

Book Reviews

South Asia

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The Accidental Prime Minister: The Making and Unmaking of Manmohan Singh

Sanjaya Baru. New York: Viking, 2014. £16.99/\$29.99. 320 pp.

Sanjaya Baru's account of his time as spokesman and media adviser to former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh came out as Singh's time in power was drawing to a close. The initial response suggested an unseemly 'kiss and tell' book. That is incorrect: Baru paints a sympathetic picture of an honourable and often wise man, cast in a role that required far greater political skills than he possessed, and unwillingly caught up in a contest for power. He describes in lively detail the competition at the centre of the Indian government – between bureaucratic 'tribes', between coalition partners and, most damagingly, between Singh and Congress party president Sonia Gandhi. No one with any interest in the Indian government will dispute the conclusion that this last situation was unhealthy and personally humiliating to Singh, and that it played a major role in the unravelling of the Congress government and its eventual defeat, the worst in its history.

The most interesting parts of the book are the chapters on the India-US nuclear agreement. The extended negotiations for the agreement took up most of Singh's first term. The negotiations, carried out by senior officials in half a dozen Indian government offices, were very much 'his show'; the negotiators were hand-picked for the job and empowered by the knowledge that Singh was personally committed to getting an agreement that would end the disabilities India suffered as a result of its anomalous status in the nuclear world. Their US counterparts had a similar relationship with former US president George W.

Bush, equally determined to make history with India while maintaining a non-proliferation structure that the US had largely created. The internal differences within each side were sometimes passionate, as one would expect given the importance of the issues involved.

Baru's account highlights the interplay on this issue between Singh and Gandhi, who was far more sceptical about the value of the agreement. She was unwilling to risk the future of the Congress government for the nuclear deal, and came close to killing it in the process. Ironically, it was Singh's decision to offer his resignation that ultimately brought the government's forces together and made this agreement possible. The resignation took a lot out of Singh, but it also boosted his standing more than anything else that happened during his time as prime minister.

Singh's story is full of paradoxes. His finest hours were those when he took a strong stand in the face of dangerous opposition. He did so in 1991 as finance minister, and introduced economic reforms that made India an economic power to be reckoned with. He did it again in 2007–08, and brought in an agreement that transformed Delhi's ties with Washington and legitimised its nuclear programme. But unlike most political leaders, who love a 'good fight', Singh hated fights and took pride in being a team player. Leadership is a lonely job. It requires character, which Singh unquestionably has. But it also sometimes demands clear choices rather than splitting the difference.

Autumn of the Matriarch: Indira Gandhi's Final Term in Office

Diego Maiorano. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015. £25.00/\$74.00.
288 pp.

It is generally accepted among India-watchers that Indira Gandhi was both the beneficiary of the powerful institution that was the Indian National Congress and, during her later years, a major cause of its institutional decline. She ruled supreme both in Congress and over the nation during her heyday, particularly after her triumphant war in Bangladesh. But in the process, she made India's premier political party into a personal power base and destroyed its ability to launch future generations of democratic leaders capable of steering their party through domestic change, or India through a complex international transformation.

Maiorano's book expands on this argument. In an elegantly written and compact study, he sketches the shift Gandhi brought about from a Congress with a strong base in India's rural areas to one that relied critically on a three-way alliance combining the state, the urban middle class and India's corporate sector. He traces her increasingly decisive assumption of all power within Congress, so that no state leader could challenge her. He argues compellingly

that her flirtation with 'Hindu politics' was critical in bringing the voice of 'Hindutva' – formally associated with Congress's main adversary the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – into the mainstream of Indian politics. The most powerful chapter outlines the impact on India's institutions, or as he terms it, their 'politicization, erosion and informalization' (p. 204), with a particular emphasis on the judiciary, the bureaucracy and especially India's federal system. He argues that the states, both as governmental and political actors, lost their ability to act as a counterweight to Gandhi's increasingly dominant and personal power.

Maiorano's account, as the title suggests, focuses principally on the period 1980–84, during Gandhi's return to power following the 1975–77 Emergency and her subsequent defeat by the short-lived Janata government in 1977. The experience of being defeated at the height of her power no doubt contributed to her determination not to allow any competition, political or institutional, to intrude on her domain.

What makes this book interesting and important reading is that the Indian electorate installed powerful BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014 and handed Congress its most devastating defeat ever. Congress's representation in the Indian parliament is now substantially lower than it was after Gandhi's electoral defeat in 1977. Modi mobilised not just 'Hindu politics' but also the tripartite alliance Maiorano attributes to Gandhi – its strength among urban middle classes and its allure for the corporate sector are if anything greater than those Indira Gandhi enjoyed. Modi triumphed in a democratic election, but he is a leader who tolerates no argument from either the bureaucracy or his party colleagues. This account of the weakness and vulnerability of India's institutions makes sobering reading.

Managing Conflicts in India: Policies of Coercion and Accommodation

Bidisha Biswas. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
£24.95/\$39.99. 144 pp.

This compact volume examines how the Indian government handles some of its most difficult internal insurgencies. It looks specifically at three: the separatist campaigns in Punjab and Kashmir, and the diffuse left-wing extremist movements variously known as Naxalites and Maoists in much of central and eastern India. In the first case, the insurgency was successfully overcome and effectively disappeared; in the second and third, they continue.

Broadly speaking, however, the Indian government followed many of the same approaches in all three cases. Its policies were driven primarily by the political imperative of showing toughness, and it therefore privileged coercion

over accommodation, and hard power (both police and military) over political outreach or development. The Punjab case, which ended best from the Indian government's perspective, had the strongest political and development component, but it also involved people that 'mainstream India' had always regarded as integral to the national enterprise, which undoubtedly made it easier to sustain a policy of integration. The Kashmir case, by contrast, was profoundly affected by the India–Pakistan dimension of the problem. This intensified the drive to show toughness. The left-wing extremist insurgency has in many ways been the most difficult to deal with, in part because its leadership and demands have been fuzzier. In all three cases, the insurgencies have involved criminal activity and alienated local populations in the process. Only in Punjab was the Indian government able to take advantage of this situation. It is perhaps not coincidental that in Punjab, the state government played a leadership role in addressing the problem. In Kashmir, the Indian government's relationship with the state government was poisoned by its suspicion that all Kashmiris were at heart separatists. Kashmir-watchers will recall that while the Indian government has at various times tried to work with the Kashmiris and with Pakistan, it has never done both at the same time.

Others have dealt more comprehensively with the military and police aspects of counter-insurgency efforts (Ganguly and Fidler (eds), *India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned*, for one). This volume does not deal with all India's insurgencies: Biswas opted to leave out those in the northeast of the country, which include the most successful use of accommodation, in Mizoram, because of the difficulty in obtaining reasonably comparable information. The significant contribution Biswas makes, however, is to identify the pattern of Indian policy, and to relate this to a very sound series of recommendations at the conclusion of her study. She focuses on the need to train and professionalise the police, to define the role and tactics of the military, and above all to develop a more nuanced menu of options beyond simply moving back and forth between coercion and accommodation. The book is a good read on an important subject that is all too often glossed over in discussions on contemporary India.

The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics

Andrew Small. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015. £30.00/\$50.00.
288 pp.

Andrew Small starts his study on China–Pakistan relations with a quotation from General Xiong Guangkai: 'Pakistan is China's Israel' (p. 1). For a relationship that has been almost a cliché in discussions of South Asian politics and strategy, there has been remarkably little serious research about it. Both

the Pakistani and the Chinese systems are fairly opaque, and neither country's architects of the relationship have any interest in describing its inner dynamics. Small's book is a welcome addition, the more so because it is both short and highly readable.

Ever since it became independent, Pakistan has built its foreign policy around one core principle: that living next to a perpetually threatening India, it must line up strong outside powers to counter India's size and strength. China, on the other hand, has a more complex external environment. It stoutly denies considering India a rival – after all, as Chinese India-watchers constantly remark, Beijing assesses India's 'comprehensive power' as only one-quarter the size of China's. Nonetheless, India – a neighbour and the only country in the world with a population close to the size of China's – is an inevitable geopolitical challenge. Hostility towards India is baked into both countries' geography, and this is the basis for the China–Pakistan 'axis' – and for the comment about Pakistan being China's Israel. The hostile relationship with India also explains why the China connection is so important to Pakistan. None of its other outside allies – the United States and the Muslim countries in particular – is willing to join forces with it against India.

Much of Small's story is familiar, but he adds valuable details. His description of China's support for Pakistan's nuclear-bomb programme leaves no room for doubt that China made a huge difference in that enterprise. His account of how Pakistan and China worked together during three of Pakistan's wars with India reveals both the value and the limitations of the Chinese connection. The two countries have very different ways of thinking about war. In one memorable example, Small quotes former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai as asking a visiting Pakistani military delegation, desperate to replace armaments lost in the 1965 war, if Pakistan had 'prepared the people of Pakistan to operate in the rear of the enemy ... I am talking about a People's Militia being based in every village and town' (p. 30). It is hard to imagine an approach further from that of the praetorian Pakistani army. And China did not intervene in 1971, despite Pakistan losing half its country when Bangladesh broke away, or in 1999, when Pakistani troops met with unexpected Indian resistance after infiltrating the Kargil area in Kashmir. Both episodes are well known, but neither figures in the hyperbolic descriptions of Chinese friendship that prevail in Pakistan.

Less well known is the interaction between China and Pakistan on Islamic extremism and especially on Afghanistan. Pakistan is famously very careful about its Chinese friends' sensitivities. The book starts with the story of the Chinese ambassador having essentially forced former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf to take action when students from Islamabad's Red Mosque

had abducted Chinese patrons and staff at massage parlours, accusing them of running a brothel. The subsequent attack by Pakistani forces on militants at the mosque left more than 100 people dead and is widely regarded as a turning point in the creation of Pakistan's own Taliban movement and the erosion of Musharraf's power. Both in Afghanistan and in its ties with extremist groups in Pakistan and Central Asia, Pakistan has objectives and relationships that run counter to Chinese interests. The clearest example is Pakistan's relationship with Islamic extremist movements, which its intelligence organisations have carefully protected but some of which also have ties to dissidents in western China. These are areas that have strained some of Pakistan's other friendships, notably the sometimes schizophrenic one with Washington. They may well become a problem for China too.

Small relied heavily on interviews in preparing the book. This makes for a lively account, and was probably inevitable since he was not able to use Chinese-language sources. But it occasionally leaves the reader feeling slightly lost in all the colourful detail. This is a small quibble, however. Small has written a valuable and perceptive book.

This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War

Samanth Subramanian. London: Atlantic Books, 2015.

£14.99/\$27.99. 336 pp.

The books that most powerfully depict Sri Lankan society and the corrosive impact of its multiple civil wars are mostly novels or plays. Samanth Subramanian's collection of vignettes is not fiction, but falls into this same tradition. He uses individual stories to convey both the protagonists' sentiments and the complicated network of relationships and emotions running through a society that has gone through a great deal of horror.

Subramanian is an Indian Tamil journalist. This collection, which he started in 2011, two years after the end of Sri Lanka's latest 'Eelam War', shows the eye for detail that characterises great novels and great journalism. The first section of the book, 'The Terror', deals primarily with the build-up to the war. His subjects include a recruit to the Tamil Tigers, two Tamil officers in the Sri Lankan army (there are practically no such officers left), and a number of other Tamils. He conveys the deep despair that gave birth to the Tigers and their cult of violence; the bitter disillusionment experienced by Tamils who had bet their lives and careers on a multinational state by joining the military but had found themselves excluded when times were tough; and the divisions within the Tamil community. The next section, 'The North', looks at Jaffna, conveys the Tigers' expulsion of all Muslims from the city through the experience of a family who

did not see it coming, and delves into the divisions between pro- and anti-Tiger family members and the toxic problem of the disappeared. 'The Faith' looks at the fissures inside Sinhalese Sri Lanka, and 'Endgames' explores both the cataclysmic final days of the war and the ruthlessness of the initial post-war government's determination to marginalise or eliminate any dissenting voice.

There is no lack of depressing literature on Sri Lanka. What makes this account unusual is how human it is, and how Subramanian manages to find humour amid the grimness. In one of his meetings in Jaffna, for instance, Subramanian and his interlocutor order a beer. Offered a choice of Lion or Tiger beer, they order Lion – only to be told that the only available one is Tiger. (The Lion is, of course, the symbol of the Sinhalese.) 'It's a good thing you have me here as a witness', says his friend, 'nobody would ever have believed that this conversation actually happened.' The characters come alive: Ananthi, who puts her boundless energy and slyness into her apparently fruitless search for her husband who had surrendered to the army in 2009; and General Turairajah, the army's former chief medical officer, a Tamil whose early ambition was to devote himself to sports.

Subramanian set about writing this book in part to discover whether yet another war was being born on the ashes of the last one. He does not answer that question. He leaves the reader with the impression that this will be the eventual result unless both the political authorities and the leaders of the Tamil community find a way to create a common polity. The elections of January and August 2015 offered a chance to do that, but each new tragedy makes the task harder.