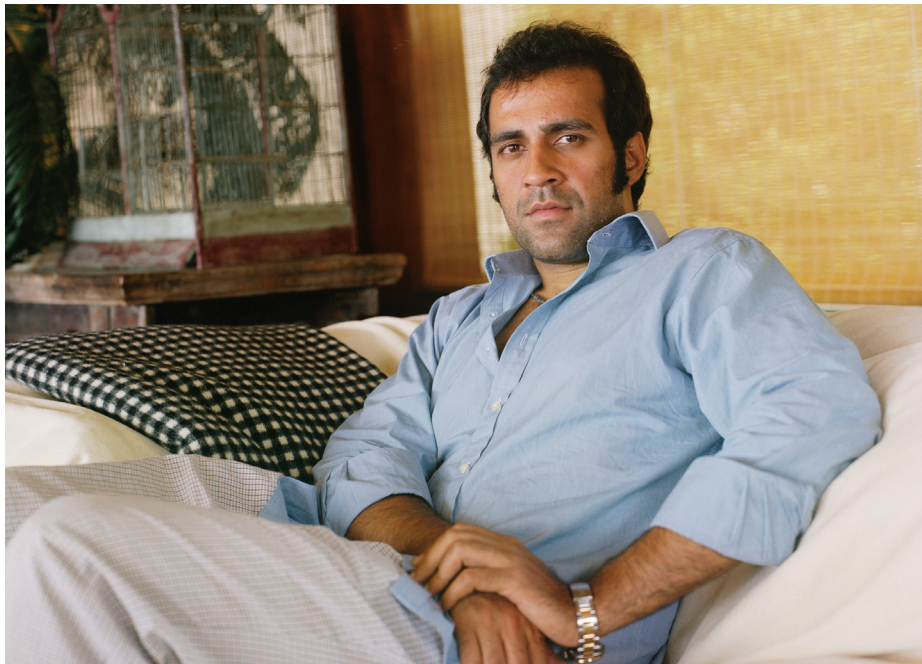


Aatish Taseer

The outsider

A young man's search for his father has yielded a book of some considerable depth, finds **Avtar Singh**. Photography **Theo Wenner**.



Consider the genetic inheritance. The mother is from a family of Sikh landlords, the father the child of a famous Urdu poet from Pakistan. Consider the circumstances of the child's birth and early development. The father has written a book, which he's promoting in India, while the mother, a journalist, is covering the event. They meet, forge a connection, and disappear for a week. The father returns to his life and family in Pakistan, the mother considers abortion. The father convinces her not to do so, the family has a few short happy interludes together, including a well-attended "wedding" reception in Delhi, and then, just like that, the father abandons mother and infant in London.

If you think you've already seen the movie, well, it's that sort of story. But this particular screenplay is actually true and has spawned a brave and often beautiful book, written by the child of that union, Aatish Taseer, who is now 28 years old. In the process, *Stranger to History* manages to be many things at the same time: a keenly observed travelogue that's alive with a sense of adventure, an educated and precise discussion of Muslims and

Islam and, perhaps most importantly, a memoir of a son's effort to start and sustain a relationship with his long-absent father.

Taseer's father is Salmaan Taseer, entrepreneur, Bhutto-loyalist and currently the governor of Pakistani Punjab. His mother is Tavleen Singh, well-known political columnist and commentator. A story that the younger Taseer wrote about the growing radicalisation of Pakistani-origin youths in northern England, post the London-bombings of 2005, elicited a furious response from his father, who accused his son of prejudice and a lack of even "superficial knowledge of the Pakistani ethos". He went on to accuse his son of "spreading... invidious anti-Muslim propaganda". The resultant silence between the two led, in part, to Taseer setting off on an overland journey – from Istanbul to Pakistan – that took in Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. His aim, he writes in his book, "was to tie together the two threads of experience from that summer: the new, energised Islamic identity working on young Muslims and my own late discovery of my father's religion. My father's letter presented me with the dou-

ble challenge to gain a better understanding of Islam and Pakistan."

The journey itself is exhilarating, and Taseer recounts it well. As he told *Time Out* over email, "It was a great adventure... It's the curiosity one feels every time one boards a flight from Delhi to London; and usually in a cabin at night, those places drift by – Tehran, Tabriz, Istanbul – on the flight map, full of suggestiveness, but somehow unreachable." He takes us by a "traditionally Islamic" neighbourhood in Istanbul, which, in Ataturk's radically secular Turkey, sticks out more than it would in London. He is in Damascus as the furore around the Danish "cartoons" of the prophet reaches its height and he performs the Umra in Mecca. He gets drunk in Tehran, drives around the city with a barefoot movie director and his lovely actor wife and attends a Hare Krishna meeting there. He spends time in interior Sind with an alcoholic landlord and crosses the Indus, a river that's ceased to flow. Along the way, he casts a sharp eye at the people who live in these places and comes to some conclusions that many people in India – on either side of the political spectrum – might find uncomfortable to read.

One of the things he points to, for instance, is a growing sense of grievance amongst Muslims in general, that has nothing to do with whether the person in question is a "moderate" or an "extremist". As he told us, "this is not really about faith; it's about a certain historical and political pain, and envy, for which the faith, in varying degrees, can become a consolation." What makes it worse, he said, is that "the rage grows ever more amorphous... And it exists even in men like my father who don't even have the faith."

Taseer is particularly severe on Pakistan, where his need to understand the country runs up against what he believes are its deficiencies, especially those that it was born with, such as its need to rid itself of anything "Indian". Clearly, a father disenchanted with a story about politically radicalised Brit-Pakistanis isn't going to like a book that takes such a hard look at his own country. Taseer is philosophical about this. As he said, "my father's not unintelligent; I hope he'll see that it's nothing personal".

But what if, even if his father doesn't, the rest of the world does think it's personal, that this is the diatribe of a deeply wounded, abandoned son? Taseer dismissed that particular possibility. "If a book is written from feelings of anger and hurt, they will become manifest in the writing. This does not mean... that the reader should feel he's travelling with someone stripped of his situation; no, all that must remain; but the writer has to be aware of it and lay it before the reader so that there is no deception. My perspective, with my mixed past, with some kind of double vision, with a certain ability to look hard at both India and Pakistan, must remain."

Stranger to History, Picador India, Rs 495.