

Book Reviews

South Asia

Teresita C. Schaffer

The Disruptor: How Vishwanath Pratap Singh Shook India

Debashish Mukerji. Noida: Harper Collins India, 2021.

₹699.00. 584 pp.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, better known as V.P. Singh, grew up in the household of one of the princes of northern India. He was born in 1931 to a landowning family and adopted at age five by a member of the princely family, whose heir he became. The early parts of *The Disruptor* provide a fascinating picture of the social dynamics in the princely family. The personal insecurity V.P. suffered in these early years, along with the family's complex relationships, shaped his persona through his long political career. Despite his elective and political successes, culminating in a couple of years as prime minister, he never seemed to fit in completely.

V.P.'s political career began in the 1950s. A trip to an international youth conference had made him into a staunch member of the Congress Party, which had a monopoly on running the government for nearly 30 years after India's independence. He campaigned for Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1957 election. It was another ten years before he was willing to take the electoral plunge himself. After much pre-election angst, Indira Gandhi, by then prime minister, saw to it that he became the Congress candidate for a seat in the state legislature in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state.

V.P. served for years at both the state and national levels. He continued as a stalwart Congressman, through the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and into the government headed by her son Rajiv. V.P. had been in and out of ministerial-level positions since 1974, and under Rajiv he stood out as a

star minister of finance, one of the few to make his name through an anti-corruption campaign.

V.P.'s time as Rajiv's minister of defence proved to be a major turning point in his career. His relations with Rajiv, still the prime minister, were cooling. Reports of corruption on a couple of major defence-procurement deals surfaced, and this led to a rift between the two men. Having established himself as an anti-corruption fighter, V.P. decided to resign from the government – and Rajiv expelled him from the party. Within a few months, he had helped to create the Janata Dal party, his new political home.

Two years later, in December 1989, Janata Dal ousted the Congress government and V.P. became prime minister. Largely on the strength of his anti-corruption campaign, he became the face of change. He was also, as author Debashish Mukerji notes, 'crisis-prone'. The kidnapping in Kashmir of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of Indian home minister and Kashmiri Muslim Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, marked a new phase of violence in that troubled state. Another insurgency convulsed Punjab. One of the two corruption-tainted deals that had soured his relations with Rajiv Gandhi came to a head. The outbreak of war in Iraq required a massive evacuation of Indian citizens. Janata Dal itself broke apart, bringing V.P.'s prime-ministerial term to a close within 11 months, and taking him from a pinnacle of popularity to a low point in less than a year.

Mukerji describes this career in minute detail, providing a rich trove of vignettes illustrating the inner workings of Indian politics and V.P.'s often troubled connections with his family. He had the temperament to be a maverick, but this quality was in tension with his devotion to Congress for much of his career. For a man whose life was largely lived in the political sphere, he seemed strangely uncomfortable there.

The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation

Declan Walsh. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. £9.99. 368 pp.

Declan Walsh was a legendary correspondent in Pakistan for a decade, making himself known – and read – among South Asia watchers for his amazing stories and gripping style, and the amount of Pakistani life he packed into his reporting. This book aims to give the reader an understanding of the diversity, the history and the feel of Pakistan through nine lives – people who each represent, for better and for worse, some critical dimension of the country.

True to form, Walsh's prologue starts with drama: his expulsion from Pakistan. After a phone call from an unfamiliar number, he headed home to find

representatives of Inter-Services Intelligence – Pakistan’s military-intelligence service that, he notes elsewhere, is always an unseen presence – waiting for him with a letter demanding his immediate departure.

The people he profiles in this book run the gamut. The cleric who presided over the Red Mosque when the army broke a siege there in 2007 – the ‘reluctant fundamentalist’ – illustrates the fraught relationship between Pakistan and Islam, especially Islamic extremism. The story of a clan leader in what was then called the North-West Frontier Province demonstrates some of the contradictions of feudal and tribal life. The chapter on Asma Jahangir, an internationally known lawyer and human-rights activist, gives a fascinating account of her complicated relationship with Benazir Bhutto.

The most gripping chapter, in my view, is ‘The Good Muslim’. It weaves deftly back and forth between the stories of Salman Taseer, a politician who wanted to release a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, and of the young police officer who assassinated Taseer while he was supposed to be guarding him. The chapter offers another view of the complexity of differing interpretations of Islam – and the relationships between different social classes.

Walsh is drawn to quirky stories that bring out the confusion, contradictions and hypocrisy of life in Pakistan (and in many other countries, if one looks below the surface). His affection for the people of Pakistan shines through. Some books introduce an unfamiliar place with numbers and averages. Walsh does the opposite – he profiles people who are in many ways outliers, but who exemplify something very characteristic of the country. He is above all a storyteller, one who draws the reader in with the vividness, and often the hilarity, of his descriptions. He doesn’t really explain: he illustrates. You will have more fun reading this book than almost any other about Pakistan.

India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power

Vinay Sitapati. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2021. £20.00. 400 pp.

Vinay Sitapati is an accomplished biographer of contemporary politicians in India, whose excellent book on P.V. Narasimha Rao (*Half Lion*, reviewed in the October–November 2017 issue) appeared six years ago. His most recent book, *India Before Modi*, describes how India’s current ruling party, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), acquired its present shape and power through the stories of two stalwarts of the old Jana Sangh and its offspring, the BJP.

The first is Atal Bihari Vajpayee, activist in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the ideological movement associated with both parties), foreign minister in the first of the governments in which the Jana Sangh participated, and twice prime minister. Vajpayee came from a middle-class family in Gwalior, in north-western India. He made a name for himself as an orator in Hindi, and for most of his political career was the face and voice of the Hindu-nationalist movement in the Indian parliament.

The second, L.K. Advani, came from a prominent family in Karachi, which later became the first capital of Pakistan. He was not interested in parliamentary manoeuvring, but excelled as the party organiser. Advani was widely considered the hardliner in the party, Vajpayee the 'moderate'. Sitapati disputes this characterisation. For most of their political careers, the two men were good friends – even willing to trade off stints as the most important figure in the party. More importantly, both were devoted to the ideological foundation of the party, which Sitapati argues started from the proposition that the Hindus in India had always lost when they were divided, and that they must at all costs avoid division in their ranks.

This explains some of the paradoxes we have seen during Narendra Modi's time as prime minister (eight years at this writing). If the iron law of the RSS credo is unity, this explains why Vajpayee was unwilling to discipline Modi after the communal riots that convulsed Gujarat under Modi's chief minister-ship, despite the political cost the riots imposed, and despite Vajpayee's own view at the time that Modi bore significant responsibility. It also explains why Modi, as prime minister, was not prepared to put a stop to incitement to violence by members of his party.

The author's thesis is controversial among scholars of the Hindu-nationalist movement. The book includes a final chapter that reviews the key points of controversy. One of these challenges the commonly held belief that the RSS did not intend to be a political organisation. Sitapati argues instead that the BJP's reliance on, and success in, first-past-the-post elections fits better with the traditional Hindu view of society. It argues that, together with the radicalisation brought on by the assault on a mosque believed to have been built on the birthplace of the ancient King Ram, it was elections that made the BJP a major power in Indian politics.

For all this academic argumentation, Sitapati's book is a wonderful read – like a fast-paced novel. The dramatis personae come alive on the page. The book was originally aimed at an Indian audience. Across the black waters from India, readers may miss a few of the insider references, but they will relish the lively political storytelling, and learn a great deal about today's Indian political scene.

Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy

Christophe Jaffrelot. Cynthia Schoch, trans. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. £28.00/\$35.00. 639 pp.

Christophe Jaffrelot, the most prominent French scholar of India, has produced a dozen books over the past two decades, several focused on the Hindu-nationalist movement. This one goes beyond chronicling the rise of Modi and the BJP; nearly half of it develops the argument that Modi's government takes the movement into new and troubling territory.

The first step has been changing the popularly perceived definition of who is a 'real' Indian by, as Jaffrelot puts it, 'Hinduizing the public space' (pp. 160–9). The religious neutrality for which India had been known increasingly is yielding to the notion that other religions are welcome as long as they are 'culturally Hindu'. This part of the author's argument has become familiar since Modi took office.

Especially since Modi's re-election in 2019, Jaffrelot argues, he has become the standard-bearer of 'electoral authoritarianism'. His government has set about undermining the Indian institutions that equip citizens to push back against government overreach, including the Right to Information Act, the Central Bureau of Investigation, the judiciary and the free press. It began by 'outsourcing' the job of intimidating minorities and dissidents to private vigilante groups from which the government averted its eyes. More recently, the government's hand has showed itself more clearly in some of these actions, marking what Jaffrelot believes is a turn toward an 'authoritarian vigilante state'. The marginalisation that results falls most heavily on Muslims, but Christians and political dissidents suffer as well.

Jaffrelot notes, as others have, that Modi is a talented political performer who has made brilliant use of hope, fear, anger and especially a sense that Hindus are divided, and therefore vulnerable. This has made him popular – indeed, he is more popular than the party is. Add to this the complete collapse of the Congress Party, which had been the colossus of Indian politics for more than three decades, and Modi is in a tremendously powerful position.

This book makes disturbing reading, especially against the background of what had been very strong Indian democratic institutions. Jaffrelot makes his case in great detail, and leaves the reader with the sense that turning back to a full-strength democracy will not be an easy task.

In an international context, these developments have far-reaching importance. India is not the only democracy that is going through a difficult time. The United States, France, arguably Britain, other countries in Europe – many are

in a similar situation, even if not all of them meet Jaffrelot's precise definition of 'authoritarian vigilantism'. The care with which Jaffrelot weaves the different strands of his story makes this a particularly important analysis of a set of problems that will be with India – and the world – for some time.

Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia

Ashley J. Tellis. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022. PDF available from <https://carnegieendowment.org/>. 318 pp.

Ashley Tellis has spent much of his distinguished career studying security issues in India, Pakistan and China. I believe this report is the first such study to look at the nuclear-weapons programmes of all three countries together, focusing particularly on how they have developed since India's and Pakistan's nuclear-weapons tests in 1998. The study assesses where they stand now and how stable or unstable the nuclear relations are among all three, and looks ahead to what might change this balance over the coming decade or two. His title telegraphs his conclusion.

The assessments are extensive and detailed. The reader who is interested in the political dimensions of the programmes will find even more value in the author's integration of the nuclear programme with each country's concept of the role nuclear weapons should play in its defence. All three countries started out with nuclear weapons assigned a deterrent role or, as Tellis puts it, viewed them as political rather than war-fighting instruments. China and India adopted versions of a 'no first use' doctrine. Pakistan did not: its nuclear force, like its defence forces generally, were aimed at India, and given India's much larger size and military resources, Pakistan felt the need to keep open the possibility of using nuclear weapons first.

As the arsenals grew, all three countries subtly reformulated their doctrines. China, whose nuclear forces were primarily aimed at the United States, expanded both the size and diversity of its nuclear assets. The same is true of Pakistan. India added a submarine-launched capability, but of the three countries, it expanded its nuclear assets the most slowly. As Tellis reminds us, India sought a minimum credible deterrent, achievable with a relatively small nuclear force given the size and capacity of its conventional forces.

Today, India's nuclear arsenal is smaller than Pakistan's, and Tellis's assessment is that both nuclear dyads in the region – India–Pakistan and China–India – are stable. The biggest potential source of instability in the near term is Pakistan's implicit use of its nuclear weapons to provide cover for sub-conventional operations against India. If one assumes, as Tellis does, that

India is territorially the status quo power and would normally have no reason to initiate hostilities, Pakistani cross-border guerrilla operations or other sub-conventional warfare could create a situation in which, in the fog of combat, a miscalculation could lead Pakistan to push the nuclear button.

What makes this report a must-read is the author's look into the potential future. Tellis sees several possible developments that are likely to disrupt the region's strategic stability. The likely evolution of China's programme over time will pose a challenge to India–China strategic stability. The most dangerous regional scenario, however, would involve asymmetrically improved intelligence, permitting one of the three to identify the storage locations of an adversary's weapons, coupled with expanded capacity (including earth-penetration systems).

There are a few dangers that Tellis does not discuss. The most important, in my judgement, is the possible impact of China–US relations on the regional security environment, as exemplified by the Chinese live-fire exercises near Taiwan after a visit by Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives. This scenario does not fit neatly into the 'southern Asian triangle', but perhaps Tellis can take his analysis further afield at some future date. This study is an important contribution to the discussion – and a timely reminder that frightening nuclear scenarios are still with us.