

Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi* – A Critical Review

Mrs. V. Rajitha, M.A., PGDTE,
Lecturer in English,
Sarojini Naidu Vanitha Maha Vidyalaya,
E-Mail: rajitha9252@gmail.com,
Ph: 7799111666,
Hyderabad.

Abstract

Ramachandra Guha reconstructs the past 60 years of Indian history that witnessed the possibility of disastrous disintegration of the nation or its transformation to a totalitarian society or a military dictatorship. In his paean to the violence marred independent India, he presents the political complexities revolving around caste, language, class, and religion, the conflicts arising out of which, the founders of modern India had to cope with. The pains, struggles, humiliations and glories of the world's largest and least likely democracy and the extraordinary factors holding it together are given a detailed treatment in the book peopled with larger-than-life characters. Notwithstanding the prominence attributed to Nehru-Gandhi dynasty in the narrative, Guha did not neglect the other historical actors, albeit briefly, who also set India on course for a democracy that functions, despite imperfections and corruption. Guha offers a panoramic view of the fight of a young nation against the veritable elements threatening secularism, its dangerous but nevertheless great gamble with democracy and the rise of populism. Selflessness and foresight of some, pettiness and fanaticism of some others, revolts for secession, linguist processions, theocratic and socialist movements, poverty and hunger, rights of minorities, even the cinema and cricket, all find their description in the volume.

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Historical narrative depends on familiarity, yet is enlivened by interpretative freshness and the surprise of new archival research. It's natural for the nations to look back into their own histories. While the older, pre-national communities occupied themselves with mythology, the democratic nation rehearses its history and the very reasons and outcomes of its existence. However, in both the cases there is an endless familiarity of subject-matter to the audience.

No master account has yet been written of the modern Indian nation-state, partly because historians of the subcontinent have usually shied away from the period after 1947, leaving the task to political scientists, sociologists and omniscient travellers. The curious practices of Indian archives and their keepers have not helped either: documents are declassified and allowed into the public domain on a very erratic basis. Sumit Sarkar's sweeping but dense account, *Modern India*, stopped at 1947. Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India*, an urbane, readable and sometimes personal account by a historically-minded political scientist, has the virtue of assuming little prior knowledge of this part of the world. It was only a matter of time before this massive historiographical gap would be filled. But history ought to be examined, and re-examined, threadbare, before nations have the capacity to move. The task that Ramachandra Guha set himself in his *India after Gandhi* is the story of the building of a rather improbable nation-state from a fragmented political landscape, and as such is primarily a narrative.

India After Gandhi is a political narrative of India's six decades of independence, with emphasis on how the country continued to remain a territorially intact and constitutional state, notwithstanding the pessimism of many after the British left in 1947. Guha reconstructs the past 60 years of Indian history that witnessed the possibility of disastrous disintegration of the nation or its transformation to a totalitarian society or a military dictatorship. In his paean to the violence marred independent India, he presents the political complexities revolving around caste, language, class, and religion, the conflicts arising out of which, the founders of modern India had to cope with. The pains, struggles, humiliations and glories of the world's largest and least likely democracy and the extraordinary factors holding it together are given a detailed treatment in the book peopled with larger-than-life characters. Notwithstanding the prominence attributed to Nehru-

Gandhi dynasty in the narrative, Guha did not neglect the other historical actors, albeit briefly, who also set India on course for a democracy that functions, despite imperfections and corruption. The book offers a panoramic view of the fight of a young nation against the veritable elements threatening secularism, its dangerous but nevertheless great gamble with democracy and the rise of populism. Selflessness and foresight of some, pettiness and fanaticism of some others, revolts for secession, linguist processions, theocratic and socialist movements, poverty and hunger, rights of minorities, even the cinema and cricket, all find their description in the volume.

The book gives adequate space to the lost decades due to socialism and the way Mahalanobis model¹ (Soviet style 5 year plans) was implemented, religious riots after independence and later. Kashmir issue, Fall of Congress, Rise of BJP and the regional parties were detailed. It gives an account of almost all watershed events: from integration of princely states to linguistic issues, from wars with China to liberation of Bangladesh, from Nehru's non-alignment to Indira's emergency, from Mandal Commission to Babri Masjid demolition, from Kashmir troubles to Assamese and Naga insurgency and also the emergence of Naxalism, from Khalistan to river disputes, from Kashmir dispute to LTTE troubles, from refugee issues to Operation Bluestar, from party politics to regional leaders and from refugee problems to corrupt Congress leaders. Guha has also tried to cite events from an international perspective, quoting foreign newspapers, delegates and leaders among others at regular intervals. This helps in understanding what other nations thought of India in those times. Quoting his first mentor, C.S. Venkatachar who said "every work of history is 'interim', to be amplified, amended, contested, and overthrown by works written in its wake" Guha justifies saying "Despite the range of subjects it covers, this book cannot hope to have treated any of them comprehensively."²

Guha has set out to produce the account of India since 1947 focusing on why India has remained a democracy against the odds, characterising this trait of the nation as 'major outlier'³, using the 'techniques of the narrative historian' rather than those of the social

¹ The Feldman-Mahalanobis model is a Neo-Marxist model of economic development, created independently by Soviet economist G. A. Feldman in 1928, and Indian statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis in 1953

² P. 18

³ P.16

scientist.⁴ The basic argument is straightforward enough: there are forces that divide India, and others that keep it together. Among the first set of forces, there are four in particular, all large and impersonal: caste, language, religion and class. These operate at times singly and at times together. The forces that keep India together, and which are still somehow winning out, are vaguer and less evident. Near the end of his prologue, which he calls 'Unnatural Nation', Guha assures us these forces 'have included individuals as well as institutions'.⁵

India After Gandhi begins with the British, who after years of suppressing Indian aspiration of self-government on the grounds that the country was both too mature ("much too old to learn that business,"⁶ as Rudyard Kipling remarked) and too young ("they are still infants,"⁷ a cricketer, tea-planter colonialist said), abruptly quit the subcontinent in 1947. Millions were uprooted during the mayhem called partition of India and Pakistan, many of them killed in religious violence. The new Indian state faced the dual challenges of integrating its remaining Muslim population and appeasing its Hindu majority. As an indication of what is bound to happen, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, said in a 1940 speech, seven years before he founded Pakistan: "The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs and literature. They neither intermarry, nor inter-dine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations."⁸ Guha shows awareness of both truth and falsehood in Jinnah's remark. A country that witnesses nasty and sectarian politicking day-in and day-out that leaves vicious religious rioting scars on both India's landscape and her people stands testimony to Jinnah's remarks on one side and on the other the Hindus and Muslims do dine in one another's homes and play on the same cricket teams. Guha registers these discordant notes.

Guha starts each chapter with quotes and excerpts from other sources and ends with a fleeting glimpse of what the future holds, and how the events could affect the unfolding of the future. The book is divided in five parts in chronological order. Each part describes a different period after 1947, giving detailed accounts of happenings of that time in India. In the first part, the author describes how India became independent and its immediate

⁴ P. 16

⁵ P. 16

⁶ Guha: p. 10

⁷ Guha: p. 10

⁸ Guha, Ramchandra: "The Logic of Division", *India After Gandhi*, Part I, p. 37

concerns like refugees, merger of princely states to British India, Kashmir problem, making constitution etc. were handled. In the second part he describes India under Nehru's prime ministership. This ranges from Nehru's unchallenged leadership in beginning of 1950s to his dwindling position after losing Sino-India War in 1962. This obviously did not go well with the public and Nehru looked weaker than ever but he was able to retain his post till his death. The part three concentrates on weakening of Centre. In southern states, non-Congress parties emerged as strong contenders of power. Kerala became first state of India where a non-Congress government was sworn in led by E. M. S. Namboodiripad and probably first democratically elected communist government in the world, whose commitment to democracy or respect to ballot was untested till then. But they set examples to other communists in the world by successfully working within the framework of Indian Constitution. The part four goes through the rise of populism in India. Elections were more about catchy slogans. Policies were not decided on the basis of their impact on nation building but on their ability to woo general public. Slogans like *Garibi Hatao* were very useful in winning elections but the public was not shown any roadmap that would remove or reduce poverty. The last part describes the last two decades where the reign of coalition governments considerably weakened Centre's authority. Many riots, major and minor, took place during last two decades. Also the author focuses Indian government's efforts to open Indian economy to the world and end what was called License Raj.

The first half of the book covers the decades under the prime ministership of Nehru and the drafting of the Indian Constitution. Guha in his hero worship wants the reader to believe that in the absence of Gandhi the Indians wouldn't have had a common nationality. But, even a prejudiced British historian like Vincent A Smith in his *Oxford History of India* conceded that "*India beyond all doubts, possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than produced either by geographical isolation or political suzerainty. That unity transcends innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language and dress manners and sect.*"

Political theorist Sunil Khilnani and other scholars have argued that by identifying caste as an organising principle in Indian society, Nehru and his allies inadvertently laid the groundwork for a more schismatic political culture. Guha declines to address these charges. Rather, he implies that Nehru did the best he could under the circumstances to prevent further splits. Guha tries to paint a convincing portrait of Nehru's good political sense

stating that Nehru's success with the Constitution, as well as his support for bills that raised the status of Hindu women and altered unfair property laws, are just some of the ways in which he had a positive impact on India's young democracy.

Still, Nehru's long tenure had its share of shortcomings. His self-described "non-aligned" stance, brought about by disgust with imperialism, certainly helped India avoid some of the nastier elements of the cold war. Some years later, India found itself unprepared for a border war with China that had long been percolating. Guha argues that Nehru ignored China's sensitivity about the border, which the Chinese saw as an illegitimate boundary drawn by the British.

India was seen at that time as a propagator of a new "mixed economy" model within a democratic set-up which refused to be aligned with any leading blocs. Guha has tried to superficially point the fallacies in the political ideology of Nehru and how it ruined the economic model of growth for India, since Nehru was overly enthusiastic about the "mixed economy" model after witnessing the nationalisation of major industries in Russia.

The author could not camouflage his unbridled devotion to Nehru and to his principles of socialism although in his Preface he promises to do his best in keeping his opinions from colouring the book. Yet, most of the initial part of the book seems like a tribute to Nehru. Sadly, apart from Nehru and Patel we get very less information and actions of other important independence leaders at that time. The author has credited Nehru with all the strengths that India gained and attributed all weakness to everything and everyone who is against Congress. This led to a very elaborate detailing of all events until 1964 and also some years right after Nehru's death. This in turn led to the author reducing the depth of elaboration of other major events such as Operation Blue Star, the Emergency, opening up of the economy in 1991.

In his brief analysis of the road to partition his analogies do not deviate even minutely from standard Nehruvian-leftist interpretations. In his defence of the Nehruvian blunders Guha frequently relies upon out of context quotations of Golwalkar, Savarkar, Jinnah and Maulana Azad, text torturing and bowdlerisation mechanisms. We find him consistently sanitizing the record of the Congress by smothering all evidence which points to compromise of national interest in the party's continuing quest for vote bank politics. Guha wants the blame for partition to be shared equally by the Muslim League and the

RSS/Hindu Mahasabha. The charge is not only preposterous but also undermines the responsibility of the league in not only dividing the country, but absolves it of the guilt in the subsequent carnage that followed. Neither theoretically nor practically could the Hindu Mahasabha claim to represent the Hindus in the same sense in which the Muslim League represented the Muslims in 1938 and later. Guha also fails to take into account that the hardened stand of the Mahasabha was only a reaction to the absolute communalisation of the issue by Jinnah. Further, Guha seems to be unsure of how to approach the horrors of partition, for he evades the degree of casualties on either side by using broad semi truthful generalisations; an ultimate attempt to exonerate Nehru on all counts dictating his thesis.

It is not just the issue of partition, Guha prefers to camouflage even the post-independence Nehruvian follies like dragging the Kashmir issue to the UN, invoking article 370 and guaranteeing sustained separatism of Kashmir, agreeing to plebiscite in Kashmir, inability to secure the rights of Hindu minorities in Pakistan, nurturing Islamic fundamentalists who had actively participated in the Pakistan movement within India, surrendering the seat of permanent member of Security Council to China, sacrifice of Tibet, Panchsheel, the de-modernisation of the Indian army, Nehru's naive attitude towards China and world powers leading to the Himalayan blunder of the Sino-Indian war and a weakened India militarily and politically on world stage, the license raj, the disastrous industrial policies Nehru stands guilty on all counts. Besides these, Nehru is clearly responsible for erosion of internal democracy within the Congress and transforming it into a party of sycophants; something which his daughter Indira Gandhi institutionalised.

The trouble with historians and biographers is that they too are human. Even they tend to fall in love (or hate, occasionally) with their subjects. Whether one writes about Genghis Khan or Gandhi, one a mass killer and world marauder and the second an exponent of non-violence, their first major historian-biographers (John Man and Louis Fischer) have tended to be hagiographers. Sober assessments tend to come later. Jawaharlal Nehru is not in the same bracket as either Khan or Gandhi, but Ramachandra Guha is his hagiographer, and treats him as India's most important political hero post-independence. In Guha's scheme of things, Nehru is the author of modern India, the arch secularist, the ultimate-nation-builder. Given his wide reading and international exposure, Nehru was

certainly good at looking at the big global picture, but he drew woolly conclusions about India's place in it.⁹

Nehru's most unfortunate legacy, however, was the family he bequeathed to the country. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, became Prime Minister in 1966, less than two years after his death. The resolve she displayed in supporting East Pakistan's fight for independence led both to an enormous increase in her popularity and to the creation of Bangladesh, which earned her American President Nixon's wrath who referred her as "the bitch"¹⁰ and Indians as "no goddamn good"¹¹, for the American government needed Yahya Khan's (the then Pakistani dictator) help in "opening" China.

What is ironic is that a woman who had once told Americans that if democracy was good for them, it would also be good for the people of East Pakistan, went on to legitimise authoritarianism saying that democracy guaranteed only mediocrity. Guha writes that her frustration and contempt for democratic procedure had been "manifested early, for instance, in the packing of the civil service, the judiciary and the Congress Party with individuals committed to the Prime Minister."¹² In 1975 she declared a state of emergency, restricting civil liberties and abolishing judicial independence. Illegal arrests and forced sterilisations in the name of population control were overseen by her son Sanjay. Indira Gandhi lifted the state of emergency in 1977, and when she was trounced in the elections a few months later, many of India's democratic institutions were restored. Still, she won re-election in 1980 before being assassinated four years later. A *New York Times* journalist wrote that with her death India faced a "period of prolonged uncertainty,"¹³ a conclusion that, Guha says "provided further proof of the late Prime Minister's success in undermining institutions that stood between her and the nation."¹⁴

If there is a connecting thread that Guha attempts to follow through, it's the question of democracy on this vast - and varied - a scale. The author shows how the western world as well as some Indian elite, capitalists or socialists, repeatedly concluded that India's

⁹ <http://www.firstpost.com/living/even-ramachandra-guha-rewrite-nehru-patel-history-1754465.html>

¹⁰ Guha: p. 333

¹¹ Guha: 329

¹² P. 360

¹³ P. 409

¹⁴ P. 410

democracy would end or that India would turn its back on secularism or that India might disintegrate due to its diversities or that it would collapse under the weight of its own population and starvation and famine etc. The book shows how India showed its resilience and never-say-die spirit and kept its faith in democracy, secular ideals and inclusiveness.

“Sixty years after Independence, India remains a democracy. But the events of the last two decades call for a new qualifying adjective. India is no longer a constitutional democracy but a *populist* one”,¹⁵ this is one of the hard hitting ideas which this book puts forward. With all the surprises, the setbacks and, the pandemonium that is associated with Indian’s freedom, we can surely say that democracy has not lost in India. It has become weak, but not lost. “India has a well established reputation for violating social scientific generalisations. That India could sustain democratic institutions was highly improbable.”¹⁶ Everyone had written off India’s future owing to low levels of income and literacy, and high levels of social conflict and maintained that it would fail as a nation and very soon disintegrate or fall in the hands of a dictator. That it didn’t, and that the democratic institutions have only grown stronger over the decades, particularly because democracy became a casualty in the neighbouring countries is indeed a marvel.

Guha suggests that one cannot understand India’s survival over the last 60 years by looking at such political models as Anglo-American liberalism, French republicanism, atheistic communism or Islamist theocracy. India is proudly *sui generis*, he says. A *Washington Post* review of the book sums up the thrust of the book well through the following words: “To comprehend India’s achievement, imagine if Mexico became the 51st of the United States, followed by Brazil, Argentina and the rest of Central and South America. Add Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to give this union the Sunni-Shia mix of India. The population then represented in Congress would still be smaller and less diverse linguistically, religiously, culturally and economically than India’s. If such a state could democratically manage the interests and conflicts swirling within it, and not threaten its neighbours, the world should ask little else from it. If we were such a state, we would feel that our humane progress contributes so much to global well-being that smaller, richer, easier-to-manage states should not presume to tell us what to do.”¹⁷

¹⁵ P. 491

¹⁶ P. 13

¹⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/16/AR2007081602827.html>

Guha shows how our neighbours have suffered in not following this 'Indian way' in resolving their ethnic and linguistic conflicts. In short, he says that a united India's survival against all odds is linked to its Constitution being mostly kept intact, elections being held regularly, keeping faith in its secularism, linguistic freedom without imposing one dominant language on the population, a reasonably efficient civil service and an apolitical army and last but not the least, Hindi films keeping its place in the culture.

Guha has focused on social mobility and its limits over the past sixty years, thus dealing jointly with two of the issues that he sees as crucial challenges to Indian democracy: caste and class. He is in truth well aware of how fruitful this line of inquiry can be: 'as a laboratory of social conflict,' he writes, 'the India of the 20th century is - for the historian - at least as interesting as the Europe of the 19th,'¹⁸ adding that 'in India the scope for contention has been even greater, given the diversity of competing groups across religion, caste, class and language.'¹⁹

Guha is quite obviously an admirer of the achievements Indian democracy has attained in a largely hostile environment, vitiated by religious superstitions, caste prejudices and acute economic disparities. He claims that the "real success story of modern India lies not in the domain of economics but in that of politics."²⁰ The writer attributes many problems of India like Zamindari, untouchability, and riots among many others to basically four factors: class, caste, religion, and language and discusses in detail the measures taken by constitution makers and by successive governments to do away with them.

The democratic practice in India is a highly contested terrain. Even during the anti-colonial struggle different political formations with widely different ideological persuasions and pragmatic approaches were in existence. Yet, after Independence the Indian National Congress held sway for almost four decades. Soon after coalition governments came into existence which Guha contends is a "manifestation of the widening and deepening of democracy" as different regions and groups acquired a greater stake in the system.²¹ A result of the decline of the Congress party was the rise of Bharatiya Janata Party, which was

¹⁸ P. 16

¹⁹ P. 16

²⁰ P. 16

²¹ 474

called fascist by many people. Guha, however, differs. In the General Elections of 2004, when the BJP alliance lost power “Its leaders moved out of office and allowed their victors to move in instead. When was the last time a ‘fascist’ regime permitted such an orderly transfer of power?”²²

The Emergency, though was the gravest, was not the only crisis that Indian democracy had to face. Linguistic conflicts, regional secessionist movements, communal tensions and riots and political violence had often made its existence rather precarious. On many an occasion, it so seemed that the existence of India as a nation was itself in danger. It not only survived all of them but also emerged from them much stronger, reinforcing in the process its commitment to democratic ideals. “The sapling (of democracy),” says Guha, “was planted by the nation’s founders, who lived long enough (and worked hard enough) to nurture it to adulthood. Those who came afterwards could disturb and degrade the tree of democracy but, try as they might, could not uproot or destroy it.”²³

Though not directly, Guha also addresses the question that whether ‘growth of regional parties and populist policies has weakened democracy in India’. Let us consider views of both sides of argument. It may be argued that greater power to states or regional parties would in fact give importance to the local issues at the Centre. The formation and winning of mass support by caste or region based parties has actually given powers to the communities for which these parties stand. Their belief in democratic ways for fulfilment of their demands is actually a pleasing development. That is one side of the argument but then author comments on nature of this democracy, “The decline of Parliament, and of reasoned public discourse in general, has meant that the Government forces are swarmed by the opposition almost instantly after an electoral mandate. There is no patience, either on the part of the government or the opposition, to respect the authenticity of the mandate to rule given by the voter to a parliament or legislature.” He concludes that India is no longer a constitutional democracy but a populist one.

The epilogue of the book “Why India Survives” (echoing R K Narayan’s unflappable assurance to Naipaul in the 60s: “India will go on”) is a strangely moving coda, and a meditation on why India has survived and is a convincing testament to its particular

²² P. 536

²³ 537

uniqueness as a modern non-western democracy, thus clarifying the country's peculiar appeal. At one point, Guha mentions he is "speaking as a historian rather than as citizen"²⁴; but allowing the historian to be in commerce with citizenship is what provides the book with impetus, and gives it its most palpable strength. Guha, as a citizen, has been "exasperated" by India, but, in the light of historical evidence, has been won over by it. This mixture of distance and surrender is fairly emblematic of why many middle-class Indians continue to invest themselves, emotionally, in the country; it's quite distinct from patriotism. In his epilogue, Guha invokes the biologist JBS Haldane, who, moved by the "wonderful experiment" India had embarked on, decided to become an "Indian citizen". Guha's book reminds us that the citizenly pride that permeates it is not incompatible with judgment, hindsight, intelligence and distance; that citizenship is not a natural thing, but that it is, in some cases, inevitable.

Guha, has the benefit of working with a continent-sized country, so there's an order of magnitude more detailed about Indian political history than about any single government in Europe or Africa. It has its shortcoming and there are points where the author's personal views have influenced what should otherwise have been an objective record. A political history of modern Indian is - seemingly inevitably - focused on the Congress Party, which in turn is inevitably focused on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Guha has refrained from direct criticism of Nehru's policy. He does compromise objectivity in favour of Nehru, especially in his narrative about Nehru's grand centralised socialist economy and his foreign policy of Non-Aligned movement both of which are more or less proven wrong in retrospect. A certain amount of objectivity would have been good while discussing Nehru's policies and his five year plans in the 1950s and the events that led up to the Indo-China war.

Further, the most disappointing aspect of this book is there is virtually no mention of major scams; especially those involving the Congress party. A survey of Indian political corruption is sorely lacking in this tome.