

The Solitude of Emperors



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Suffocating in the small-town world of his parents, Vijay is desperate to escape to the raw energy of Bombay in the early 1990s. His big chance arrives unexpectedly when the family servant, Raju, is recruited by a right-wing organization. As a result of an article he writes about the increasing power of sectarian politicians, Vijay gets a job in a small Bombay publication, *The Indian Secularist*. There he meets Rustom Sorabjee — the inspirational founder of the magazine who opens Vijay's eyes to the damage caused to the nation by the mixing of religion and politics.

A year after his arrival in Bombay, Vijay is caught up in violent riots that rip through the city, a reflection of the upsurge of fundamentalism everywhere in the country. He is sent to a small tea town in the Nilgiri Mountains to recover, but finds that the unrest in the rest of India has touched this peaceful spot as well, specifically a spectacular shrine called *The Tower of God*, which is the object of political wrangling. He is befriended by Noah, an enigmatic and colourful character who lives in the local cemetery and quotes Pessoa, Cavafy, and Rimbaud, but is ostracized by a local elite obsessed with little more than growing their prize fuchsias. As the discord surrounding the local shrine comes to a head, Vijay tries to alert them to the dangers, but his intervention will have consequences he could never have foreseen.

The Solitude of Emperors is a stunningly perceptive novel about modern India, about what drives fundamentalist beliefs, and what makes someone driven, bold, or mad enough to make a stand.

I thought about the taxi driver who had been murdered. Deepak hadn't said whether he was young or old, but I imagined him to be as young as I was, and there was a good chance that he, like me, was a recent immigrant to the city, perhaps from Hyderabad, or some smaller place that did not have enough work or resources to hold on to its young. He would have come here hoping to make his fortune, and maybe in time he would have.

Why had he worn the badges of his faith to the very end, I wondered. Even when his life was at stake, why hadn't he thought to take them off? Maybe they were so much a part of him, he hadn't even seen them as symbols to be discarded. They would have helped him link himself to a community, of course, until he had saved enough to bring his family over from his home town because it was likely he had married young. Until this fateful day, his religion would have saved him from the loneliness of the room in the chawl or slum. He would go to the mosque, meet others as lonely as he was. They would do their namaz together, celebrate the great festivals of Id and Ramzan with feasts of biryani on Mohammed Ali Road. Yes, his religion had been good to him, until the day it had devoured him.

— From The Solitude of Emperors

From the Hardcover edition.

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