

SAGRAMANDA

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A NOVEL OF NEAR-FUTURE INDIA

ALAN DEAN FOSTER



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To the young people of India, who are waking up.
To Kali at Kolkata, apologies for *Gunga Din*.
To the tigers and barasingha of Kanha, thanks for the memories.
To Dimple at Kanha, who taught me how to make pakhoras.
To Kiran Moktan at Darjeeling, for letting me spend time with the
snow leopards.
To the carvers of Khajuraho, eternal life.
To the silent stories of Orchha.
To the friendly rats of Deshnok, more milk and cookies.
To the people of Jaisalmer, more water and less heat.
Most especially, to Nagy, for his patience and skill.
Four weeks, 3000 kilometers, drive on the right, and remember:
Camels and elephants have the right of way.

Chapter i

There are the poor, and there are the terribly poor. Below them are the wretchedly poor. And then there are those who literally have nothing, not even hope. To them, the term is not even any longer applicable. That so many of these utterly forgotten manage to reach adulthood is itself amazing. To belong to this class of humanity is to view the alley as mansion, the street as home, and to live most if not all of one's miserable life in the gutter.

Taneer had once seen such a man, not much older than himself, walk quietly up to others, hand outstretched, one finger upraised. Not as an insult, but as a silent request. The man was asking for a single rupee. One rupee. About two American cents. Taneer had watched as the man stopped outside an eating place. Not a restaurant, really. A few rough wooden tables and chairs, not even a roof over the stall where the food was cooked in sizzling open skillets and pans. The man

had stood there with his suppliant, petitioning, upraised finger until the exasperated proprietor had heaved a very large pot brimming with dirty dishwater square in the man's face. The patrons, most of whom were not a great deal better off than the beggar, had laughed heartily.

The man had blinked away the dirty water coursing down his face and seeping into his eyes. He'd said nothing, had not wiped at the two-legged column of walking filth that was himself. He had not cursed, or started to cry. Instead, he had remained as he had prior to the polluted dousing, finger upthrust, waiting. After another ten minutes of being ignored he had moved on, the white and brown rags that cloaked his slender form held together with sweat and grime, wearing little more than his dignity.

That was India.

That was Sagramanda.

It like to broke Taneer's heart.

Remembering the dignified beggar, Taneer gave rupees when he could safely do so, without fear of being mobbed. He could not do so at present because he dare not do anything that might attract attention to himself. If they caught him, those who were after him would break him much more than emotionally. They would break his bones.

What he had discovered after all those days and nights spent slaving in the lab, what he had subsequently stolen from it and from his outraged employers, could not destroy the world—but it could remake it. Because of his discovery, and his decision to abscond with it, he was going to end up either very rich or very dead. For Depahli's sake as much as his own, it had to be the former.

Right now, more than anything else, he needed time. Time to consolidate his thoughts as well as his gains. Time to determine whether he would be more successful as a scientist or as a thief. He had to find a place to hide, where he could think, and plan, and decide on his next move. Fortunately, his home was Sagramanda.

In a city of more than one hundred million people, even a formerly honest man like Taneer Buthlahee stood a fair chance of losing himself.



Sanjay Ghosh had determined to leave the village for good when the leopard ate his dog. The household canine was not the first local children's favorite the leopard had eaten. The uninvited occasional visitor had acquired a taste for defenseless family pets, and the Ghoshes' dog was either the tenth or eleventh it had snatched from the village, depending on whether or not the Toshwahlas' cat had been taken by it or killed by a snake.

The leopard lived high up in the hills that were still covered by jungle and had not yet been cut and burned for cooking charcoal. Years ago, the state government had added the hills to an existing wildlife preserve and had forbidden the cutting of trees within the new boundaries. While it was true that the stream that ran by the village subsequently ran clearer and purer than ever, and did not flood nearly so often, the animals that lived in the forest had grown bolder with time and had lost their fear of being hunted. One could tolerate monkeys, Sanjay believed. They were always fun to watch, even when they were making trouble or trying to raid the fields, and were sacred to Hanuman besides. But a leopard . . .

The big cat was protected, local officials had insisted when the village headman had gone to town to complain. It was in hope of seeing such animals that money-spending tourists came to visit the preserve. But Sanjay and his family and friends never saw any of the foreign money that they suspected ended up, like so much similar money, in politicians' pockets in Delhi and Mumbai and Sagramanda.

Would the village sacrifice its cleaner, fresher water to get rid of the leopard? A wandering priest had taken a poll on his PDA. The verdict was that Sanjay's fellow villagers would tolerate the big cat until and unless it switched from eating kittens and dogs and chickens to

the villagers themselves. Perhaps then they could interest a local newspaper, if not a local government official, in their ongoing predicament.

Sanjay, however, was determined not to wait around to find out if he was to be the one signifying a step up in the leopard's diet. Small, dark, and tough, with a mustache as fine as any in the village, he had spent hour after hour late into the nights at the village computer terminal. He had learned English, and even some German. English and computers were the keys to everything, he knew.

Now he felt that he was at last ready to take the big step, to move away from subsistence farming and to join the modern economy. He was going to earn real money. The incident of the leopard and the family dog had only been the final push he needed.

"We have to find a way to make a better life for our children than can be found in this village," he had told his wife on more than one occasion. "To do that, a man needs money. There is no money here. In Sagramanda, there is money."

"There is also death." Chakra had spoken to him from her side of the bed. She had the face of a Bollywood star and the body of a whore, which not even long days of hard work in the fields had been able to diminish. Yet. One of Sanjay's goals was to preserve both—for her self-image as well as for his own pleasure. The only reason he had not left the village for the city earlier was his fear of leaving her behind. In his absence, other men would be tempted by her apparent availability. The world would not be a natural place if it were otherwise.

Even with worry in her voice and fear in her eyes for his prospects, she had repeatedly reassured him on that score.

"I love only you, Sanjay," she had cooed as she had stroked him to hardness. "I love that you love only me, and I know you will be true to our family even should you find yourself among the many temptations of Sagramanda. Also," she had added with a smile while giving him a painful twist, "if I find out that you have cheated on me, or spent the money you are so desperate to make for us on another woman, I will

find you and feed your balls to the leopard, may it make an interesting change of diet for him.”

With a woman like that waiting for him, he had mused, how could he become anything other than a success?

It had been almost two years since he had left the village. The first months in Sagramanda had been horrible. As it did to all who struggled to embrace it, the city had overwhelmed him; with its size, the fury of the competition just to survive, the traditional threats and new dangers. But the two weapons he had brought with him—his studied command of English and his slight but steadily growing knowledge of computers—had soon raised him up above the millions of lost and abandoned souls who populated the streets.

It was as true as the government announcements that repeatedly played on the village computer back home had claimed: education was the key to everything.

Within six months, he had a dry place to live. Within a year, he was sending money home. The email he received from Chakra via the village terminal, the glowing photos of his son and daughter, and the pride inherent in their words at his success, were more than enough to inspire him to keep going, though the regular communications did less to assuage the loneliness he felt.

Next month, he promised Chakra. By next month he would have saved enough, and secured enough, to allow him to come home for a visit. What a celebration there would be then! Everyone was anxious to see him again, to hear the stories of his adventures and experiences in the city. Through sheer determination and force of will he had become, if not a Bollywood movie star, certainly a village success story.

“*Chakra*,” he whispered to himself. Chakra *sundar*; beautiful Chakra. Her name was poetry. The village celebration would have to wait. Sanjay was a modest man, even shy. But back in Chakra’s arms again, after nearly two years, he intended not to stir from his house, newly renovated by her with some of the money he had succeeded in

sending, for at least two days. It would be two days they would not spend sleeping. He smiled, and his fellow passengers could only stare at him and wonder at the source of his contentment.

The maglev was not only the fastest way into the heart of the city, it was the safest. More expensive than the old subway to be sure, but Sanjay felt he could afford it now. Peering out from the confines of the economy carriage at the endless expanse of conurbation, he could for the duration of the journey feel that he had risen figuratively as well as literally above the uncountable masses that swelled the city to unmanageable size. Yet unmanageable or no, somehow it all held together. Somehow, it worked.

That was India, too. Knowing it gave him a feeling of pride.

From Mahout Station he took a bus. Fuel-cell powered, electric-engine driven, it contributed no emissions to befoul the already dangerously polluted urban air. Sanjay was able to breathe freely as he stepped off, however. It was nearing the end of the monsoon season, and recent rains had washed the atmosphere above the city blissfully free of contaminants. If the climate was kind, he would not have to wear his face mask for another month or two.

As if to bless the new day a light rain began to fall. Not the kind of thunderous torrent of a downpour that characterized the full monsoon. This was more of a last parting kiss. It would be a good day. Around him, towering new skyscrapers blocked the morning light from the city's half-restored historical district. His destination, his shop, lay nearby, chosen as much for its proximity to public transport as for its commercial viability.

Being located near the historical district, with its venerable old buildings and museums, meant tourists. Tourists meant money. Since most of them had not the slightest idea how to bargain properly, good money.

His tiny souvenir shop stood untouched, one of several dozen similar shops located in the old, single-story block. Ghosh's Keepsakes had

a middling location, squashed tightly between Ardath's Souvenir Shop and Shankrashma's T-shirt Emporium (and souvenirs). Taxis and buses, scooters and powered three-wheeled covered rickshaws, trucks and motorcycles and bicycles and tricycles choked the streets. Private vehicles were, of course, banned from this part of the city between the hours of six in the morning and nine at night in favor of public transport, government vehicles, and delivery trucks. Otherwise everything would come to a complete standstill and nothing would move at all.

As he removed the electronic key that would unlock his front door and disarm the alarm he had to scurry sideways to avoid the familiar warning beep of a municipal cattle remover. The hulking vehicle slowed as it neared the pair of cows who had settled themselves atop and alongside the grassy median that divided the several lanes of traffic. He did not bother to stop and watch as the driver went about the business of gently slipping the teflon-coated metal scoop beneath the first animal. As its sides came up to gently enfold and secure the mildly irritated bovine, the scoop rose upward, over the cab of the mover, to deposit the unharmed animal in the holding pen in back. By the time the process had been repeated with the remaining animal, Sanjay was already opening the door to his establishment. The achievement of which he was perhaps most proud and for which he was certainly the most thankful greeted him with a soft whine as the air-conditioning sprang to life.

"Namaste—assalam aleikum—good morning." The shop's voice greeted him in Hindi, Urdu, and English, as it would any of his customers should he find himself busy with stock in the back room.

It was a long way from having to rise before dawn to eat dirt and dust in the village fields, he reminded himself gratefully. He tried to make a moment most every morning to render such thanks.

The register's box tunnel sprang to life at the touch of his fingers. There was nothing much more to do except set the tea to boiling, which he did with a verbal command to the shelf-mounted unit.

Ready, alert, and open for business, he called forth the morning's *Times* in the tunnel. Indulging in an addiction that was common to hundreds of millions of his fellow citizens, he went straight to the Entertainment pages. Outside, traffic flowed a little more smoothly now that the morning's wandering cattle had been relocated. Afternoon might see a family of curious monkeys ambling down the boulevard, though with the rain the local troops of langurs might choose to remain among the trees in the nearby park.

Confirmation that it was going to be a good day came when his first buying customers turned out to be a quartet of visiting Japanese. They were young, energetic, and chatty. As expected, the first thing they did was have their picture taken inside the shop. Sanjay had grown sufficiently sophisticated in the ways of foreigners to know that the Japanese never took pictures of places they visited. They only took pictures of *themselves* standing in front of places they visited.

Obsequious shopkeeper and eager tourists communicated in broken English, of which Sanjay's command was by far the greater. He was careful to defer to his visitors, of course: admiring their attire, complimenting them on their English, expressing astonishment at their bargaining abilities, remarking favorably on their taste, and being sure to add a ten percent surcharge onto their purchases for shipping costs as well as another seven percent for the use of credit cards. Not to mention the thirty percent overall profit he made on the entire sale once they had worn him down to half his initial asking price on every item.

While they went away happy, he treated himself to a cup of second-pick green Darjeeling, with extra sugar and cream. Sealed tightly nearby was the hand-wrapped packet of Ruby Clonal first pick, but such exclusive tea was reserved for customers who purchased only the best his poor shop had to offer. That meant trinkets of gold and gemstones, not mass-produced sandalwood carvings or inlaid marble boxes from Agra.

He made several additional sales before lunch, which put him in a more contented mood than usual when Bindar arrived. The two men smiled at one another. Or at least, Sanjay smiled. Bindar's expression was more of a furtive grimace. It suited the man. In stature he was as short as Sanjay but far thinner. Cousin to the rats that still infested parts of the city, some would say. Brother to the mongoose would have been Bindar's preferred comparison.

"You had a pleasant journey from the north?" Sanjay inquired conversationally as he flicked a switch on the shop controller. In response, the window and door darkened while a glowing "Closed" sign written in a multiplicity of languages materialized, ghostlike, within the light-altering depths of the polycrylic panels.

"I'm not missing any body parts, am I?" As the visitor flopped himself down in the single chair that stood opposite Sanjay's front counter, he swung a small backpack off his bony shoulders and onto the glass counter top, blocking the view of rings and necklaces and bangles within. It was a view not missed. Bindar was a supplier of goods, not a customer.

Sanjay maintained his smile. "Nothing that is readily visible, anyway. Tea?"

The wiry visitor seated before him nodded briskly. Both men drank. There followed brief but intense conversation involving the cricket of the previous day, during which the Sri Lankan national team had nearly managed to beat the Australians. In India, few things could displace business. Cricket was one of them. Talk of batsmen and bowlers concluded, Bindar sneaked a last glance at the darkened storefront before opening his pack.

This involved considerably more than simply unsnapping a strap or untying a couple of knots. First, Sanjay's lean visitor entered a code into the hand unit he extracted from the pocket of his ragged shorts. An LED on the pack, which was woven of impenetrable carbon fiber composite camouflaged to look like cheap burlap, flashed green. Entry

and broadcast of a second code brought forth another green light plus a soft click from somewhere within. Had anyone else tried to force their way into the pack without successfully entering both codes, the amount of C-4 explosive integrated into its inner lining was sufficient in quantity and purity to scatter the would-be intruder's body parts plus those of anyone in his immediate vicinity over a distance more expansive than the standard cricket field. As the pack's owner unsealed the top flap Sanjay leaned forward, the better to see what the man with the mongoose countenance had brought for him.

There were a dozen small packets, every one as neatly wrapped and bound as a Chinese New Year present. Each was hand-identified in English, that being as much the language of general commerce throughout the subcontinent as it was in the rest of the wider world. One package said "Acetaminophen syntase—Pandeswami Industries, Guwahati." The two next to the first declared their contents to be "Multivitamin with proprietary Ayurvedic herbs and supplements." All three packages contained nothing of the kind, unless one counted as a similarity the fact that they were packed tight with synthesized pharmaceuticals.

Illegal recreational pharmaceuticals.

Sanjay had always been a very fast learner. He had been the first in his village age group to master English verbs, the first to inquire about how to use a computer keyboard, the first to try voice recognition commands. Once he obtained the small business loan that had enabled him to open his little shop, it had not taken him long to learn that even when dealing with ignorant tourists, the profit margin on T-shirts and silver anklets and carved wooden elephants was small. Much smaller than on other things that could be sold to travelers out of a shop such as his.

He prided himself on never selling such items to Indians. Well, not to Hindus, anyway. He was a strong BJP man, firmly believing them to be corrupt but less corrupt than the members of the Congress and other parties. When resigned to a life in hell always vote for the lesser devil,

his father had once told him. Though considering himself to be completely unprejudiced, he was happy enough to sell drugs to Buddhists, and Muslims, and the occasional Sikh, as well as to eager tourists.

You are throwing away your lives as well as your money, he wanted to tell them when they came looking for his shop (he had already gained a modest reputation for availability of certain chemical combinants). You were born with all these advantages, and you are casting them to the winds for a few moments of false pleasure, he felt the urge to say.

But he did not. Because he had a wife, and two children, and had not the brutal ancestors of his fresh-faced customers raped and stolen from his own progenitors whatever had taken their fancy? Ghosh's Keepsakes was not exactly a front for a reprise of the Sepoy Rebellion, but neither did his misgivings over what he was doing cause him to lose much sleep. Especially not when some smart-mouthed French or Italian kid wearing fake Indian clothing and sporting long dreads ambled in off the street, acting as if he owned the place, and flashed a wallet stuffed with more rupees than Sanjay's long-suffering father was used to seeing in a year.

So he beamed at Bindar, who was forever looking over his shoulder as if Durga herself was on his tail with a knife in each of her eight arms, and selected one of the packets at random. His visitor simply nodded, knowing in advance what Sanjay intended to do with the package. Unless, of course, the shopkeeper had taken leave of his rural but carefully honed senses.

Using his remote, Sanjay unlocked the bottom drawer of his counter. It did not look like a drawer, but like a section of the counter base itself. Recognizing his thumbprint, the drawer slid out. It contained not trinkets and bangles, not even the good 22k gold jewelry he kept for knowledgeable customers, but several pieces of gleaming white electronics.

Carefully puncturing the packet he had selected he used a small spoon to tip a tiny bit of the beige powder it contained into an open

receptacle atop one such device. Practiced fingers manipulated a set of buttons. Sanjay did not know how the instruments worked. It was not necessary that he did. While lights flickered and danced, Bindar struggled as he always did not to lean forward and peer over the counter.

As a matter of professional regard, Sanjay was not smiling now. He liked Bindar, who had come to Sagramanda from a village even poorer than Sanjay's and who had chosen a profession far more dangerous than that of shopkeeper. But it was hard to keep a straight face when his restless visitor was twisting and squirming in the chair like a man whose previous night's meal of curried goat was threatening to come back on him.

It took only a couple of minutes for the precision instrument to render its verdict and end the courier's agony.

"Quite satisfactory," Sanjay declared. The drawer shut down and locked automatically when he pushed it closed. A second touch on the remote would have opened a panel in a dirty section of floor behind him. Storing the merchandise could wait until Bindar's departure. After all, if the courier, good man though he was, saw the location of Sanjay's hiding place, then it would be a hiding place no longer.

Though even Sanjay's small shop accepted a wide range of credit cards there were some transactions to be made in this world where cash was still preferred. Bindar's tension eased when Sanjay returned from a back room with a small box. Opening the box, the whippet-thin courier thumbed rapidly through the wad of bills it contained; a comforting masala of rupees, euros, yen, and dollars. He didn't count it all, just as Sanjay had not tested every packet. If the total was short, someone would accost the shopkeeper one day and have a word with him about the discrepancy. Perhaps break a bone or two. Or put out an eye. The same thing could happen to Bindar if one of the packets Sanjay had accepted turned out to be full of, say, turbinado sugar instead of fashionable hallucinogenics.

The transaction completed, the two men exchanged gossip, further sports talk, political conversation, and more tea. Bindar did not linger

He had other deliveries to make, other collections to pursue. Both men found themselves discussing the disappearance of a mutual acquaintance who had shorted a certain midlevel distributor in the district of High Hooghly. The acquaintance had been found just last week. In three different parts of the city. Simultaneously. It was an object lesson no one needed to dwell upon.

Bindar finished the last of his tea, rose, and moved toward the door. Fingering his remote, Sanjay unlocked it, at the same time reopening his shop for business and brightening the windows so passing customers could once more see inside as soon as he had safely locked away the delivery.

“Take care of yourself, my friend,” he told the departing courier. “Watch out for evil spirits and loose women.”

“Every chance I get.” Bindar smirked. They were bound together by business and a common heritage. Neither of which would keep Bindar from having Sanjay’s throat cut if he ever felt the shopkeeper had cheated him: a purely businesslike sentiment Sanjay silently reciprocated.

But—business was good, and there was no reason this day for such dark thoughts to trouble either man. Bidding Bindar good-bye, Sanjay returned to his chair behind the counter; the one that circulated a permanent cooling fluid throughout its seat and frame. There was no need to advertise that he had just restocked a certain singular portion of his inventory. His regular customers would know, and travelers would find out. Switching on the storage box, he settled back and relaxed as a schedule of available entertainment materialized in the tunnel that opened in front of him.

He chose an old movie. He liked the old movies, even if they were in black and white. Three-dimensionalized, the figures appeared in front of him, one-quarter actual size, whirling and dancing and singing something about love and fate and the caprices of the Gods. Business was good, life was good, he told himself as he directed the brewer to make another cup of chai—iced, this time.

Next year, he told himself. Next year he would bring Chakra and the children to Sagramanda to live with him. We would get them out of the hot, stinking, poverty-stricken countryside forever.

One man's picturesque village is another man's slum.