

Using *Makers of Modern India* to Teach about India

By Thomas Lamont

Makers of Modern India

By Ramachandra Guha, editor

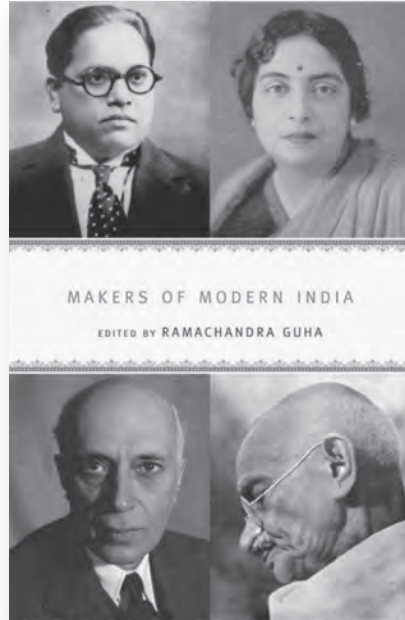
CAMBRIDGE: BELKNAP PRESS, 2013
512 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0674725966,
PAPERBACK

Makers of Modern India, edited by acclaimed Indian historian Ramachandra Guha, is a terrific addition to the growing body of work on India's founders. More than just a compilation of excerpts from selected writings by India's foremost political figures and theorists, this excellent book gives a sense of how the extraordinarily rich trove of work that these influential Indians produced between roughly 1830 and 1970 helped shape India and continues to inform Indians.

This impressive book helps fill a gap—Indian political philosophy—that perhaps only Amartya Sen has done justice to in his wonderfully engaging book, *The Argumentative Indian* (2005). Yet Sen's book deals mostly with ancient and premodern philosophical traditions, whereas Guha's is squarely focused on modern Indian political philosophers who directly impacted India in their own time. Guha observes that “[India's] leading politicians were its leading political thinkers” (1), who also happened to write a great deal, Gandhi being the most prolific of the bunch.

Gandhi and the others whose writings are included in *Makers of Modern India* are a diverse and impressive group of Indians and represent the perspectives of different genders, generations, religions, regions, and socioeconomic groups, especially caste. Included are critics of Gandhi, socialists, secularists, conservatives, and, of course, Gandhi, whom Guha calls a bit of everything. Critics of *Makers of Modern India* have complained that there are significant omissions. There certainly are. Yet this is perhaps the price to be paid in order to be able to give depth to those who are included in this roughly 500-page tome.

Indira Gandhi, who Guha admits had an enormous impact on India and, ironically, is included in another book by Guha, does not merit inclusion. Guha dismisses her by noting that while her leadership was influential, her ideas were not original and, furthermore, her staff wrote almost all her speeches and published



writings. Guha also omits Indian Marxists who have had a significant impact on many Indians, including the individuals featured in this book. Guha argues that their writings are simply “derivative” of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Guha acknowledges two other major omissions—Subhas Chandra Bose and Vallabhbhai Patel. Guha calls them “out and out ‘doers,’ whose writings were either insubstantial or merely humdrum” (12). Aurobindo Ghose and Swami Vivekananda, despite being prolific writers on the nexus of spirituality and politics, are dismissed as having an influence that passed with their deaths because, unlike Gandhi, their influence “never really extended beyond the middle class” (12).

Guha even omits one of his favorite Indians, the “grand old man of Indian politics,” Dababhai Naoroji.

The nineteen individuals whose writings are included in *Makers of Modern India* are each slotted into one of five parts, each of which includes a very useful synopsis of the historical context of the material, as well as useful, short biographical sketches of the writers. Each document is then given a brief introduction by Guha. This approach allows teachers to pick and choose which documents they want their students to read, allowing tremendous flexibility in almost any course.

Part 1 of *Makers of Modern India*, “The Opening of the Indian Mind,” is short and uses only the writings of Rammohan Roy, the

dominant Indian thinker of the first half of the nineteenth century, who sought to modernize India through accommodation with the British, by, for example, calling for the end of *sati*, the traditional practice of a wife immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Part 2, “Reformers and Radicals,” is much more substantial and focuses on the post-1857 generation of Indian nationalists, including the following: Sayed Ahmad Khan, a contemporary of Roy's who focused on modernizing the subcontinent's Muslims; Jotirao Phule, an advocate for lower- and middle-caste Hindus, especially in rural communities; G. K. Gokhale, the late nineteenth-century liberal reformer who may have influenced Gandhi more than any other Indian political figure; Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a radical Hindu nationalist and Gokhale's fiercest challenger within the Indian National Congress; and Tarabai Shinde, an obscure but prolific nineteenth-century feminist.

Part 3, “Nurturing a Nation,” is extensive and includes quite a few excerpts from Gandhi's work, as well as material from the following: Rabindranath Tagore, the patriotic poet; B. R. Ambedkar, champion of the “untouchables” and the midwife of India's constitution; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League and founder of Pakistan; “Periyar” E. V. Ramaswami, a radical liberal and reformer from south India; and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a socialist feminist. This chapter could certainly have included some of those people in the previous chapter, and perhaps vice versa. Yet for most purposes, it probably does not matter.

Part 4, “Debating Democracy,” focuses on postindependence India and includes the writings of the following: Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's protégé and India's long-serving prime minister; M. S. Golwalkar, a Hindu supremacist who was longtime director of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), to which current Indian leader Narendra Modi belonged as a youth; Rammanohar Lohia, an independent whom Guha likens to Trotsky and who in 1964 was arrested in the United States for protesting Jim Crow laws in Mississippi; Jayaprakash “JP” Narayan, a fiery, grassroots socialist who eschewed national politics to organize people at the local level; C. Rajagopalachari, an autodidact whom Mohandas Gandhi called the “keeper of my conscience”; and Verrier Elwin, an Englishman turned Indian, who became a champion of the “tribals,” India's indigenous population that was largely

ignored by the leaders of India's independence movement.

Part 5, "A Tradition Re-Affirmed," like the opening section, is short and focuses on one individual, in this case Hamid Dalwai, a Muslim who fought against religious extremism and obscurantism, especially within Islam.

By having substantial excerpts rather than simply a few lines quoted here and there, *Makers of Modern India* puts the focus squarely on the Indian political thinkers and their writings. In doing so, Guha allows readers to reach their own conclusions in the course of reading the documents. Furthermore, the selection of documents and their excerpts seems sensible and effective. They are not too long nor too short, and they demonstrate the wide range of political thinking among India's most influential citizens. The book also includes a very useful bibliography for students and teachers who may want to dig more deeply into the topic.

In writing *Makers of Modern India*, Guha was inspired by American historian Richard Hofstadter's classic, *The American Political Tradition*. With *Makers of Modern India*, Guha seeks to show how India produced political thinkers at least as equal in influence and intelligence as America's most recognized political thinkers. Like the United States and many other young countries, India has a group of founders, even if Gandhi, perhaps like George Washington, sits at the top alone. And like the Americans featured in *The American Political Tradition*, Guha sees the figures in *Makers of Modern India* as more than just an inspiration for the home crowd; for him, they are an inspiration and model for people in the non-Western world who seek to build modern, wealthy, stable societies out of communities wracked by desperate poverty, ignorance, and social violence. With barely disguised pride, Guha declares, "India can give the world the idea of a state and constitution that protects far greater religious and linguistic diversity than is found in any other nation" (470).

Of course, Guha has also written this book in part to "make Indians more aware of the richness and relevance of their modern political tradition" (270-1). In this sense, Guha has tried to emulate Gertrude Himmelfarb's book, *The Roads to Modernity*, a paean to the political writings of the European Enlightenment. Guha in fact argues that since the early nineteenth century, India has been going through its own Enlightenment (465). Guha claims, "... there were, and are, five revolutions simultaneously occurring in India: the urban revolution, the industrial revolution, the national revolution, the democratic revolution, and the social revolution" (4).

He adds that the nineteen individuals featured in *Makers of Modern India* "lived through these revolutions" (5).¹

Although he is sometimes dismissed in India as an "old school" academic who does not appreciate changes in India of late, Guha is generally regarded as one of India's finest historians, if not the expert on twentieth-century India. His book *India After Gandhi* (2008) is perhaps the best single volume on India since independence. In *Makers of Modern India*, Guha's eloquence and passion for his subject come out most lucidly in the epilogue, as does a better sense of the historiography of the subjects in the book. Notably in this section of the book, Guha describes a wonderful exchange of letters between Narayan and Nehru in which these giants of India discuss the nature of power in a democracy, "how to win or exercise political power and how to reform or reshape society." (464) One striking aspect of the readings in this book is that, unlike the United States' founders, the makers of modern India, with very few exceptions such as J. Narayan, debated relatively little about the structure of government and how to manage and limit governmental power within a political system. Instead, India's founders were obsessed with the issues that continue to bedevil India, including communalism, economic and social inequality, and regional and caste identities. Reflecting this reality, most of the ninety-eight amendments to India's constitution that was promulgated in 1950 have to do with these divisive issues

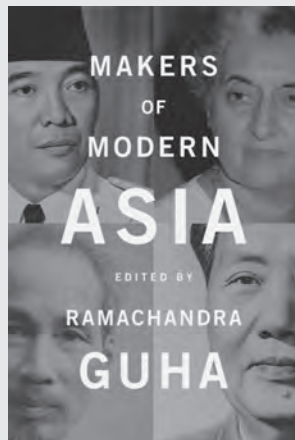
rather than questions of rights, as is the case in the American constitution.

The interesting similarities between American and Indian history point to the relevance of *Makers of Modern India* for Americans. In the book's excerpts of Gandhi's writings Americans will hear echoes of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the selections by Nehru, Americans will detect the influence of Thomas Jefferson. There are also notable differences; unlike Hofstadter's group of American political figures, Guha's Indians in *Makers of Modern India* are not all cut of the same cloth. In this regard, Guha may be correct in thinking that the writings of his subjects may have more applicability, or at least resonance, with readers in today's increasingly less Anglo-centric world. ■

NOTE

1. Guha's grasp of non-Indian history, especially US history, is perhaps dubious. He argues that no Indian thinkers had the kind of "canonical status" that Lenin and Mao enjoyed in their countries, when, of course, these two figures created dictatorships that allowed for the emergence of cults of personality. Guha perhaps jumps the gun when he suggests that, as President of the United States, Barack Obama is the equal of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt (3).

THOMAS LAMONT teaches Indian history, Chinese history, world history, and international relations at the Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts, where he also serves as Chair of the History Department.



Makers of Modern Asia

By Ramachandra Guha, editor

CAMBRIDGE: BELKNAP PRESS, 2014

400 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0674365414, HARDBACK

Readers interested in well-written biographical vignettes of eleven Asian leaders that substantially influenced twentieth- and twenty-first-century Asia and the world should find Guha's latest compilation an excellent and informative read. In addition to Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the book contains chapters on Chiang Kai-shek, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Sukarno, Deng Xiaoping, and Lee Kuan Yew. Guha also provides a useful introduction, "The Politics Behind the Economics of Asia's Rise." Each chapter tends to be on average about twenty-five pages. The length, the accessible prose, and the fact that virtually every author selected for the volume is a recognized scholar who has prior publications about the individual they depict in the publication make this book particularly appealing for students and teachers. Notably, no Japanese political leader is included in the book. Guha's explanation for this omission in his introduction is certainly debatable, which makes the introduction provocative and even more appealing for classroom discussion.