

RIVER OF GODS



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RIVER OF GODS

AUGUST 15, 2047—HAPPY BIRTHDAY, INDIA

IAN McDONALD



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2006 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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10 09 08 07 06 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McDonald, Ian.

River of gods : August 15, 2047—happy birthday, India / Ian McDonald.

p. cm.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

“In terms of ideas, intellectual scope, detail, inventiveness, risk taking and sheer scale, McDonald’s novel is one of the most ambitious I have read in recent years. It is also a staggering achievement, brilliantly imagined and endlessly surprising, the characters intriguing and psychologically convincing, their dialogue brisk and naturalistic, the grasp of Indian customs and nuances impressive, the sex scenes unusually spicy, the politics subtle and plausible, and much else besides. . . River of Gods is a brave, brilliant and wonderful novel.”

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PART ONE
GANGA MATA



The body turns in the stream. Where the new bridge crosses the Ganga in five concrete strides, garlands of sticks and plastic snag around the footings; rafts of river flotsam. For a moment the body might join them, a dark hunch in the black stream. The smooth flow of water hauls it, spins it around, shies it feet first through the arch of steel and traffic. Overhead trucks roar across the high spans. Day and night, convoys bright with chrome work, gaudy with gods, storm the bridge into the city, blaring filmi music from their roof speakers. The shallow water shivers.

Knee deep in the river, Shiv takes a long draw on his cigarette. Holy Ganga. You have attained moksha. You are free from the chakra. Garlands of marigolds coil around his wet pant legs. He watches the body out of sight, then flicks his cigarette into the night in an arc of red sparks and wades back towards where the Merc stands axle-deep in

the river. As he sits on the leather rear seat, the boy hands him his shoes. Good shoes. Good socks, Italian socks. None of your Bharati shit. Too good to sacrifice to Mother Ganga's silts and slimes. The kid turns the engine; at the touch of the headlights wire-thin figures scatter across the white sand. Fucking kids. They'll have seen.

The big Merc climbs up out of the river, over the cracked mud to the white sand. Shiv's never seen the river so low. He's never gone with that Ganga Devi Goddess stuff—it's all right for women but a raja has *sense* or he is no raja at all—but seeing the water so low, so weak, he is uncomfortable, like watching blood gush from a wound in the arm of an old friend that you cannot heal. Bones crack beneath the SUV's fat tyres. The Merc scatters the embers of the shore kids' fire; then the boy Yogendra throws in the four-wheel drive and takes them straight up the bank, cutting two furrows through the fields of marigolds. Five seasons ago he had been a river kid, squatting by the smudge-fire, poking along the sand, sifting the silt for rags and pickings. He'll end up there too, some time. Shiv will end up there. It's a thing he's always known. Everyone ends up there. The river bears all away. Mud and skulls.

Eddies roll the body, catch streamers of sari silk and slowly unfurl. As it nears the low pontoon bridge beneath the crumbling fort at Ramnagar, the corpse gives a small final roll and shucks free. A snake of silk coils out before it, catches on the rounded nose of a pontoon and streams away on either side. British sappers built this bridge, in the nation before the nation before this one; fifty pontoons spanned by a narrow strip of steel. The lighter traffic crosses here; phatphats, mopeds, motorbikes, bicycle rickshaws, the occasional Maruti feeling its way between the bicycles, horn constantly blaring: pedestrians. The pontoon bridge is a ribbon of sound, an endless magnetic tape reverberating to wheels and feet. The naked woman's face drifts centimetres beneath the autorickshaws.

Beyond Ramnagar the east bank opens into a broad sandy strand.

Here the naked sadhus build their wicker and bamboo encampments and practise fierce asceticisms before the dawn swim to the sacred city. Behind their campfires tall gas plumes blossom skyward from the big transnational processing plants, throwing long, quivering reflections across the black river, highlighting the glistening backs of the buffaloes huddling in the water beneath crumbling Asi Ghat, first of the holy ghats of Varanasi. Flames bob on the water, a few pilgrims and tourists have set diyas adrift in their little mango leaf saucers. They will gather kilometre-by-kilometre, ghat-by-ghat, until the river is a constellation of currents and ribbons of light, patterns in which sages scry omens and portents and the fortunes of nations. They light the woman on her way. They reveal a face of middle-life. A face of the crowd, a face that would not be missed, if any face could be indispensable among the city's eleven million. Five types of people may not be cremated on the burning ghats but are cast to the river: lepers, children, pregnant women, Brahmins and those poisoned by the king cobra. Her bindi declares that she is none of those castes. She slips past, unseen, beyond the jostle of tourist boats. Her pale hands are soft, unaccustomed to work.

Pyres burn on Manikarnika ghat. Mourners carry a bamboo litter down the ash-strewn steps and across the cracked mud to the river's edge. They dip the saffron-wrapped body in the redeeming water, wash it to make sure no part is untouched. Then it is taken to the pyre. As the untouchable Doms who run the burning ghat pile wood over the linen parcel, figures hip-deep in the Ganga sift the water with shallow wicker bowls, panning gold from the ashes of the dead. Each night on the ghat where Brahma the Creator made the ten-horse sacrifice, five Brahmins offer aarti to Mother Ganga. A local hotel pays them each twenty thousand rupees a month for this ritual but that does not make their prayers any less zealous. With fire, they puja for rain. It is three years since the monsoon. Now the blasphemous Awadh dam at Kunda Khadar turns the last blood in the veins of Ganga Mata to dust. Even

the irreligious and agnostic now throw their rose petals on the river .

On that other river , the river of tyres that knows no drought, Yogendra steers the big Merc through the wall of sound and motion that is Varanasi's eternal chakra of traffic. His hand is never off the horn as he pulls out behind phatphats, steers around cycle rickshaws, pulls down the wrong side of the road to avoid a cow chewing an aged vest. Shiv is immune to all traffic regulations except killing a cow . Street and sidewalk blur: stalls, hot-food booths, temples, street shrines hung with garlands of marigolds. *Let Our River Run Free!* declares a hand-lettered banner of an anti-dam protestor . A gang of call-centre boys in best clean shirts and pants out on the hunt spill into the path of the SUV. Greasy hands on the paint job. Yogendra screams at their temerity. The flow of streets grows straiter and more congested until women and pilgrims must press into walls and doorways to let Shiv through. The air is heady with alcohol fumes. It is a royal progress, an assertion. Clutching the cold-dewed metal flask in his lap, Shiv enters the city of his name and inheritance.

First there was Kashi: first-born of cities; sister of Babylon and Thebes and survivor of both; city of light where the Jyotirlinga of Siva, the divine generative energy, burst from the earth in a pillar of radiance. Then it became Varanasi; holiest of cities, consort of the Goddess Ganga, city of death and pilgrims, enduring through empires and kingdoms and Rajs and great nations, flowing through time as its river flows through the great plain of northern India. Behind it grew New Varanasi; the ramparts and fortresses of the new housing projects and the glassy, swooping corporate headquarters piling up behind the palaces and narrow, tangled streets as global dollars poured into India's bottomless labour well. Then there was a new nation and Old Varanasi again became legendary Kashi; navel of the world reborn as South Asia's newest meat Ginza. It is a city of schizophrenias. Pilgrims jostle Japanese sex tourists in the crammed streets. Mourners shoulder their dead past the cages of teen hookers. Skinny Westerners gone native

with beads and beards offer head massages while country girls sign up at the matrimony agencies and scan the annual income lines on the databases of the desperate.

Hello bello, what country? Ganja ganja Nepali Temple Balls? You want to see young girl, jig-a-jig; see woman suck tiny little American football into her little woman? Ten dollar. This make your dick so big it scares people.

Cards, janampatri, hora chakra, buttery red tilaks thumbed onto tourists' foreheads. Tween gurus. Gear! Gear! Knock off sports-stylie, hooky software, repro Big Name labels, this month's movie releases dubbed over by one man in one voice in your cousin's bedroom, sweat-shop palmers and lighthoeks, badmash gin and whisky brewed up in old tanneries (John E. Walker, most respectable label). Since the monsoon failed, water; by the bottle, by the cup, by the sip, from tankers and tanks and shrink-wrapped pallets and plastic litrejohns and backpacks and goatskin sacks. Those Banglas with their iceberg, you think they'll give us one drop here in Bharat? Buy and drink.

Past the burning ghat and the Siva temple capsizing slowly, tectonically, into the Varanasi silts, the river shifts east of north. A third set of bridge piers stirs the water into Cats' tongues. Lights ripple, the lights of a high-speed shatabdi crossing the river into Kashi Station. The streamlined express chunks heavily over the points as the dead woman shoots the rail bridge into clear water.

There is a third Varanasi beyond Kashi and New Varanasi. *New Sarnath*, it appears on the plans and press releases of the architects and their PR companies, trading on the cachet of the ancient Buddhist city *Ranapur* to everyone else; a half-built capital of a fledgling political dynasty. By any name, it is Asia's biggest building site. The lights never go out. The labour never ceases. The noise appals. One hundred thousand people are at work, from chowkidars to structural engineers. Towers of great beauty and daring rise from cocoons of bamboo scaffolding, bulldozers sculpt wide boulevards and avenues shaded by gene-mod ashok trees. New nations demand new capitals and Ranapur

will be a showcase to the culture, industry and forward-vision of Bharat. The Sajida Rana Cultural Centre. The Rajiv Rana conference centre. The Ashok Rana telecom tower . The museum of modern art. The rapid transit system. The ministries and civil service departments, the embassies and consuls and the other paraphernalia of government. What the British did for Delhi, the Ranas will do for Varanasi. That's the word from the building at the heart of it all, the Bharat Sabha, a lotus in white marble, the Parliament House of the Bharati government, and Sajida Rana's prime-ministership.

Construction floods glint on the shape in the river. The new ghats may be marble but the river kids are pure Varanasi. Heads snap up. Something here. Something light, bright, glinting. Cigarettes are stubbed. The shore kids dash splashing into the water . They wade thigh-deep through the shallow, blood-warm water, summoning each other by whistles. A thing. A body A woman's body. A naked woman's body. Nothing new or special in Varanasi but still the water boys drag the dead woman in to shore. There may be some last value to be had from her. Jewellery. Gold teeth. Artificial hip joints. The boys splash through the spray of light from the construction floods, hauling their prize by the arms up on to the gritty sand. Silver glints at her throat. Greedy hands reach for a trishul pendant, the trident of the devotees of Lord Siva. The boys pull back with soft cries.

From breastbone to pubis, the woman lies open. A coiled mass of gut and bowel gleams in the light from the construction site. Two short, hacking cuts have cleanly excised the woman's ovaries.

In his fast German car, Shiv cradles a silver flask, dewed with condensation, as Yogendra moves him, through the traffic.