



## India: A Portrait

By Patrick French

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A monumental biography of the subcontinent from the award-winning author of *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul*.

Second only to China in the magnitude of its economic miracle and second to none in its potential to shape the new century, India is fast undergoing one of the most momentous transformations the world has ever seen. In this dazzlingly panoramic book, Patrick French chronicles that epic change, telling human stories to explain a larger national narrative.

Melding on-the-ground reports with a deep knowledge of history, French exposes the cultural foundations of India's political, economic and social complexities. He reveals how a nation identified with some of the most wretched poverty on earth has simultaneously developed an envied culture of entrepreneurship (here are stories like that of C. K. Ranganathan, who trudged the streets of Cuddalore in the 1980s selling sample packets of shampoo and now employs more than one thousand people). And even more remarkably, French shows how, despite the ancient and persistent traditions of caste, as well as a mind-boggling number of ethnicities and languages, India has nevertheless managed to cohere, evolving into the world's largest democracy, largely fulfilling Jawaharlal Nehru's dream of a secular liberal order.

French's inquiry goes to the heart of all the puzzlements that modern India presents: Is this country actually rich or poor? Why has its Muslim population, the second largest on earth, resisted radicalization to such a considerable extent? Why do so many children of Indians who have succeeded in the West want to return "home," despite never having lived in India? Will India become a natural ally of the West, a geostrategic counterweight to the illiberal rising powers China and Russia? To find the answers, French seeks out an astonishing range of characters: from Maoist revolutionaries to Mafia dons, from chained quarry laborers to self-made billionaires. And he delves into the personal lives of the political elite, including the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, one of the most powerful women in the world.

With a familiarity and insight few Westerners could approach, Patrick French provides a vital corrective to the many outdated notions about a uniquely dynamic and consequential nation. His *India* is a thrilling revelation.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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- Sales Rank: #893444 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-06-07
- Released on: 2011-06-07
- Format: Kindle eBook

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“A fittingly vigorous and colorful book about what it means to live in India six decades after the nation freed itself from British rule.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“French mingles historical analysis with on-the-spot reportage, aiming to capture the country in all its teeming, volatile complexity. The result is rich, engaging and indeed multi-hued.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“A well-informed and well-crafted portrait. . . . [French is] a skilled interviewer who writes with a descriptive flair.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Perceptive. . . . French goes beyond the obvious. . . . India is a burgeoning nation with an inspiring message to the struggling people of the world: It gets better.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Sharply observed. . . . An accomplished portrait of momentous times in a remarkable country. . . . French is a fine reporter, with an appealing fascination for all things Indian, as his book makes clear.”

—*The Economist*

“It is a funny, witty book; also dense, gripping, thrilling. What blazes through from each page is French’s absolute and uncondescending engagement with India, Indians and the mindboggling plurality of practices.”

—*The Times* (London)

“Fizzing with wit, insight and infectious curiosity. . . . A riveting read. . . . One suspects that French could not pen a boring passage if he tried. . . . A thoroughly enjoyable romp through six momentous decades.”

—*The Wall Street Journal Asia*

“Vivid. . . . An impressive study of India since independence.”

—*The Telegraph* (London)

“Admirable. . . . There are many Indias, and French sets out, with enthusiasm and empathy, to encounter as many as he can find.”

—*The Spectator*

“Complex. . . . Stirring accuracy. . . . French offers a fascinating analysis, revealing a deeper truth.”

—*The Independent* (London)

“Lives up to its promise. . . . It’s not just readable; it’s gripping. . . . French’s writing is touchingly evocative at times . . . and hilarious at others. . . . If you’re Indian, reading the book is like learning the history of your country in four days.”

—*New Indian Express*

“French is the brilliant enfant terrible who can get away with heresies because they are embedded in his deep

affection for and intimate knowledge of India.”

—*Business Standard*

#### About the Author

Patrick French is the author of *Younghusband*, *Liberty or Death*, *Tibet*, *Tibet and The World Is What It Is*. His books have won the Somerset Maugham Award, the Royal Society of Literature W.H. Heinemann Prize, the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Hawthornden Prize.

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#### ACCELERATED HISTORY

In Ladakh the air is thin and dry, and it is cold even when the sunlight burns you. Tashi Norbu could remember how, in 1948, Buddhist monks in their dark red robes had built an improvised, rocky airstrip near the monastery in Leh. Out of the sky came a buzzing metal shape, a Dakota aeroplane carrying India's new prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. It landed in a cloud of dust.

"We had never seen a car or a motor vehicle at that time," Tashi Norbu said, sitting above his apricot orchard, speaking in a Tibetan dialect. He was an old man, an expert in medicinal herbs, water diversion and the correct way to shoot a bow and arrow. He wore a long brown robe secured with a lime-coloured sash, and on his head he had wedged a homburg.

"There were no roads in Ladakh. A plane lands from the sky, you can't imagine . . . All the local people put their hands together and prayed to the plane, we were all praying."

Ladakh is a mountainous region by the borders of Tibet, China and Pakistan. In the rush of history, it might have ended up on the wrong side of the line; but it is in India. It feels like the remoter parts of Tibet, though without the Chinese influence. By a quirk of history, Ladakhis follow Tibetan Buddhism, having avoided the waves of Muslim invasions that changed the traditions of their neighbours. Geographically inaccessible, the region preserves an ancient way of living. The present, powerless King of Ladakh's lineage dates back an incredible thirty-eight generations to 975. His family lost their influence more than a century ago, and he lives in a little hilltop palace.

Tashi Norbu thought of himself as a Ladakhi above all else. "As children, we hadn't heard about India. We didn't know who the Indians were. We knew they were 'gyagarpa,' people who came from the plains, but it was not until I grew older and saw a map that I understood how big India was. Some things changed after independence: a politician came to visit us from Srinagar in Kashmir, but we didn't know what that meant, whether he was a religious leader or a king, or what.

"I can remember when I first saw the Indian army using kerosene! I couldn't believe the flames, how easily they could make them. They told us we could buy kerosene in Leh if we sold eggs. We would take the eggs, carry them like a baby while crossing the [Indus] river, sell them to a trader, buy the kerosene, and carry the kerosene back to the village.

"Pandit Nehru told the chief lama he should become a leader, and the lama said since we were in a mountain region he would rather be a worker. He handed a shovel to Nehru, who began digging! They took some photographs of it. Yes, I am content to be with India. We would never have got along with Pakistan, because they are Mohammedans and follow different customs. As for China, it is communist; you have to take

permission for everything you want to do, and you can't speak your mind. In India you can speak your mind, so I'm happy to be with them."

Ladakh is about as far north as you can get in India. The modern nation created after independence was implacably diverse, culturally and geographically.

Tamil Nadu is more than 1,500 miles south of Ladakh. It is a different kind of world. While Ladakhis are wiry, with narrow facial apertures—a small nose, mouth and ears and slit eyes, perhaps in response to the icy, windy climate—Tamils usually have a wide sprawl of a face, in keeping with the southern lushness. The land is rich with vegetation, paddy fields and mango trees, and the view from the coast is filled with fishing boats, long painted skiffs with curved prows, catching kingfish. Young men dive low for stone fruit-giant blue-green mussels, which they pluck off the rocks.

When the Indian national flag was chosen at independence, a tricolour of saffron, white and green, Ashoka's wheel of dharma, or law, was placed at its centre. The emperor Ashoka had united the subcontinent before the birth of Christ, but even his kingdom stopped advancing when it reached the south. The southern tip of India, perhaps more than any other place on earth, has an unbroken chain to the ancient past. There have been caste wars, the usual comings and goings of power, with one imperial dynasty replacing another in earlier times, but no invasion. European traders—British, Dutch, Portuguese and French—had all pursued their interests forcefully over the centuries, but the society had retained its own earlier forms. It would be as if the religion or culture at the time of the pharaoh Amenhotep III, who ruled Egypt in the fourteenth century bce, had survived in snatches in the everyday life of modern Egyptians.

The noise of central and northern India can at times drown out the subtlety of the south, which has been so vital in determining the country's present status. On the edge of Chennai or Madras, it can be so luxuriant and humid and quiet that you feel as if you are in another land; but it is just another face of India, with the tinkle of bicycle bells and the echoes of a temple the only distraction. Saravankumar, a professor, described it to me this way: "The identity we have here goes right back to the first century, to the Tamil poem *Puram 183*. I would say my Tamilness comes from the language." I could understand what he meant, and could see—or hear, on the street and in the home—how the high-speed, bubbling Tamil tongue was part of the environment. So while the north had its upheavals, the south went on forever.

The nation can be triangulated in many ways: it is all India. Far across to the east, about 1,750 miles from Chennai and the same distance from Ladakh—up near Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh—lies Meghalaya. It is a hilly and rainy state, a kingdom with rushing waterfalls, tropical forests and unexpectedly successful rock groups. The people look different from Tamils or Ladakhis, and follow their own traditions.

Take just one tribe in Meghalaya as an example, the Khasi people, who are more than a million strong. Their language bears some connection to Khmer, which is spoken in Cambodia. They are a matrilineal society: their family name comes from the mother's side, and the last daughter in the family to leave the family home is the custodian of all ancestral property. The Khasi religion is not connected to any other faith and emphasizes a belief in one supreme god, U Blei. In their creation myth, the Moon (which is male) and the Sun (which is female) stand symbolically for the divine presence. The Khasis have a covenant with their deity—who is the dispenser, the maker, the giver, the creator, the divine law. They believe in the concept of "iapan," or pleading with god for everything they need, and are very sure about how they came to be on earth—by descending a golden ladder from the mount of heaven's navel. What they are not sure about is how exactly man came to be created by god.

As Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a Khasi, explained to me in perfect English: "Although we believe we were

created by god, we also think that it is not the business of humans to know exactly how. As I said, the Khasis believe in one supreme god, who is formless, or rather whose form man cannot even begin to imagine, for that is forbidden. A Khasi does not believe in idol worship, since he must not conceive the appearance of god. We do not have a place of worship since our religion is private and familial. True worship takes place in one's heart, or at one's family's hearth. Because of this, the Khasi religion remains largely unorganized, and it is completely lacking in missionary tendencies. This is because a Khasi believes his god is also the god of the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian, and of all other people. His motto is, therefore, 'eit la ka jong, burom ia kiwei'-'Love one's own, and respect others.' As for me, I will always prefer my own religion to any other because it's the only religion that I know which does not believe in hell's damnation. The Khasi universe is two-tier-heaven and earth-and there is no room for hell."

Each of these disparate places was part of the nation that was born in 1947.

When the British gained control of the subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they often preferred to rule through a local potentate. They did not make a lot of converts to Christianity. By propping up client rulers and giving them imperial baubles and titles, they could secure influence at minimum cost. This strategy of containment succeeded until the early twentieth century, when a new class of Indian nationalists, stirred by ideals of liberty and democracy, used peaceful mass resistance to campaign for an end to foreign rule. The Indian National Congress had been established in 1885 by English-speaking professionals who wanted a greater involvement in government. Under the creative guidance of Mohandas Gandhi-the Mahatma, or "great soul"-the Congress became a popular movement of liberation from the British empire.

While this new political force challenged imperial control and promoted itself as the true voice of India, many Muslims, who made up nearly a quarter of the population, felt excluded by the largely Hindu idiom in which it operated. The Muslim elite, which still retained much of its influence after the decline of the Mughals and the rise of the European powers, was not attracted by what Gandhi represented. Many felt that for all the talk of inclusiveness, the Congress leadership was made up largely of Hindus from the higher end of the caste system who would, if India became independent, undermine the security and status of Muslims. With their homespun khadi clothing, their emphasis on Hindi rather than Urdu as the national language of India, their big rallies and their belief in profound social reform, the Congress leaders seemed like a threat. The Congress-run provincial governments which took office in parts of India in the 1930s were presented as the heralds of a new "Hindu Raj."

When political uncertainty grew during the Second World War, large numbers of Muslims turned to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who wanted to establish a homeland or a place of safety for their community in parts of north India where Muslims were in a majority. The Indian National Congress failed to acknowledge the gravity of this demand. As late as 1946, Jinnah's Muslim League was willing to accept a federation in which defence, foreign policy and communications remained under common control, rather than a fully independent Pakistan. During the final negotiations, Jinnah was boxed in by a triumphalist Congress and British incompetence: the result was the bloody and disastrous partition of the Indian empire into two dominions, Pakistan and India.

It was a time of accelerated history, when a political leader's decisions might have enormous and fateful consequences. In the largest mass migration in history, Hindus and Sikhs escaped to India and Muslims escaped to Pakistan. Even setting aside the vast, unexpected convulsion during the creation of the two new wings, East and West Pakistan, the shape of free India remained highly unclear. Most significantly, the status of India's princely rulers was left unresolved at independence. Each kingdom had its own treaty with London, and control could not legally be handed over to the successor government-controlled by the



Congress-without a signature.

Take Jodhpur as an example: Hanwant Singh was a volatile young man, and like most princely rulers he was not accustomed to being told what to do. Tall and bulky with a toothbrush moustache, he was called "Big Boy" by his father. He liked playing polo, shooting sand grouse and performing magic tricks. As heir to the dry, flinty kingdom of Jodhpur in the west of India, a princely state not much smaller than England, his life had been mapped out for him. When he went to boarding school, he took with him two cars, a stable of horses and a retinue of servants, including a tailor and a barber.

In June 1947, life became more complicated. His father died, making him Maharaja of Jodhpur just as India was about to become free. On the personal side, the 23-year-old intended shortly to breach protocol by marrying a European, although not long before that he had taken a sixteen-year-old princess from Gujarat as his first bride. He dealt with the tension by going off on pig-sticking hunts, but the decisions facing him could not be postponed because he was in an unexpectedly important political position. Jodhpur bordered the emerging Muslim homeland of Pakistan, and its founder, Jinnah, had asked him to break with India and link his kingdom to the new nation. Unfortunately, the prince and most of his people were Hindu. Jinnah offered extraordinarily favourable terms: the maharaja could use Karachi as a free port, purchase whatever weapons he wanted, control the railway line to Sindh and receive free grain for famine relief. It sounded like a good deal. He agreed to sign up for Pakistan. Then, as he was about to touch his fountain pen to the paper, he learned that none of his fellow Rajput princes had yet thrown in their lot with the Pakistanis and he got cold feet. He told Jinnah he would go home and think about it.

India's capital had moved earlier in the century from Calcutta to a processional new city on the edge of ancient Delhi. A few days after he met Jinnah, the maharaja was staying at New Delhi's finest hotel, the Imperial. A short south Indian man appeared there and told him he must come to Government House and meet the viceroy. This was unexpected. Unlike other members of the princely order, the Maharaja of Jodhpur disliked the British, and was glad they were leaving, even if his late father had been made a Knight Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India by the King Emperor George V. He claimed that as a boy he had at night crept out of his marble and sandstone palace (which had been built by his father over fifteen years, using 3,000 skeletal labourers) and put up anti-colonial wall posters. Hanwant Singh did as he was told, and accompanied the south Indian man to Government House.

Here the departing imperial power, in the form of the suave viceroy Mountbatten, told him it would be unwise to join Pakistan since his subjects could rise up in rebellion. The maharaja was incensed. It was clear that what the viceroy was really saying was that independent India's new rulers-lawyers, agitators, socialists, Gandhians; the sort of people who had never shot a sand grouse-would foment revolution against His Highness. He wanted the imperialists to leave, but he certainly did not want their power or his patrimony to be taken over by the Indian National Congress. So would the new Indian government, then, give him what Pakistan had promised? Mountbatten looked to his adviser. No, said the short south Indian man-V. P. Menon, the senior political reforms commissioner-but they might offer a donation of grain. The big prince argued and blustered at Lord Mountbatten, and prevaricated and argued some more, and finally signed the instrument of accession.

## **Users Review**

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