

'INDIA AFTER GANDHI'

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Living in India means enduring endless and often heated discussions about India. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen argues that the richness of the tradition of argument is particularly relevant to the “development of democracy in India and the emergence of its secular priorities.” The tradition was thriving in 1946, when the members of India’s constituent assembly gathered in New Delhi to debate the drafts of the Constitution the new country was to adopt. The assembly, whose 300 members included socialists, Hindu nationalists, supporters of feudalism, upper-caste Brahmans, Muslims, women, untouchables and other lower castes, received public submissions ranging from demands to base the Constitution on “ancient Hindu works” to requests for “adequate representation” from members of the Central Jewish Board of Bombay. “These submissions testified to the baffling heterogeneity of India, but also to the precocious existence of a ‘rights culture’ among Indians,” writes historian and biographer Rama-chandra Guha in *India After Gandhi*, [ECCO, 893 pp, p 34-95] a lucid and engaging summary of independent India.

Guha, a well-known public intellectual in India, has also written on environmental history, the social history of cricket and many aspects of India’s cultural and political history. The story told in *India After Gandhi* is not a revelation for South Asian readers, but it is certainly the first attempt by a historian to compress into a single book a story previously scattered in hundreds of books, newspapers, journals and other archival material. Guha was chosen by the remarkable former publisher of Picador UK turned literary agent, Peter Straus, to write this book. After reading an essay by Guha in the journal *Past and Present*, Straus tracked him down, visited his home in Bangalore and suggested that he write a history of independent India.

Freedom to argue about the constitutional character of an independent India came at a great price, as the bloody partition of the subcontinent killed and displaced millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs from both sides of the hastily drawn border between India and Pakistan. The border, known as the Radcliffe Line, was named after the British judge Cyril Radcliffe, who had finalized its jagged path. Radcliffe was a stranger to India. After arriving in New Delhi from London in early July 1947, he had just five weeks to complete his task. He knew his line would stir up strife. “There will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance looking for me. I do not want them to find me,” he wrote to his nephew soon after his arrival. The Radcliffe Line divided the north Indian province of Punjab into Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab, and in the east it divided Bengal into West Bengal and Eastern Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971. It was these two divided provinces that saw the worst violence after the partition. In the late '90s, Intizar Hussain, the foremost short story writer of Pakistan, wrote in a collection of essays, *Chiragoon Ka Dhoowan (The Flight of History)*, about traveling in a dark train coach from his hometown near Delhi to Lahore. He and his fellow Muslim passengers, paralyzed by the fear of an attack from a Sikh or Hindu mob outside, are quiet as the train rumbles toward the border. A flicker of light inside the coach startles them. It is only a young fellow traveler trying to light a cigarette. Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan have similar stories about the looming threat of fratricide.

One of the biggest administrative tasks confronting the new Indian government was to resettle millions of refugees. Guha evocatively describes the biggest refugee camp, erected in Kurukshetra, a town a few hours from Delhi, where around 300,000 Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan were housed in tents, provided rations and even shown screenings of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse cartoons. In stark contrast to today’s

mostly inefficient, corrupt and indifferent Indian bureaucracy, Guha explains, social workers and unnamed officials, led by London School of Economics graduate Tarlok Singh, had made 250,000 allotments of land by November 1949. The refugees set about “digging new wells, building new houses, planting new crops. By 1950 a depopulated countryside was alive once again.”

The princely states that resisted joining the Indian Union, especially Hyderabad, Junagadh and, foremost, Kashmir, required a different kind of cultivation. Guha tells a gripping story of the taming of princes through a mixture of coercion and persuasion, orchestrated by the home minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, a man who sought “practical proof” of loyalty from the millions of Indian Muslims who stayed in India instead of migrating to Pakistan. Patel, who believed that most of these Muslims had earlier supported the demand for an independent Pakistan, had his secretary direct the secretaries of all other departments to monitor Muslims working under them. Guha reproduces the chilling letter: “I would request you to prepare lists of Muslim employees in your Ministry and in the offices under your control, whose loyalty to the Dominion of India is suspected or who are likely to constitute a threat to security.” Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru disapproved of such witch-hunt tactics, and according to Guha, “Whereas the home minister demanded that the Muslims prove their loyalty, the prime minister placed the onus on the Indian state, which had a constitutional obligation to make all its citizens, especially the Muslims, feel secure.”

Patel’s death in 1950 created an opportunity for Nehru to fashion the government and the nation according to his vision of a secular modern democracy. He overcame the Indian National Congress Party leaders sympathetic to the Hindu extremists and prepared for India’s first general election in 1952. The Congress Party faced electoral opposition from the Socialists, the Hindu-right Jana Sangh, the Communists and even B R Ambedkar, the chief draftsman of the Indian Constitution and great leader of the untouchables, who felt that the Congress Party wasn’t doing much to benefit his constituency. Yet Nehru led his party to victory by campaigning on the strength of personal charisma, the idea of national unity and the principle of secularism, which he established as the civil religion of India. Nehruvian secularism aspired to equal treatment of all religions by the state and insisted on the separation of political office and religious institutions. Nehru was very critical of Rajendra Prasad, the first president of India, when Prasad presided over a reconstruction ceremony of Gujarat’s Somnath temple, which had been destroyed by a medieval Muslim chief, Mahmud of Ghazni, a native of Ghazni in what is now Afghanistan. For Guha, one measure of Nehru’s secular vision is the fact that the 1952 election was a successful civil engineering project: “Some 224,000 polling booths were constructed and equipped with 2 million steel ballot boxes, requiring 8,200 tons of steel. About 380,000 reams of paper were used for printing the rolls.”

Nehru led India until his death in 1964. His achievements included largely democratic government institutions and an economic model called *Nehruvian Socialism*, which relied on high tariffs and other measures to protect national industries and promote economic self-sufficiency. He also made India a strong backer of decolonization movements in Asia and Africa. Nehru’s succession by the veteran but uncharismatic Congress leader Lal Bahadur Shastri, and the emergence of Nehru’s difficult daughter, Indira Gandhi, as head of the Congress Party and, eventually, the nation’s prime minister, made many Western observers question the viability of Indian democracy. “There was a line of thinking, widely prevalent in the West, which held that only the personality and example of Jawaharlal Nehru had kept India united and democratic,” Guha writes. He is obsessed with tracking down advocates of this line in publications like *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times* and the *Times of London*, and in the writings

of various social scientists, almost vindictively digging out the most obscure comment and refuting its “doomsday” proclamations with evidence that Indian democracy had survived.

Yet such stern judgments are absent whenever Guha writes about how Nehru failed democracy, such as when he imprisoned the prime minister of Kashmir, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, who was also Nehru’s personal friend, in 1953, after Sheikh Abdullah talked about the possibility of Kashmiri independence. Had Sheikh Abdullah not been arrested by Nehru, had Nehru and his Congress not promoted dubious puppet regimes in Kashmir and eroded its autonomy, Indians not have lived to see the emergence of a regional conflict that nearly brought India and Pakistan to the brink of a nuclear war in 2002, a conflict that continues to brutalize millions of people in Kashmir and has given the region, controlled by half a million Indian soldiers, the distinction of being the most militarized area of the globe.

Strangely enough, in his telling of the reconstruction of Kashmir after its rebellion against Indian rule in 1989, Guha chooses not to cite Kashmiri accounts, not even the archives of the much-respected English-language newspaper the *Kashmir Times*—something that Indian scholar Sumantra Bose, who teaches at the London School of Economics, does very well in his two astute and non-nationalistic books, *The Challenge in Kashmir* (1997) and *Kashmir : Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (2003). Indian writer Pankaj Mishra’s essays on Kashmir, reproduced in his latest book, *Temptations of the West* (2006), are another important example of critical thinking and moral courage on the subject. Guha’s narrative skills are also subdued when he describes the pro-independence protests in Kashmir that first occurred throughout 1990, when millions marched with memorandums to the UN offices and prayers to Sufi shrines. Instead, he offers a few newspaper headlines and discusses the separatist rebellion sparked by the denial of fair electoral democracy in terms of *jihad*. Similarly, while writing about the infamous massacre of thirty-five Sikhs in Kashmir on the eve, of President Clinton’s visit in March 2000, Guha again prefers the standard Delhi view and loses a chance to raise some important questions. The Indian government claimed to have arrested a “Pakistani militant” involved in the massacre. Why has there been no news of a trial, conviction or sentence? In a country where few calamities don’t prompt a judicial inquiry, why was there no inquiry into the massacre of the Sikhs?

Yet Guha is passionate about the successes and failures of parliamentary democracy when he describes the spell of authoritarianism that Indira Gandhi engineered in 1975. Political opponents of Indira, led by veteran Gandhian leader Jayaprakash Narayan, had mobilized the disenchanted population and cornered her government with demonstrations and sit-ins. Indira was further annoyed by an adverse judgment in a technically weak case against her own membership of the Parliament, which if upheld in the Supreme Court could have forced her to resign. She responded by declaring a state of emergency and ruling by decree. Her policies included press censorship, the jailing of political opponents, forced vasectomies under the guise of family planning and the demolition of slums and poor neighborhoods in the name of progress and development. Most of the Indian intellectual and media elite are passionate about that time, maybe because it was the only time the might of the state threatened their comfortable existence. To sum up his account of the era, Guha quotes an anonymous obituary in the *Times of India*, announcing “the death of D.E.M.O’Cracy, mourned by his wife T Ruth, his son, L I Bertie, and his daughters Faith, Hope, and Justice.” □ [Source : *The Nation*]