


many and great dangers, to have been pitifully small. After a three-year wait, the highest return seems to have been 8.92 per cent. The details of the insurance policies are fascinating—slaves could not be insured against suicide, for example—and so too is the wonderfully elaborate system of double-entry book-keeping. Marchesa Origo deals brilliantly with the whole complex structure of taxation, with the system of loans, and the problem of usury. Poor Datini sadly complains after fifty years of “so much labour” that he has reached a point where taxation has so reduced him that “methinks if a man stabbed me, no blood would issue forth.”

But the wealth of detail about the trading companies, the structure of medieval finance, together with the delightful accounts of food, drink and physic, are subordinate to the personalities that emerge: those of the bad-tempered, avaricious, anxious Datini, of his querulous, unsatisfied wife, of the serene and saintly family friend, and of the various sychophantic or devoted hangers-on.

The historian, as the Marchesa Origo quotes, is like the ogre in the fable: Where he smells human flesh, there is his quarry. One is left, after all the inventories of two fur linings made of dormice, or of gentleman's gloves not to be worn to wheel barrows, with a feeling of having met and known Ser Lapo, with his “finest little curly badger,” and Margherita, who each day saw her husband “doing things that make me swell up a dozen times,” and, above all, the ink-stained Datini, who never heeded his friend's warning that “measure is God's demand and no immoderate thing was ever pleasing to that eternal equity,” but who wrote on the first page of his great ledgers: “In the name of God and profit.”



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## India between Two Worlds

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

THE NATURE OF PASSION, by R. Prawer Jhabvala. Norton. \$3.75.

Last winter we spent three months in India. Our life both in Calcutta and on our travels was mostly with Indians. It was a wonderful introduction to the endless fascinations and complexities of Indian society, but it wasn't a substitute for Mrs. Jhabvala's book. I realize this is extravagant praise, but that is what it is meant to be. For anyone who has been to India or is going (as well as for all who can't go) this novel is just about perfect.

One reason it is important is that no westerner going to India is likely to meet the author's people. A serious visitor will meet lots of professors, politicians, journalists, and civil servants. An ultra-serious visitor may go to the villages and sample the life there. But Mrs. Jhabvala deals with another and quite anonymous segment of Indian society—the businessmen and moneymakers and the routine civil servants and their innumerable wives, children, in-laws, cousins, and coreligionists.

MRS. JHABVALA's people have the same problem E. M. Forster dealt with some thirty years ago in *A Passage to India*. They are still suspended between two worlds. Some belong to the world of the women's quarter, of the extended family, of profound filial piety and obedience, and also of phenomenal avarice and unblushing corruption. And some belong, or yearn to belong, to the new world of colleges, elegant and tasteful saris, dancing, dinner parties, and, if not cocktails, at least sherry. This is also the world of the Second Five-Year Plan and government files and public service and fiscal morality. However, there is a change from Forster's day. In Chandrapore there was agony. In Mrs. Jhabvala's New Delhi there is only tension, and it is even possible to laugh at much of it.

To an amazing degree, the life of modern India is influenced and even dominated by the people who came as refugees from East Bengal and

West Punjab. The uprooting and movement released vast wellsprings of energy and ambition.

### Cast of Characters

Lala Narayan Dass Verma is a displaced Punjabi who came to Delhi ten years ago and became exceedingly rich by a scrupulous attention to his contracting business and discriminating bribery of all who would help him get contracts. Lalaji is a good man. He is respected in his community and he, in turn, respects its ancient and intricate rules. So do his wife and his older sister and one of his sons and that son's wife. But there is another son who is a civil servant and who subscribes to the new code of honesty—even where his father is involved. And a third son loves a restaurant called the Rendezvous and yearns to study in England or America, or at least to go abroad. And the youngest daughter has danced and been kissed, and would like to know the man she is to marry. Here are the seeds of conflict. As everyone knows, the Indian soul is made of very sensitive tissue, and Mrs. Jhabvala presides joyously over tearing it.

IMAGINE some Indians will think she goes too far. The incredibly foolish young members of the *avant-garde*, the stuffy civil servants, and, to a lesser degree, the elderly profiteers all receive merciless treatment. But her compatriots should, I believe, think of her as a brilliant craftsman who knows the uses of caricature. As part of her craft she is also deft, elegant, and amusing. The book is important, not because the author set out to prepare a social document but because she knows her business as a storyteller. She knows, among many other things, that a good story needs a solid problem.

The struggle between new and old in India is not an unequal one. As Mrs. Jhabvala shows, the old society has great sources of strength and vitality. But her book itself is a vivid demonstration of the power of the challenge.



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