Salil Misra. *Slices of Indian History: The Story of India's Transformation*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2025, pp 328.

SAMIKSHA KUMARI
School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

To measure and evaluate the making of India in the modern landscape is to undertake a never-ending journey where time refuses to pause and space is constantly reimagined. How did it become the India that we inhabit today? A linear yet complex story captures its transformations, its experiments with modernity—the transitions that remain, even till today, incomplete. *Slices of Indian History: The Story of India's Transformation* situates India's tryst with modernity precisely within this vast, ever-moving terrain. The book's cover engages the reader to see the never-closing windows of India's past: the colonial town of Shimla's twisting streets with the backdrop of canopies of deodar; the continuous line of Partition refugees whose downcast looks symbolise the ache of displacement and whose pots are held tight like their homelands; the imperial clock tower standing as a symbol of colonial power and culture; and finally, the quiet portrait of Gandhi, a figure endlessly written about yet hardly understood in its fullness. Together, these visuals weave themselves into a long story of India's continuous metamorphosis from the shadows of colonial rule to the present-day challenges. Thus, the book seeks to trace an odyssey of India's becoming through the shifts of transformation and transitions from colonialism and its aftermath.

The book is a collection of essays originally written for various newspapers by Salil Misra. Each essay opens a distinct window into India's shifting encounter with modernity. Together, these essays resemble slices of a larger mural, a brief yet thought-provoking glimpse that, when placed next to each other, sketch the making of the nation. In accordance with its title, the book gathers 'slices' of India's history to point towards a comprehensive picture that the author himself admits will always remain incomplete. What provides these essays with their strength is the author's scholarly precision in historical enquiry, for he never treats historical happenings as mere events but as

processes that shaped, and continue to shape, Indian society. In this layered journey, the author takes the reader across the tangled, unfinished terrain of modern India.

The book is divided into five parts, each opening a new yet connected window to the larger archive of India's modern journey. Part one discusses the "episodes of consequences," (p.1) taking the readers to those moments when global events such as the two World Wars tilt the ground beneath a nation. Part two turns to institutions and spaces, treating them as living architectures where power, memory, and everyday life converge. In part three, titled "Heroes and Villains," the author sheds light on the individuals who shaped the face of India's political, economic, and moral imagination. This part presents them as complex figures forged in the heat of their times. Part four turns to the making of the Constitution, a blueprint built on an edifice of debate and consensus. Finally, the book reaches part five, which offers the many flavours of Gandhi's life and philosophy. Here, Gandhi becomes the central figure of the narrative. By saving its most engaging reflections on Gandhi for the end, the book arranges itself into a slow-building crescendo, allowing its climax to rest on the figure who, for generations, embodied the paradoxes and possibilities of modern India.

Part one of the book contextualises Indian events within broader global currents. The twentieth century emerges not as a span of dates, but as a furnace in which humanity repeatedly tested the limits of its own endurance. India enters this century not by choice but by gravity, having been pulled into the First and the Second World War as conflicts born out of imperial rivalries and a world intoxicated with its own insecurities. These "episodes of consequences" (p. 1) show a world capable of dazzling technological optimism even as it perfected the art of destruction: two hundred and fifty wars, one hundred and ten million deaths, while hatred in all forms—ethnic, racial, ideological—became the century's most widely traded commodity. India's men, food and resources were mobilised without consent, leading to famine in Bengal and uneven prosperity in Punjab, revealing how deeply global conflicts settled into Indian soil. The nuclear weapon, the "*qayamat*" (p. 11) of modernity, closed the century but did not end its anxieties: the Cold War—the unipolar moment of 1991— and today's race for dominance all grew from seeds sown during this turbulent age.

Amid global turbulence, the colonial state turned inward, mapping Indian society through the modern instrument of the census. What began as enumeration soon became conceptual engineering. For instance, the Kabirpanthis were fractured into the categories of Hindu and Muslim by the census of 1901. Thus, the British reading of varna, jati, and caste made the evolving social categories into a rigid classificatory grid. Even when caste was dropped from the 1941 census, its imprints remained; as we know independent India inherited the political and psychological weight of these categories. In 1917-19, Colonial promises of responsible governance collided with the moral abyss of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The massacre lasted beyond the commission of inquiry, travelling through poetry, memory, and vengeance, culminating in Udham Singh's assassination of O'Dwyer. This massacre reminds the world that when a state crushes innocents, it dissolves its own legitimacy. A lesson which the colonial government failed to learn. In the continuous story of India's freedom struggle, things sharpened in 1942, when the Quit India Movement—"the most un-Gandhian struggle nonetheless initiated by Gandhi" (p. 40)—struck at an empire that no longer commanded consent. The freedom gained at midnight in 1947 was followed by the catastrophe of Partition, a calamity measured not only in twelve million migrants but in gendered silences, legislative divergences in India and Pakistan, and memories that refuse to stay buried. Partition, just like the two wars, produced no victors. It was another reminder that a century obsessed with redrawing borders rarely paused to consider what lines do to people. Taken together, these chapters explore India's transformation within the global currents of the two World Wars, imperial state practices and the manner in which India responded to these definitive events.

Part two gives us a glimpse of the pretence of modern governance under colonial rule and its materialisation within universities, cities, and state architecture. The roots of this modernity can be traced further back to the strange sovereignty of the East India Company, a trading corporation that became a territorial power, binding India to global circuits. Its successor, the British crown, extended control over its subjects' minds through universities shaped by Macaulay's Minute, Wood's Despatch, and the Universities Act of 1857, whose foundation was already laid down by the Company. Vernacular traditions were displaced rather than being brought into dialogue with; this created institutions that remained "prisoners of the past" (p. 74), still

struggling to reconcile knowledge with vernacular traditions and modern skills. This struggle finds spatial form in Delhi and Shimla. Both cities were "doing very well and also badly" (p. 83), resilient yet overburdened. Shimla, a mountainous region reshaped into an imperial capital, was segregated by the British into Station Ward and Bazaar Ward, yet its people were spirited enough to join the national movement. After independence, India turned to democracy and also to elections. Since the 1951-52 elections, Nehru's immense faith in popular mandate and citizens' participation has anchored India's democratic resilience even as institutions weakened and corruption corroded trust. This is the contradiction of India doing well and also poorly. The reorganisation of states in 1956 offers a counter-image of that particular moment when 152,000 public submissions shaped the map of the nation on a linguistic basis. Karnataka, Kerala, and later Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, and Haryana emerged not from coercion, but from listening. It was a democratic triumph drawn not by the force of rulers but by the voices of the people. What links these chapters is a shared focus on the institutionalisation of power and its spatial expression, which continues even today in state reorganisation, as part of an ongoing process involving the redrawing of authority and belonging.

The next part of the book revisits India through contested figures whose lives reveal the ambitions, ambiguities, choices, and possibilities that shaped India's journey towards modernity. This part begins when Vasco da Gama stepped onto the shores of Calicut in 1498. His arrival set in motion the long arc of integration, affluence, and domination that would crystallise in the post-World War globe (p. 136). Its shadows fell heavily on Mysore, when Tipu Sultan recognised with rare clarity that survival required not merely defeating the British but expelling them, making him in retrospect "a nationalist before nationalists were around" (p. 142). His death in 1799 closed not an era but a possibility, a road whose unfulfilled and unrealised potential continues to haunt India's modern arc. This tension between collapse and possibility returned in 1857, when rebellion lifted the fading poet-emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar into reluctant prominence. Politically diminished yet imaginatively expansive, Zafar embodied a world of longing and cosmopolitan memory. When the sepoys came to him, he agreed hesitantly and fatefully, to lead them, thus becoming "a bird in a storm, but a giant one" (p. 149). His exile marked a civilizational break, opening corridors through which nationalism could later

walk. Alongside this, there was also a transformation of thought through a melodious language—Urdu—and a more melodious form of writing—poetry—and through the most melodious person, Ghalib, all of which unfolded within India. His writings on famine, ruin, and imperial collapse offered a philosophical compass that is still resonant with contemporary anxieties. His meditations on universalism, on the balance between progress and stability, and the tension between freedom and unfreedom, according to Salil Misra, speak to the existential core of modernity itself (p. 153). Another important figure in the theatre of negotiations and missteps was Mountbatten, the last Viceroy. He entered not as a solitary arbiter but as one actor among many. He presided over decisions in haste, such as advancing independence from June 1948 to August 1947 and delaying communal awards. Yet beneath these headline events lived the unsung heroes: the Ghadar revolutionaries, Chandra Singh Garhwali, and the INA, figures whose failures were formative and whose sacrifices pressed upon the national conscience (p. 175). Read together, these lives mark the stages of India's transformation, from European arrival to resistance against them through mass awakening.

Out of these collisions emerged one of India's most remarkable achievements: the crafting of its constitution, which is discussed in part four. The narrative begins by situating the Indian Constitution not as a sudden post-colonial artefact but as the outcome of a prolonged twentieth-century gestation. This included a series of colonial "installments" stretching from 1858 to 1935 (p. 199). The colonial government rejected the Nehru Report of 1928, but it made a huge contribution to the central ideas of the Indian Constitution by bringing forth the notions of fundamental rights, a bicameral legislature, and universal adult franchise. The Constituent Assembly debates convened in 1946 were a result of the pressure on Britain in the post-World War II period and the Quit India Movement of 1942. The Assembly emerged as a crucible where India's political, social, and economic future was consciously imagined. Thus, the Constitution became a blueprint for India's transformation. Its durability, the author argues, lies in its distinctive combination of democratic consensus and elite expertise, represented in the indirect election of its members such as Ambedkar and K.T. Shah. At first glance, the Indian Constitution might appear as a successor to the Government of India Act, 1935, but on a deeper level, its ideological preference for egalitarianism stood in contrast to colonial interests. The uniqueness of the Constitution lies in the process of its making

through disagreements, debates, and reasoned compromise, for instance, Gandhi-Ambedkar exchanges on Dalits and separate electorates. The process of its making has been the legacy of the Indian freedom struggle through democratisation of politics, mass participation, and global influence, inclusive of socialist thought. Despite all these merits, it missed the opportunity to reimagine gender justice.

The transformation of India, through Constitution-making shaped its post-independence years, especially the revolutionary period from 1947-52, marking the onset of independence and the first elections in post-colonial India. The early march towards modernity was guided by state agency, secularism and democracy, but as argued by Shahid Amin,[1] the persistence of communalism, the pretence of "Unity in Diversity," (p. 225) and slow economic growth have hampered this march in the long run. But where is the answer to this paradox? The author sees it as embracing a balance between economic hardware and ideological software. This puts a responsibility on us as citizens to fulfil the dream that our constitution-makers dreamt of.

Part five takes us to the person who was the answer to the question of ideological software raised earlier. This is the man who refused to be frozen but was continually evolving Gandhi. His late entry into the Indian freedom struggle shows his rooted experiments of truth and nonviolence in South Africa, like Phoenix Settlement, Tolstoy Farm, *The Indian Opinion* newspaper, etc., against the racial discrimination. The techniques he adopted, like satyagraha, nonviolence, and ashram, were all adapted to Indian conditions, but with a new element of fasting. Gandhi's own admission, "I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent" (p. 240), becomes a key to understanding his openness to change, for instance, his shifting engagement with modernity. Despite these inconsistencies, one thing remained constant within Gandhi: his commitment to human service through moral means. For instance, he was neither a traditionalist nor a renunciatory saint; he envisioned society as an "oceanic circle" (p. 255), advocating for a decentralised power structure. This moral vision was further illuminated through his dialogue with

[1] Shahid Amin, "Representing the Musalman: Then and Now, Now and Then," in *Subaltern Studies XII: Muslims, Dalits and the Fabrications of History*, ed. S. Mayaram, M.S.S. Pandian, and A. Skaria (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 1-35.

Nehru, which was multidimensional in nature. The Nehru-Gandhi relationship was marked by disagreements, mutual correction, and synthesis. For instance, Nehru's critique of *Hind Swaraj*, capitalism, Gandhi's reluctance towards constitutional matters, his strategy of multi-pronged struggle in a phased manner against the British, as opposed to Nehru's strategy of one large-scale struggle of total independence. Their exchanges shaped both the strategy and imagination of the national movement; and in this process, both of them were transformed as well. This section offers a measured assessment of Gandhi's engagement with women's questions. While he expanded women's participation in mass movements and redefined courage and resistance as feminine virtues, he was reluctant to challenge entrenched gendered roles. He was also sceptical towards women's political representation through positive discrimination.

Despite these contradictions, it is his final interview with Margaret Bourke-White that marked his commitment to ethical means, for he believed that even the atomic bomb must be confronted with "prayerful action" (p. 309). Unfortunately, Gandhi has been misused in the contemporary politics, especially through the misinterpretation of his emphasis on religion which, for Gandhi, signified moral order rather than sectarian identity. It was in this climate of misinterpretation that his assassination took place, amidst with the communal atmosphere of the Partition. His insistence on Hindu-Muslim fraternity and reconciliation with Pakistan was perceived as betrayal by communal forces, leading to his assassination by Nathuram Godse hours after his interview, on 30 January 1948. Yet, his death was not the last goodbye;[2] he continued to be remembered in India, and abroad, by figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. This section affirms that Gandhi is India's gift to the world.

Thus, the book under review is a reminder of India's modern story as a collage of fall and rise, dominance and resistance, poetic lamentation and constitutional vision. The journey that began with a ship at Calicut and found one of its most restless centres in Gandhi continues, still unfinished, uncontained, and alive.

[2] The phrase 'not the last good bye' is taken from David Servan-Schreiber, *Not the Last Goodbye: Reflections on Life, Death, Healing and Cancer* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

What sustains this book is its language, simple yet textured with an engaging, almost conversational cadence that invites the reader into complex histories. It has the flavour of storytelling without surrendering historical enquiry, scholarly rigour, and nuances, allowing arguments to surface organically. Its greatest strength lies in what it chooses not to be, neither exhaustive nor encyclopaedic, neither burdened by academic excess nor constrained by disciplinary gatekeeping. Instead, the book is enriching and thought provoking, the intended audience is wide and heterogeneous, from scholars and students to public readers. I am confident each of them will enter its pages with different curiosities and leave with a shared sense of having encountered history as a lived experience rather than archival residue.

References

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