing. Some said it was because Rajiv, unlike his mother, died as a spent political forcenobody cared about him enough to seek serious revenge. Others said it was because Tamils, Dhanus ethnic group, were less identifiable than the turbaned, bearded Sikhs and thus less easy to isolate and kill in street revenge attacks. Others said the quietude was encouraged by appeals for calm from Congress leaders, which only proved that the 1984 attacks on Sikhs had been an active conspiracy carried out by certain Congress politicians. Perhaps there was something to each of these theories. But in the streets of Delhi that Friday in May, when they pulled Rajiv Gandhis body along vacant avenues in blistering heat, what seemed palpable was a collective sense of paralyzing shockat the severed torsos and bloody faces photographed at Sriperumbudur and splashed across the newspapers, and at the strange audacity of a twenty-four-year-old woman willing to destroy herself and all around her in a political act.The Congress Party thugs brought in a few thousand peasant farmers and laborers. They packed them into trucks, unloaded them in the center of the capital, and told them to chant slogans on the streets of New Delhi during the three days Gandhis remains lay in state at Teen Murti House, the official residence of his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru. But these professional mournersCongress street cadres like those who burned Sikhs alive in 1984seemed a little confused about who they were supposed to blame for Gandhis death and how angry they were supposed to get about it. Around the grassy circle outside Teen Murti and along the tree-lined avenues nearby, the Congress-supplied crowds reached back initially to the old slogans of imperialism, in which foreigners are responsible for most things wrong in India. The white people are eating away at India! they yelled, and then beat up Western photographers and reporters who came to see the grieving thousands at Teen Murti. After a couple of days, however, this xenophobic theme dissipated, in part because some of the politicians who organized the Teen Murti crowds wanted Rajivs Italian-born widow, Sonia Gandhi, to take over leadership of the party and the country, and it occurred to them that stirring up hatred of white people might hinder the way to Sonias rule. By then, evidence from the assassination site made it appear all but certain that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had been involved. But while there was tension on the streets, nobody was yet prepared to hold Indian Tamils directly responsible for the transgressions of their Sri Lankan brethren. So after a few days the rabble climbed back

onto their trucks and went home, still shouting Long live Rajiv Gandhi!, only now with less conviction than before.Everybody was talking about what it meant to lose Gandhi, the last plausible heir to the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty that had towered over Indian politics since independence from Britain in 1947. Gandhi struck many as a decent man but a lousy politician, prone to autocracy, political cowardice, and outright stupidity. But he was also in some ways a young progressive, enamored of modernity and technology, an internationalist who symbolized the bridge between Indias past and future. To lose him to an anonymous young woman with a bomb wrapped around her waist seemed to many Indians an event of overwhelming hopelessness, a moment when South Asias collective strength and purpose was subsumed by an incomprehensible, self-destructive anger.