

## University of Massachusetts Boston ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

---

History Faculty Publication Series

History

---

3-19-2010

# Uncharted Territory

Ananya Vajpeyi

*University of Massachusetts Boston*, [ananya.vajpeyi@gmail.com](mailto:ananya.vajpeyi@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/history\\_faculty\\_pubs](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/history_faculty_pubs)

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

---

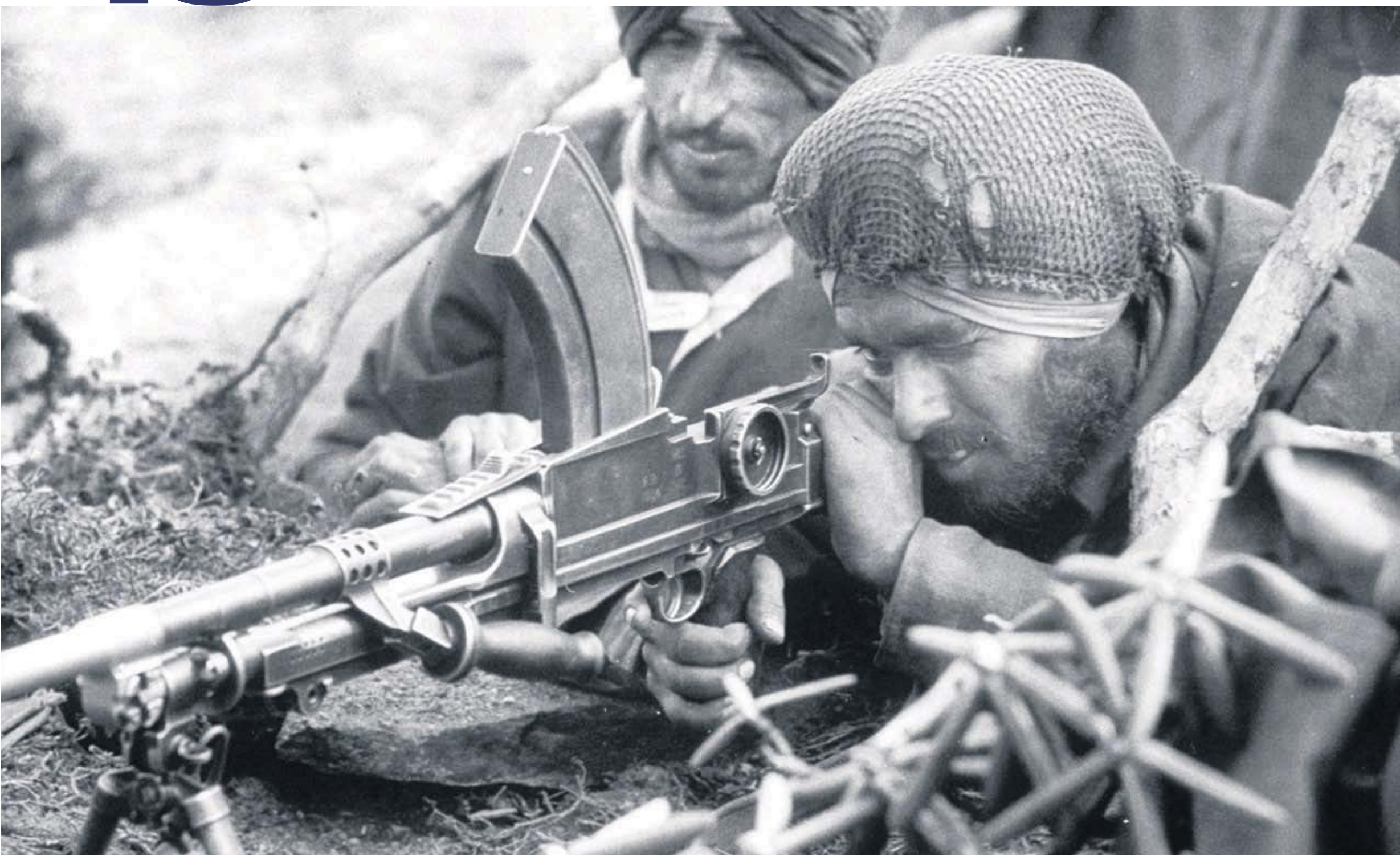
### Recommended Citation

Vajpeyi, Ananya, "Uncharted Territory" (2010). *History Faculty Publication Series*. Paper 7.  
[http://scholarworks.umb.edu/history\\_faculty\\_pubs/7](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/history_faculty_pubs/7)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [library.uasc@umb.edu](mailto:library.uasc@umb.edu).



The date in August 1947 when modern India was granted independence from British rule



Raghavan throws new light on the policies and values of Jawaharlal Nehru between 1947, when he took office in the midst of Partition, and 1964, when he died in shame after defeat in the Sino-Indian conflict (above). Larry Burrows / Getty Images

# Uncharted territory

Srinath Raghavan excavates an unexplored region of India's past in a new history of the nation's first decades, writes Ananya Vajpeyi

In 1964, my father Kailash Vajpeyi, a Hindi poet, then just about 30 years old, published his first collection of poems, *Sankrant (Crisis)*. He belonged to a rising generation of angry and highly politicised poets; one of his poems, a scathing commentary on the last days of Jawaharlal Nehru's administration, was banned from broadcast on All India Radio; another was the subject of a heated debate in the Indian parliament. When Nehru, the ageing prime minister, met the rebellious poet at a literary gathering, he bemusedly asked: "Why so upset, young man?"

In poem after poem, India's capital New Delhi became a symbol of political decay, rampant corruption and institutional failure. *A New National Anthem*, a caustic "celebration" of 20 years of Indian democracy published in 1967, memorably painted an unflattering picture of India's circular Parliament House:

*Each morning  
There rises in my sky  
A great big shoe.*

*It clambers down  
From the roof of the Round Building  
And starts walking  
And keeps on walking  
Into public life...*

*Until by evening  
It arrives in the courthouse  
And vanishes at last  
Into a newly printed  
Rupee note.*

This language could not be more different from the country's actual national anthem, a short lyric by the Nobel Prize winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, evocative of a beautiful, beloved and noble country, which by the late 1960s already seemed a bitter, broken promise.

But as independent India enters its seventh decade, there seems to be both a popular and a scholarly effort to reassess the career, character and rule of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, a shining star of India's anti-colonial movement, a leader of the Congress Party, free India's first prime minister, Mahatma Gandhi's dearest protégé, and one of the 20th century's most significant global statesmen. The blistering criticism and raging disappointment of my father's generation is slowly being replaced by a

renewed desire to understand and appreciate the founding father inextricably linked to the birth and life of independent India.

In three successive administrations spanning 17 years, elected to power with overwhelming majorities, Nehru and his Congress Party put in place not only the "steel frame" of the Indian Constitution, but also the entire structure of the fledgling Indian state: its legislature, executive, economy, foreign policy and ideological framework. While Nehru's economic and political commitment to socialism and to state-led economic policy have been jettisoned since 1990, in most respects, India still retains the imprint of his vision, partly because it has not had another ruler of his intellectual or moral stature in the 45 years since his death. For better or for worse, "the idea of India", as Sunil Khilnani pointed out in an important book by the same title in 1997, is still pretty much Nehru's idea of India.

Despite his monumental achievements as the founder and leader of the Indian republic, South Asian history has not given Nehru his due. This may be partly because the field of Indian history has been dominated in the past four decades by theoretical approaches like Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, postmodernism, subaltern studies and globalisation theory. Moreover, historians of the subcontinent have stuck to the pre-modern and colonial eras, ending at India's independ-

ence from British rule, Partition, and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 – as if stopping a movie at its climax without watching its denouement, leaving the audience to wonder what comes after.

In 2007, at the 60th anniversary of India's independence, Ramachandra Guha finally broke that taboo with his masterful *India after Gandhi*, the first complete history of postcolonial India. Srinath Raghavan's first book, *War and Peace in Modern India*, follows Guha in terms of both method and period, excavating the archival record to explore five significant domestic and international conflicts that beset India under Nehru.

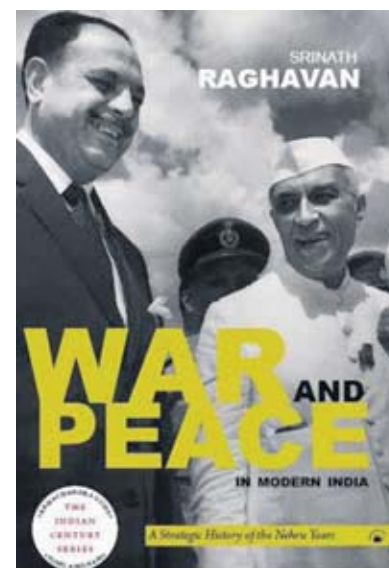
An Indian army officer turned war historian, Raghavan looks at the theatres of Junagadh, Hyderabad, Kashmir, Bengal (East Pakistan) and China to throw fresh light on the personality and policy of Nehru between 1947, when he took office in the midst of the carnage of Partition, and 1964, when he died in shame after a humiliating defeat in the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. Unlike the voluminous biographical literature on Nehru that already exists, Raghavan's skilful use of the historical material on war and diplomacy demonstrates that it is possible to assess Nehru's political judgement and leadership style while completely avoiding his personal life: the friendships and love affairs, the passions and proclivities for which he was so famous and infamous. His deeds, it turns out, speak loudly for a core set of political ideas that he articulated and embodied throughout the nationalist movement under Gandhi, as well as for the first 17 years of the Indian republic, when he served as both prime minister and foreign minister.

Nehru's values, in Raghavan's narrative, were clear-cut: protection of minorities, hatred of communal sentiment, rejection of the "two-nation theory" that led to the creation of Pakistan, avoidance of war, "non-alignment" or strategic independence in the midst of the Cold War, commitment to self-determination and democratic rule, concern for India's reputation and standing in the international community, and cautious rather than precipitate decision-making. Through a welter of data, we see Nehru consistently following

these fundamental tenets and projecting them on behalf of his nation. Raghavan describes Nehru's security doctrine as liberal, realist and inclined towards a combination of consensus and coercion rather than control. In dealing with Pakistan, Nehru's pole star was his resolve that India be secular and diverse (an ideological preference); in dealing with China, he had to preserve the Himalaya as India's final frontier (a historically driven view); in dealing with former kingdoms like Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad, he stayed firm on the principle of India's territorial continuity and contiguity (a strategic necessity). In war as in peace, he never veered much from this defining framework.

As Nehru managed the unimaginably complicated transition from British colonial rule to Indian democracy, the integration of almost 500 erstwhile "princely states" scattered all across South Asia into the new Indian Union, an unremittingly hostile relationship with India's fraternal twin, Pakistan, a difficult rivalry with India's gigantic northern neighbour China, and continuous internal resistance from both the Hindu Right and the Indian communists, he had no mean portfolio in the foreign office. While his faults, flaws, miscalculations, defeats and mistakes were numerous, on balance, his achievement was considerable and his influence abiding. Raghavan hews close to the archive, and yet crafts a picture of Nehru that leaves the reader in no doubt as to the basic integrity, intelligence and statesmanship of history's protagonist. We also get a tantalising glimpse into the personalities, dynamics and thinking of Nehru's chief advisers, strategists, generals, ministers and diplomats, especially the talented men and women who surrounded him during his first and most challenging term in office, which ended in 1952.

While Raghavan does well to view Nehru through the lens of war and peace, he does not by any means write a perfect history. Lurking in the details are several unexploded historical bombs: Nehru's bizarrely unhinged relationship with the leader of Indian Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah; the catastrophic invasion of Tibet by China and the permanent



**War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years**  
Srinath Raghavan  
Permanent Black  
Dh60

exile of the Tibetan people in India ever since the 1950s; the immediate and long-term repercussions of the huge massacres of Muslims in Jammu and Hyderabad during and soon after Partition that are completely bypassed in Indian popular memory.

The historian's silence on all these points is rather loud, more so because he demonstrates elsewhere an impressive capacity to unearth, examine and judge the most complex, inconvenient and irreconcilable facts. And he doesn't just exclude these time-bombs, as it were; he also bypasses huge milestones on the highway of history, including Gandhi's assassination in 1948, the debates over the constitution in India's Constituent Assembly between 1946 and 1949, and Nehru's participation in the Bandung conference in 1955, which laid the foundation for the Non-Aligned Movement.

Admittedly Raghavan, like other historians, is still hampered by the Indian government's continuing reluctance to declassify documents long after they were supposed to be made public; worse yet is the attitude of the inheritors of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, including the Congress

Party president Sonia Gandhi and her children Rahul and Priyanka, who refuse to allow the public access to what they claim are personal rather than state records. Raghavan compensates by resourcefully tracking down private papers, as well as documents available from Britain, Pakistan, China and the US. The rewards for his assiduousness and tenacity are spectacular: *War and Peace* is not just thoroughly researched but also admirably balanced; not just careful but also riveting. Raghavan is a gifted and promising historian, and his first book suggests that he will continue to produce extensive and ambitious works that address the way India has fulfilled – or failed to fulfil – what Nehru memorably called its "tryst with destiny".

There is a great deal in the history of post-colonial India that remains unexplored, and perhaps Raghavan, or others, might next turn their attention to how the early years of Indian independence gave way to the contemporary state's authoritarian tendencies at home and militaristic regional ambitions. With founders like Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore – all of them liberals, pacifists and agonistic nationalists, genuine believers in non-violence, passionate advocates of ethical sovereignty and committed practitioners of secularism – how did India end up with so much blood on its hands? While it has matured as a democracy, India also seems increasingly comfortable with waging war on both its own citizens as well as its near and distant neighbours.

The shoe in my father's poem, written almost half a century ago, signified the brutality of unchecked state power, trampling all over the rights of the people. If Indians are not vigilant about their hard-won freedom, that very same shoe may rise yet again in India's political skies like a baleful sun. And unlike Nehru, today's leaders may not have the self-awareness, the moral muscle or the critical capacity to ask, of today's dissenters, "Why so upset, young man?"

*Ananya Vajpeyi teaches South Asian History at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her book Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India, is forthcoming from Harvard University Press.*