

# Death and rebirth

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Twice-Born: Life and Death on the Ganges

By Aatish Taseer. 242 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26.

BY WENDY DONIGER

The “twice-born” in Aatish Taseer’s title are the Brahmins who are “reborn” when they undergo initiation as young men into India’s highest caste. But the word could refer equally well to Taseer himself. His story is a variant of the much-told tale of the American man (or Englishman or other European man, seldom a woman) who revolts against the shallowness of Western materialism and goes to India to find his soul, to reinvent himself, to be spiritually reborn. Cross this genre — epitomized by W. Somerset Maugham’s 1944 novel, “The Razor’s Edge” — with the equally shopworn story of the American in search of his ethnic identity and you get a man of Pakistani and Indian heritage who (re)turns to India to find his roots (and/or soul).

But Taseer’s is a far more convoluted authorial voice: Born in 1980 in London to a Muslim father (the governor of Pakistan’s Punjab Province, assassinated by an Islamist fanatic in 2011) and a Sikh mother (a famous Indian journalist), Taseer was educated at a posh international school in India and then in America, where he graduated from Amherst College. A successful, often controversial, journalist, he was much praised for his first book, a blend of memoir and travelogue called “Stranger to History: A Son’s Journey Through Islamic Lands,” and for his three novels, which deal with a young Indian who returns to his country after some years abroad. It’s not very hard to see an obsessive pattern here, in which “The Twice-Born” forms the final element, since it aims to do for Hinduism (and India) what Taseer’s first book did for Islam (and Pakistan).

It was a difficult re-entry. Taseer describes his own cultural schizophrenia in India: “I saw everything as an Anglicized Indian watching an imaginary European or American visitor watch India, and I had my heart in my mouth as I tried to guess what he would make of it. It was an embarrassment twice removed.” Part of the problem was that he had chosen to view his rediscovered country through the lens of Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, which he had studied for a decade.

Taseer is rightly enthralled by the great richness of Sanskrit literature

and by its amazing survival over thousands of years in the minds and lives of Indian scholars, primarily in one community: the Brahmins. He loves the Brahmins for both their knowledge and their disdain for materialism. And his admiration for these unworldly intellectuals, who seem at first to be his kind of people, inspires his appreciation of traditional India, which for him is Hindu India. But this gives him an idealized, airbrushed image of Hinduism and India, which he views *en saffron*, the color of the robes of ascetics and hence originally a symbol of ascetic Hinduism — but nowadays an emblem of right-wing, nationalist Hinduism. He therefore decides to live in the holiest city of Hindu India, Varanasi.

Actually, Taseer calls it Benares, the British name Indians have replaced with the original Sanskrit. Elsewhere he comments obliquely on this choice: “One forms an idea of India by balancing what India knows about herself with what outsiders, from Megasthenes and Fa Hsien to Al-Biruni and Niccolò de Conti, have written about her. It makes the country ripe for being defined from the outside.” Yet he largely ignores the many Indian writers who, *pace* Taseer, have managed to define it quite well from the inside.

Taseer’s discovery of India results in a detailed, learned and highly readable tour of Hindu history, noting many of the positive contributions of the centuries of Muslim rule and dwelling at some length on the degrading and demoralizing effects of the British Raj. But along the way, the saffron scales

### At first, admiration for Brahmin scholars fuels his interest in traditional India.

seem to fall from his eyes as he describes the rise of Hindu nationalism, with its anti-Muslim violence, and the failure of liberal Hinduism to apply more than an ineffectual Band-Aid to the deep, septic wound of the people once called Untouchables, now known as Dalits. He excoriates the rise of the present ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its prime minister, Narendra Modi, charting the way they have exploited both anti-Muslim passions and the wounded pride inflicted by British rule, riding to power on a wave of religious bigotry. He watches Modi manipulating precisely those high-minded Hindu values that he, Taseer, has so admired. He is particularly eloquent when he bemoans the weird claims that have been made for Indian (that is, Hindu) science, including the assertion that ancient Indians used nuclear weapons and mastered air travel.

By this time, Taseer has realized that a much-admired Brahmin friend named Tripathi is speaking “a cut-rate version of the banalities one hears every day on American college campuses,” and Taseer fears that his former awe of this man may have been “an extension of my romantic idea of Tripathi.” Finally, near the very end of his narrative, Taseer comes up against the issue of caste. After a seemingly jolly dinner at a Brahmin home, he is shocked, shocked, to see his friends insist that a non-Brahmin dinner companion must wash his own plates and utensils. At that moment, “a deep shame came up in me, as if from the

recesses of childhood, like the shame of wetting one’s pants.”

Despite his sharp-eyed condemnation of the evils of Hindu nationalism and caste, Taseer manages to salvage his admiration for the Brahmin world by making a rather artificial, though quite common, distinction between two aspects of religion, spirituality and magic. Spirituality — love of the gods, of ancient texts, of uplifting and comforting ceremonies and magnificent architecture — is high-minded, moral, inspiring, and Taseer praises the Brahmins for their spirituality. However, magic — the superstitious belief in the efficacy of rituals and astrology, along with the measures taken to avoid pollution from contact with lower castes — is stupid, destructive, cruel. Taseer’s damning critique of Modi’s “pseudoscientific impulse” culminates in his dismissal of Hindu magical thinking, which he sees as opposed not only to science but to religion.

Though he admits that “I had tried to sidestep the subject of magic until now, even though it had encroached many times,” it is magic that finally drives Taseer out of India. After months spent hanging out in ashrams, he realizes, as he is about to visit yet another, that “I did not want to enter its crowded spaces where religious feeling was at a fevered pitch. I made some excuse about not wanting to remove my shoes.” He had undergone a kind of reverse enlightenment, from the purified life of the mind to a realization of the material tragedy of present-day India. He puts it well:

“Maybe all my questing after India had been the precursor to my moving more honestly away from it.” As he encounters more anti-Muslim violence, more anti-Dalit violence, as well as the “vigilantes” falsely proclaiming the sanctity of cows, he recoils from the sort of fanaticism that killed his father. But he salvages some of his original idealism by remarking, “It was an age that spelled the destruction of the very ideal of the Brahmin.”

And what of his own ideals? “After Amherst,” he writes, “I had planned to come back to India forever, but I was unable to fit back in.” He returns to New York, to the man to whom he is married (as he tells us, though he lies about it to his friends in India). All that he has been able to salvage from the saffron days is his love of Sanskrit, which he continues to study, now at Columbia University. There he encounters a “left-wing Indian intellectual” who insists, “I am not a Brahmin. . . . For me that word is the same as Nazi.” This encounter makes Taseer recall the horrors of “castebound” India and Modi’s manipulation of “the old Indian disease of symbolic action.” Two more deaths rekindle his grief over his father. In mourning all three, he explains, “I was also mourning the end of my life in India.” And that death was his rebirth.

Wendy Doniger is the author of “The Hindus: An Alternative History.” Her latest book, “The Donigers of Great Neck: A Mythologized Memoir,” has just been published.



Indian devotees on the bank of the Ganges in Varanasi in November 2018.

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