

A miraculous journey

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The story of India's transformation, by two writers who have different views on the leader who guided the nation through its early independence



"YOU British believe in fair play," said a Punjabi official to a young British social worker in 1947. "You have left India in the same condition of chaos as you found it." He had a point. Disbanding, at two months' notice, a system of rule that had taken two centuries to construct, the British left a subcontinent famished and divided. Thanks to modern medicine, the population had steeped to 400m. But with no corresponding effort to improve agricultural productivity, food production per head had plummeted: hunger was general. In sectarian rioting over the partition of British India—the necessity of which history has yet to decide—1m people, maybe 2m, perished.

Delineated by caste, a society less fit for democracy was almost unimaginable. In southern Kerala, an "untouchable" *paraiya* (hence: pariah) would cry out a warning as he went, ensuring that no high-caste brahmin need be sullied by a glimpse of him. Consisting of a dozen main linguistic blocks, which had never previously been united, and with over 500 independent principalities speckled across it, India was not a nation at all. Many departing Britons predicted it never would be.

That it has survived as the world's biggest democracy and is now emerging, with over a billion people, as an economic giant, is one of the remarkable tales of modern times. Ramachandra Guha, an Indian himself, has rendered it in rare detail.

He describes the country's first rulers, the nation-builders of the Congress party, in shimmering terms: as saints and heroes, no less. And indeed they included several brilliant men. Thus, B.R. Ambedkar, an untouchable legal scholar, who drafted a liberal constitution in the teeth of the most illiberal opposition. Also, Vallabhbhai Patel, who duped and threatened most of the princes into merging with India in less than two years.

Above all, Jawaharlal Nehru, who led India for its first 17 years. He made appalling mistakes, for example in his arrogant, autocratic handling of the contested region of Kashmir. On this, the admiring Mr Guha judges him too kindly. Yet the principles of secularism and democracy

upon which India was founded were his own. A weaker leader would probably have failed to implant them.

By giving Nehru such a smooth ride, Mr Guha stores up opprobrium for his daughter, Indira Gandhi. On Nehru's death, in 1964, she inherited a party and a state sickening with corruption. Conveniently for Mr Guha's thesis, she accelerated their demise, proving dreadful in most ways. The economy needed urgently to be liberalised; she tightened control over it. Congress was aching for internal democracy; she let it splinter. She suspended the country's democracy, imposing a two-year emergency. When democracy was restored, in 1977, Congress was swept from power by an alliance of its opponents. Only two governments since, both of them Congress, have been formed by a single party.

Political fragmentation was inevitable. India is too diverse to be represented by a single party. Yet Martha Nussbaum, an American polymath, blames Nehru for it nonetheless. Remarkable as were his achievements, his stern generalship of Congress alienated many in the provinces. Encouraged by affirmative action written into the constitution on behalf of untouchables and low-caste groups, caste-based alternative parties emerged, often hugely corrupt and linked to gangsters.

Worse, in Ms Nussbaum's view, was Nehru's rationalist disdain for "the cultivation of liberal religion and the emotional bases of a respectful pluralistic society". If such bases are understood to be liberal arts schools—of the sort created in the first half of the last century by Ms Nussbaum's hero, Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate poet, in Bengal—a good point lurks within an esoteric sentence. Difficulty in disentangling language is quite a common experience in reading Ms Nussbaum, rewarding as her book is in other ways. It is also a bit harsh on Nehru to attribute the rise of the Hindu right in part to his suspicion of religion; the right's flagship Bharatiya Janata Party espouses pro-business policies and extreme nationalism.

Ms Nussbaum considers the Hindu extremists, nourished by the communal violence that they stir, a terrible threat to India's improbable democracy. And there are others, with a Maoist insurgency inflaming the impoverished east of the country. Continued fast growth is critical. Millions of poor Indians need a reason to believe in their way of government.

But growth will not, on its own, heal their divisions. Indeed, the extreme unevenness of India's current enrichment is creating new splits. Amartya Sen, an economist and a more recent Nobel-prize winner, has given warning that the country's west and south may come to look like California while the north and east is more like sub-Saharan Africa. To develop a unity that is not based on race or religion, Ms Nussbaum argues for the "public poetry" advocated by Tagore. That would be lovely but, as an ugly consumerism lays hold in India, almost unimaginable.