

Subcontinental Drift

Is India's past a guide to its future?

BY LISA SINGH

The President has proclaimed Emergency. This is nothing to panic about."

Those words, spoken in 1975 by India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, on state-controlled radio, confirmed every dour prediction that Western critics had been making. For decades, their thinking had gone something like this: Because its people were so divided along the lines of caste, religion, and language, India would eventually cave to autocratic rule.

Now, barely 30 years into the country's life, it looked as if those predictions were already coming to pass. Faced with corruption charges, as well as mounting national strikes and violence over her failed campaign promise to end poverty, Indira Gandhi suspended democracy. Over the next 19 months, up to thousands of political opponents were imprisoned, forced sterilizations of the poor occurred, and the lights of independent newsrooms were cut off.

There was, in fact, everything to panic about. And yet, the middle class hardly raised a peep—this, in contrast to pre-independence days when Mahatma Gandhi had successfully rallied thousands of teachers, judges, and lawyers to resign their positions in protest of British rule.

When bits of dissension toward Indira managed to reach the public surface, it did so in crafty little ways. In one journal, *Eastern Economist*, an article entitled "Livestock Problems in India" began, "There are at present

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580 million sheep in the country"—a thinly veiled jab at India's population at the time. Away from the censors, in the West, V.S. Naipaul offered the harshest assessment of all: "Archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament, and courts." The crisis, he wrote, "is not only political or economic... but of a wounded old civilization that has at long last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead."

But move ahead it has. In the years since its only brush with autocratic rule ended, India has, in the words of columnist Thomas Friedman, traded in its image as a "country of snake charmers, poor people, and Mother Teresa" for one of "brainy people and computer wizards." And while the population now tops one billion people, it doesn't generate nearly as many despairing, or disparaging, headlines as it did in the past—headlines like "India: A Huge Country on the Verge of Collapse."

These days, if there's anyone with a crisis, it may well be you and your computer with the virus in it. Fear not; "Nancy" over in Bangalore will walk you through it.

India isn't just taking calls, however. Backed by its booming software industry, it's now spoken of, in turns, as a "global leader" and "economic powerhouse," slated to become the third largest economy by 2040. Most compelling, despite the premature obits, as well as religious riots, insurgencies, and assassinations, India turned 60 in August, still holding on to its title of "world's largest democracy." It is this improbable resilience, this story of a

"wounded old civilization" beating the odds, which Ramachandra Guha explores here.

Naturally, any claim of having written the history of a country so young, and so subject to extreme forecasts—the alarmist reports of the past, today's "global champ" accolades—carries its share of hazards. Conceding as much, Guha, one of India's best-known historians and citizen of what he sometimes calls the "most exasperating country in the world," plays it safe, going light on the exasperation (or praise) and heavy on a dry, chronological retelling culled from a "capacious repository" of private papers, periodicals, and books.

Unfortunately, *India After Gandhi* then falls prey to encyclopedia-talk and such unforgivable phrases as "at this stage, circa 1989-1990." Rarely does this approach spark any expansive discussion of the country's cultural and religious life; religion, instead, is largely relegated to the category of "Hindu chauvinism," against which secularism is the only option. Most glaringly, Guha offers barely a word about the most intriguing aspect of modern India's story: why Mahatma Gandhi, "the Father of the Nation," the man who shares the book's title, has come to figure so little in the country's imagination. This omission speaks to an ultimate weakness: a lack of reflection.

What a shame, when modern India's story is all about the wrangling that has accompanied its search for unifying principles. Here, in some respects, India's venture into democracy bears comparison to America's. Like the American post-revolutionary model, in which the schools of political thought advanced by Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton were often in conflict, modern India's founding leaders were not always of the same mind. Like Jefferson, Gandhi embraced an agrarian ideal. The "real India," he once said, could be found in its villages, not in the cities, which were "influenced by the West." He advocated a decentralized form of government in which the village would serve as the main unit of governance.

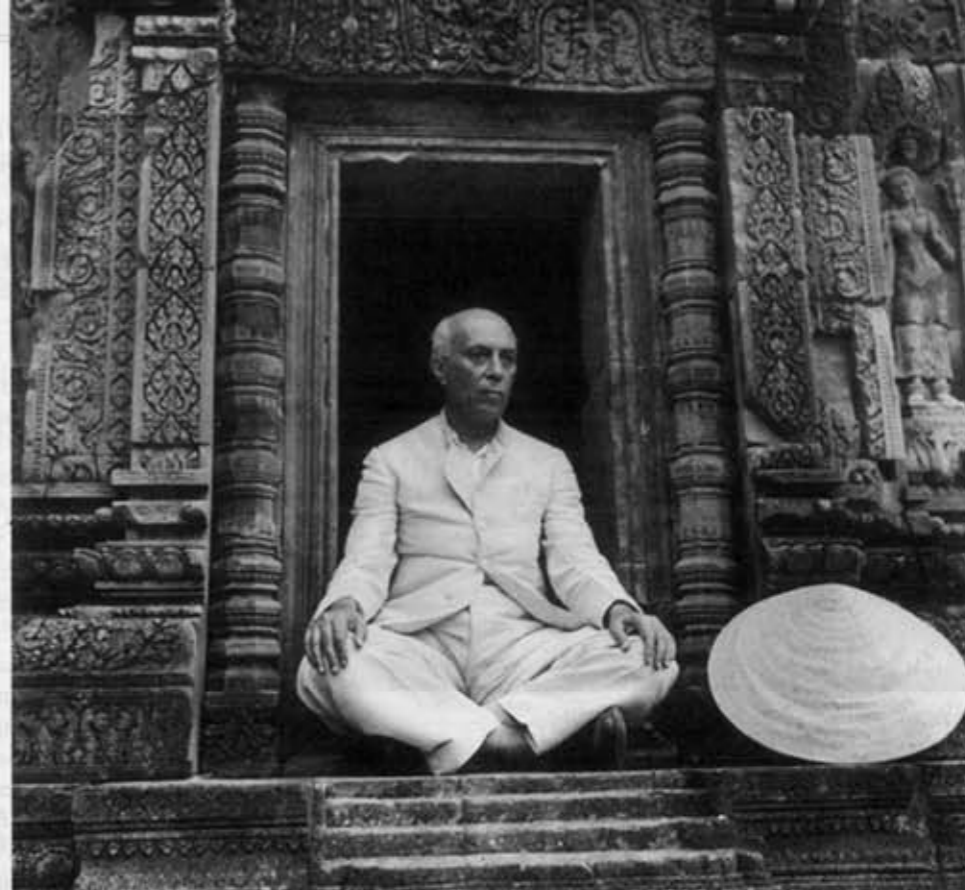
But just as Jefferson's vision had its

critics (including Hamilton), so, too, did Gandhi's. The fiercest was B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of India's constitution, and "untouchable" by birth.

"The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is, of course, infinite, if not pathetic," he said, and famously added, "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?"

Still, India never did find a pragmatic counterweight to Gandhi's vision, not the way the United States did in Hamilton and his belief that the "spirit of commerce" could rein in those "inflammable humors, which have so often kindled into wars." In a land of dizzying social complexity—about 20 recognized languages, 1,600 dialects, 3,000 castes (plus 25,000 sub-castes), not to mention significant minority groups like Muslims and Sikhs—the man at the helm for its first 17 years was Jawaharlal Nehru. A "sentimental socialist," as Guha calls him, Nehru endorsed state democracy and a free press, along with a sizable bureaucracy, which included generous set-asides for tribals and lower castes. Meanwhile, the country's closed, state-controlled economy grew at an average annual rate of just 3 percent, earning it the label "Hindu rate of growth." But to his credit, as Guha notes, Nehru took the idea of an opposition seriously, unlike his daughter Indira, who stated, "Sometimes I wish we had a real revolution—like France or Russia—at the time of independence."

With the Emergency, she got her wish—at least temporarily. When she finally restored democracy, following entreaties in the British press, a correspondent for the *Guardian* wrote, "Democracy can only survive if there is economic progress and reform." And these days, excitement abounds. Spurred largely by the economic liberalization of 1991, India's economy



Jawaharlal Nehru in Indonesia, 1954

has been growing at around 6 percent a year. (To be fair, Nehru's insistence that English be the major language of the country's educational system has given India a big competitive edge.)

Of course, there's still plenty of poverty: A third of the population lives below the poverty line, but that's down 10 percent from the early '90s. And while the caste system is still deeply entrenched, we're hearing more proclamations like this, from the chairman of Microsoft Corp.'s India unit, who recently told the *Wall Street Journal*: "We don't give a damn about any of these differences in caste or religion. ... Talent [is] the number one issue for all companies."

As always, however, if you want to ring the alarm about India, there's still plenty of cause. The famed IT sector only employs about one million people, this in a country where over 700 million people still live in villages and where, over the past decade, at least 10,000 farmers have actually committed suicide in the midst of a bewildering, shifting new economy. The specter of AIDS looms, as does Hindu nationalism. "Government" and "corruption"

are often uttered in the same breath, while almost a quarter of India's 545 members of parliament have been indicted for one or more crimes. The list goes on.

You would think, then, that Guha's restraint in chronicling India's past and future is understandable, even commendable. But it is not enough to recapitulate the trials and tribulations of this vibrant nation; to be instructive, you must ask the difficult questions of how India will fare, not only politically or economically, but socially and religiously in the midst of a rapacious world economy. If you doubt that such questions arise in the mainstream of Indian society, I have, on a number of occasions during my visits been asked, by Indian professionals, "Do you believe in God?"

To consider that the India of today inspires such a question is to wonder if the India of tomorrow will have a response that reflects the values of the past, living in harmony with the realities of the future. Guha opens the door to such consideration, but does not open it quite wide enough to give us a glimpse of an answer. ♦