

On May 11, 1998, the newly constituted government of India, headed by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), detonated a nuclear device at Pokhran. The same site had been used twenty-four years earlier when Indira Gandhi had done the same thing. This time, the world was aghast for a multitude of reasons. This device was detonated to further India's program of nuclear weaponization, whereas Indira's program was for peaceful purposes. Secondly, the decision was made by a Hindu-nationalist party, rather than the secular Congress party. Finally, this nuclear detonation essentially forced the government of Pakistan to respond two weeks later with its own detonation and weaponization. Overnight, "South Asia has thus achieved the dreaded distinction of becoming the world's most perilous region of potential nuclear conflict in the twenty-first century."<sup>454</sup> A region that still has not resolved long-festering Indo-Pak tensions over Kashmir, that are only exacerbated by religious differences.

Stanley Wolpert's sixth edition of his *New History of India* updates his work to cover the Pokhran II tests and the BJP's rise to power. Wolpert is one of the foremost historians on India, having written numerous books and articles on the country and currently teaching at the University of California in Los Angeles. He is able to navigate more than four thousand years of history in a relatively short and readable volume. The book follows a simple chronological organization, with topical subdivisions. All the while he develops his thematic focus on the complex interplay in India between continuity and change on one hand, and unification and fragmentation on the other. Only rarely does the book's organization hamper its readability. Towards the end of the text, the fact that this work has been through six editions is evident in a slightly disjointed feel to the last two chapters, which have had to be thoroughly revised to cover recent events.

This book is designed as an introduction. It is not for the specialist; it does not delve extensively into any issue, topic, or time period, but rather serves as an overview of Indian history. Wolpert also does not provide extensive citation, which can prove frustrating for certain quotations and conclusions. Further, Wolpert's focus is clearly on modern India. He covers the first 3,900 years of Indian history in half of the book, while he saves the last half for post-1905 India. While the early history is adequate, it is the greatest weakness of the book. Most of the research for this portion was done during the writing of the first edition, and the sources have not been updated to include the most recent historiographic debates.

Wolpert manages to control his biases relatively well, especially for a historian dealing with contemporary issues. Only his coverage of the premiership of Inder K. Gujral is questionable. Wolpert developed a friendship with the former prime minister, and at one point in the work describes him as "India's greatest statesman and one of its few incorruptible political leaders... a true Indian patriot."<sup>448</sup> While this conclusion is defensible, it may appear to some as evidence of bias.

Although the work generally objective in its survey of Indian history, that does not mean that Wolpert is not passionate about it. It is evident that he is deeply concerned about trends in India, particularly the poor administration by various governments, the de-secularization and potential for fragmentation of the country, and the ominous geopolitical trends on the subcontinent. The last few chapters are intertwined with reflections that Wolpert has on the country he has studied for the last fifty-years. These reflections shine through with sagacity, tempered by distress, and they stand as inspired testimony to Wolpert's half-century of work on this country. Despite the above criticisms, the work is frequently brilliant and almost undoubtedly the best introduction available on modern India.

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