THE COOKING OF BOOKS

THE COOKING OF BOOKS

A Literary Memoir

RAMACHANDRA GUHA

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2024

Copyright © Ramachandra Guha 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353457099
E-ISBN: 9789353459420

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own. The facts contained herein were reported to be true as on the date of publication by the author to the publishers of the book, and the publishers are not in any way liable for their accuracy or veracity.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in Baskerville Display PT by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

For sale in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh,
Nepal and Bhutan only

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

For Sujata, my second-best editor

Good editors, really good editors, are very rare, in fact even rarer than good writers. It's a special kind of talent because it takes two qualities that rarely go together in the same person. On the one hand, great arrogance, and on the other hand, great selflessness. The arrogance lies in the fact that you, the editor, thinks he knows better than the author, who is usually a specialist, on how to say what it is he wants to say. The humility or selflessness, which is very important, is that you are willing to lend your talents to someone else's work without getting any credit for it.

NORMAN PODHORETZ

Photo credit: Anuradha Roy

Rukun Advani and Ramachandra Guha
in conversation, Ranikhet, April 2019

Contents

Preface (Why this book was written) xi

1. Sportsman and Scholar 1
(How Rukun Advani and I first met, his early antipathy to me, and the college where we studied which quickened and shaped our minds)

2. Finding One Another 31
(How Rukun shed his prejudices towards the sportsman I once was, and warmed to the historian I had now become, and sought to publish my books with the Oxford University Press, where he worked)

3. Author and Editor 63
(On the process of working together on the writing of my books, with copious extracts from Rukun's editorial comments and personal letters on the subject, highlighting his role in turning a stuffy sociological historian into a biographer and essayist with a lighter touch)

4. Exiting the OUP 123
(On the self-willed destruction of the Indian Branch of the Oxford University Press, and Rukun starting an independent press that was soon publishing the best works of history and social science on the subcontinent)

5. Writer and Critic 173
(On the role played by Rukun in my work as an essayist and newspaper columnist, with examples of how he polished my prose and refined my arguments, with I taking all the credit)

6. Patriot and Sceptic 195
(On our arguments about the redemptive potential of Indian democracy, with Rukun mocking what he saw as my naïve and sentimental patriotism, in a series of sarcastic responses to some of my published pieces, the criticism hitting home)

7. The Editor at Home 221
(On Rukun's increasing retreat into himself, his refusal to meet or relate to people, the chapter [and book] ending with me visiting him in his remote mountain home in the Himalaya)

Preface

I am a creature of habit, from the way I structure my day's work to the manner in which I organize my year's travels. After moving to Bangalore in 1995, I started making four trips each year to India's capital city, to raid the rich archival collections of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). These were generally in January, April, September, and November, enabling me to avoid the brutal heat of the Delhi summer and the sapping stickiness of the monsoon. I would book myself for a week or ten days in a boarding house within walking distance of the NMML. I would reach the Manuscripts Room at 9 a.m., as soon as it opened, colonize a desk by the window, order my files, and settle in for a day of concentrated research. Apart from a short break for lunch and two shorter breaks for chai, I took notes until 5 p.m., coming back the next day for more.

I have worked in dozens of archives around the world, but the NMML has always been my favourite place to do research. The reasons are various: the setting, a tree-laden campus rich in birdlife, behind the magnificent Teen Murti

House; the range of primary materials on all aspects of my country's history; the capable and helpful staff; the planned and unplanned meetings with other scholars who came to work there.

For a quarter of a century I made four, and occasionally five, pilgrimages each year to this shrine for historical researchers. When I was there in January 2020 I had no clue that year would be any different. Then the pandemic set in, and for the rest of the year, and much of the next, I was marooned in south India. Even if I had somehow got on a flight to New Delhi I would have found the NMML shut.

Denied access to my best-loved public repository, I took recourse to my personal archive. In my study I had a vast cache of my correspondence with a man named Rukun Advani, a Cambridge scholar with a PhD on E.M. Forster who helped transform the Indian branch of the Oxford University Press (OUP), making it the go-to place for the best scholarship on the subcontinent, whether written by historians, sociologists, political scientists, or economists, whether these were Indian or British or American or Japanese.

Rukun and I had been contemporaries at St. Stephen's College in the 1970s, when he was already deep into serious books while I was an anti-intellectual sportsman. In those days he had contempt for me (preferring, naturally, the company of the future novelist Amitav Ghosh and other literary-minded folks) but later, after I rebooted myself

and did a PhD as well, we became acquaintances and then friends. He published all my early books, and was instrumental in my becoming, successively, a historian, a biographer, a cricket writer, and an essayist. It was also he who encouraged me to leave the OUP for trade presses that, he felt, could do more justice to the books I was now writing. Meanwhile, he had himself left the OUP and started a small, boutique press called Permanent Black, which he ran from a small town in the Himalaya, where he lived with his wife (the novelist Anuradha Roy) along with an assortment of dogs picked up from the street.

In an author's life, the person next in importance to his or her romantic partner is his or her editor. I first saw Rukun Advani several years before I met my wife Sujata Keshavan, and these two relationships have run in parallel for more than four decades now. My early encounters with Rukun were discomforting – for me – but once the initial barriers were surmounted, matters have been more or less smooth (if not always sweet) ever since. While we have had many disagreements, we have never really had a fight. This may be because our friendship has largely been conducted by correspondence. Had we seen each other more often, face to face, we might have gone our separate ways long ago.

After the pandemic prevented me from travelling to the archives I needed for my scholarly work, I went through my correspondence with Rukun (handwritten

or typed from 1986 to 2003, via email thereafter). While our professional roles are (or were) complementary, our personalities are utterly dissimilar. I am gregarious and outgoing, with a zest for travel, whereas Rukun is notoriously reclusive, preferring the company of dogs to humans. I give many talks and too many television (lately, Zoom) interviews each year. Rukun detests speaking in public, and after his first two books (the second being a novel, *Beethoven among the Cows*, published by Robert McCrum at Faber in the early 1990s), pretty much stopped writing for public consumption too. But he continues to maintain a regular private correspondence with me (and a few others), his letters sparkling with wit, intelligence, learning, and sarcasm.

The Cooking of Books is based on the letters and emails exchanged between Rukun and myself. There are some recollections of personal meetings. The reader is introduced to the two institutions, an undergraduate college and a publishing house respectively, that shaped the minds and lives of the book's protagonists. There are cameo portraits of our colleagues and contemporaries. There are a few quotations from published books and articles. But it is the personal correspondence, the letters and emails exchanged between Rukun Advani and myself, that lies at the heart of the narrative.

Rukun and I have had some sharp disagreements over literary and political matters, and these find their place in

what follows. At the same time, the narrative does, I think, touch on larger questions of literary and sociological importance, such as the role of editors in shaping books and writers, the craft of history and the art of biography, the degradation of humanistic scholarship by the virus of political correctness, and the transformation of Indian public discourse from the age of Jawaharlal Nehru, under whose prime ministership both of us grew up, to the time of Narendra Modi, under whose prime ministership we are both growing old.

In many respects this memoir also records a vanished world. When Rukun and I first came together as editor and writer, the universe of books was a less visible and much less flamboyant place than it has since become. There were no literary festivals at which authors and publishers were compelled to talk up and sell not just their wares but their professional identities and their own importance within the book world. Because there was no Facebook, no Instagram, no Twitter/X, no rampant social media, no instant and continuous communication, there was less hype and no vigorous selling of the book, the author, and the editor/publisher. A few writers were much celebrated, but they were not seen as celebrities. The book and its author had not yet arrived as an image that the whole reading universe felt it had better see if it wanted to be 'with it'. It was not important – or at least a lot less important – in that earlier time for readers to

demonstrate (to themselves and others) that they hadn't missed out on this wonderful book, author, and publisher that everyone who mattered seemed to be familiar with (and taken a selfie with) already. The thinking then was that just the making of a book – the very fact that a book had been conjured up and made to exist – was more important than selling it. This was especially so in the sphere of academic publishing, where the lordly view was that since scholarly books always sell in small numbers and can never be hawked in vast quantities, the sheer merit acquired by author and publisher in having brought out a fine book had positioned them among the Elect. In contemporary publishing, where the blaring of trumpets is among the most important aspects of the trade, this Olympian worldview is now likely to be seen as at best laughable and at worst contemptible.

There have been memoirs written by editors which feature writers they have worked with.[*] In their own autobiographies, scholars and writers sometimes devote a few pages or a chapter to the editor who chiselled and refined their prose. However, as far as I know, the relationship between an author and his/her editor has never resulted in a whole book – at least not in English-language publishing.[†]

---

[*] Two books in this genre that I would particularly recommend are Diana Athill's *Stet* and Roberto Calasso's *The Art of the Publisher*.

[†] I write this knowing of, and having read, Ved Mehta's *Remembering Mr. Shawn's New Yorker: The Invisible Art of Editing*, first published in

Partly, this may be because each such relationship tends to be short-lived, lasting for the duration of the editorial process over which a book is shaped – typically three or four months – at the end of which the author and editor go their own separate ways, unless they happen to come together later to craft a second and a third book. But the continuous collaboration of an author with one specific editor and of the two befriending each other are not unknown. Consider the partnership between Robert Caro and Robert Gottlieb over the writing of the former's multi-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, or between Roy Hawkins and Jim Corbett over the latter's shikar stories. But it was always uncommon and has certainly become uncommoner in recent decades.

An obvious reason is the decline, with email and the ease of instant replies, of letter writing on paper. By and large, authors and editors no longer keep a record of their interactions, seeing them as transient or inconsequential or not of general interest. So there is usually no epistolary or other archive from which to write a book like this one

1998. Notwithstanding its title, this charmingly written memoir is mostly about Mr Mehta rather than Mr Shawn. It narrates Mehta's literary and personal encounters in three continents, with the *New Yorker* and its editor serving as a decorative backdrop. There are no letters by Shawn to Mehta or even editorial interventions quoted in the text. On the other hand, the book is peppered with extensive excerpts from letters (of praise, advice, and consolation) written to Mehta by, among others, the Oxford philosophers Isaiah Berlin and Jasper Griffin and the American writers E.B. White and Elizabeth Hardwick.

– a matter of regret, perhaps, because exchanges between authors and editors can provide insights not merely into book history and the culture of publishing but also into the intellectual and social history of their time.

A related reason for the absence of this kind of book is that editorial functions in publishing have grown more specialized since the time Rukun and I began corresponding. Between c.1950 and c.2000, an editor who acquired a manuscript was usually also the editor who would copyedit it. In the Indian context this kind of editor who both acquired and edited books began to fade out of publishing in the 1990s. More and more, there were on the one hand acquisitioning editors who plied authors with lunch, beer, and the promise of a royalty advance, and on the other hand copy editors to whom manuscripts were farmed out once they had been contracted. Especially in the Indian context, copyediting became the domain of freelancers, and this function – which requires advanced skills in language use, a trustworthy understanding of refined narration, and persuasive communication with authors who can be as difficult as opera divas – came to be regarded as the inferior end of editing.

The greater specialization within editorial functioning made business sense, increasing editorial productivity and therefore publishing profitability. But it did not result in an equally happy situation for authors who, when deciding on the best publisher for their book, also hoped for an

accomplished copy editor whom they could trust to curtail, elongate, and polish what they had written. When my own writing career began in the 1980s, I was fortunate to encounter a publisher's editor whose counsel on possible or prospective books I greatly valued, with the same person acting, once a manuscript was ready, as its meticulous and highly skilled copy editor. In this sense, my relationship with Rukun, which has lasted more than forty years – with hardly a week having passed without our exchanging strings of letters – has been atypical. I do not see this kind of relationship being replicated, given the very changed world of writing and publishing in which we now live.

In what follows, Rukun Advani's letters and emails are quoted more abundantly than mine. This is not an accident. Back in 2009, I wrote to Rukun:

> What is that line of Gray's (unlike my son, wife and esp mother-in-law I know no poetry) about blushing unseen in the desert air, etc. Your lines and lobs* are too funny and serious to be merely in cyberspace floating between your address and mine. Put them all in a book – a novel about lunatic academics, even.

Rukun Advani, had he agreed to write this book, is likely to have written a frivolous and spoofy account, his instinct as

---

* 'Lobs' is 1970s' Delhi University student argot for witty puns and epigrams.

a writer being iconoclastic, seeking to provoke rather than inform. Perhaps it is just as well he declined to write this book, and that it has fallen to me to do it instead. The result is a memoir that has nothing in it of the artifice of fiction.

I suppose readers of *The Cooking of Books* will interpret it in different ways: as a memoir of friendship, as an elegy to a lost world, as a partisan account of publishing in India, as a self-indulgent celebration of elite male privilege. It may (or may not) be any or all of these things. I see it in more straightforward terms, as an author's tribute to the remarkable (and remarkably self-effacing) editor who made his books possible, and, occasionally, popular and even profitable.

The Cooking of Books was read in draft by Keshava Guha, Ian Jack, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Joan Martinez-Alier, Rupert Snell, Brijraj Singh, Chiki Sarkar, Rivka Israel, K. Sivaramakrishnan, David Gilmour, Arabella Pike, Anjali Puri, and A.R. Venkatachalapathy, and I am grateful to them all for their (sometimes brutal) comments. Although the printed book appears in my name alone, Rukun Advani is entirely complicit in its contents, arguments, evocations, and evasions.

ONE

Sportsman and Scholar

I

In July 1973, a Bengali boy named Amitav Ghosh joined St. Stephen's College in Delhi, hoping to take an honours degree in history. Like every other freshman, he was nervous about the first few weeks, when one was 'ragged' – shorthand for being verbally harassed, harangued, interrogated, and intimidated – by those who had already spent a year or more in the college. Twenty-five years later, by now an established novelist, Amitav Ghosh began an essay on his time at St. Stephen's with this paragraph:

> The year I joined College, 1973, the word among us freshers was that the most terrifying ragger in College lived in Rudra Court, in L5. Terrifying because he wasn't the usual kind of bullying, bellowing senior. No, he was to them as the panther is to the elephant, the scimitar to the war club, the rapier to the broadsword. He was bearded, they said, and soft-spoken, so stealthy that you never sensed his presence until he had you square in his sights.

Young Amitav was able to escape the clutches of this fearful senior for a fortnight. But then he 'was "nabbed while

attempting to abscond" as the *Indian Express* used to say'. The 'legend of L5' caught hold of the fresher, and quizzed him about his interests. 'I like classical music,' answered Ghosh, nervously. 'You do?' said the legend, and walked him into his room in Rudra North. The legend put a record on the turntable and began to play it. He asked Ghosh to identify the composer and composition. Beethoven's Emperor Concerto, answered the fresher, correctly. It was followed by the same composer's Pastorale, 3rd movement. Three or four more records were played and all except one accurately identified. At this, 'The legend stuck out his hand. "I'm Rukun Advani," he said. "Let's go down to Maurice Nagar and have a cup of tea."'

Maurice Nagar (named after a former vice chancellor of Delhi University, Sir Maurice Gwyer) lay down the road from St. Stephen's. It was from where Bus 210, which connected the campus to the city, started, and thus had around it some tea stalls with benches. These were open until late at night, long after the college's own cafe and dhaba had shut. Rukun Advani took Amitav Ghosh there for tea, and the talk flowed so easily that he took him there again the next evening.

In his essay of remembrance, Ghosh writes that these walks to Maurice Nagar became a 'night-time ritual; something to look forward to through the day'. He continues: 'As I remember them, the two staples of our

conversations were literature and music.' A little later, he notes, 'Rukun was my first critic; it was because of him that the first piece I ever published saw the light of day. It was he who launched me on what I think of as My Literary Career by finding me a job at the *Indian Express.*'*

II

Founded in 1881 by a group of British Anglicans, St. Stephen's College had by the time Amitav Ghosh got there acquired the reputation of being the best undergraduate college in the country. Although the college admitted a mere three hundred students (all male) each year at the time, its graduates went on to exercise disproportionate social, administrative, and cultural power in (and on) independent India. All through the second half of the twentieth century, Stephanians dominated the upper echelons of the civil service, the diplomatic corps, the media, the legal profession, the academic world, and the private corporate sector. The influence of St. Stephen's on

* Amitav Ghosh, 'The Lessons of Rudra Court', in Aditya Bhattacharjea and Lola Chatterjee, editors, *The Fiction of St. Stephen's* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2000). Rukun Advani claims that his room was actually L4, not L5. I have, however, not corrected this in the text, allowing literary licence to triumph over editorial fidelity.

Indian public life was perhaps comparable to that of Balliol College on British public life.*

The dazzling array of successful alumni that St. Stephen's produced was not unrelated to the fact that the dominant language spoken in the college was English. That so many people huddled close together spoke a language foreign to India in India's capital city was odd, strange, bizarre – but not unprecedented. In seventeenth-century Delhi, the intellectual and political elite had spoken to one another in Persian, not in Hindi or Urdu. And they had written their poetry and manuals of statecraft in that language too.

In the first decades of postcolonial India, facility with English still served as an entrée to high status and well-paid jobs in the public and private sectors. That Stephanians spoke and wrote the language so well and so easily was one reason they went on to become successful diplomats, lawyers, novelists, editors, professors, etc. The argumentative culture of the college was another. The debates that students had in the classroom, the cafe, the lawns, and in their rooms after dinner, were excellent preparation for the years of more profitable disputation that lay ahead, whether in the law court, the lecture theatre, Parliament, the editorial pages of newspapers, or in public administration.

Most Stephanians know that their college is named after

---

* A partial list of prominent alumni is available here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_alumni_of_St._Stephen%27s_College,_Delhi

the first Christian martyr, but they know little or nothing about the man himself. Stephen of Jerusalem was stoned to death early in the first century because he was a greatly skilled debater, whose abilities in this regard angered and annoyed the dominant factions of the day. It is perhaps in unconscious obeisance to the memory of this defiant contrarian that Stephanians have continued to argue so intensely and passionately among themselves – and against others too.

I joined St. Stephen's College in July 1974, a year after Amitav Ghosh, and from the same school, the Doon School in Dehradun. I was never ragged by Rukun Advani, which was probably lucky for me, since I knew very little about English literature and even less about Western classical music. But while I was not ragged by Rukun I was nonetheless in awe of him. He was the first student in years to get a first class in English, a subject where the Delhi University examiners were notoriously parsimonious with marks.* He was also known to be phenomenally well read, and had (as we have seen) a cultivated taste in music.

On the other hand, I was a 'sports type', who had come to St. Stephen's chiefly to play cricket for the college, while registering for a degree in economics on the side. Rukun was

* The only BA English Hons 'First' remembered at St. Stephen's before Rukun was Rabindra (Lalloo) Ray in 1969. Lalloo Ray went on to publish a path-breaking study of the Naxalite movement, which features later in this narrative.

two years ahead of me; he went on to do an MA in English, staying in Rudra North. I lived in a block named Mukarji West, which was a mere fifty metres down the road from where he was. For three years Rukun and I lived in the same, small, enclosed, and extremely self-referential community of young males.* Yet in all this time I do not believe we exchanged a word. I suppose we must have passed each other in the hallway or sat on adjacent tables in the college cafe. So we must on occasion have looked at one another: me with awe, he with indifference (or even contempt).

Other Stephanian toppers (Shashi Tharoor, for instance, who was in the same batch as Rukun Advani, but reading history) were more affable; they liked to be popular, if not famous. Rukun was famously antisocial. We could all see how he glowered when in the company of those he disliked; though it was rumoured that he glowed in the company of those he liked. The former category outnumbered the first by a factor of (roughly) a hundred to one. There were around a thousand students in St. Stephen's, of whom perhaps ten had spoken or been spoken to by Rukun Advani.

Of the handful of Stephanians whom Rukun had favoured with his friendship, several were known to me. They included of course Amitav Ghosh, who had been in the

* In 1975, when I was in my second year and Rukun doing his MA, St. Stephen's finally went co-educational, admitting forty-seven women in the first instance. However, 'Residence' (as the hostel was quaintly called) remained all-male for many years thereafter.

same dormitory as me in boarding school. Before joining the Doon School I had spent eight years in Cambrian Hall, a school from which Rukun's English literature classmate and close friend, Vipin Handa, came. Vipin had been taught at Cambrian Hall by my mother; he always treated me with affection and – although he was, like Rukun, two years my senior and of a scholarly bent as well – without condescension. Then there was my batchmate, the already manifestly brilliant Mukul Kesavan, whom Rukun liked because of his love of literature, and whom I liked because of our shared love of cricket literature. Kesavan was reading history; in the same class as him was Rukun's first cousin, Mukul Mangalik, a young man of much empathy and warmth (despite the genes he shared with the surly and snobbish topper). Mukul Mangalik and I sometimes played tennis together, and at other times went to the college cafe for a round of gupshup.

My own closest friend as an undergraduate was a Tamil named K. Sivaramakrishnan. Shivy was in the same year as I, reading mathematics. He was soft-spoken and shy, whereas I was loud and garrulous. We met in our first week in college, and went to the Delhi University Coffee House together almost every day, sort of mirroring what Amitav Ghosh and Rukun Advani did in Maurice Nagar.

Shivy had been two years junior to Rukun at La Martinière in Lucknow, a place known for excessively celebrating its own 'sports types'. He was one of only three

boys to have used the school library in his time; Rukun was another, and the future novelist Allan Sealy was the third.*
In school Rukun and Shivy had discussed novels and poems, and they continued to discuss them when back in Lucknow during the college holidays. (My friendship with Shivy, on the other hand, was based on our common interests in cricket, bridge, and romantic Hindi film songs.)

While Rukun's friends in college were either scholars or connoisseurs of classical music (most often both), there was one exception. His name was Akhilesh Kala, and he, like me, was born and raised in Dehradun. Kala was a boxer, a gymnast, a guitarist, and not least, a mimic, with an excellent ear, able to reproduce Haryanvi Hindi and Jaffna Tamil with equal precision. Kala lived in the same block, Rudra North, as Rukun, and the latter came to know and like him. For even the most reticent and superior of men could not resist this bubble of warmth and fun from Dehradun. Years later, when I reconnected with Akhilesh Kala in our home town, we spoke, naturally, of our time together in St. Stephen's College. One of the most charismatic undergraduates of his day now lived in utter obscurity. Yet he spoke with much affection of the Stephanians who were now ambassadors, secretaries to government, and newspaper editors. Kala was especially

---

* Among the users of the La Martinière library in the generation before Rukun Advani was Vinod Mehta (later an acclaimed magazine editor and author of the memoir *Lucknow Boy*).

proud of Amitav Ghosh for the books he had written and of Rukun Advani for the books he had published. Kala had been Ghosh's exact contemporary (they had registered for degrees in history in the same year), and he lived in Rudra North too. 'Vipin Handa was definitely Rukun's number one sidekick,' Kala said. 'But it was a close contest for number two. One week it was Ghosh, the next week, me.'

Apart from being a sports type I was boisterous and badly dressed. This may have further predisposed Rukun Advani against me. Although we never spoke to each other in the three years we spent together in college, I do have a vivid memory of passing him outside Allnutt Court – one of the college quads – one evening. I was entering St. Stephen's after cricket practice, dressed in creased and stained whites, whereas he, clad in a smart leather jacket, was exiting it on his motorbike, going to south Delhi to see his girlfriend. As he pressed the starter he looked up and saw me. I said hello with a smile; he answered with a look of undisguised hostility and sped away.

III

Born in 1955, Rukun Advani was raised in Lucknow, the capital of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. It was the embodiment of Ganga–Jumni tehzeeb, the

syncretic culture of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, which was as much Muslim as it was Hindu. At the time of Rukun's birth, Lucknow had one of India's best universities, which excelled particularly in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as a pioneering college for women, Isabella Thoburn. The city was home to a great centre of Islamic scholarship, Firangi Mahal, and a famous school of Hindustani classical music, presided over by the Agra gharana maestro S.N. Ratanjankar.

The architecture of Lucknow was impressive, with elegant minarets built by the nawabs of Awadh in the eighteenth century alternating with colonial structures built by the British a century later. Claude Martin, a renegade Frenchman with a love of fine buildings, had lived there in the late eighteenth century, and among his most beautiful constructions was Constantia, a stately home which later became the La Martinière School.

The population of Lucknow was multicultural. There were many south Indians who worked in the Secretariat, and many more Punjabis who ran the stores and restaurants. There was a large population of Bengalis, who dominated the science as well as humanities faculties of Lucknow University. There were plenty of Anglo-Indians, who worked in the railways, and quite a few Garhwalis, who worked in homes and offices. The diversity and aesthetic charm of Lucknow was further enhanced by its

Cantonment, which had army officers from across India, their homes scattered along spacious, tree-lined avenues.

Rukun's father, Ram Advani, had come to the city from what is now Pakistan. A Sindhi born and educated in the port town of Karachi, he studied at Lucknow University (where he captained the cricket team), then taught briefly at Bishop Cotton School in Simla (once umpiring a cricket match alongside the infamous architect of 'Bodyline', D.R. Jardine), before moving back to Lucknow.

One of Ram Advani's relatives had run a bookshop in pre-Partition Rawalpindi. Now, in Lucknow, Rukun's father chose to do the same. He rented a space in the handsome Mayfair buildings, in the heart of the city's central district, Hazratganj. In the same building was a theatre showing the latest Hollywood films, Kwality restaurant, and the British Council Library. Down the road lay an iconic branch of the Indian Coffee House. Fine paan and chaat shops were close by as well.

In the high noon of postcolonial Lucknow, before the rise of Hindutva and the emergence of the internet, the cultural pursuits of the city's genteel middle classes were captured in the hybrid Indo-Anglian word 'ganj-ing'. This meant dressing up and going to Hazratganj in the evening, with friends, to have snacks and chit-chat at the Coffee House, the trip beginning or ending with a visit to Ram Advani's bookstore.

One day in the early 1950s, a pretty Punjabi girl from Isabella Thoburn College came ganj-ing with a group of her friends. They went to the bookstore, where she and the owner exchanged glances, and a romance coyly began. Some years later, this girl, Darshi Suri, married Ram Advani. She produced two children in quick succession, and, as soon as they were sent off to school, chose to work part-time in her husband's store, for love of good company and for love of good books too.

Ram Advani's clientele included civil servants, lawyers, school and college teachers, and students. These were local residents who came to the store once or twice a week while ganj-ing. More itinerant visitors were scholars, who came from out of town to work in the Uttar Pradesh State Archives. After 1947, the history of colonial India was all the rage; and the United Provinces (as UP was known in British times) had been at the epicentre of both the Congress-led national movement and the Muslim League–led Pakistan movement. The popular uprising of 1857 was at its strongest here; the suppression of the uprising by the British at its most brutal. The scholars who were studying the different dimensions of these important historical developments all came to rely heavily on Ram Advani. They bought government gazetteers from him, out-of-print books from him, works published by small local presses from him. After a day's work consulting files at the archives, they dropped by for a browse and a

chat. Ram Advani's name came to figure prominently in the acknowledgements of the books these scholars came to write.*

Ram Advani welcomed scholars and teachers, and he was especially kind to the young. He generously allowed school and college students to take books on loan, or to pay for them in instalments. A Lucknow boy who is now an eminent lawyer in Bombay told me that for him, Ram Advani's bookstore would always be 'as famous a Lucknow institution as the Great Imambara'. Another Lucknow boy, now a journalist in the United States, showed me, when I visited his Brooklyn home, a cricket book gifted him by Ram Advani when he was ten. The anthropologist T.N. Madan, who is now in his nineties, recalls that in his five years as a student at Lucknow University he came to spend as much time in this bookshop as in the university library or the classroom. When Madan got a

---

* These scholarly patrons of Ram Advani's bookstore included the Australian Peter Reeves; the Americans Gail Minault, Thomas Metcalf, Barbara Metcalf, Michael Fisher, and David Lelyveld; the British scholars Francis Robinson and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones; the German historian of north Indian publishing, Ulrike Stark; the French scholar of Indian Muslims, Violette Graff; the *bhadralok* historian of the 1857 uprising, Rudrangshu Mukherjee; and the UP *bhaiyyas*-turned-Rhodes Scholars Gyanendra Pandey and Shahid Amin. At least two world-renowned writers spent time browsing and conversing with Ram Advani in his shop in the 1960s: the French anthropologist Louis Dumont and the Trinidadian novelist and essayist V.S. Naipaul.

first class in his MA, Ram Advani presented him with a copy of *Other Men's Flowers*, an anthology compiled by the literary-minded viceroy Lord Wavell, with an inscription to the effect that aspiring scholars would do well to read poetry too.

The writer and translator Ira Pande, who came of age in the Lucknow of the 1960s, recalled:

> Ram Advani's was always a cosy, intimate space with mellow teak bookshelves that exuded the delightful aroma of printed paper and a respectful hush, the hallmark of every good bookshop. It never felt like a shop because Ram Advani presided over it as if he was sitting in his home. Dressed immaculately, glasses dangling beneath his patrician face framed by a French beard, he was the book lover's best friend. Somehow, he managed to distil the best of Lucknow's nawabi andaz into that little space and even as the city went through social upheavals and morphed into a goons' city, this little oasis kept its still, calm centre inviolate. It was widely accepted that no research scholar or writer of the city could afford to ignore it. Ram Advani would offer books, information and point the person in the right direction. There was nothing about the city's history, sociology or anthropology that he did not know. What a pity that he never wrote a portrait of the city himself.*

* See https://scroll.in/article/804915/the-bookseller-of-hazratganj-the-lucknow-of-ram-advani-1920-2016

The only thing missing from this evocative tribute is the music in the background. As a young man in Karachi and Rawalpindi, Ram Advani had grown very fond of jazz. It was in Lucknow that he developed a taste for more serious stuff, aided by his friend, Kailash Tiwari, who had acquainted himself with Western classical music already. In Ram Advani's store, there was always music playing, Dave Brubeck alternating with Beethoven, Miles Davis with Mozart. Tiwari himself was a furniture maker by profession and a Gandhian by political inclination. That an artisan of Brahmin background would convert a Sindhi bookseller to Bach and Beethoven was emblematic of the Lucknow of the time.

Outside work, Ram Advani relaxed by playing golf. He played the game into his eighties, at the club in the Cantonment which had a well-stocked bar to go with the well-maintained fairways and greens. His son Rukun was to inherit this love of golf, along with the love of books and of Western classical music. In all other respects he was utterly unlike his father. Rukun was shy and introverted, and kept very much to himself. His cousin Mukul Mangalik recalls that unlike the other children of his class and age, Rukun detested birthday parties, whether his own or any others. When he grew into his teens he had no gang of his own to go ganj-ing with. While quiet and withdrawn, he was, however, prone to occasional tantrums, which terrified his parents, since for him to shout and scream was so out of

character for a boy who otherwise spoke so little. Clearly, there was always a storm brewing inside that apparently quiet and calm exterior.*

The most famous school in Lucknow was La Martinière College. Founded in the nineteenth century, it had grand arched buildings within a spacious campus. The school's students and teachers had come to the aid of besieged British forces in 1857. Traces of this martial (and loyalist) history were still very visible a hundred years later, when Rukun Advani was admitted to it.

Ram and Darshi Advani sent their son Rukun to La Martinière since it was considered the best English-medium school in Lucknow. That it might have been, but the shy, book-reading and music-loving little boy was altogether out of place there. He detested its macho and philistine culture. Three decades after he had finished high school, he wrote of his unloved alma mater:

> If you couldn't answer the questions that were asked in class, it was logical to expect a beating to follow. Some beatings were more savage than others – it depended partly on the master whose questions you blanked out on. If it was history, you had no time. The history master looked black as a panther, weighed more than Muhammad

* To find expression in his private correspondence as an adult, as revealed in later chapters, as also in his propensity for the most sublimely volcanic music of the Western canon, that of Beethoven.

> Ali, had a nasty temper, a pencil moustache that went too far in both directions before dipping menacingly, a wife with whom his relations were rapidly souring, and an unending sequence of children who all said Daddy, Daddy with gratuitous regularity and without adequate cause. Given this, it was unlikely to benefit your scholarly destiny if you were prone to confusing the Chandlers of Bundlecund with the Rohillers of Rohillcund.

In this (admittedly fictional) recollection, the teachers of La Martinière were not just brutal, but also corrupt. Thus the aforementioned history master (obviously an Anglo-Indian by the sound of his patois) is captured telling a student in class:

> Your bloody dad is in the bloody army, ya bugger, and I have to buy rum in the bloody market. How d'you think you're going to pass in history, Albert? No rum, no marks, heh heh heh. Just tell your dad to send his batman to the canteen and get me some rum ya bugger.*

While put off by the overall culture of the place, Rukun Advani was nonetheless inspired to read more widely by some of his teachers – none more so than the man who

* Rukun Advani, *Beethoven Among the Cows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 132, 133. La Martinière also figures in a far more celebrated work of fiction, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, where it is the model for 'St Xavier's', the school in Lucknow that Kim attended.

taught English literature, the splendidly named Victor Godfrey Rayner. Rukun matriculated from La Martinière in December 1971 – at the very top of his batch of seventy-five – and the next year joined St. Stephen's College to read English. He was happy to be away from Lucknow, and happier to be done with school altogether – especially *his* school. St. Stephen's was in many ways a liberation – no bullying or sadistic masters, no compulsory physical training, a large and well-stocked library, and the freedom to choose one's own friends. The college had then an exceptional record for academic achievement. Its departments of economics, history, and English were reckoned to be the best in Delhi University, which was itself far and away the finest university in the country.

In 1972 St. Stephen's, not yet co-educational, attracted the brightest English-speaking boys from all over India – or, to be more precise, the brightest of such boys who did not wish to do medicine or engineering. Once in college, while exam results counted, extracurricular achievements perhaps mattered even more. The debating and quiz societies were very active; so also a Gandhi Study Circle and a Social Service League. Those of a more literary bent joined the Shakespeare Society; those with more humorous inclinations, the P.G. Wodehouse Society, which ran an annual 'PJ' (Practical Joke) week.

As a solitary sort of fellow Rukun Advani did not, it seems, join any of these clubs or societies. But in the quiet

of his room or theirs – or on a bench in Maurice Nagar – he could cultivate friendship with other literary-minded Stephanians, these being far more numerous than literary-minded Martinians. There were also more than a handful of boys in Residence who listened to classical music, and even one, Ahmer Nadeem Anwar, who played the classical guitar. Always known as Pasha, he was in Rukun's year, also reading English, and became a lifelong friend.

So, unlike in school, in college Rukun found friends to talk books and music with. And the teachers were immeasurably superior. During his BA, Rukun came under the influence of Brijraj Singh, a Rhodes Scholar who worked very much in the Oxbridge style, interrogating his students and opening their minds in small tutorials. During his MA, he was greatly inspired by the classes of A.N. Kaul, the author of a classic work on the American Transcendentalists who had given up a professorship at Yale University to come back and teach in his homeland.

For Rukun, a further attraction of St. Stephen's was that, by the norms and values of the institution, he was considered a success. In La Martinière you were a star if you captained the boxing or football teams. In St. Stephen's, on the other hand, academic distinction was also highly regarded. That Rukun always came first in class had marked him out in school as an eccentric oddity; that he continued to always come first in class in college marked him out as a star, someone to be admired. Before the annual examinations,

lesser gifted boys in his English literature class begged for a peek at his notes, as did girls from Miranda House and Lady Sri Ram College.

Rukun Advani finished his MA in 1977. Almost immediately, his old college offered him a job on the English faculty, a privilege it reserved only for its best graduates. I, still a student in the college, passed him occasionally in the corridors. By now St. Stephen's was co-educational, and the girls in his English literature class feared and adored him in equal measure. While not conventionally handsome, he dressed tidily and had a well-trimmed beard. Besides, he had got higher marks in his exams than any Stephanian before him. That he seemed so inaccessible outside the classroom, and that he was said to listen to Beethoven when alone in his rooms, made the aura around him even more intriguing.

Rukun was to teach in St. Stephen's College for only a year; in 1978, he got a scholarship to do a PhD at Cambridge. Three years later, St. Stephen's celebrated one hundred years of its existence, and the official college magazine, *The Stephanian*, brought out a special issue to mark the occasion. The eighty-odd alumni invited to write essays of reminiscence included distinguished scholars, diplomats, civil servants, and entrepreneurs. The first (and presumably oldest) contributor to the volume was a certain Patrick N. Joshua, who had graduated in 1919 with a BA in mathematics, before becoming a district and sessions judge

in undivided Punjab, and, after Partition, secretary of the Pakistan Bible Society.

The youngest alumnus to contribute an essay for this volume was Rukun Advani. Here he wrote:

> No one comes to St. Stephen's without preconceptions about it. I arrived from a weird school in which boxing and brutality were more important than imagination and intelligence, and having heard about ragging, expected life to continue a savage affair. In this respect St. Stephen's was a revelation. I found that ragging could be sadistic, but that it was more often a reasonably human (and the only practical) method of making friends. The intellectual humiliation wasn't pleasant, but it drove me to read more and showed me a world in which quality of mind was considered more valuable than thickness of skin. There were many appealing features which contributed to a generally humane atmosphere – such, for instance, as the absence of communal feeling, the obvious physical beauty of the place, the roughly equal status of staff and students, the freedom to wake up after Assembly was over.*

In another essay, published some years later, Rukun further reflected on what made St. Stephen's so congenial to those, like himself, who wished to expand their minds:

* See Rukun Advani's untitled contribution to *The Stephanian*, Volume XC, Number 1, College Centenary Issue ('St. Stephen's in Our Times'), February 1981.

> First, everyone who'd made it into the College had done at least reasonably well in school, so that the average intelligence levels in the corridors and classrooms were good; it was usually allied with a desire to carry on doing well in whatever one chose to do. Second, in its physical and architectural charm the college seemed like a harbour within a sea of troubles. The library was better than most [Indian] libraries because it had more books than peons.
>
> . . . These things added up. They ensured an uncrowded mind which could take in what it wanted and keep out what it didn't want to absorb. You were left alone to do what you liked, and since you were placed in pleasant surroundings, amidst a bunch of people who had brains and didn't mind using them late into the night, the environment was conducive to the general exercise of intelligence.

And finally: 'One of the pleasanter things about the College was the number of people who took humour and irreverence seriously but who simultaneously recognized that it was only one area for their creative energies.'[*]

[*] See Rukun Advani, 'Novelists in Residence', in Bhattacharjea and Chatterjee, editors, *The Fiction of St. Stephen's.*

IV

I was born in 1958, three years after Rukun Advani, also in the state of Uttar Pradesh, albeit at its other end. My home town, Dehradun, lay in a valley that had the Himalaya to its north and the Sivaliks to its south. The river Jamuna constituted the district's western flank, the even larger, greater, and holier river Ganga its eastern flank.

While Tamil by blood, I was born and raised in the north because my father and maternal grandfather were both scientists who had chosen to work in the Forest Research Institute (FRI) in Dehradun. The FRI was, if anything, even more representative of the diversity of India than the city of Lucknow. It drew its staff from across the country. Among my father's scientific colleagues were a Sikh, a Mangalore Christian, a Parsi from Pune, several other Tamils, an Andhra, and an Odia. The president of the FRI when I was a little boy was a UP Muslim; his daughter and my mother taught in the same school, and we went to wish them on Eid and they came to wish us on Diwali.

Rukun and I both were 'Nehruvian Indians': Indians whose parents were great admirers of the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The admiration was passed on to us, their children. To be a Nehruvian Indian did not necessarily mean one was a supporter of the Congress Party; rather, it meant that one sought to transcend, in mind and behaviour, petty distinctions of region and

religion. It meant having a relatively progressive attitude on questions of gender; unlike in more conservative homes, daughters as well as sons went to college and became doctors and university professors. Nehruvian Indians were unreconstructed modernists, placing great faith in the powers of science and technology to transform India and make it a 'developed nation'. We did not disparage religion or ritual, but rarely practised it ourselves.

For the Advanis of Lucknow and the Guhas of Dehradun, the language of the household was English. Growing up, Rukun and I spoke Hindustani with the cooks who worked in our homes, while also occasionally using the language with our friends when out on the street. However, within the family and in school, the language of choice, and comfort, was English. The newspapers we subscribed to were in English, as were the novels and stories we read.

In Dehradun, I studied first in Cambrian Hall, the school where my mother taught, before moving to the Doon School. I did not detest my schools quite as much as Rukun did La Martinière, but I cannot say I loved them either. The Doon School was filled with the sons of rich businessmen, who flaunted their wealth and possessions in a manner that this child of a scientist found vulgar. My time in school was redeemed largely by my being the best bowler in the school's First Eleven.

Growing up, I was consumed by my passion for cricket. My mother's brother, to whom I was very close, had a badly

deformed right hand; even with this defect, he had played cricket for St. Stephen's alongside and against some future Test cricketers. Later, he captained a first division club in Bangalore. When he saw that I, his only nephew, had two whole hands and two whole legs, and that I could bowl a bit besides, he determined to make me the Test cricketer that he himself, with his cruel handicap, could never be.

When Rukun joined St. Stephen's in 1972 he knew already that he loved literature, and would most likely make a life and a living somewhere in the world of books. When I joined St. Stephen's in 1974 I had only one ambition: to play cricket for the college. Which I did, just about. I made the college's First Eleven in my second year, and kept my place for the next four years, until I finished my MA.

My life in St. Stephen's was largely consumed by cricket. Although I had enrolled for a degree in economics I rarely attended class – cricketers were allowed to be lax in these matters by an indulgent principal – and relied on friends' notes to pass the exams. All afternoons between July and February were spent at the college nets, and sometimes the whole day too, since we played some thirty or forty matches each year.

The game Rukun Advani grew up playing was golf, which one could play alone. In any case, in his scheme of things, golf came a distinct third after books and music. I, on the other hand, played a team sport that was far more social than any other. Placed at first slip, one carried on

a continuous conversation with the wicketkeeper. If one batted, one spoke to the person at the other end after every over. We cricketers went to the practice ground in a group; we returned in a group as well.

In my years in St. Stephen's I was highly gregarious, both on and off the field. When there was no cricket I hung about with my friends on the lawn or in the cafe. I rarely went for meals on my own. Most evenings, after dinner we repaired to one of our rooms, carrying on the conversation, perhaps while playing a round or two of bridge.

Rukun loved St. Stephen's, where he could listen to music alone, in his room, or expand his mind in one-on-one conversations with similarly clever young men. That he won a sheaf of academic prizes every year added to his self-esteem. On the other hand, while I was a second-class student who never won any prizes, I loved the college too. I made many friends, enjoyed playing cricket, and, like my scholarly contemporary, revelled in the beauty of the place and its relative disregard for regional and religious distinctions.

In his essay for *The Stephanian*'s centenary issue, Rukun remarked that a linguistic feature of the college of his time was

> to conserve verbal energy by abbreviating sentences into epigrams, epigrams into phrases, phrases into monosyllables, and monosyllables into gestures. This

> made it a wonderfully Swiftian world in which complex ideas could be conveyed by curling the lip, raising the thumb, tossing the head, tapping the leg and gyrating the body.

I cannot say that I (or anyone else) remembers Rukun Advani tapping his leg or gyrating his body in public in his years in college. Nonetheless, he could convey a lot through gestures. That look he gave me outside Allnutt Gate as I was returning from cricket and he was starting his motorbike, said: 'What do these sports types know of St. Stephen's who only St. Stephen's know?'

Sophisticated scholar versus scruffy sportsman: such were our varying trajectories in St. Stephen's College. No one who knew us both then would ever have thought that we would come to work together, so closely and for so long.