



July 09, 2001
Issue



COVER

Where Have All The Jobs Gone

Old jobs are being slashed and new ones have slowed down to a trickle. With corporate India shedding staff faster than ever before, the worst sufferers are freshers and middle-level managers.

THE NATION

Preparing For Musharraf

Administrators, securitymen and hospitality merchants gear up to ensure that it's not just the Taj that will impress the visiting Pakistani President.

Adviser Raj

Bureaucrats don't retire. Their terms are extended or they are reappointed to counsel political mentors.

STATES

Out Of Luck Now

It will take more than voter-friendly symbolism to ensure victory in UP.

Hard Cover Up

The Government is

Home

BOOKS

Such a Poppy Love Story

Kunal Basu's first novel is an exuberant tale of mud and need.

By Geeta Doctor

Just one whiff is enough. You don't have to be an opium addict to savour the slow, burning languor of the sticky-sweet saga of the opium trade that Kunal Basu places before you. He does it with so

much assurance, twisting the glowing ball of his murky tale at the end of his storyteller's pipe, that when he hands it to you, you don't ask any questions. You sit back in the dark recesses of colonial history, almost with a sigh of contentment. This is familiar territory; the Calcutta of sahibs and superintendents, of memsahibs as frail in their muslim chemises as the poppy flower itself, of Chowringhee in all its imperial glory, setting itself aflame to welcome another Viceroy, while at the back, in the crowded alleys and lanes, the teeming life of the natives. It's as sharply etched in black and white as a Daniells' print, until you notice that blurring the edges is the blue-gray smoke that winds through the centre singeing the image so that nothing is left, except an acrid sense of loss.

[Heatwave In Siachen](#)

[Memory Lapse](#)

[Top 10 Best Sellers](#)



THE OPIUM CLERK
By Kunal Basu
Weidenfeld & Nicolson
Price: £12.99
Pages: 314

By this time, you have inhaled so deeply of the potent weed that you cannot say whether it is the effect of the opiate (however removed) that has drugged your senses into accepting the strange visions that Basu conjures before you, or whether it is his skill as a fabulist that powers his narrative. It hardly matters that the Kolkata-born Basu is a first time novelist, or that the blurb describes him as a teacher in some of the better known universities of North America and the UK, without telling you what he teaches. He has opium in his blood.

There is nothing timid about Basu's intentions. He starts off briskly with the precipitous birth of his hero in the midst of the turmoil of the Mutiny that leaves him fatherless. The young boy, Hiranyagarbha Chakraborti, progresses through life like another Nirad babu, a Bengali aesthete with a mission-school education that enables him to give the correct answer during his initiation into babudom, as a clerk in an auction house, dealing with the opium, though no one calls it that. It is referred to as mud. As Basu describes the scene: "The dark chamber reminded Hiran of the theatre. The Superintendent paced like an actor before a giant mahogany desk. His face was truly pink, unlike the painted ones at The Star or The Emerald. And he spoke not to Hiran but to his report from the mission school and his certificate of elocution. 'Name an English poet of your liking.' Instantly Hiran thought of Derozio, but he checked himself at the last moment. 'George Gordon, the sixth Lord Byron, Sir.'" Nirad Chaudhuri would have been proud of him.

Search



METRO TODAY

MetroScope

The Art Of Fashion

Dance of the Kites, an oddball fashion show at the new Sheetal Design Studio store, elicited reactions like, "It's different and that doesn't need qualification" (singer Suneeta Rao) and "These couldn't be models, they're probably theatre artists!" (veteran model Anu Ahuja). [more...](#)

Looking Glass

Mumbai Hotel: Renaissance Mumbai Hotel and Convention Centre

Mumbai Tribal Art: Murias

Pune Multiplex: City Pride

Web Exclusives

DESPATCHES

Long considered politically naive, the Gujarat chief minister is a wiser man now. But the shrewdness

perturbed by a cop's unreleased book on Rajkumar's kidnapping.

SCIENCE & TECH.

Connecting Bharat
It's a project to bridge the digital divide. But sources of funding are not known.

OTHER STORIES

- Offtrack:
Ranchi, Jharkhand
- Kautilya:
Jairam Ramesh
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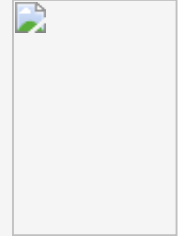
The auction house not only allows Basu to explore the full ramifications of the opium trade-through the eyes of Hiran indeed we are given more information about it than what we might need-but he also re-creates the rich cast of characters who work there. It's a Dickensian world peopled with Bengali characters. When he first appears before his fellow clerks, a David Copperfield in an ill-fitting jacket and serge trousers with a dot of sandalwood paste on his forehead stamped by his distraught mother, stricken by the thought that her delicate child must now become a clerk and not a Brahmin priest, the clerks give him the once over. "From desks piled high with files, the gentoos examined Hiran, polishing eye-glasses as if inspecting a letter from an unknown sender ... "



One of Basu's strengths has been to weave stories from myths and popular legends into his narrative so that they appear in some places as dreams, in others as portents and in still others as a means of communicating the mystery of life. His main character is at times a palm reader of extraordinary intuitive power. Can everything be explained, or is the imagination all that we have to encircle us with the phantoms in the brain that will entice us like the promise of smoke fuelled by a dark weed? The Opium Clerk does not tell, or perhaps he tells it too well.

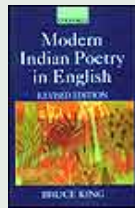
would prove worthier if employed in matters of state, writes INDIA TODAY's Special Correspondent **Uday Mahurkar** in **Misplaced Guile**

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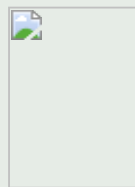
NEW RELEASES



Modern Indian Poetry in English
By Bruce King
(Oxford, Rs 595)
Revised edition features Agha Shahid Ali's works.

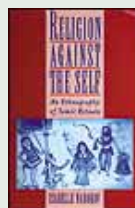


SP's Military Yearbook 2001
Ed by J. Baranwal (Guide, Rs 1,725)
Exhaustive introduction to Asian defence industry.



World Class in India
By S. Ghoshal, G. Piramal, S. Budhiraja
(Penguin, Rs 895)
A casebook of companies in transformation.

Religion Against the Self
By Isabelle Nabokov (Oxford, \$19.95)
Princeton professor's ethnography of Tamil rituals.



Vaastu: A Path to Harmonious Living
By Sashikala Ananth (Roli, Rs 275)
Understanding the science of spatial configuration.



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