

HIGH SOC  
...you know you travel all the way from  
London to Paris and you do not get a  
complaint with the British passport  
holders' demand of diplomatic immunity  
of the passport by the French in India  
and which every bedroom had its own se-  
parate bathroom. The most luxurious room  
in the world had smashed this most cher-  
ished of Indian luxuries.

*A one-armed beggar approaches two  
wealthy young women on the  
beach at Madras, where rich and poor  
alike promenade each evening*

examples of contemporary Indian art. The coffee-table books were lavishly produced English editions of the *Kama Sutra*. Behind the settee there was an exquisitely carved 200-year-old phallic symbol. On the floor lay wonderful Kashmir carpets. Every now and again, bearers in shiny white uniforms would sweep through, offering whisky, soda and cashew nuts. They seemed to be under instruction to see that no one should ever have even a half-empty glass.

By the time I arrived, the writer was already drunk. By the time food was served (as in all such Indian gatherings it was well past midnight), a poet, who had vivid memories of drinking all night in Soho, had grown quite maudlin about England. Twenty years ago, he had left England, fulminating about racial prejudice. Now he found the Indian failure to

appreciate his jokes very worrying. "Never tell a joke if you are making an after-dinner speech. I did so the other day at the Rotary meeting, and they looked on me as if I was a weirdo."

Such tinsel and glitter is what you expect from Indian parties. It was much later, when a composer told his tale of woe, that you sensed some of the despair. The composer had just come back from a spell in the mountains near Kashmir. He just could not believe the enthusiasm generated by the television showing of the *Ramayana*, the great epic which is like the Bible to the Hindus. "Did you know," he said, "people garlanded the television sets as they watched the serial. This wretched television soap was like a deep religious experience. In Jammu, when the transmitter broke down, a crowd gathered to burn down the power station. Only some very



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there was much doubt whether an illiterate, largely peasant, population could cope with a sophisticated electoral system. Several elections later, it is clear that the worries were misplaced. The illiterate peasant nearly always exercises his vote. The problem is with the sophisticated, educated élite. In the United States, it is the underclass of the Bronx who do not vote. In India, the non-voters are the élite in cities like Bombay and Calcutta. Many of Rajiv's fiercest critics at the Bombay party had no intention of voting in the general election on 22 November. Some of them could not even remember when they had last been to the polling booth.

One matronly woman, who had been very critical of Sonia Gandhi said, "What difference will our vote make? These political parties have their enormous vote banks." She meant the blocs of minorities, caste groups and the like. "They pack them in lorries and get them to the

polling booths. Against that, what can my personal vote do? It will not bring down Rajiv's government."

Over the years, a sharp division has developed between the politicians and the élite. The Indian élite dominates the social and intellectual life of the cities. But its inability to influence the political process means that it can act as if it has no stake in the country's future. The élite's command of the written media (television and radio are government-controlled) is most evident between elections. At these times it can set the political agenda. Indian newspapers have done this very successfully with the Bofors arms scandal, which nearly brought down Rajiv Gandhi's government. But the most fervent critic knows that even the fiercest editorial will not bring real change in Delhi. This produces a powerful sense of alienation.

This has been deepened by the most curious development of all. This is the

*This ferry, near Cochin in the southern state of Kerala, has no first-class cabins, so – unusually for Indian transport – the rich have to travel with the poor*



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