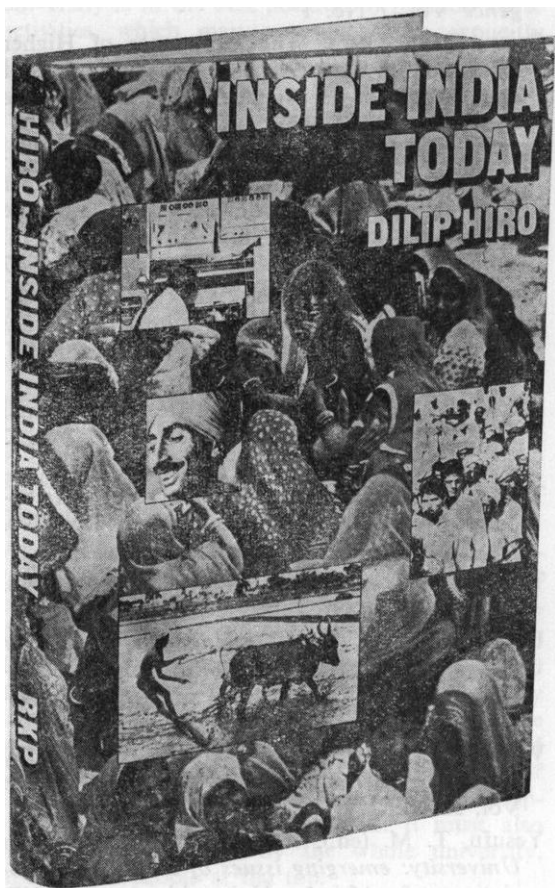


Book Reviews



Inside India Today, Dilip Hiro, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976, £6.95.

James A. Craig

One of the most fascinating aspects of contemporary debate on India is to be told by apologists of Mrs Ghandi's recent assault on the fragile democratic processes of that complex polity, that one does not understand the real situation. It is quite true that Indian politics is labyrinthine, partly because of the sheer size of the country, but also because of the complex social structures that are to be found across its vast expanse. But, before one retreats suitably humbled by lack of understanding, one perhaps ought to pause and read Dilip Hiro's formative study of the functioning of "the most complex political entity in the world". No one who has travelled in India can

fail to find in this book a keen sense of the main forces within Indian society and the cleavages which the post-independence policies of the Indian National Congress, despite declared intentions, have failed to tackle. The declaration of a 'state of emergency' on 26 June 1975 testified, as no other event in recent Indian history could, to the failure of Congress to match deeds with words. It is to the credit of Dilip Hiro that despite the fact that the book was largely written before the emergency, the analysis is almost prophetic in perceiving the trends towards increasing authoritarianism.

The first part of Hiro's book deals with life in India and examines with great feeling the hopelessness and despair of India's rural poor. The effect of policy in the rural areas has been to assist the rich peasant increase food production, thus leaving the problem of the landless untackled. Land ceiling legislation has been drafted so as to provide gaps through which Congress supporters (the richer peasants) could walk rather than crawl. The rich peasants have the political muscle, assisted by local bureaucrats, the courts and the police, to render much of the land ceiling legislation ineffectual. Hiro documents the deprivation resulting from sharecropping systems in agriculture where one half to two thirds of the crop goes to pay the landlord. The fact is that Congress depends on the support and money of the richer peasants, and landlords ensure that powerful rural interests govern what can be done at village level.

Hiro's chapters on urban India, corruption, the bureaucracy and the police, are written with clarity and yet tinged with anger and disappointment. He quotes a Calcutta journalist (Page 23):

Clubs and parties, golf and horse races have been the staple of their existence. For them, it has been a separate, esoteric world: they would slink to office, nursing yesternight's hangover, at around ten-thirty; by eleven, coffee will be served by dainty secretaries; one or two perfunctory meetings concerning office chores, or one or two letters for dictation; come twelve-thirty, the chauffeur-driven cars will be summoned, and the sahibs will migrate to the clubs, aperitifs will be followed by yet other aperitifs, indolent gossip about other people's jobs and wives, a langorous luncheon, a slovenly, contented reappearance in office

around three or three-fifteen; but by four-thirty, the sahibs will call it a day, some will head toward a few hurried rounds of golf, others to the luxurious bungalows or apartments for a brief rest and recreation before the gruelling round of boisterous cocktails and parties commences in the evening.

It is this contrast that is urban India today.

Hiro has a number of chapters on the Communist Movement, which he sees as part of the "leftist advance ahead". Perhaps there is a slight degree of wishful thinking in the discussion on the Communist Movement and its three parts. He admits that the CPI (roughly speaking pro-Moscow) has failed to make administration less bureaucratic and corrupt. Like Moscow-leaning parties elsewhere (and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union itself) the CPI is afraid of mass action and appears to be forced into the position of giving Mrs Gandhi critical support. The two other parts of the movement discussed are the CPI (Marxist) and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist)—the latter known as Naxalites after an area of India where the party was active. Land invasions, murder of landlords, and thugs with private scores to settle, gave Mrs Gandhi a much-needed excuse to infiltrate and destroy much of the support enjoyed by both the CPI(M) and CPI(M-L). Congress preached against violence (although Congress thugs were active against both parties) and used the opportunity to link both parties particularly in West Bengal where the CPI(M) had built up a mass base and entered the state government in 1969, as part of the coalition United Front Government. Naxalite activity, however, discredited the party despite attempts by the CPI(M) Minister of Land Revenue to enforce land ceiling legislation. Congress, in alliance with the CPI, was able to win the 1971 state election and so deprive the CPI(M) of office.

The activities of the CPI(M) and the CPI(M-L) were often politically naive and whilst it is true that areas such as West Bengal abound with social and economic discontent, this does not mean that the future lies with the Communist Movement.

Mrs Gandhi has just announced elections for the Federal Parliament in March, 1977, but no elections to the state assemblies. Congress will probably win comfortably, although in the state assemblies it is often weaker than at the centre.¹

Some of the better-known figures of the 'right' such as Desai have been released from prison,

but others have not. However, Mrs Gandhi has her 'new' constitution, and the ease with which she proclaimed a state of emergency means that it is a weapon she could use again. Recently Mr Michael Foot has hastened to the aid of the much criticised Indian Prime Minister and stated that she did not want to be a dictator. Giving the lady all the benefit of the doubt, she still wants to be Prime Minister and is willing to bend the rules in order to keep the post. However, Mr Foot must surely recognise that bending the rules to preserve personal power is certainly part of the repertoire of dictatorship.

Despite censorship, news from India is not without its satirical side. A report dated January 5 1977 from Inder Malhotra which appeared in the *Guardian* described the Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela at Allahabad.

"The Government is also using the opportunity to educate the assembled people politically. On closed circuit TV and improvised cinema houses films are being shown to explain the programmes of Mrs Gandhi and her son Sanjay."

I love that touch of humour—India is still alive and managing to kick!

¹ Since this article was written the election results have shown an overwhelming defeat for Mrs. Gandhi and her congress party.