

## Review Article: Rulers of India\*

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P. N. Dhar's book is part personal autobiography, part political memoir, part critique of the functioning of India's democratic political order. Its author, a Kashmiri Brahman born in 1919 and brought up and partly educated in British missionary schools in the pre-Independence united state of Jammu and Kashmir, received higher education as a student of economics at the University of Delhi and spent a year at Harvard. He began his career with some distinction as one of the principal founders and head of the Institute of Economic Growth, which has become an internationally respected component of the University of Delhi.

Dhar ultimately found his true *métier*, however, in government service as a policy advisor to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He became a member of the Prime Minister's Secretariat (PMS) under the headship of P. N. Haksar in 1971 but soon replaced him as its head, in which capacity he served for more than 5 years, encompassing within his term the 2-year period of Emergency Rule between 1975 and 1977.

Momentous changes occurred during the time of Dhar's tenure in the PMS, in several of which he and his agency were closely involved. Of all the decisions made by Indira Gandhi during Dhar's service, certainly the most momentous and consequential were the series that preceded the 1971 war with Pakistan and the secession and independence of Bangladesh. It is evident from Dhar's account, as from all others, that this was Mrs. Gandhi's finest hour. Throughout the crisis, Mrs. Gandhi made no idle threats to Pakistan (then an American ally), bided her time, and moderated her statements. When the time came to act, she visited personally the heads of state of the principal powers of the West—including especially the United States—and the Soviet Union to make clear the seriousness of the situation and ascertain whether or not external aid and/or intervention were to be expected. She also secretly

concluded a treaty with the Soviet Union designed to prevent the United States and China from blocking India's war with and defeat of the Pakistani army.

Dhar also devotes an entire chapter to the postwar peace agreement reached at Simla between Mrs. Gandhi and Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He adds little new to our knowledge but supports what appeared in the *New York Times* immediately after the signing of the agreement, namely, that the two sides had reached a tacit understanding that the original cease-fire line, somewhat adjusted into a "line of control," was to evolve from a de facto to a de jure border as peaceful relations between the two countries developed and expanded, including trade and peaceful border crossings along the line. This, of course, never happened as Pakistan has continued to contest the legitimacy of the division of Kashmir.

With regard to the declaration of the Emergency regime, Dhar artfully displaces blame for it away from Mrs. Gandhi's own willfulness to the opposition and the people of India as a whole. The "cause" of the Emergency, in his account, was not the Allahabad High Court judgment invalidating Mrs. Gandhi's election and her determination to avoid its inevitable consequences of loss of power by establishing an authoritarian regime and changing the relevant laws and whole sections of the Constitution of India as well. The cause, rather, "was a systemic failure": the "democratic system" had been breaking down for years. The most blatant manifestations of its breakdown, Dhar argues, occurred in the immediately preceding years in the mass movements launched by Jayaprakash Narain (JP) and other opposition leaders against the Congress and Mrs. Gandhi's leadership. Dhar glides from his general "causal analysis" to a complete reversion of blame for the establishment of the Emergency regime from Mrs. Gandhi's specific and well-known decisions to JP's leadership, which led the opposition parties "to convert JP's call into a confrontationist movement which eventually ended in the Emergency" (p. 248). He ignores completely the fact that the mass movements led by JP had petered out many months before the decision of the Allahabad High Court, though that decision raised the hopes of its leaders and the fears of Mrs. Gandhi that it could once again be revived during her moment of truth.

However, Dhar does not even grant Mrs. Gandhi true agency for the actions she took at this time. Rather, he claims, she was deluded by members of her own party and the Congress's ally, the Communist Party, into believing that "attacks on [Congressmen] were really attacks on her" and that the JP movement was "fascist." Thus deluded, Mrs. Gandhi was influenced by these self-interested forces to her fateful decision. But, finally, what moved Mrs. Gandhi was not her own self-serving desire to hold onto power at any cost, including the establishment of a dictatorial regime more severe than anything previously imposed during British rule, but "the consequences of her exit on the governance of the country" (p. 259). She had to save herself in order to save the country. But Dhar is inconsistent, for, having set out to establish the case that it was the massive, extraconstitutional movement led by JP that brought about and justified the Emergency, he comments on its utter demise

after the declaration by saying it was “obvious,” therefore, “that the JP movement was not as widespread as the media had made out” (p. 264). Are we to conclude then that the Emergency was a misplaced media-produced event?

Dhar’s chapter on what he calls “the merger of Sikkim” provides one of the more informative but also quite misleading chapters in the book; it gives a detailed account of the moves, by the forces opposed to the monarch (the Chogyal), that led up to India’s annexation of the state. In Dhar’s account, Sikkim, an Indian protectorate at the time, was incorporated as a consequence of rising discontent among the people of Sikkim with the rule of the Chogyal, which they expressed through their representatives in the Sikkim legislative assembly. This created serious instability in the state, which virtually required the Government of India’s intervention given the security situation on this volatile border with Tibet/China. Ultimately, the crisis was resolved by a formal request from the leader of the Sikkim legislature that amounted to a plea for integration with India. Mrs. Gandhi’s government responded favorably to this request, Parliament passed the necessary legislation, and Sikkim was annexed as the then twenty-fifth state in the Indian Union.

The problem with Dhar’s account is his failure to acknowledge fully the close ties between the Sikkim National Congress leaders and their namesake Indian National Congress leaders, the extent to which the movement was encouraged by the latter, and the long-standing wish of many Congress leaders to incorporate Sikkim into the Indian Union. Further, he fails to note the close parallel to Mrs. Gandhi’s most important political act while her father was alive and she was president of the Indian National Congress—namely, the well-known fostering of a so-called popular movement against the duly elected Communist government in the state of Kerala in 1959, which provided the spurious justification for the imposition of President’s Rule (PR) on that state.

Mrs. Gandhi emerges from Dhar’s accounts as quite like the person we have come to know from many sources: often inscrutable, suspicious and distrustful of others to the point of paranoia; capable of strong—even harsh—and decisive action when threatened personally; contemptuous of and venomous and vindictive toward her rivals within and outside the Congress; a demagogue who believed firmly in the purity of her own aims and good intentions who denied knowledge of the abuses of power that took place during her Emergency Rule; subject to very frequent, frequently noticed, and embarrassing withdrawal into silence at inappropriate times in meetings with others, including a long list of international leaders; a lonely person apparently without stable, lifelong friendships; and, finally, somewhat pathetic in her inability to control her immature, strong-headed, and ruthless son Sanjay. Dhar served her faithfully during his entire tenure in the PMS and witnessed several of her outbursts of paranoia, a term he uses himself.

A substantial segment of opinion within India’s ruling class is sharply critical of the way the Indian political system has functioned in the past—and is functioning in the present—and also longs for a shift to a more authoritarian regime and a more disciplined society. The members of this ruling class have

displayed a range of ideological perspectives that has, however, concealed a broad consensus on many matters as well as a code of political and social behavior, many features of which are displayed clearly in Dhar's biography and in his account of the major events of the 1970s.

The class from which the post-Independence rulers of India have come is overwhelmingly upper caste and highly educated, usually with some educational experience abroad. For a half-century, they occupied the overwhelming majority of places in the central government, in most of the Indian state governments, in the higher levels of the Indian bureaucracy, and the leading positions in most major political parties from the Communist Left to the liberal Swatantra and militant Hindu nationalist parties of the Right. However, the ideology they share is of greater importance than the differences among them. It is premised upon a development orientation aimed at transforming India from a "backward" peasant society to a modern, industrial, technologically sophisticated one.

Insofar as the internal politics of the country are concerned, the ideology of the ruling class comprises two central features: secularism and a constricted view of what constitutes democracy. Secularism, in theory, has meant a country not defined by religion, in which all religions are respected equally, and in which, most importantly, Hindus and Muslims live together in amity as part of a composite culture. Since the ruling class has been entirely Hindu, secularism for this class has meant in practice little more than the acceptance of a few upper-class Muslims in prominent positions, mostly either ceremonial (such as President of India) or in the politically less powerful cabinet positions, such as the Ministry of Education. The centerpiece in the secular ideology is the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is its central symbol, its signifier, symbolizing the very essence of the Indian state ideology that rules out any concessions to Pakistan or to any movement for self-determination on the part of the Muslim population within the state.

That same state ideology perceives Pakistan itself as an obstacle to India's achievement of its rightful stature in the world not only because it stands for the hated two-nation theory, but because its very existence as a large, rival state in the region interferes with the aim of the ruling class to assert India's place as the hegemon in South Asia. That status, in effect a "Monroe Doctrine" for South Asia, implies restrictions on the rights of the smaller sovereign states in the region to establish alliances with foreign powers or to allow other powers to use their territories and seaports for military purposes. It also implies that India may from time to time find it necessary to intervene militarily in the domestic conflicts of the smaller powers or to incorporate them into the Indian Union. The latter threat, implemented in the case of Sikkim, applies particularly to the Himalayan border states, where India's leaders have justified their hegemonic aims in relation to the unsettled border disputes with China.

Democracy for this class does not mean rule by the people but the rule of law and the maintenance of order and discipline in society within the

framework of a strong state able to prevent disorder. Disorder, for Dhar, covers many aspects of politics that are common in all democracies. He considers the fact that “agitation, protest and the mobilization of public opinion on disputed issues have become more widespread than in the British period” to be a sign of India’s increasing departure “from the norms of constitutional democracy” (p. 229). In this view, what has been lacking in India is “governance,” a term Dhar uses several times (e.g., pp. 259 and 371), the meaning of which, for him and for the ruling class as a whole, is rulership and management of the country, its people, and its economy; its opposite, misgovernance, leads to disorder and the possibility of a complete collapse and an inability of the ruling elites to govern the country at all.

In the society they dominated for a half-century, the attitude of the ruling elites toward the poorest and most deprived segments of society was one of “uplift,” the provision of ameliorative economic measures of various types and incorporation of mostly—with rare exceptions—nonassertive segments from these groups into symbolic places in the political hierarchies. To the members of this class, the recent rise in assertiveness of the backward and lower castes, the uncouthness of their leaders, and their ability to mobilize large numbers in both electoral politics and extraconstitutional movements challenge the dominance of the elite castes in the political and administrative realms. Indeed, they have been displaced from power already in most of the Indian states, except where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—a party dominated by upper castes with the same ideology of uplift for the rest—is in power. Indeed, for members of the class, the BJP represents the best hope for the persistence of their prominence and privileges in contemporary Indian politics and society. It is not inconsistent, therefore, that Dhar, having served Indira Gandhi faithfully in the period under discussion, is now (as of publication of his book) a member of the current BJP prime minister’s Economic Advisory Council.

Aside from their own interests, and a strong patriotic desire to serve their country, members of this ruling class are able to work with others across political and ideological divisions because of their shared participation in a code of social comportment. The elements in this code include respect for different points of view and “honest differences” (p. 119); civility and calmness; and “the pursuit of excellence” (p. 378) and recognition of merit, rather than caste or community, as the basis for advancement in society and government. This code worked eminently well to unite the leading politicians from all parties and the upper-level bureaucrats and policy advisors across caste and community boundaries—but only among the upper castes and “good” Muslims (called “nationalist” or secular). Dhar, and probably the great majority of the upper-caste senior bureaucrats as well as the present leaders of the BJP, greatly distrust and fear the new, rising social forces, condemn them as wreckers of civil society and enemies of social order, and yearn for a constitutional reform of the present system, preferably toward a more pres-

identical form that will provide stability, the maintenance of law and order, and preservation of their own privileges within the prevailing political and bureaucratic hierarchies.

**Note**

\* Review of P. N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, the "Emergency," and Indian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xii+424.