

The India that my father forgot: the myth of ancestral memory

Vaseem Khan

In the summer of 1997, I landed at what was then called Bombay International Airport. I was 23, and I'd arrived in Mumbai to work as a management consultant. Negotiating my way through the dilapidated airport, I walked out into a wall of searing heat, and into the India that I knew only from hazy childhood memories passed down to me by my father, memories that, as I would soon discover, bore little relationship to reality.

My father was born in 1936, in the state of Punjab, before being shunted across the newly created Indo-Pak border in 1947. Like millions of his contemporaries, he was a victim of the cataclysm that was Partition, though he was luckier than most. (Two million died, and ten million were displaced by Mountbatten's bungled handling of the situation.)

People often describe a first visit to the subcontinent as akin to an assault on the senses. As I swept through the streets of the 'city of dreams', I was confronted by beggars, lepers, eunuchs, cows, goats, dogs, trucks, motorbikes, bicycles, handcarts, and a chaotic stream of humanity with a seemingly cavalier disregard for their own wellbeing. At one point, we stopped at a set of traffic lights and I watched in amazement as an elephant lumbered through the pollution-filled chaos.

This, then, was the India in which I found myself.

That India, the India of the late 90s and early 2000s, was a complicated place. The outsourcing bonanza had begun to gather critical mass – western corporations were arriving on a daily basis, drawn to the economic possibilities of a low-cost labour force and high rates of literacy. Over the next

decade, these assets would transform a largely rural economy into a nation of programmers, call centre operators and entrepreneurs. In the urban centres, western culture took root: MTV, McDonalds and coffee shops – all markers of my own childhood growing up in the UK. Soon, I was infused with the inescapable feeling that I belonged here. Like Colossus, I had managed to straddle both worlds, East and West.

Or so I thought.

The truth is that much of what I thought I understood was false.

On many levels, India remains locked in the legacy of her past – entrenched inequality, rampant corruption, the politics of caste, the spectre of communal strife. Skyscrapers and malls sit side-by-side with vast slums.

It is this contrast that I now seek to depict in my series of crime novels set in modern Mumbai. The Baby Ganesh Agency novels, beginning with *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* in 2015, feature a Mumbai police officer forced into retirement in his late 40s. At the same time, he must deal with the unusual dilemma of inheriting a baby elephant – the elephant being a metaphor for modern India, innocence in a maelstrom of turbulent change.

In western fiction, we are sometimes guilty of mythologizing India, depicting her as a land of swamis and snake-charmers. But modern India is far more complex. The conflict between old and new provides a dynamic canvas against which I write my mysteries. Chopra is a man whose social conscience drives his every action. His India is a finely textured place, not the sepia-toned, one-note India of my father's memory.

That is the India I seek to bring to life for my readers – a modern, turbulent, changing society in which to look anew at notions of 'belonging'. It is a journey out of ancestral myth and towards self-discovery that helps to shape the fiction that I write, fiction embedded firmly in a 'sense of place'.

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Vaseem Khan is the author of the bestselling Baby Ganesh Detective Agency series featuring Indian detective Ashwin Chopra and his baby elephant sidekick. The first book in the series, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* was a *Times* bestseller and a Waterstones Paperback of the Year, now translated into 13 languages. The second in the series won a Shamus Award in America. In 2018 he was awarded the Eastern Eye ACTA (Arts, Culture and Theatre Award) for Literature. His books aim to take readers on a journey to the heart of modern India, exploring social issues and the realities of life in a country being transformed by unprecedented global change. Vaseem was born in London, but spent a decade working in India in his twenties. Since 2006 he has worked at University College London's Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science. His latest book is *Bad Day at the Vulture Club* about the murder of a wealthy Parsee in Mumbai's notorious Towers of Silence where the Parsee dead are left to be eaten by vultures.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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