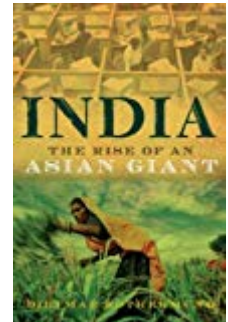


Dietmar Rothermund. *India: The Rise of an Asian Giant*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Illustrations. 288 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-11309-9.



Reviewed by Umair A. Muhajir

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Some days it feels like everyone has written or is writing a comprehensive book on India aimed at the general reading public. Ranging from ambitious attempts to condense the country's recent (and not-so-recent) history into one volume (such as Maria Misra's *Vishnu's Crowded Temple: India after the Great Rebellion* [2008] or Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi* [2007]) to books that can only be called "introductions to India" (such as Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* [1999] or Edward Luce's *In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India* [2006]), India's economic trajectory after 1991, and its increased global profile, have clearly been a boon for at least one subsection of the publishing industry. Dietmar Rothermund's book falls in the "introduction to India" category, and as such is shadowed by the same questions as other books of its kind: For whom is it intended? Who exactly is to be "introduced" to India? (The questions do not always have a pat answer in the form of the foreigner or the urbane English-only Indian reader, as the recent publication of a Hindi-language edition of

Khilnani's book makes clear.) Rothermund does not address these questions beyond a prefatory note characterizing himself as "a witness who has watched India for nearly half a century," and whose "aim in tracing the rise of India as an Asian giant is that of understanding the present in terms of its historical background and its future potential" (p. ix). Rothermund is well aware that "by calling India an Asian giant" he is "juxtaposing it to China," and "wish[es] to contribute to a more balanced appreciation of the two" (p. ix). Far from settling the question, however, Rothermund's preface and prologue place the question of the book's purpose into stark focus. The book's density of detail and its reliance on facts, figures, and statistics suggest that the author had more specialized audiences in mind than those needing to be apprised of the adventures of the Indian "Gulliver" who has finally been "released from the web of threads with which he had been pinned down" (p. xi). In a nutshell: if you do not know what it means for foreign institutional investment to enjoy "full convertibility on capital

account whereas Indian funds are restricted to convertibility on current account for purposes of trade,” do not look for any explanations here (p. 83).

Indeed, the technical data regularly threatens to overwhelm the ambition of a unified narrative; even as Rothermund’s determination to avoid the sort of breathlessness that has so marred much contemporary writing on India means that the book’s subtitle can be more than a little incongruous. Certainly, Rothermund’s authoritative sobriety, especially on economic matters, is the book’s biggest strength, reflexively qualifying and providing contexts for a particular industry’s progress (or lack thereof), and, more generally, laying out the challenges confronting India’s future economic growth. But no less obvious is the book’s disjointed feel, consisting of chapters on particular aspects of contemporary India that do not seem to be held together by any obvious thread. The relative weight accorded the various sections compounds the problem: thus, chapters called “Caste in a Changing Society” and “Agriculture: Crisis or Promise” occupy less space than one called “Diamonds, Garments and Software.” Even conceding that the latter three industries account for over half of Indian exports (p. 96), according the chapter devoted to them more space than each of the portions dealing with two of the most important pillars of India’s political economy is more than a little distorting.[1] The prism would not be illegitimate in a book dedicated solely to India’s emerging markets and burgeoning commercial opportunities, but is disorienting in a book purporting to engage with the full range of India’s “future potential” (p. ix).

The impression that this book has been hastily put together is not alleviated by Rothermund’s discussions of Indian politics, ranging from the maddening superficiality (such as the passing references to that “rather maverick regional party,” the Shiv Sena) to the occasional stereotyping (Muslims, we are told, are “of course ... not a meek

community,” and Marwari traders “swarmed” all over the country under British rule), and to the dry cataloguing of facts (pp. 20-21, 12, 143). The book’s account of the recent politics of the large southern state of Tamil Nadu is typical: M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), Tamil Nadu’s chief minister (1977-87) “patronized a young favorite, Jayalalitha Jayaram, who then emerged triumphant from the rather fierce struggle for the succession after MGR died in 1987. She defeated Karunanidhi in 1991 after his comeback in 1989. [Former Indian Prime Minister] Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991 when he was conducting an election campaign in Tamil Nadu and it soon appeared that the ... [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fighting for the independence of Sri Lanka’s Tamil-majority areas] had murdered him. Karunanidhi was supposed to be close to the LTTE and Jayalalitha was able to profit from the wave of sympathy ... which swept the country. As Chief Minister ... from 1991 to 1996 she followed [her party’s] tradition of siding with the Congress in national affairs. In 1996 she was defeated by Karunanidhi” (p. 19).

The chapter in question (“The Emergence of National Coalitions”) includes analogous recitations of changes in government in various other Indian states, from Andhra Pradesh and Kerala in the South to Assam in the Northeast. But the accounts are not woven into the wider tapestry promised by the chapter’s title. The reader is left with the knowledge that the Indian National Congress’s single-party rule after independence was replaced over time by a system where no single “national” party could accommodate the “regionalist” or other aspirations of several Indian social groups—but is none the wiser as to why this happened, or what explains the contours of the new dispensation. For instance, why did opposition to the Congress take such different forms as Communism in Kerala and West Bengal; “Dravidian” cultural/subnational movements in Tamil Nadu; and, ultimately, caste-based and Hindu-nationalist parties in the Hindi-speaking states of Northern In-

dia? In each instance, Rothermund provides little more than chronology.

The flip side is that no other “introduction” to India covers more ground than Rothermund’s book, and with a keener appreciation of the country’s fitful progress, and its failures, since 1947. Everything from India’s water management issues (and its neglect of traditional local knowledge on the issue in favor of colonial-style irrigation projects with high ecological costs; its agricultural problems (including the changes obscured by a myopic focus on growth rates: Rothermund is sensitive to the fact that agricultural growth in the 1980s “had been fostered by increases in productivity,” whereas in the 1990s it was increasingly attributable to the “support” prices the government guaranteed farmers [p. 125]); the social base of the farmers who most benefited from the country’s “Green Revolution” (pp. 123-125); the media (pp. 218-231); the paradox of India’s “middle” classes (who are, statistically speaking, more its “upper” third than its “middle” quintile); and to petrochemicals are addressed in this slim volume. Along the way, Rothermund debunks some popular myths too, showing, for instance, how the rail network built by the British—and the associated freight rates—were designed to benefit foreign, as opposed to internal, trade—bringing progress to India was not the goal (p. 152). And the book’s dryness is occasionally leavened by pointed humor: for instance, we are told that the Telugu actor N. T. Rama Rao once played the role of an “honest” forest officer, “almost a contradiction in terms”; or that “when speaking of the middle class as a consuming class, it is usually forgotten that one of the major items of its consumption is the labour of the poor” (pp. 227, 201).

The chapter on India’s nuclear program is an example of how useful Rothermund’s book can be: in a mere fourteen pages, he outlines the history of the atomic program, India’s “argument [about power] rather than an operational weapon,” and helps to make sense of the civilian

establishment’s reluctance to trust the country’s military with a fully formed weapon (p. 58). Along the way, Rothermund manages to provide brief sketches on the key personalities (the passages on physicist Homi Bhabha’s travails developing a nuclear program for Jawaharlal Nehru’s government are especially vivid), outline the technical limitations and achievements of the Indian missile programs, and accurately convey the fitful nature of the Indian establishment’s engagement with the very idea of nuclear weapons. The nuclear program was at once the holy grail for a once-colonized country, yet an ambivalent prize for a civilian establishment deeply suspicious of giving the military too much power, and cognizant of the incompatibility of nuclear weapons with the ideals espoused by many in the anticolonial struggle. That establishment’s attitude is perhaps best encapsulated by the fact that the program is structured such that even if India wished to respond to a nuclear attack “a retaliatory second strike would take some time ... because the warheads would first have to be transferred from civilian control to the military guardians of the weapon’s delivery systems” (p. 58). One is hard-pressed to think of another country so determined to retain civilian control over its nuclear weapons; the determination is all the more impressive given India’s geostrategic context. (Rothermund does not look at events outside India, but this is one of the areas where the book might have benefited from such comparative analysis: the extent to which the experience of military rule in neighboring Pakistan, Burma, and [in time] Bangladesh; and the extent to which the nuclear quest of countries like Iraq influenced the Indian establishment’s thinking, and contributed to its desire to avoid accruing too much power in the country’s own military arms, bears further study.)

Not every chapter is as concisely insightful as the one on the nuclear program or on the country’s water issues, and the book’s wide range means that the lacunae are all the more striking (and inexcusable). The book contains no more

than a couple of stray references to Muslim Indians (let alone to other religious minorities, B. R. Ambedkar's protest-Buddhism for the "untouchables" aside)--remarkable given the centrality of Muslims to Indian politics, both by exclusion. It largely omits discussion of the Hindu-nationalist Right--and by ideological inclusion--the secular Left, as well as smaller Northern Indian caste-based parties, the success of each of which depends on particular caste-groups voting in tandem with Muslim voters. One reference early on in the book has already been noted; the second is on the second-to-last page, and, after stressing the numerical and geopolitical significance of the country's Muslim minority, contrasts "the Hindu attitude of inclusive tolerance, stressing the equal value of all religions" with the fact that such relativism "is an insult to an orthodox Muslim who believes Islam is the only religion," before moving on to ways in which India's police/security forces might better combat communal violence (p. 244). No serious student of comparative religion could deny the differing perspectives of the monotheistic orthodoxies with the various Hindu traditions--but in the absence of any such serious discussion in the book, Rothermund would have done better to refrain from bandying about cartoonish caricatures of the two most important South Asian belief systems. Likewise, the book has nothing to say about the country's various "Naxalite" insurgencies: the indifference to these rebel movements--more or less loosely identified with Maoism, but more concretely animated by the landlessness, poverty, and dispossession of far too many aboriginal and other marginal communities--is simply baffling.

In sum, its combination of great specificity and striking omissions limits the extent to which *India: The Rise of an Asian Giant*, can serve as a general introduction to India. But for those with a significant interest in policy debates, especially those directly bearing on India's economic growth and human development, Rothermund's book nevertheless ought to be read: its somewhat for-

bidding writing style contains a wealth of useful information and sober analysis.

Note

[1]. This limited examination is also surprising, given Rothermund's status as one of the pre-eminent German scholars of India--see, e.g., http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/saireport/2001/SAI_Report_2001.pdf--and given his prior extensive work on the agrarian sector in India. See, e.g., Dietmar Rothermund, *Government, Landlord and Peasant in India: Agrarian Relations under British Rule, 1865-1935* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978); and Dietmar Rothermund, *India in the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).

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