

India

An Introduction

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This is an unpretentious introduction to India, meaning its religions, especially Hinduism, its history, including its defining myths, going up to the present age of writing. It is not very sophisticated, more of the nature of a potted history to be found in a guide-book; yet rather helpful as a refresher and reminder, putting headlines in the right order filling up gaps.

As to Hinduism it makes clear that there is to it also a philosophical metaphysical side that transcends ritual and religion, but by its nature too sophisticated as a vulgar creed. There are of course striking parallels between say Greek thought and Hinduism at its most philosophical and abstract, the notion of 'oneness' say makes one think of Parmenides. The problem with meta-physical pronouncement is that when divorced from the context for which they make a commentary, they tend to be meaningless and insipid. They are aphoristic in nature, the distillation of a certain experience, the ignorance of which, make them vacuous. Metaphysical statements are portentous and grand, and cannot be used as building-stones for transcending structures, as most of the facts that we discover and elaborate in science, they are ends in themselves, fuzzy entities at infinity.

Nevertheless the basic philosophy of Hinduism pervades the religion as such and makes it rather tolerant and conducive to the absorption of other elements of thought. It has no sacred text, no codification, but is essentially fuzzy. This has enabled the recent revival of Hinduism, endowing recent traditions with the illusion of a long tradition. True there are myths comparable to the epics of Homer, although those epic myths of the Hindus are far more extensive providing a treasure trove of fairy-tales (with only the most tenuous connection to historical reality) providing an unending delight.

The Muslim aspect of modern India is of course inescapable, next to Bangladesh and Indonesia, India houses the largest Muslim population in the world, making it a sizable minority if still a definite majority. The tradition of Islam in India dates back to Arab seafarers crossing the Arabic Sea in the 8th century A.D. Those early contacts did not make much of a dent, although leaving some indelible marks, the real confrontation with Islam was not as peaceful. Invaders from the North-west regularly spilled into the subcontinent, starting with the Persians and the Greeks under Alexander, but becoming really serious only later on with the descent of the great nomadic tribes of Central Asia. Pointless to list them all, even all the major ones, except the most glorious of them all, the Moghuls. The first one was Babur, essentially a Turk of Muslim persuasion and Persian culture, a man of contradiction, like all fascinating men, ruthless in battle, yet with a refined cultural sensitivity, a seeming oxymoronism the manifestations of which can be traced throughout most of history into modern times. Two things attracted him to India, the beauty of its landscape and the blessings of the Monsoon. For two hundred years, through the

succession of six notable and relatively long-reigning emperors, that dynasty provided the most splendid empire at its time, New Delhi, its capital (still as a major city going back to pre-historic Hindi times), was one of the worlds most populous cities, and such an empire must have appeared quite intimidating to intrepid western explorers coming from far more primitive surroundings. Yet the empire crumbled through internal strife and loss of will, the fate of any empire in the long run, although the Mughals only lasted for two centuries as a power.

One may pause at this period of history, spanning the 16th century to the end of the 18th. It was an empire of ostentatious wealth, no doubt one of the sources for the Western concept of Oriental riches; yet it must have been based on a mass of people living in squalor. Still the population in those days cannot have been that great, maybe a hundred of two hundred million people at most. This means that much of the present day geographical region was still untouched, a pristine wilderness with a rich fauna of tigers, lions and elephants. Unsullied rivers, untouched beaches. In many ways it must have appeared paradisaical. No wonder why Babur was enchanted by its natural riches, if not its human.

The British acquired its Indian empire by absentmindedness it is claimed, but when it came to a serious challenge, they defended it single-mindedly. The atrocities perpetrated in connection with the so called Sepoy Mutiny were in many ways comparable to what the Nazis would do later to fellow Europeans. On this Singh does not dwell, after all his book is supposed to be uncontroversial.

The independence movement started in the 19th century, an educated elite started to form an idea of a more modern Indian identity, in the process reviving many of the old and dormant Hindu practices. At the end of the century this revival of hinduism benefited from the low tide suffered by the Muslims. But the British at the turn of the 20th century probably thought of India as their Millenial Reich, the imperial refashioning of New Delhi being a case in point. However, the independence movement gained momentum, and the advents of two world wars significantly weakened the British position, the second one revealing its basic hollowness.

Three figures of Modern India are highlighted in the book. The first one is Gandhi of course, more than anybody else the icon of modern India, a status achieved paradoxically through his exaltation of ancient traditions and the call for a return to the simple life. Gandhi was a man of contradictions, as any interesting and charasmatic human being. He started out as an anglophile set to embrace the modern world of smart living. An extended sojourn in South-Africa saw him coming to age, and relatively late in his life, did he espouse what became hismission. He was famously against violence, but not a true principled pacifist and by no means adverse to some strategic deployment of force if necessary. He exalted poverty, but as is often remarked, it cost the Indian movement quite a lot of money to keep him poor. A mild-mannered man, yet a shrewd and ruthless politician. Nehru, a middle-class Brahmin from Kashmir, and a reformed anglophile as well, came under his tutelage and protection, and was thus able in the end to step into the shoes of the first prime ministrall office of the independant India. Now independance was marred by the partition, a drastic measure seen through by Jinnah, and the result no doubt of an far earlier alienation of the Muslims from the Congress party. Partition,

very much resented by Gandhi, was also an unmitigated disaster. A kind of compromise machinated by the departing British, and going against the secular, non-communal idea of a modern India, especially endorsed by Nehru.

Nehru was a economical socialist, not to say communist, and the new nation started out on Five year plans. While he was a committed democate rejecting the politics, as opposed to the economics of socialism. His major failures were in foreign policy, first the handling of the Kashmire controversy which have poisoned Pakistani-Indian relations ever since, secondly his failure to accomodate the Chinese and the military humiliation at the Indo-Chinese border.

He was eventually succeeded a few years after his death by his daughter Indira. An uneducated woman, Singh reminds us, yet of uncanny political shrewdness. Proud he is of her being the most powerful woman politician ever, even if he is well aware of her shortcomings. She did come precariously close to ending democracy in India by imposing emergency decrees under which she ruled effectively for a few years in the middle of the 70's. But Indian democracy turned out to be far more resilient than feared and she suffered at the polls, only being able to regain electoral confidence after a long struggle. She met her death in 1984 at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards¹. This produced violent massacres of the Sikh population in Delhi and environs, massacres perpetrated by the tacit approval of politicians, maybe even instigated by the same. Her son (and murderer?) cynically pointed out when a big tree is felled, the ground shakes.

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¹ This is the official version anyway, in the interlude between the beginning of this essay and its completion, I fortuitously met a Norwegian speaking Sikh in my overnight train compartment. He disclosed that she was not at all murdered by her bodyguards but that it was an inside job, maybe arranged by her son. No proof of the culpability of the putative murderers has ever been produced, although with all that camera surveillance, one would think that there would have been plenty of evidence. Darlymple in his book on New Delhi does of course not question the official view, he might not even be aware of its nature as such, but does point to the tragic fact that although there was always an ambulance on duty, at the time its driver was taking tea, and she was delivered by her daughter-in-law.