Buddhist texts commonly tell a story where a holy man (sometimes the Buddha himself), seated at a crossroads, is faced with a difficult decision. The holy man sees a man run by him; moments later, another man, or group of men, come running by, and enquire of him if he knows which road the first man has taken. In the interpretive traditions surrounding this story, the holy man or the Buddha is faced with an intersecting array of considerations, and at least three choices are evidently available to him. He can choose to tell the truth, with the possible consequence of endangering the life of the man who ran by him; he can choose to tell a lie, and perhaps save the life of this man, but at the price of violating an indispensable injunction of the ethical life, the obligation to remain bound by the truth; or he can choose to remain silent. This parable speaks to us about the difficulties of adhering to the life of truth, about the conflicting interpretations of truth and falsehood, and about the virtues of stillness and
equanimity; it also says something about energy, and about the dialectic of rest and motion; and yet again we can also read it as a homily on the contingent nature of all systems of knowledge, on the ambiguous necessity of choosing between interpretations, and on the difficulties of deriving the meaning of meaning itself.

Whatever the holy man's eventual choice, the compilers of the Guinness Book of Records appear to have had no difficulty in locating the meaning of another story involving a seated man. For a good many years, the Guinness Book accredited an Indian holy man with the world record for remaining seated for the longest period of time. The entry notes that 'the silent Indian fakir Mastram Bapu ('contented father') remained on the same spot by the roadside in the village of Chitra for 22 years from 1960-82.'\(^1\) It would seem quite logical that this record should be held by an Indian. The fakir has been, for some centuries, an iconic figure in popular representations of India, and Westerners have, over the years, flocked to India to learn something of the ascetic and meditative practices of Indian holy men. In colonial writings, the hot climate of India was seen as inducing a stupor in its natives, making them indolent and averse to a life of action; and a stationary and seated man would have been the most appropriate icon of a static country—impervious to the passage of time and the attraction of places—where men were quite content with the simplest of human needs, fulfilled with a minimal expenditure of energy. By the twin processes of condensation and iteration, this image is then captured in the entry in the Guinness Book, which also imposes its own categories of knowledge. Thus the editors must have thought that there was nothing ironic in placing the entry under the caption 'Camping out'. Indians know nothing of camping, and the practice of pitching tents or placing stakes in the great outdoors remains a largely Anglo phenomenon, common to the great American, Australian, and Canadian expanses of wilderness or sparsely inhabited land. There is yet a more supreme irony, one that Henry David Thoreau, who wrote of the world and stayed in the woods around Walden Pond, whose water he thought had mingled with that of the Ganga, would most certainly have relished: in having stayed at one spot for a good part of his life, Mastram Bapu had nonetheless managed to arrive, propelling himself into the pages of what the West calls 'history'.

The peculiar achievement of Mastram Bapu is only one of many such stories. News bits about Indians finding a place in the Guinness Book of Records have become staple items in Indian newspapers, whether published in India or abroad, over the past ten to fifteen years. Though Indians hold only a small fraction of the tens of thousands of records of human achievement, endurance, prowess, ingenuity, and foibles, lavish attention is bestowed by Indian print and visual media upon each Indian triumph, and there is every indication that Indians today are scrambling, with resounding success, to have their names etched, in however bizarre a manner, in the annals of fame. Most of the records for which Indians are included in the Guinness Book were set in the last ten years, in the immediate aftermath of the Rajiv Gandhi 'era', and according to the London headquarters of the Guinness Book, at least one tenth of all mail they receive is from India, mainly from people seeking to receive acknowledgment of some record that they have set.\(^2\) Indians who have been admitted into the pages of the Guinness Book also belong to the World Record Holder Club of India, and the President of this club changed his name from Harprakash Rishi to Guinness Rishi.\(^3\) What explains this compulsion Indians apparently feel to find a place in the Guinness Book? Must one point to fragile egos and a feeling of inferiority in comparison to Anglo-Saxon culture, or can one evoke, as has one writer, the notion of a fetish for records? Or is there perhaps, in the narrative of Indians' enchantment with achieving records, something that can be inferred about the manner in which configurations of masculinity, femininity, eccentricity, competitiveness, sportsmanship, and 'Indianness', all shaped by the experience of colonialism and modernity, have contributed to the shaping of contemporary Indian middle-class public culture?

While these records are to most people a matter of some curiosity, they would also appear to be something short of trivia. The authors of those assaults upon the 'canon' that were common in the 1980s and early 1990s, while denouncing with good reason the grand narratives of Enlightenment rationality,\(^4\) or questioning the place of foundational categories in interpretive critical theory, or—less subtly—substituting the works of women and men of colour for the writings of white males grounded largely if not exclusively in European traditions of enquiry and intellectual practices, have nonetheless retained a fairly conventional sense of what constitutes 'material' for the purposes of intellectual enquiry and political argumentation. The place of gossip, rumours, and anecdotes in the construction of narra-
tives, and in the creation of a cultural politics of resistance, is beginning to be explored, and in allowing the Guinness Book to be a refracting medium, particularly for certain positions on modernity, I am doing no more than extending the meaning of the 'canon'. Let us recall that the word canon, which has an extraordinarily rich history, largely forgotten in current debates, meant in the first instance a yardstick, standard, rule, or model; only later did it acquire some other meanings, such as the notion of a 'list', which is indeed one of the meanings inherent in the idea that there exists a grand canon of literary works. Rules, much like records, exist to be stretched, indeed broken, and there are also, needless to say, rules for establishing records. If I appear to be enshrining trivia, by constituting the Guinness Book as my central text, I do so with the encouragement of a not inconsiderable authority, Walter Benjamin: 'Method of this work: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only show. I won't steal anything valuable or appropriate any witty turns of phrase. But the trivia, the trash: this, I don't want to take stock of, but let it come into its own in the only way possible: use it.'

To speak of records is, for the most part, to speak of numbers. Take, for example, the record for needle threading. The 1992 Guinness Book noted that the record for the number of times that a strand of cotton thread had been threaded through a number 13 needle (eye 0.5 in. x 0.16 in.) in two hours was 7,238, set by Brajesh Shrivastava on 12 December 1990 in Bhopal, a city notorious for the record number of deaf people left behind by a gas leak in a Union Carbide plant in 1984; however, this record was not to last long, as his fellow countryman, Om Prakash Singh, a clerk at a bank in Allahabad, threaded a needle 20,675 times in the same amount of time before a live audience on 25 July 1993. The former gentleman, having been deprived of his world record, was to demonstrate his tenacity, and his will to fame, by the mere expedient of setting a record in another altogether different domain: as the Guinness Book for 1995 states, Shrivastava holds the record for having created the largest hand-painted wooden fan in the world, nearly eighteen and a half-fet-tall. Shrivastava, who appears to have nurtured lifelong ambitions to appear in the Guinness Book, first made his way into the Limca Book of Records, which largely whets the appetites of those Indians who are not manly, bold, or lucky enough to make it to Guinness' compilation of world records, but can nonetheless satisfy themselves with the thought that they hold some record in India, with numerous records for microwriting, such as writing 61,800 characters, which cannot be read by the naked eye, on three-fourth space on one side of a postcard. This sort of record would seem to appeal to Indians: according to the Guinness Book, the record for 'minuscule writing' is held by Surendra Apharya of Jaipur, who wrote 1,314 characters on a single grain of rice on 28 February 1991 (GB 1992:457).

If there is, then, a fetish for records, it is in the first instance a propensity towards numbers. As in any other civilization, numbers have played a crucial role in the shaping of Indian culture, but it is arguable that the Indian imagination is particularly drawn to taxonomies, numerology, and the sheer play to which numbers lend themselves. The Hindu Puranas contain the most complex concatenations of numbers, and numbers have been critical to such enterprises as divination, ritual sacrifice, literary compositions, construction of genealogies, cosmogony, and astrology. The Kama Sutra, the well-known Indian guide to love-making, is precise about the number of sexual positions during copulation, and a recent cartoon history of the world mocks this 'Hindu thoroughness' by showing a couple engaging in intercourse, while the man, whose one hand holds a book, exclaims: 'O.K. Position #133.' Similarly, the Atharva Veda notes that 33 kinds of sorceries are possible (with dice), or that there are 101 varieties of death. The Hindu use of numbers, or rather playfulness with them, filled the English with exasperation, and James Mill pointed to Hindu numbers—such as the 1,555,200,000,000 years during which the Creator was incubating, or the 17,064,000 years during which the Creator transformed itself from 'neuter to masculine, for the purpose of creating worlds'—as a sign of the 'ruddy and imperfect state' of the Hindu mind. Hegel, like most other 'great' European philosophers, was without a clue as to how Indian texts might be read, and could only consider 'large numbers' in 'Hindoo writings' as having 'a quite arbitrary origin.' If certain kings were said to have reigned 70,000 years, and Brahma is said to have lived 20,000 years, one had to presuppose that the 'numbers in question, therefore, have not the value and rational meaning which we attach to them.'

Memory, too, has a hand in this nexus of records, numbers, and statistics, and what has not been adequately realized, much less studied, is how numbers function as mnemonic devices. Competitions lasting over
days, even weeks, in which pandits recite entire texts—such as the Ramayana and the Bhagvat Purana—from memory, or recite passages from sacred texts picked for them randomly, are quite common. It is a similar facility with memory, and the resort to those mnemonic strategies by which cultures (and not mere texts) have been preserved and transmitted may help to account for the fact that the most extraordinary ‘human computer’ in the world has been an Indian, Shakuntala Devi. When she was given two 13-digit numbers (7,686,369,774,870 and 2,465,099,745,779) to multiply, Shakuntala Devi, who apparently became known at the age of eight as ‘a living wonder’, did so accurately within 28 seconds; and she has repeatedly performed such feats. ‘Some experts on calculating prodigies refuse to give credence to Mrs Devi’, states the Guinness Book, ‘on the grounds that her achievements are so vastly superior to the calculating feats of any other investigated prodigy that the authentication must have been defective’ (68 1992:176). It is not an accident that India is today one of the principal countries for research in statistics, and that her statisticians are renowned the world over.

That those numbers which Hegel and James Mill derided may not have been without ‘meaning’, or that they followed a cultural logic impervious to an instrumental rationality, would not have occurred to European commentators on Indian culture and ‘experts’ on Indian knowledge systems. This form of indulgence in, and engagement with, numbers owed something to what we might call a cultural cosmology, whereas the present-day obsession with numbers among many Indians has, in part, a rather different locus. Ian Hacking, the historian of science, has noted that in the 1830s and 1840s England was engulfed by a ‘sheer fetishism for numbers’: bodies were furiously counted, and statistics were accumulated on everything, from railway mileage and the total number of lasses administered in a year to all habitual offenders, to the number of drunkards and lunatics contained in prisons and asylums. Where numbers were at one time an occasion for men and women to give expression to their ludic tendencies, even rendering themselves ludicrous, in the nineteenth century numbers acquired a restraining function. The colonial rulers in India were to follow suit; in the nineteenth century, the state began to acquire enumerative functions, and this obsession with statistics, which was to constitute one of the central features of the colonial sociology of knowledge, was conveyed in such practices as the census, anthropometry, criminal statistics, and numerous other classificatory, investigative, disciplinary, and repressive procedures. This avalanche of numbers was to be described by Foucault as ‘biopower’; an entire administrative and regulatory machinery, harnessed to the body, was to come into place. It is useful to recall that the word ‘statistics’ is etymologically related to the word ‘state’; and statistics would henceforth do the work of the state.

If we appear to be at great remove from the quest for records, we might return then to the relation between records and numbers. The modernizing Indian middle classes are never so happy as when India’s achievements are honoured, when her sportsmen and sportswomen are lauded, and when she is recognized as a nation on the move. If it should take nuclear explosions to push India out of its supposed inertia, and into the realm of nations that do matter, these Indians are well prepared—as I argue elsewhere in this book at much greater length—to undertake such political adventurism. It is these same elements, to whom Mastram Bapu would be an anathema, who have been pressing for India’s admission into the Security Council, on the supposed ground that India’s might and importance as a nation ought to be recognized, but they are oblivious to the fact that the United States, the leading power in the world, has rendered the United Nations into a highly disreputable body which is increasingly seen as serving its interests rather than the welfare of all mankind. No country is loath to surrender its monopoly over power when other, more effective and thorough, avenues for wielding power have been found; and if India does make its way into the Security Council, to the great delight of its elites, it shall be a Security Council for whose decisions the United States will have little or no use. It is the political and economic elite in India who remind us that India stands third in the strength of its scientific manpower, that it is a member of the ‘Nuclear Club’, that its software engineers have conquered (so to speak) the heights of Silicon Valley, and that it is the only Third World nation to join a few of the post-industrial countries as an exporter of satellite and rocket technology.

Sadly, India is also the country that holds the world record for the largest child labour force in the world, the largest number of illiterates, the largest number of people suffering from malnutrition, the largest exploited force of tribal people, the largest population of lepers and the blind: the list is almost infinitely long with respect to these shortcomings.
However, these gross forms of exploitation are viewed as deplorably necessary, or as shortcomings of an earlier era; the elite are prepared to believe that a price has to be paid for ‘development’, and that some of these problems will disappear over time. However, what cannot so easily be tolerated, especially when the country is making a bid to be considered a strong and important member of the world community, is the shockingly poor performance of Indian sportsmen and sportswomen. There is no greater lamentation that fills the Indian papers than the continued inability of India’s sporting hopes to haul home a few trophies and medals, and that humiliation is aggravated when the smallest nations, which cannot possibly have any pretension to being a major player in world politics, and which in the view of Indian elites can even less lay claim to the enormously complex and rich history of a civilizational entity like India, are shown to have better and more many athletes. In the 1992 Olympics, India failed to win a single medal, not even a bronze, and there was much soul-searching and agonizing in middle-class homes and organs of middle-class opinion; in the 1996 Olympics, it scarcely did better: Leander Paes brought home a bronze medal in men’s tennis, when the sport, that year, had been boycotted by the greater majority of the major men players. ‘The rot in Indian sports continues’, wrote one commentator in the Hindustan Times (4 August 1996), though Paes himself was congratulated for having brought ‘glory’ to the country. ‘Paes does India Proud’, screamed one newspaper headline, while in California a major Indian community newspaper described Paes’ bronze as having ended India’s Olympic medal ‘drought’.19 That India has nearly every year a great many other droughts, which ruin the lives of millions and lead to their dislocation, is of less import to those who are accustomed to viewing triumphs in beauty contests and Olympic games as the true measure of a nation’s greatness.

The anguished breast-beating following the debacle after every Olympics leads to much media speculation about the causes for India’s failure in sporting events. It is commonly alleged that politicians intervene in the conduct of sports, making it impossible for true sportsmen to flourish; one hears of the country’s disinclination to invest in its sports programme, and thus in its youth. Sporting programmes, like everything else in the country, are described as having been victimized by corrupt and nefarious practices. In a word, India’s youth had never had much of a sporting chance. Never mind that Indian youth are not able to accomplish much in sports, at least the country can claim the distinction of having the oldest athlete in the world, Baba Joginder Singh, who competed in the Indian National Athletics Meet for Veterans at the comparatively young age of 105 and struck gold in discus throwing.20 Perhaps India’s medal chances should be left to its elderly citizens; they might at least restore some dignity to India’s athletic ambitions.

Had India’s Herculean disaster at successive Olympics stood in singular isolation, it might have been less sinister, considering that athletes who compete in the Olympics are often groomed for competition since their infancy, but more recent sporting events have only confirmed that Indian sports and athletics are in a bad way. At the 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima, where India was competing not only with Japan, China, and South Korea, the sporting giants of the continent, but with Macau, Turkmenistan, Brunei, Myanmar, and Tajikistan, not countries whose presence in the mental cartography of most people is overwhelming, India could only manage to finish eighth in the medal tally. India won four golds compared to 137 won by China. Of India’s four gold medals, two were won in tennis, one in kabaddi, a game that is played only in South Asia, and one in pistol shooting. ‘A Notch Better, India Still Falls Far Behind’ is what India-West, the principal organ of Indian opinion in California, had to say about India’s performance.21

The medal for shooting makes one pause. Three weeks before the Asian Games, at the Commonwealth Games, where India’s competitors included Britain, Australia, and Canada, India’s small tally of six gold, eleven silver, and seven bronze—occasioning a remark from one major newspaper that there had been ‘a lot of concern over the poor performance of the Indian contingent’—included four medals won by just one sportsman, Jaspal Rana. The subject of India’s poor showing was important enough to merit an editorial, significantly entitled, ‘Shooting, the saving grace’.22 One might be forgiven for thinking that the writer of the editorial is a card-carrying member of that fanatical and constitutionally-blessed American organization known as the National Rifle Association. It is particularly ironical that India should be winning virtually its only medals in shooting and weightlifting. Throughout nearly the last one hundred years of colonial rule, India was governed by the Arms Act, which forbade Indians from owning arms or weapons. Very few Indians know how to handle a gun; the vast majority have never even seen one; and those imbecil-
ic debates that are carried out in the United States over the most trivial measures to limit gun ownership would be incomprehensible to Indians, as indeed they are to most people elsewhere in the world. In the British colonial sociology of knowledge, the Indian could not be manly; his effeminacy was supposedly apparent in his diet, apparel, and behavior, and his inability to confront the Englishman. In the characterization of Robert Orme, who penned an essay in 1770 on 'effeminacy of the inhabitants of Hindostan', an Englishman had merely to brandish a stick and the Indian would be sent flying. A gun was scarcely to be expected in the hands of an Indian; nor was the Indian known for flexing his muscles through the practice of weight-lifting, which is scarcely to say that there are no Indian traditions of body-building.

A certain anxiety, first generated during the colonial period, and subsequently aggravated by the process of nation-building, over masculinity and the manliness of a people, no less of a nation, must also account to a great degree for the quest among Indians to have their names etched in the Guinness Book. Part of the ethos of manliness consists simply in gaining recognition, in being acknowledged as supreme in one's chosen field of endeavor. One long-lasting effect of colonialism has been that the Indian continues to look up to the white European male, who confers recognition upon inferiors, and who has established the standard that the Indian (like other formerly colonized people) must meet. That is the canonical truth, the 'kamoon' of this world. Anthony Parakal of Bombay, who engineered his way into the Guinness Book by having the largest number (3,700) of published letters to an editor, was catapulted into the pages of Time, which devoted a full page to him, and he has been interviewed and photographed by other American publications. Such recognition, which is unquestionably a mark of 'achievement', does not come easily to Indians. The Guinness Book is there to remind them that such recognition is possible and desirable, and the editor of the Guinness Book has himself gone on record as saying: 'We at the Guinness Book of Records greatly value the interest shown by Indians in our book and respect their zeal in trying to better world record targets in a wide range of subjects.'

It appears to matter little to some Indians themselves that the records they have set exemplify, in minute detail, the Orientalist constructions of India. Speaking of effeminacy, it is notable that the record for needle-threading is held by an Indian man, in a country where stitching at home is invariably deemed to be a woman's job. The Guinness Book also notes that the record for 'the longest duration in a typing marathon on a manual machine', 142 hours 50 minutes, was set by an Indian man from 25-31 July 1990; he hit 916,000 strokes (GB 1992:530). Perseverance at a type-writer is scarcely the most persuasive demonstration of manliness, or of the ability of Indians to excel, or be taken seriously as a modernizing people, and in India, as women continue to join the work force in large numbers, jobs requiring typing are almost exclusively the preserve of women. It is perfectly apposite that the record for minuscule writing and letter-writing should be held by Indians: writing was construed by India's colonizers as something quite feminine, the task of men being to rule, govern, and administer. (India's colonial rulers did leave behind voluminous records and would appear to have displayed a penchant for the written record: when the men wrote, however, they recorded 'minutes' and 'memoranda', and these forms of adjudicative and prescriptive writing would have been distinguished from more frivolous engagements with the pen.) The large statue of John Lawrence, the 'saviour of the Punjab' and the Viceroy of India, that stood in Lahore and that was the target of a satyagraha campaign in the 1920s by the people of Lahore seeking to have it removed, bore the inscription, 'Will you be governed by the sword or the pen?'; though the countenance and demeanour of Lawrence belied the force of the interrogative. English officials in India had no anxiety that nationalist-minded effeminate Bengalis would ever pose a threat to their sovereignty: 'the Balsoodum of Lower Bengal', exclaimed Bulwer-Lytton, the Viceroy of India in 1878-79, 'though disloyal, is fortunately cowardly and its only revolver is its ink bottle; which through dirty, is not dangerous.'

When the Indian was not seen as lazy, dirty, a lying cheat, and effeminate, he was construed as being bizarre and eccentric, bound to peculiar customs, wild in his looks, wholly obsequious to authority. Here, again, Indians whose names are enshrined in the Guinness Book would appear to endorse this representation. Much was written in colonial days about the 'Hindu Juggernaut', and of fanatical believers who would allow themselves to be crushed under the wheels of the chariot at the Jagannath festival in Puri. In 1994, over a period of eight months, the sadhu Lotan Babu rolled his body nearly 2,486 miles, or an average of six-seven miles a day, from Ratlam to Jammu by way of rendering homage to Vaishno Devi (GB 2000:77). In a similar vein, during a period of fifteen months ending on
9 March 1985, Jagdish Chander crawled 870 miles, apparently 'to propitiate his favorite Hindu goddess, Mata' (GB 1992:526; GB 2000:70). Students of Indian history might recall that the notorious General Dyer, perpetrator of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and of the even more infamous 'crawling order', which required Indians to crawl on a particular street where an Englishwoman had been assaulted, when asked to explain his conduct, replied that some 'Indians like to crawl'. It may be poetic justice that the record for the longest continuous crawl is held by an Englishman, who traversed 28.5 miles in a mere nine and a-half hours. To be eccentric is, literally, to be off-centred, or to be peculiarly balanced; so showed N. Ravi of Sathyamanglam City, who stood on one foot for a record 34 hours. As the Guinness Book states plainly, 'The disengaged foot may not be rested on the standing foot nor may any object be used for support or balance' (GB 1992:186). Not to be outdone, his countryman Girish Sharma bettered this record ten years later by nearly 22 hours.

India's yogis and rishis have long been viewed as capable of the most bizarre or absurd acts, and Swami Maujgiri Maharaj of Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, took it upon himself to engage in the most unusual form of penance by continuously standing for 17 years, thereby establishing a world record that no one is likely to break too soon. 'When sleeping', adds the Guinness Book for the benefit of those left somewhat mystified, 'he would lean against a plank' (GB 1992:186). Hindus will apparently do anything as a gesture of their devotion to God: this, in the event, appears to be the explanation furnished by Amar Bharti for having kept his right hand raised for a period of 26 years (GB 2000:71).

Numerous other records of this kind are held by Indians. Thus far I have suggested that the quest for records by Indians must be viewed not only in relation to their absorption in, and engagement with, numbers but also in relation to anxieties about masculinity, modernity, and the nation-state. It is not accidental that virtually all of the records were set in the last 20 years, and most of these in the last 10 to 15 years. In late 1984, following the assassination of his mother, Rajiv Gandhi assumed the office of the Prime Minister of India. Himself a rather young man, quite unlike many of India's geriatric politicians, Rajiv Gandhi gravitated towards the youth, and made known his commitment to making India a strong, modern nation-state. It is perfectly apposite that 'Mera Bharat Mahan'—which may be read as 'My India is Great', or 'May My India Be Great',—should have become the slogan most closely associated with him, and that Rajiv Gandhi became known as the man eager to usher India into the twenty-first century, the iconic representation of which was fittingly a train, which supposedly first propelled India into modernity, and which today serves as the reminder of a greatness that India can achieve if it can retain the political integrity of its borders. It is in Rajiv Gandhi's time that the Indian Railways inaugurated its most prestigious train, the Shatabdi (literally, a century Express, as though to suggest that India would, under his leadership, be well positioned at the beginning of the next century (and millennium), an ancient civilization once again poised to leave its impress upon the minds of men and women. The youth were exulted to excel at sports; the artistic community was urged to bring home honours; and Indian scientists were encouraged in the belief that their endeavours would be suitably rewarded. Telecommunications might well be in a complete shambles, but Rajiv Gandhi's technological adviser, Sam Pitroda, could quite blithely speak of cellular phones as though the day when they would be in every Indian home, howsoever humble, was just around the corner.

In such a climate of opinion, it is no surprise that, amidst fortune-hunters, Indians seeking records should also have found a place under the sun. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the project of modernity has never received the endorsement of all Indians, and that even a greater number of Indians do not think of the nation-state as the inevitable and 'natural' culmination of history. Nor are those Indians who fancy themselves as members of the modernizing elite unequivocally pleased about Indian achievements of the sort that are celebrated in the Guinness Book; indeed, they are quite embarrassed, and occasionally angry, that Indians should be recognized for endeavours that, in their view, only reinforce Orientalist representations of Indians as exotic, effeminate, and custom-bound. Nothing fills Indian elites, who are eager to invite foreign capital into the country, and crave for the acceptance of India as a tourist mecca, with greater dread than the thought that India might be construed as backward. (I might note, incidentally, that the world record for 'backwards running' is held by Arvind Pandya of India: he covered the distance between Los Angeles and New York City in this fashion in 107 days, from 18 August to 3 December 1984, just at the time that Rajiv Gandhi was starting to give his painfully monotonous speeches on taking India forward [GB 1992:785]. These elites cannot but feel that most Indian achievements
are not ‘real’; the real, and the capacity to grasp the real, lies only in the West.32

The freakish activities that leave Indian elites disturbed represent, I would submit, a counter-ideological force to modern orthodoxies about development, production, competition, and modernity. The competitive spirit, we have been told, brings out the best in human beings, and encourages people to excel. The narrative of the ‘competitive spirit’ usually counterpoises the stagnation and decay of the East, ‘vegetating in the teeth of time’ (in Marx’s memorable phrase), has a long history in the West. The story of one element in that narrative is the story of capital, self-aggrandizement, and the greed that drove the West to acquire colonies and markets overseas; the other element is encapsulated in the phrase ‘cultural capital’, though I use it here less in Bourdieu’s sense, and more to suggest that narratives of the like of ‘competitive spirit’ are used to engender pride in the nation, refurbish the ever fragile masculinity of the male of the species, and promote a cultural ethos that thrives on such notions as a purported individualism and self-improvement. It is this ‘spirit’ of competition that has contributed to the restlessness, anomic, and anxiety of Indian youth, and to these riots and disturbances over positions and privileges that have been witnessed in India from time to time, and which seemed to reach their apogee in 1990 when several young men took to self-immolation in protest against the stated policy of the government to implement a plan for increased educational and employment opportunities for the disadvantaged.

It is precisely the narrative of competition and triumph, which modernity has claimed as its very own, that is being defied, and there is no better way of defying this narrative than by seeming to emulate it, and even giving it one’s most profound homage. If the ‘competitive spirit’, which stands behind the quest for records, leads to the drive to excel, or to raise productivity, why not do so by setting records in activities, appearances, and achievements where the disability is all too apparent? What could be the point in growing the longest moustache in the world? Kalyan Ramji Sain of Sundargarh had grown, by July 1993, a moustache measuring 133.5 inches (GB 2000:261); one of his illustrious predecessors, a life convict in a New Delhi jail by the name of Karma Ram Bhcel, received the permission of the prison governor to keep his moustache untrimmed, which by 1979 had grown to 7 feet 10 inches (GB 1992:169). He too generated his own political economy; we do not know how many prison personnel were assigned to help him in keeping his moustache groomed, or in preventing his fellow prisoners from tampering with so seductive an appended to a man’s body. Moreover, as the Guinness Book states, Bhcel used ‘mustard, oil, butter and cream to keep it in trim’, and no doubt a number of cows were tethered by the jail to service this man’s appetite and ambition in a city that, much to the chagrin of its residents, faced chronic butter and milk shortages on a frequent basis throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

Butter is not the only item that is in short supply, or that is unusually expensive: for the size of Indian cities, there are relatively few petrol pumps, and petrol prices are almost exorbitant. Nonetheless, in the city of Poona, renowned (or so think its residents) for martial valor, a number of its men, among them Hariprakash [later Guinness] Rishi, could think of no better way of entering into the Guinness Book than by keeping a motor scooter in nonstop motion for 1,001 hours, covering a distance of 49,831 miles at Traffic Park between 22 April and 3 June 1990 (GB 1992:271). Though Guinness Rishi’s immersion in the world of the Guinness Book is self-evident, it can be better gauged by the fact that he appears to hold the world record for the ‘longest will’ (104,567 words, 489 pages); the ‘shortest valid will’ in the world, comprised of 2 words in Hindi, was written in the name of Bimla Rishi, who—a reasonable inference—is related to Guinness Rishi.33 Evidently, too, Guinness Rishi has a great deal of time on his hands. Many of the Guinness Book’s Indian heroes appear quite insistent on leaving their imprint on the economy—predecessors, perhaps, of the Indian CEOs, venture capitalists, and computing ‘geniuses’ whose names are now encountered in the Wall Street Journal—much as they are interested in acquiring cultural capital. Often these two objectives are sought to be achieved by the attainment of a single record; no other interpretation so readily comes to mind in explaining why the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Javalalitha presided over a wedding where 5,004 couples tied the knot and 500,000 guests helped in raising the cost of the
whole affair to $2 million. Her colleague, AIADMK [All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam] party leader M. Chinnaswamy, reportedly said: ‘Our rivals are green with envy at our achievement, which should find a place in the Guinness Book of World Records.’⁵⁵ Not only do Indians marry early, they marry in style, and why not? Marriages, according to an old saying, are made in heaven, and one Indian would seem to be quite set on proving this right. An Indian businessman based in Dubai, one newspaper has reported, recently chartered an Air India Airbus so that he could have his son conduct the marriage nuptials with his fiancée in the presence of a Sikh priest at a height of 20,000 feet above ground. According to the report, ‘Popley senior said he hopes the couple, bonded just a tad below heaven, will wing their way into the Guinness Book of Records.’⁵⁶

If the Guinness Book is the poor Indian’s medium for acquiring cultural capital, for the nouveau riche their entry into the book of fame, and the book of numbers, is rendered possible by conspicuous consumption. In either case, modernity is at once both emulated and defied, honoured and parodied, celebrated and mocked; if the scientific spirit and the competitive ethos appear to be endurmed, it is unequivocally clear that the achievements which have enabled Indians (in the most clichéd phrase of the times) ‘to make history’ scarcely rebound to the credit of the nation-state, or do modernity proud. It is the same ambivalence towards modernity, the ethos of development and the achievements of science, that can be witnessed in the photographs that appeared in many Indian newspapers and magazines during the outbreak of plague in Surat in the mid-1990s, showing a man holding a dead rat in his naked hand, his mouth covered by a small piece of gauze! Modernity in India is a unfinished business, and the increasing triumph of Indians in entering the Guinness Hall of Fame simultaneously enacts a delification and defilement of modernity. If the Indian obsession with the Guinness Book is construed as constituting irrefutable evidence of Indians’ feelings of inferiority or their emulation of the ‘achieving races’, and their commitment to modernity and the nation-state, perhaps one should also begin to view the records set by them as markers of the resilience of a complex civilization against the homogenizing and deleterious effects of modernity. Resistance in an era of globalization and totalization will perchance exact both homage and parody.

Notes
2. Private communication from Peter Matthews, Editor of the Guinness Book of Records, London, 13 April 1995. A brief unsigned article in the Chicago Tribune of 6 May 1993, entitled ‘A peculiar fetish with records’, states that nearly ‘one-fifth of all Guinness mail to its London headquarters is from India’.
8. The Guinness Book is named after Guinness Stout, the largest-selling alco-
holics in ireland. limca, as indians know, is the name of a soft drink.


13. I cannot here explore the relations between orality and memory. But the Indian facility with numbers extends to matters beyond numbers. A six-year-old Indian girl living in California earned a place on the Tonight Show on 31 May 1998 because she is known to be able to spell any word, forwards and backwards, after having glanced at it only once, and similarly she can recite any whole number. See Viji Sundaram, *Six-Year-Old Can Spell Any Word Backwards and Forwards*, *India-West* (13 September 1998), p. B13.


17. See Ian Hacking, *Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers*,


19. Viji Sundaram, *Pace's Bronze Medal Ends Drought in Olympics*, *India-West* (9 August 1996), Sec. A, p. 1. In the 2000 games, India once more had to be content with a single bronze, only its third individual medal in the entire history of the Olympics. This bronze was won by the weightlifter Karnam Malleswari in the women's 69 kg category: once again a 'drought' had been ended, and she was suitably feted.


21. Issue of 21 October 1994, Sec. C, p. 91. The writer glumly added: 'The failure of the Indian sports system to provide a counter to improving continental standards stood pronounced as the last vestiges of its past domination in athletics were wiped off the record books at the games.' It is extraordinary that the past, when India's medals came in a trickle, should now—when at present the country is witnessing a virtual drought—finally be remembered (remembered both as recalled and re-masculinized) as a time when India dominated athletics! The only domination that any Indian can remember in 'athletics' is that of P. T. Usha, who won a number of gold medals at the Asian Games in women's races. Long before her time there was Milkha Singh, but the present generation of Indians know little of him.


25. Private communication from the editor, Peter Matthews, 13 April 1995.

26. Students at what are termed 'typing colleges', which are to be seen not only in the cities but in large towns as well, are largely if not exclusively women. The computer is making inroads into India and may well
render the typewriter obsolete in a decade or so, but the computer keyboard is modeled after that of the typewriter. It is worth emphasizing that while both men and women are to be found in computer-related jobs, new entrants into jobs where typing on a typewriter is required are invariably women.

The brothers Abhishek and Anurag Jain have competed worldwide in various typing competitions, and the former now holds the world record for striking 6,736 strokes in 10 minutes, or 135 words per minute, with only seven errors. Anurag was a silver medalist in 1996. Abhishek practices on the typewriter three-four hours every day, but prepares himself for a major championship by setting himself a rigorous schedule of eight hours of practice for three months. According to one news item, 'His name appeared in the Hindi version of the Guinness Book of World Records as the youngest and fastest world typewriting champion. However, he regrets that his achievement does not feature in the English version.' See ‘Typing Prodigy Wins Top Place in World Meet’, IndiaFier (26 July 1996), sec. B, p. 8. Editions of the Guinness Book in Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada were introduced in the 1980s.


31. ‘Mahan’ is most accurately rendered as ‘strong’ or ‘powerful’, but here should be understood as ‘great’, great in the sense of ‘this great country’, or ‘our great civilization’. Indira Gandhi’s slogan was ‘Garibi Hatao’ (‘Wipe out poverty’); whatever her authoritarianism, pretensions to socialism and egalitarianism were critical to her idiom, but Rajiv Gandhi dispensed with such pretensions for the most part.

32. It was in quest of a ‘real’ record that Salauddin (Salon) Choudhury and his wife Neena, of Calcutta, went around the world in an Indian Contessa Classic in 69 days, 19 hours and 5 minutes, thereby setting a record. ‘Many Indians see freakish activities as the only way to get into the book’, Choudhury told an interviewer. ‘I broke that pattern by trying to set a real record’ (see ‘A peculiar fetish with records’, Chicago Tribune [6 May 1993]). Salauddin Choudhury then became involved in a controversy which lasted over several years, and finally led to a resolution which must have pleased him. His record of going around the world, set in 1989, did not appear in the Guinness Book until 1991. When the record was broken by an English team, which covered 26,078 miles in 39 days 23 hours 35 minutes, the Choudhurys again broke the record, improving upon the British record by 3 hours and 20 minutes. Though they completed their second journey on 17 December 1991, their world record did not appear in the Guinness Book until the 1994 edition. Choudhury has alleged that the Guinness Publishing Company was unwilling to concede his record because of ‘racial prejudice and the ego of the Anglo-Saxon race’, but this charge is predictably denied by Peter Matthews, then the editor at the Guinness Book offices in London: ‘He’s alleging there was a deliberate attempt to do something against him, that’s wrong’. Ibid.

In late 1993, Choudhury successfully sought an injunction in the District Court in Calcutta preventing the Guinness Publishing Company from selling the Guinness Book, either in English or in Indian language editions, anywhere in India. The Guinness Publishing Company appealed against the injunction. Mr Matthews, in a letter to me, has stated: ‘We entirely and completely reject Mr Choudhury’s allegations and it is very curious indeed that he has twice appeared in the Guinness Book of Records and yet he takes action against us.’ Noting the interest of Indians in the Guinness Book, and the zeal with which they have been trying to improve upon the records, Mr Matthews adds: ‘It is therefore very sad that the activities of one man should prevent them from currently being able to purchase a copy of the Guinness Book of Records in India’ (private communication, 13 April 1995).

But, then, the proverbial happy ending: Choudhury appears to have prevailed in his battle with the Guinness Book people, and the Millennium Edition states that the ‘record for the first and fastest circumnavigation
of the world by car, under the rules applicable in 1989 and 1991, embracing more than an equator’s length of driving (24,901.41 road miles), is held by Mohammed Salahuddin Choudhury and his wife, Neena, of Calcutta, India’ (GB 2000:12).


34. See http://www.recordholders.org/en/members.html


This account itself relies on reports appearing in the Times of India and Hindustan Times.

Two

THE NEAR IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE OUTSIDER, OR THE SIGNIFICANT OTHER IN THE MODERN HINDI FILM

For a number of decades now, India has laid claim to the largest film industry in the world. Like many other observations about Indian cinema, particularly popular Hindi films, this is something of a cliché, since a large number of Hindi films are never completed, and the revenues generated by Hollywood far exceed the total earnings of the Hindi film. Only a minuscule number of Hindi films do well at the box office. There are, as well, many Indian cinemas, though this is seldom recognized outside India. To film connoisseurs and aesthetes, Indian cinema may be synonymous with the names of Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, and Mrinal Sen, or a number of other directors—Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal, Kumar Shahani, to name a few—whose films appear in film festivals,1 or are otherwise thought to be deserving of the attention of serious film scholars and critics. However, this so-called ‘art’ cinema, which owes a great deal to traditions of humanism, social realism, and the cinematic conventions associated with European (and less often American) cinema, is dwarfed by the less high-brow films that are popular with the masses, and which play to