

MODERN INDIA, 1885–1947



Gul Hayat Institute

MODERN INDIA

1885–1947



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To Tanika



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FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to welcome Professor Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India, 1885–1947* to the Cambridge Commonwealth Series. It has hitherto only been available in India itself. It is hoped that its additional publication in the present form will make it more readily available to students of modern Indian history elsewhere.

It is now a quarter of a century or so since the late Dr Percival Spear published three versions of his history of (mostly modern) India, which over the intervening years have been so widely used in one or other form as the starting point and chief reference work for students of Indian history in universities and colleges all across the world. That quarter of a century has seen a large burgeoning of modern Indian historical studies both in India and elsewhere, and in a number of ways that has significantly filled out and changed the picture as Spear portrayed it. It has thus been clear for some time that a novel drawing together of the new information and insights which have long been available to more advanced students in a wide range of new journals, and an even larger range of new monographs, was overdue. But it has long been quite evident too that it would take a courageous spirit to do this. Not only is there a mass of new material to be digested and cogently presented. As in any fast developing scholarly field there were controversial viewpoints to be accommodated and fairly summarised as well. It was proper to expect, moreover, that all this would be most satisfactorily accomplished by an Indian scholar of distinction.

It is these manifold challenges that Professor Sarkar has here quite splendidly met. He belongs to the younger generation of modern Indian historians who (to the particular pleasure of those of us outside India who seek to make some study of modern India ourselves) have moved into the centre of the field and properly assumed principal responsibility for its exposition. He belongs more especially to the group that for part of their work has been closely associated with Mr Ranajit Guha in

exploring, so much more systematically and penetratingly than before, 'subaltern', that is non-elite, themes in modern Indian history. In recent years this has been far the most fruitful enterprise in modern Indian historical scholarship – despite the caveats that might be offered about it – and the results are fully represented in this volume.

But it is by no means confined to these as, like any accomplished scholar who goes about such an enterprise in an effort to produce a rounded account will be careful to do, Professor Sarkar has set out to provide as comprehensive an account as he can of the period as a whole in all its complexities.

To my way of thinking, he has quite triumphantly accomplished this task, from which many others will understandably have flinched. There is as much packed into this volume as one could have hoped for. It is all carefully, cogently and helpfully presented. The book contains a clear point of view, and particularly on the nationalist agitations a good deal of new material which is not easily available elsewhere. But there has been much less concern to argue a particular thesis than to make a sufficient abundance of material succinctly available for students of all kinds to develop an understanding of their own and form their own judgements from that. In this and other respects it has no equal. While on one or two issues others might perhaps have presented rather different thoughts, for example on the *raison d'être* of the Pakistan movement, or the realistic possibility of a social revolution in India in the mid 1940s, in the overwhelming number of cases it may be confidently stated that the propositions which Professor Sarkar advances would be readily endorsed by very many other scholars in the field. If it is chiefly composed of political history, that appropriately reflects the primacy of the major political developments – of worldwide importance – that occurred in India during the period covered. It also reflects, however, the relative paucity of work for these years on, in particular, the economic history of India on which some of the most important new studies are currently being conducted. As more of this comes to fruition so perhaps amplifications in Professor Sarkar's volume will be called for.

As it stands, however, it may be warmly commended as the single most helpful volume now available on the modern history of India, not least for students in schools, colleges and

universities, while for scholars it will provide a touchstone for their detailed studies for some years to come. For several years it has been extensively used for both such purposes in India. It is high time that it was similarly employed elsewhere.

D. A. Low
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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Modern India: 1885-1947 was planned some years back as part of a collective attempt to write the history of India in six volumes. Its publication now as an independent work requires a brief justification of its starting point. While 1885 was chosen mainly for convenience it can be argued that what is recognizably 'modern' India began not with the Mughal break-up or with Plassey, but during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was during these decades that colonial political and economic domination attained its finished apparently stable form, while its counterpoints had also started developing alike at the level of autonomous popular movements and of 'middle class' or intelligentsia-based all-India nationalism. The period with which I deal relates to the subsequent unfolding of these contradictions down to the achievement of independence.

The present work has a twofold aim. It attempts a synthesis of the massive data unearthed in recent years by the flood of monographs on specific problems in political, social and economic history. At the same time it explores, in the light of my own research interests, the possibilities of a 'history from below' as distinct from the usual tendency in the historiography of Indian nationalism to concentrate on the activities, ideals, or factional manoeuvres of leaders.

This book would have been inconceivable without the massive research output in modern Indian history during recent years. The format did not permit the usual acknowledgements through footnotes except in the case of direct quotations, but I have tried to honour my debts by lists of Further Readings which appear at the end of the book, arranged chapterwise.

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the students of my modern Indian history classes, on whom I have been testing many of the ideas, set out here, for years. Their questions and criticisms have been indispensable in sorting out my formulations.

I am grateful to Barun De, Asok Sen, Amiya Bagchi and Gyan Pandey, for going through the manuscript in whole or in

part and offering extremely helpful comments and criticism. I remember with particular gratitude and pleasure a`nightlong discussion with Ranajit Guha in Brighton in 1977 which modified many of my ideas at a time when I had just started collecting material for this book. The *Subaltern Studies* series which he is editing unfortunately reached me only after my manuscript went to press.

My father followed! the writing of this book with unfailing interest, and it must always remain a matter of deep sorrow to me that I could not show him the finished work. Tanika as always was the source of undiminished criticism and sustenance. Aditya provided a delightful distraction.

I would like to thank my publishers for prodding a lazy author into completing his manuscript and for indispensable typing and editorial assistance.

The responsibility for errors remains mine alone.

University of Delhi
October 1982

SUMIT SARKAR

A circular logo for Gul Hayat Institute. It features a central emblem with Arabic calligraphy, surrounded by five stylized pen nibs pointing outwards. The entire logo is set against a light yellow circular background.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The format of this new edition of *Modern India*, a book which I had finished writing in 1980, has not permitted any substantial revisions in the text. Yet every year the 'massive research output on modern Indian history' I had referred to in my Preface becomes ever more massive, and major methodological shifts have taken place, embodied most notably in the *Subaltern Studies* project edited by Ranajit Guha. All that the method of offset printing has allowed is something like an 'auto-critical' Introduction, briefly outlining the ways in which I feel the book could have been modified and improved.

Modern India had been conceived as a textbook synthesizing recent research, as well as a tentative exploration of a 'history from below', counterposed to the dominant historiographical focus on the activities, ideals, or factional manoeuvres of leading groups. Many sections would have read very differently today if thorough revision had been possible. I would have liked to incorporate some of the findings of Shahid Amin, Neeladri Bhattacharji, Neil Charlesworth, Sumit Guha, and C. J. Baker in the section on the colonial economy (as well as the debates sparked off by the *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Volume II). Chris Bayly, J. T. F. Jordens, Barbara Metcalf and Rosalind O'Hanlon would have enriched my account of nineteenth-century society and culture. New regional studies include Rajat Ray, Partha Chatterji, and Tanika Sarkar on Bengal, Arvind Das and Stephen Henningham on Bihar, Kapil Kumar on U. P. peasants, Stephen Dale and David Arnold on the South, and the ongoing work of Gyan Pandey on the Bhojpur region and David Hardiman on Gujarat tribals. The research of Hari Sen and Biswamoy Pati will soon indicate how incomplete my surveys of Rajasthan and Orissa had been. David Page, Gail Minault, Mushirul Hasan, Stanley Wolpert, and Ayesha Jalal have contributed new data about so-called Muslim politics. Labour history has been advanced through the research of Richard Newman, Raj Chandavarkar, Dipesh

Chakrabarti, and Chitra Joshi. One could go on adding names, books, articles and work-in-progress.¹

At a more general level, *Modern India* had been structured around a dual polemic: directed simultaneously against the 'Cambridge School' and Indian nationalist historiography. I have found no reason so far to modify my views substantially on either issue, but there would have been some shifts in nuances and emphasis. Refutation of 'Cambridge' viewpoints may have occupied a somewhat less central position in a revised book, for much of that controversy now belongs to the past. Elite-nationalist interpretations, however, have become more prominent. Threatened by disruption, the Indian state has taken to the appropriation of history via the public media on a massive scale. *Challenge of Education*, the official draft for a 'new education policy', for instance, mentions history only in the context of fostering national integration and instilling pride in the national heritage. Simplistic propaganda on such lines, however, may well prove seriously counter-productive, and is bound to hinder genuinely critical historical scholarship. A 'Left-nationalist' variant is also very much with us, in the writings of Bipan Chandra and some of his colleagues on nationalism, communalism, and Left movements. I would have probably stated my disagreements here more sharply.

I had sought the counterpoint to both 'imperialist' and 'nationalist' historiography in a focus on popular movements. The central argument of *Modern India* – spelled out more explicitly in my *Deuskar Lectures*² – was that some kind of 'autonomy' of popular movements existed and that it often influenced the courses of history much more decisively than had been appreciated so far. That, of course, was also the starting-point of the *Subaltern Studies* project, which I was privileged to join two years after my manuscript had been completed. Subsequent research, both within and outside the *Subaltern Studies* group, has repeatedly confirmed this basic understanding.

But – and this requires some emphasis – many of us feel today that autonomy can only be a starting-point, and that we have to go beyond the endless and increasingly sterile autonomy/leadership debates focused ultimately on the validity or otherwise of policies and decisions of the Gandhian Con-

gress: what may be described as Gandhi the great leader/great betrayer syndrome. Study of the autonomy of popular movements must broaden itself out into more wide-ranging efforts to explore popular perceptions, mentalities, cultures, a formidably difficult, but essential task. That in its turn requires a vast extension of the concept of historical 'sources'; necessary (though often difficult) dialogues with related disciplines like social anthropology, linguistics, and recent trends in literary analysis; and – above all – a relentless self-questioning of all received categories and frameworks, rare so far in Indian history-writing.

In the absence of such a critique, broadly similar problems have had a tendency to recur in virtually all existing historiographical traditions, 'Cambridge', nationalist, and Marxist alike. The tendency to look at things only from the top – in terms of great leaders or ideologies, efficient manipulations, patrons mobilizing clients, Marxist parties and programmes – is only the most obvious of such limitations. Economic reductionism extends far beyond orthodox-Marxist confines, and has often gone hand in hand with faction analysis. Explicit or implicit teleologies evaluate past events only in terms of their 'contribution' to some broader chain leading up to the present. Popular movements must be 'national' or 'anti-imperialist' if they are to be respectable, and debates go on endlessly about the 'correctness' or otherwise of particular Congress (or Communist) decisions. Most invidious of all is the 'essentialist' trap, objectifying ever-changing relations and processes into finished 'things'. The 'nation' is always with us (or at least is perpetually 'in the making'), and a unified sub-continent is always something unquestionably positive (hence the focus on periods of 'imperial unity' – one never remembers that Europe was unified by Napoleon and Hitler). In an alternative – though often not unconnected – framework, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs are taken as given stable entities, and present-day tensions are relentlessly read back into the past. Patron–client linkages span centuries and continents with ease: eighteenth-century England, Tandon and Malaviya in Allahabad, East Bengal zamindars and peasants. 'Class' and 'class consciousness' also become givens, to be read directly from material relationships or rejected as 'false consciousness'.

I was not unaware of most of these problems when I wrote *Modern India*, and even spoke of some of them in general terms, and yet I discover with a sense of dismay how often I had fallen into such traps, in analysis of specific processes and even more in terminology. The greatest lacuna I now find in my book is in discussions of consciousness and culture. The sections on tribal and peasant movements, which I had tried (implicitly here, and more directly in my Deuskar Lectures) to organize around forms of struggle and social composition, and not patterns of consciousness, would have benefited enormously if Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* had been there in 1980 to stimulate, provoke, and occasionally disagree with. I would also have loved to rewrite the pages on 'middle-class' consciousness, bringing in some of the insights I have derived from my still-unfinished work on Ramakrishna.⁵ A convenient entry-point here could have been the problem of 'levels' within religion: how religious traditions come to be read and acted on in subtly distinct ways by various social strata. That would have provided the appropriate context for studying the disjunction-cum-interaction of levels within the national movement. The vernacular literature of the period – tracts and a host of minor novels, stories, poems, plays and farces, as much, if not more, than the works of the well-known figures – comprise here a rich and so far largely unexplored quarry for the social historian.

The struggle for freedom provided the core of the book, but here a much more sensitive analysis of a whole range of symbols, myths and perceptions was called for. I had tried occasionally to go into such dimensions (as in the section on rumour in early Gandhian nationalism, for instance), but while talking of specific movements had slid imperceptibly at times into economistic formulations. British perceptions, too, merited greater attention, approached perhaps through imaginative literature about India from Kipling or Flora Annie Steel down to E. M. Forster and Edward Thompson. A major problem here was that I had thought far too little about the nature of colonial authority, dismissing it in my mind as conventional and tedious 'political' or 'administrative' history. Edward Said's *Orientalism* has now stimulated some attempts to study colonial

'discourse', and middle-class Indian thinking heavily conditioned by it, as forms of 'power-knowledge'. But we need to consider also the extent to which institutions and conceptions of 'disciplinary power', so brilliantly analysed by Foucault, were transplanted to colonial India through the army, law courts, prisons, administrative and commercial offices, and schools, and how they might have mingled with older forms of power exercised through crude coercion and spectacle. The study of Indian reactions to such things – to the new discipline of time imposed through offices on clerks, for example – might add some interesting dimensions to our analysis of the roots of patriotic mentalities and of the ways in which these so often took 'anti-modern', 'neo-traditionalist' or 'revivalist' forms.

As for teleology, and unilinear assumptions of development, I provided a really crude example on page 290, where participation of women in Civil Disobedience has been hailed as 'a major step forward in the emancipation of Indian women'. What I had ignored were the ambiguities involved in an extension of nationalism to women through an essentially religious idiom of the nation as the 'extended family', with women in politics playing a nurturing and sustaining role with a high premium on sacrifice: not on the whole modifying, therefore, received gender identities. The whole problem of gender is in fact virtually missing from my book: a very major gap, indeed.

Feminist historiography is still rather undeveloped in India – it is only just entering even *Subaltern Studies*, for instance – but all the indications are that many received categories, periodizations and accounts of Indian history are likely to be overturned in the near future, just as has happened already in many other parts of the world. The value of feminist critiques is indicated very vividly by my own blind-spot in 1980. It seems obvious enough now, for instance, but was not so only seven years back, that I could have explored fairly easily certain parallels in the dialectic of extension/control by middle-class nationalism over not only plebian or subaltern groups, but also women. In both cases, mobilization was accompanied by controls, and did not eventually lead to significant changes in social relations and attitudes. At the same time, subtle shifts did take place: the literature of the rationalist period, for instance, outwardly so

often traditionalist, at times reveals a pattern of reassertion of norms by the ideal woman against male betrayers of the country, its religion and its culture – a reassertion through ‘feminine’ methods approximating to, and indeed sometimes anticipating, Gandhian passive resistance. A whole rich domain awaits exploration here, and I am sorry I did not try to enter it.

Scattered through the book are some formulations and categories which reveal insufficient awareness, though often these consist of inadvertent slips. The political/social disjunction which appears in the titles of Chapters III and IV is unfortunately not uncommon still in historical writing, but remains a fallacy. Relations of power, of domination, subordination and occasional resistance, pervade all aspects of social life, and such a disjunction comes perilously close to Trevelyan’s notorious definition of social history as history ‘with the politics left out.’ My rejection of the term ‘élite’ for any Indian social group (p.67), and use of false consciousness to describe caste identities (p.55), are evidently slips which reveal a careless slide towards Left-nationalist positions. Other question-begging terms include ‘sporadic’, ‘elemental’ and ‘spontaneous’ (e.g., pp.44, 183, 254): *Elementary Aspects* was not yet there to warn me.

More serious, since these involve the basic building-blocks of my narrative, is the insufficiently critical and ‘essentialist’ use of terms like ‘tribal’, ‘communal’, ‘caste’, ‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘national’. I did try in many cases to indicate that processes of change, social construction, ambiguities and tensions underlie all such terms, but not, probably, to a satisfactory degree and at sufficient depth. In parenthesis, I might add that the title of my book certainly should not be read to imply that ‘modern India’ somehow ‘began’ in 1885. This would have been a most dubious historiographical assumption, giving a primacy to the foundation of the Congress which is in fact belied by the entire tenor of the work. The date, as I hinted in the preface, was there only because there had been plans for a collective venture in which another historian was to have written a volume ending in 1885.

A reviewer has warned that taking *Modern India* to be the definitive general ‘history from below’ would be extremely dangerous:⁴ it should be obvious by now that I could not agree with this more. And yet the book does seem to have met a felt

need, for the gap between general surveys or textbooks and the levels attained by recent specific research on modern India remains as vast as ever. Despite all its problems, *Modern India* did try to outline certain new perspectives for a broad audience. Standard accounts and media coverage marginalize or omit altogether a whole range of processes and events: Birsa Munda, Alluri Sitarama Raju or Baba Ramchandra; Girni Kamgar, Tebhaga, Telengana, or the RIN Mutiny. Students and general readers alike need to know about such almost forgotten, and at times deliberately suppressed, dimensions of our recent past.

Many scholars and general readers abroad have shown an interest in my book, even though the technicalities of publication have by no means made it easily accessible. I am grateful to Macmillan (London), and personally to Professor D. A. Low, for bringing out this edition for readers abroad.

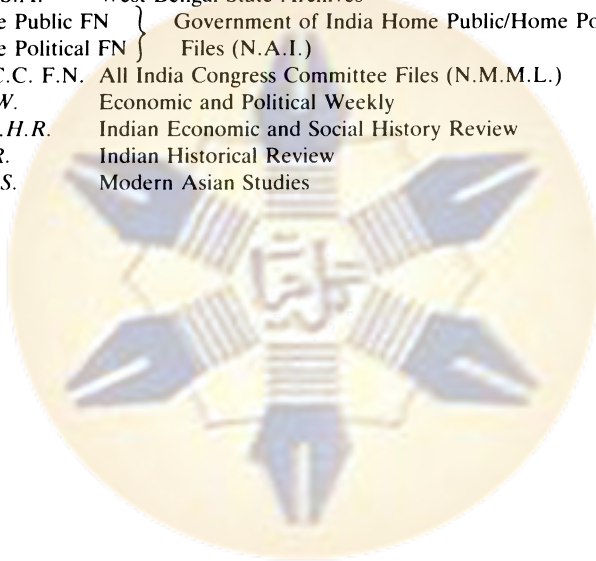
NOTES

1. See note on Additional Readings (1988), p.479.
2. Sumit Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Colonial India: Problems and Perspectives of a 'History from Below'* (Calcutta, 1983)
3. Sumit Sarkar, 'The "Kathamrita" as Text: Towards an Understanding of Ramakrishna Paramahansa' (Occasional Paper no. 22, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, 1985).
4. Arvind N. Das, 'History in the Present Tense: On Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India*' (*Social Scientist* no. 137, October 1984).

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ABBREVIATIONS

I.O.L.	India Office Library, London
N.A.I.	National Archives of India, New Delhi
N.M.M.L.	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
W.B.S.A.	West Bengal State Archives
Home Public FN	} Government of India Home Public/Home Political Files (N.A.I.)
Home Political FN	
A.I.C.C. F.N.	All India Congress Committee Files (N.M.M.L.)
<i>E.P.W.</i>	Economic and Political Weekly
<i>I.E.S.H.R.</i>	Indian Economic and Social History Review
<i>I.H.R.</i>	Indian Historical Review
<i>M.A.S.</i>	Modern Asian Studies



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