journalistic biographies depend on access, and Shuster's is hard to beat in this regard. He first met and interviewed Zelensky in 2019, when he was juggling his presidential campaign and his comedy career. He travelled to the front line with him in 2021, as the Russians were massing their forces, and once the invasion had begun in 2022, he spent months embedded with Zelensky's team. Nevertheless, his refusal to deliver the kind of hagiographic portrait produced by too many of his starstruck Western colleagues has led to some unpleasant sniping from anonymous sources close to the president – not least the suggestion that because Shuster was born in Moscow, he somehow imbibed Russian sympathies, even though his family emigrated to the United States when he was six.

The picture that emerges is of a much more complex and darker man than the usual coverage suggests. As a comedian and actor, Zelensky had a keen sense not only of the division between himself and his roles, but also of how the latter could shape the former. It is not simply the case that the exigencies of war have transformed him; he has deliberately refashioned himself. Zelensky recalls telling himself, in the early days of the invasion, when his security team were hustling him into a bunker ahead of a Russian airstrike, 'They're watching. You're a symbol. You need to act the way a head of state must act.'

If only, one might wistfully conclude, more Western leaders felt similarly. Then again, they do not face the same stakes. If they fail, they can still look forward to directorships, book deals, the international speaker circuit, maybe even becoming foreign secretary. For Zelensky, by contrast, 'losing is worse than death'.

OWEN BENNETT-JONES

New Delhi Confidential

The Incarcerations: BK-16 and the Search for Democracy in India
By Alpa Shah
(William Collins 336pp £30)

In September last year, the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, said he had credible information about Indian state involvement in the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian-based campaigner for an independent Sikh state. Nijjar had been shot dead in his pickup truck outside a Sikh temple in British Columbia. 'Absurd,' said India in an official statement. 'We are a democratic polity with a strong commitment to rule of law.'

But then in November, the United States authorities said they had thwarted a plot to kill another Sikh separatist, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, on US soil. More mindful of US than Canadian power, India gave a measured, private response. The White House relayed what the Indian government had said: 'They stated that activity of this nature was not in their policy … We understand the Indian government is further investigating this issue.'

Generally speaking, when states murder dissidents abroad, they pay a price. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul and the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London are still frequently mentioned in the media. Documentaries have been made and plays written about them. Human rights organisations have demanded that those responsible be shamed and sanctioned.

No doubt Khashoggi and Litvinenko were better known to Western journalists than Nijjar and Pannun. And the campaigns for democracy in Saudi Arabia and Russia are probably of greater interest to Westerners than the struggle for an independent Sikh state. But there is another aspect to the relatively uncritical treatment of India. It is thought of as the world's largest democracy. People go there on holiday and enjoy one of the world's great food cultures. It used to be the jewel in the imperial crown, and while most attempts to export parliamentary government to former colonies resulted in vicious dictatorships, India has been vaunted as an exception.

It all means, to put it in public relations terms, that India has a great national narrative. And, once embedded, narratives are very hard to shift. So, while the sending of assassins abroad fits with our preconceptions of Saudi Arabia and Russia, it contradicts our understanding of India and so has been discounted or even ignored.

The Incarcerations shows how outdated the established narrative about India has become. The book describes the way Hindu nationalists have taken over Indian state institutions, including the judiciary. It tells the story of the arrest of sixteen of the country's leading liberal activists and human rights campaigners (known as the BK-16), who were detained in 2018 for supposedly being involved in a plot to, among other things, assassinate the prime minister, Narendra Modi.

The first section of the book is devoted to the best known of the incarcerated activists, the trade unionist and lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj. Her story typifies those of the men and women the Indian state has silenced by imprisoning them ahead of trial. As one of their lawyers put it, they may well all be found innocent, but the judicial process, which could take ten to fifteen years, with the defendants spending long periods in pretrial detention, is itself the punishment.

Born in the USA to parents studying economics at Harvard, Bharadwaj began her life of activism by giving up her American passport. The US consul, she later recalled, was 'flabbergasted' and asked if she really understood what she was doing. She said she did and soon relocated from the comforts of Delhi to Chhattisgarh in central India, where for decades she devoted herself to defending the rights of mineworkers. Alpa Shah admiringly describes the sacrifices Bharadwaj made, the obstacles she faced and the battles she won. It is a portrait of a woman of remarkable selflessness, principle and courage. Shah describes the equally impressive lives of the other human rights defenders arrested at the same time as Bharadwaj.

As well as offering these biographical sketches, *The Incarcerations* touches on three new aspects of political power in India: oligarchs, 24-hour TV news and digital surveillance technology. Like Putin and to a lesser extent Xi, Modi has relied on the support of oligarchs, particularly the multibillionaire Gautam Adani. Back in 2002 Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, was banned from visiting the USA and UK after presiding over anti-Muslim riots that left a thousand dead. Following the massacre, Modi was shunned by some of India's business leaders but not Adani, who was later handsomely rewarded for his loyalty. At one point, Adani was worth $150 billion. Their relationship has endured, despite Adani's companies facing fraud charges last year.

As for India's private news channels, they generally accept the official line before buffing it up with advanced production techniques and the window-dressing of independence to pump out state-sanctioned messages in a far more effective way than staid state TV could ever manage. In Bharadwaj's case, for example, an Oxford-educated TV hack, Arnab Goswami, denounced her as a Maoist promoter of terrorism involved in a plot to kill Modi within hours of her arrest. Having shredded Bharadwaj's reputation, the channel then offered her an interview, which she wisely declined, not only because to have accepted would have given the channel undeserved legitimacy but also because she would have been shouted at so aggressively that she would have been unable to make herself heard.

The most interesting passages in *The Incarcerations* document in detail how the Indian government uses digital technology to not only monitor but also frame its opponents. By purchasing the services of private companies that specialise in hacking, most states now have the capacity to get into mobile phones, home computers and email accounts. But there is a countervailing force in the form of activists, journalists and specialist companies that respond to these state actors by discovering what security officials have been doing and then exposing it. Even the best state hackers, it seems, leave clues. Citing the *Washington Post*, *Wired* and a loose international network of cybersecurity experts, Shah convincingly argues that key material in the prosecution cases against the sixteen activists, including a letter supposedly written by Maoists plotting to assassinate Modi, were fabrications planted by the Indian police on the computers of some of the accused. The whole story illustrates how sophisticated states can be in their efforts to suppress criticism, but also how clever and dogged cyber activists can be in pushing back.

But for all that, the state has had the last laugh, tying its opponents up in legal knots and forcing them to defend themselves in court when they would far rather be defending the rights of those who are oppressed by India's authorities and exploited by its corporations.

RORY MCCARTHY

The Case of the Vanishing Missiles

The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, the United States and the Middle East, 1979–2003
By Steve Coll
(Allen Lane 576pp £30)

On the evening of 13 December 2003, nine months after the invasion of Iraq, a combat team from the US 4th Infantry Division arrived at a small farmhouse by the River Tigris, north of Baghdad. Soldiers pulled back a mat on a patio to reveal a narrow, chest-deep hole, out of which they dragged a dishevelled Saddam Hussein, a pistol tucked in his belt. 'I am the president of Iraq, and I am willing to negotiate,' he said. Two decades earlier, the Iraqi dictator had been a US pawn who, it was hoped, might restrain the revolutionary clerics across the border in Tehran. But Washington and Baghdad misread each other, stumbling from alliance into seismic confrontation, the Americans driven by the pursuit of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons that the Iraqi regime had long since destroyed. In his compelling book, journalist Steve Coll investigates the prewar years to ask why the Americans found the Iraqi dictator so hard to fathom and why Saddam effectively sacrificed his regime in the cause of weapons he did not possess.

The picture that emerges of Saddam's motivations seems contradictory. The Iraqi leader was both 'exceptionally cunning' and 'as unsubtle as a shotgun blast'. His cruelty is already well documented. Within days of becoming president in 1979, Saddam purged the leadership of his Baath Party, ordering party members to shoot their comrades in 'democratic executions'. Coercion might be arbitrarily followed by generosity. To the favoured few, he handed out not just cash but also new suits, Toyotas and Volkswagens, Rolexes and Piagets, and tradable vouchers to sell barrels of Iraq's sweet crude oil. In this vivid historical narrative, we learn that Saddam rose early and was obsessed with policy detail but spent the final months before the US invasion absorbed in writing allegorical novels. The Iraqi dictator prioritised security. He coup-proofed his regime with concentric rings of security agencies, which spied on each other, among them the Mukhabarat, the General Military Intelligence Directorate, the General Security Service and the elite Special Security Organisation, which tested his birthday cakes for traces of poison.

In 1982, a CIA officer flew into Baghdad offering intelligence on Iranian military positions at the height of the Iran–Iraq War. A year later, Donald Rumsfeld, Reagan's personal envoy, arrived with a gift of golden spurs to seal the alliance. Saddam and his advisers suspected that their new benefactor wanted to condemn Iraq and Iran to a mutually debilitating conflict, yet they put the battle maps and satellite photos provided by the Americans to use nevertheless. Unnerved by early