

P R E F A C E



Contemporary India attracts the attention of the world. Yet, only a few decades ago, the subcontinent was largely ignored by outsiders. Writing in the early 1960s, the future Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul famously termed India *An Area of Darkness* after his first disillusioning sojourn in his ancestral land. In the mid-1970s, when I first arrived in India from Britain, before going to university, to teach science in a school in the Himalayas and see the country, I knew practically nothing of its history and culture, despite India's historic, two-century relationship with Britain. In my school history classes, I had briefly studied Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and the foundation of the British empire in India in the mid-18th century, but the history of the Mughal empire, Hindu kingdoms, the empire of Asoka, the life of the Buddha and the spread of Buddhism, or the ancient Indus Valley civilization was a blank – not to mention the story of Mahatma Gandhi and the end of empire in the subcontinent.

The same indifference was commonplace during the colonial period, before India's independence from Britain in 1947, perhaps surprisingly. In 1925, the historian of India Edward J. Thompson (father of E. P. Thompson) regretted that 'British lack of interest in India is no new thing' in a controversial little book, *The Other Side of the Medal*, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, intended to ruffle more than half a century of imperial complacency with news of hitherto concealed British atrocities against Indian civilians during the uprising of 1857–58 known to the British as the Indian Mutiny. 'It has been notorious, and a theme

of savage comment by Indians, that the Indian Debate in the House of Commons has been regarded with indifference by the few who attended, with contempt by the many who stayed away', Thompson noted. A century earlier, in 1833, at the time of a crucial British parliamentary debate about the government's effective nationalization of the East India Company, the MP and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay – shortly to set sail for India from London as a high government official – regretted 'the strange indifference of all classes of people, members of Parliament, reporters and the public to Indian politics'. However, he also privately admitted to his family his own profound ambivalence towards India: 'Am I not in fair training to be as great a bore . . . as the greatest?' For all his praiseworthy dedication to improving the educational and legal systems of India, Macaulay would himself come to epitomize British indifference to Indian culture. He had polyglot gifts in European languages, but never bothered to learn any Indian language during his four-year stint in India. In his much-quoted Minute on Education, written in Calcutta in 1835, Macaulay asserted: 'who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole literature of India and Arabia'.

Indifference persisted through the 1980s, more or less. When I worked for Granada Television at the time of the making of *The Jewel in the Crown*, the justly acclaimed drama serial set near the end of the British Raj, the production staff looked at India chiefly through colonial-period spectacles – both on screen and off. When I published a biography of India's most internationally acclaimed living cultural figure, Satyajit Ray, in 1989, there were many reviews; but the London and New York film critics were plainly not much interested in Indian culture – only in Ray's artistry as a film director, as being worthy of comparison with, say, Jean Renoir's, Vittorio de Sica's or Robert Flaherty's. The editor of the film magazine *Sight and Sound* (for which I was then writing), despite having revered Ray's films since the classic Apu Trilogy of the 1950s, had nevertheless not felt the desire to visit an Indian film festival – perhaps because she suspected that India's

prosaic urban reality and Indian filmgoers' apparent addiction to song and dance would not chime with Ray's enchanting vision of his country. As Ray himself candidly remarked to me in London in 1982: 'the cultural gap between East and West is too wide for a handful of films to reduce it. It can happen only when critics back it up with study on other levels as well. But where is the time, with so many films from other countries to contend with? And where is the compulsion?'

At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the tide began to turn, fairly rapidly, cresting in the first decade of the new millennium as something of an India wave. There were many reasons: empires had gone out of fashion; former servants of the Raj were dead or dying off; younger westerners free from colonial baggage were travelling extensively in India, not just to the usual tourist spots such as Delhi and Rajasthan; some were even marrying Indians and settling there; young India-based writers were being published in the West to considerable acclaim; 'Bollywood' films were becoming partially known to non-Indians. Most important of all, a diaspora of Indian citizens and people of Indian origin was making its mark in Europe, North America and other parts of the globe in business, the media and the professions, especially medicine, science and technology, including information technology. At the same time, within India, following the government's liberalization of the country's commerce after 1991, the economy began to grow fast, averaging just over six per cent per annum during the rest of the decade. The flourishing of the Indian diaspora and of India's own economy made Europeans and Americans curious about the country as a whole, and provided the compulsion – Satyajit Ray's word – to understand the sources of this unfamiliar success.

The sea change was symbolized by the commercial triumph in 2008–09 of a multi-Oscar-winning movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*, which owed almost as much to Bollywood as to Hollywood cinema. The film was not to my taste, but there was no denying its public appeal in both East and West – if that old polarity can any longer be said to mean much in our globalized

world. Back in the 1970s, such a British-directed production about India would have provoked outrage from the Indian government and almost every Indian for its lurid revelling in Indian poverty and squalor – as happened with the Indian government's banning in India of Louis Malle's mammoth documentary, *Phantom India*, in 1970, after it was shown on BBC Television. Even Ray's prize-winning Apu Trilogy suffered severe criticism in the Indian parliament in the early 1980s for its projection of Indian poverty to audiences in Europe and America. Now, instead of old-fashioned patriotic outrage, *Slumdog Millionaire's* worldwide success was greeted in India with nearly unanimous applause. The film's go-getting message, that even a slum kid from Mumbai with some brains could make a million in a TV quiz show – and in real life get to step on the red carpet in Hollywood – jibed with the brash confidence of India's newly rich middle class. After all, the film was based on an English-language novel written by one of their own, a successful Indian diplomat.

The upsurge of interest in India prompted the publication of scores of non-fiction books. Naipaul began the trend in 1990 with *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, by interviewing a wide variety of 'unknown' Indians (to recall the title of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's remarkable 1951 memoir, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*) and narrating their personal histories. Writers, journalists, political activists, business people and academics from many fields – both Indians and non-Indians – followed on. Whereas the first decade or so of these books, including Naipaul's, was understandably optimistic about India, emphasizing its refreshing prominence, later books veered towards pessimism. For example, in *Accidental India*, the India-based economic analyst Shankkar Aiyar argued that almost all of the beneficial economic changes in independent India – including the agricultural 'green revolution' of the 1960s, the economic liberalization of 1991 and the software revolution of the 1990s – happened as a result of 'accidents', not government planning: often they arose from crises forced upon India by incompetent official policies. 'Governance in India, in 2012, is a sham and

a shame', summarized Aiyar. 'In every crisis . . . , the common thread is the inability of successive governments to think imaginatively and act decisively. India deserves better.' Few present-day Indian commentators would disagree with that last remark.

Virtually all of the books restricted themselves to India of the past century or two – that is, the British colonial period and after. Most also focused on politics and economics, underplaying India's intellectual, religious and artistic life. Still to be written was an introductory, non-academic history of India since the Indus Valley civilization of the third millennium BC, tackling its significant aspects rather than striving for the completeness of a textbook, and paying as much notice to individuals, ideas and cultures as to the rise and fall of kingdoms, political parties and economies. Although Indian democracy is certainly a remarkable achievement, worthy of study and at times even of celebration, despite its longstanding failures and perversions of justice, India's political system does not – at least in my view it *should* not – define the country's importance to the world, whatever politically minded pundits may instinctively believe. Indian history deserves better than an exclusive focus on politics and economics (or indeed the prejudices of a Macaulay).

India: A Short History aims to steer a middle path between polarized reactions to India, whether positive or negative. Indian history is undeniably full of fascinating extremes; but a historian must try to view them *sub specie aeternitatis*. For me personally, the book is also an attempt to understand somewhat better a civilization that has changed my life.

NOTE ON NOMENCLATURE

Since this is a history book, recently changed Indian spellings of place-names, such as Mumbai (previously Bombay), are not used, except where appropriate in describing present-day India. Personal names and terms taken from Indian languages follow common usage, without being entirely consistent, for example Asoka (rather than Ashoka) but *dharma* (rather than *dhamma*); diacriticals have been omitted.