CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL & CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF INDIA
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIA

As late as 1920, it was believed that civilisation in India dated back only to the time of Alexander's invasion in the 4th century B.C. The problem was that the Hindu people unlike the Greeks, the Europeans, the Chinese and the Arabs, never developed the art of historical writing. India did have a considerable historical tradition, embodied in both its literature and its semi-religious works known as the 'PURANAS' but until the early 1800s little was known of the history of the Hindu people before the Muslim invasions of the 11th century A.D.

ANCIENT INDIA

Then came the discovery of the ancient Indus civilisation. Some time in the mid-19th century, British engineers laying a rail track between Karachi and the Punjab stumbled across a vast quantity of ancient sun baked bricks, which were being used by locals to provide solid foundations for the track. It was later found that these bricks were over 5000 years old. Intrigued, archaeologists visited the area in the 1920s and presently came up with two buried cities-Mohanjodaro (mound of the dead) along the Indus, and Harappa on the Ravi. A rapid
series of other discoveries, in the Punjab and in Gujrat, confirmed that an ancient civilisation with well planned cities, large scale commerce, skilled craftsmen, knowledge of mathematics and script, and sophisticated social structure existed in India as long ago as 3000 B.C. This was a timely discovery. To know that they belonged to one of the earliest areas of civilisation in the world, contemporary with ancient Egypt and Sumer, provided the modern Indian people with just the kind of national pride and feeling they needed to achieve unity, and with it Independence.

The Indus civilisation was created by the 'original' Indians whose descendants still inhabit the South of the century today. This civilisation then spread to northern and western India while the original cities fell into disuse. Around 1500 B.C. the Aryans came from the north, mounted on horses and riding in chariots. They were acausasian people who brought a rich language tradition to India, later to result in the Sanskrit literary classics of the Vedas. Around 800 BC they learned how to make iron tools and weapons, and then pushed further east and south-wards to the Gangetic plain where they founded villages, tribal republics and well-governed
powerful states. These communities developed agricultural and mercantile wealth.

Under Cyrus, then Darius (521-485 BC), the Persians conquered the Indus Valley regions of the Punjab and Sindh. Their was the passing visit, but they left some interesting influences on religion, art and administration. The Greeks, under Alexander the Great, spend even less time in India-Alexander overthrew Darius III in 331 B.C., advanced as far as the Beas River in 326 B.C., conquered King Porus and his elephants, and was then compelled by his troop to return home, leaving behind a series of garrisons and administrative systems to keep the trade links open with west Asia and the consequent exchange of ideas and art.

The powerful Maurya dynasty of Magadha (present day Bihar) which rose under the monarch Chandragupta, cut out an extensive swathe of territory across the Indo-Gangetic plain, from Bengal in the east into the heart of Afghanistan in the north-west. By this time the religious legacy of the first Aryans, Brahmanical Hinduism, had laid down firm roots, and the 6th century B.C. protest movements of Budhism and Jainism, were also well established. The caste systems, interestingly, was starting to splinter-by Chandraguptas time, the original four castes had given way to at least seven definite classes of Indian society: priests and scholars, graziers
and hunter, artisans and traders, tillers, police and bureaucrats.

The Mauryan empire reached its zenith under Ashoka (268-31B.C.), who consolidated the north, conquered as far south as Mysore, and then drove east to Orissa. His fateful battle here, at Kalinga, caused him to renounce warfare forever (so appalled was he by the carnage that he had wrought) and to espouse Buddhism. He had messages of peace inscribed on rocks and pillars all over his domain, notably in Orissa, in Gujarat at Sarnath and Sanchi, and in Delhi. He also sent his son Mahendra over to Sri Lanka (armed with a sapling of the Bodhi Tree) to spread the message of Buddhism.

The Mauryan power collapsed within a century of Ashoka's death. In its heyday though, this empire probably ruled over more of India than any other until the time of the British. In its wake, came a number of different dynasties—Brahmin rulers in the Indo-Gangetic plains, Telgus in the Deccan plain, and Cholas (around Madras), Cheras (Kerala) and Padyas (Tamil Nadu) in the south, while the Tamils busied themselves in spreading Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Indian philosophy, art and medicine to Cylone, Combodia, Jawa, Rome and the far east (either by invasion or trade), the Telgus—self styled' Lords of
Deccan'-were mainly engaged in building Buddhism stupas (burial mounds). During their rule Hinayana Buddhism, in which the Buddha was represented by stupas, footprints, elephants and trees, flourished. This form of Buddhism continued to around A.D. 400, but had been effectively supplanted by the Mahayana form at least a couple of centuries earlier. The Buddhist influence at this time was so strong that when the Greeks revisited, occupying the Punjab and invading the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra (Patna) in 150 B.C. their King (Menander) promptly converted to Buddhism. But what was happening in the north of India was invariably a very different story to what was happening in the south. In the north, Hinduism continued to flourish more or less unaffected.

INVASIONS:

As foreign invasions became more and more frequent, India became a virtual melting pot of different cultures. Some say it was simply born to be invaded, its geography certainly points that way. The northernmost zone of the country— the soaring Himalayan range of mountains—gave Indians the illusion of being guardeds by an impassable wall. But there was always a series of accessible passes—the Khyber, the Bolan and the Khurram in the northwest, and others linking India to Tibet—and these were the routes which for three millennia at least
brought invader and trader across the Afghan-Punjab saddle. They came in the main to loot the vast Indo-Gangetic plains, an apparently inexhaustible granary. They were marauders from the north, who crossed over the passes in the autumn before snowfall, descended to the Indian plains just as the crops began to ripen, fought the traditional big battle in the Punjab, spent the winter methodically looting the rich cities and raiding winter crops, and then-unless they decided to found an empire-disappeared back across the mountains before the hot season arrived.

As such invaders continued to make their inroads through the north-western passes, India received visits from western China, from the Scythians (around 130 BC), from the Parthians, and from the Kushans of central Asia. Then came a century-long free-for-all, followed by the rise of India's greatest Hindu dynasty—the Imperial Guptas. This empire was founded by Chandragupta II in AD 319, and for the ensuing three centuries (ending in AD 647) ruled an extending domain which eventually included the whole Indo-Gangetic plain down to the northern boundaries of Deccan. During this period of peace and stability, art and literature flourished (polished
Sanskrit replacing Pali script) and extremely fine painting
and sculpture were executed at Buddhist centres like
Ajanta, Sarnath and Sanchi. By the end of the Gupta
period, however, the popularity of Buddhism had begun to
wane and the star of Hinduism rose once again. The
break-up of the Gupta Empire meant the general
splintering of north India into a number of separate Hindu
Kingdoms. Prominent amongst these were the Prashiharas of
central India, Gangas of eastern India, the western and
eastern Chalukyas and further south the Cholas, Cheras
and Pandyas. By the 10th-11th centuries these powerful
dynasties had created vast kingdoms, built impressive
capitals and magnificent temples. In eastern India the
temples at Bhubaneshwar and the Sun Temple of Konar-k
are reminder of the splendid Ganga Kingdoms. The temples
of Khajuraho, which draw thousands of tourists to their
erotic sculptures, are the best surviving examples of
central Indian temples. While many thought that India was
in a state of decadence thus paving the way for the
advent of Islam it appears that this was not the case. It
was during the 9th-13th centuries, and in some case the
late 15th century, that the greatest achievements of Hindu
art, music, literature and philosophy were made.
The Muslims:

The Muslim conquest of India had far-reaching effects on the political, social and cultural life of the country. Between AD 1001 and 1027, the infamous Mahmud of Ghazni mounted 17 separate attacks, eliminating Hindu armies, ransacking temples, and sacking cities on each occasion. His most notable victory was the capture of the holy city of Somnath—the wealth and booty he found here were so great that even he couldn't carry it all away. Mahmud also picked up the nasty habit of collecting severed Hindu fingers, one for each chieftain vanquished. But he was never anything more than a glorified bandit, who returned home to Ghazni in Afghanistan after each individual raid. The real conqueror-founder of Islam in India was Mohammed of Ghor, who mounted the first wholesale invasion of the country in 1192, and brought Muslim power to stay. The Hindu Kingdoms of the Gangetic Valley fell without effective resistance to his attacks within a single decade. One of his generals Mohammed Khilji, swept through Bihar in 1193 and effectively destroyed Buddhism overnight—razing all the monasteries and massacring all the monks. Another general, Qutb-ud-din, became Mohammed of Ghori's direct successor,
and after the latter's death in 1206 became the first Sultan of Delhi. But it was left to the Khilji monarchs, notably Ala-ud-din Khilji, to consolidate the Muslim conquest. He ruled for 20 years (1296-1316).

The next Turkish dynasty, the Tughlaqs, ruled from 1320-97. It had two great Kings—the first Mohammed Tughlaq was very potty; the second Mohammed Firuz, was a great patron of the arts and architecture. His successor Nasir-ud-din, fell victim to the encroaching Mongol hordes. In 1397 Timur (known as Tamerlane to the Europeans) swept over the Indus, massacred 100,000 Hindu prisoners captured in the Punjab, and toppled the Delhi Sultans. The direct result of his invasion, which nobody could withstand, was to sever India into two parts. Parts of northern India returned to the Turks and the Afghan princes; the south regained independent status under Hindu kings. The latter development was significant. Even while the Muslim Sultans of Delhi were in control of parts of the North in south India the mighty Vijayanagar Empire was founded in 1336 with its capital at Hampi.

The Mughal Emperors:

Of all the invading dynasties, the Mughals were the most influential. A succession of six Mughal emperors
left behind a powerful legacy of magnificent buildings, including the Taj Mahal. Their rise was quick and dramatic. The first Mughal monarch, Babur, ruled from 1527 to 1530. He believed it his duty to conquer India and release it from the rule of the Turks. But he started with the Afghan Lochi rulers of Delhi, employing superior tactics to defeat an army 10 times stronger than his own. Then he advanced, with some trepidation, against the Hindus. The reason for his nerves was that for once the Hindu forces had buried their differences and managed to form a united confederacy under the Rajput monarch, Rana Sanga. This redoubtable individual was a living tapestry of warlike wounds—he had lost an eye and an arm, and had 80 battle scars on his body. But Babur won the day, and raised himself to the status of 'Ghazi', slayer of infidels.

He had intended to stay, but then found he didn't much care for India after all. He liked its countryside, its monsoon and its gold, but he was plagued by its heat, winds and dust. He died, still dreaming of a return to the cool, fragrant air of Kabul, and India passed to his even more hesitant son, Humayun. This young man was a natural recluse, more interested in scholarly pursuits than in administering an empire. Seizing on this weakness, the brilliant chieftain Sher Shah attacked and
retook parts of the empire for the Afghans (1540). He was an enlightened ruler, who ruled only 5 years but achieved more in them-far-reaching administrative, financial and transport improvements than his three weak successors (1545-56) put together. Then, after 15 years of exile, Humayun finally recaputured Delhi and Agra for the Mughals (1556). His honour vindicated, he enjoyed a few weeks of power, then tripped down some steps hurrying to prayer, and fractured his skull.

Humayun's son, Akbar (1556-1605) was only 14 when he came to the throne. It took him 6 years to remove power-hungry guardians (one was flung off the ramparts of a Delhi fort) and to become the real ruler. He then revealed himself to be the greatest of the Mughal emperors. A man of culture, intelligence, wisdom and equity, he was also a military genius with a practical motto: 'A monarch should be ever intent on conquest, otherwise his neighbours will rise in arms against him. Instead of trying to subjugate the Hindus (an impossible task, in view of their numbers) he went far to integrating them into his empire with a policy of effective administration. To start the ball rolling, he married a Hindu and raised her Rajput Kingmen to high rank. Then he recruited several Hindu advisers, generals and
administrators, abolished a number of taxes on Hindus, and evolved his concept of a secular state with an eclectic faith combining the best of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. This enlightened experiment failed (with Akbar himself as the supreme godhead, it could only be short-lived), but the memory of it still lives on in Akbar's greatest monument, the ghost city of Fatehpur Sikri.

On Akbar's death, his son Jahangir (1605-27) took over. He was an excellent builder, who left fine marble tombs and mosques in and around Agra (and in his beloved Kashmir), but his achievements were obscured by two things: his craving for alcohol and women, and his sadism. Gifted with none of his father's vision for a united people, he put down the Hindu Rajputs and the Deccani Muslims with calculated ruthlessness.

The fifth Mughal, Shah Jahan (1637-58), spend half his reign campaigning against the Rajputs and the Deccan Kingdoms. Merciless in his dealings, he gave his Hindu subjects very short shrift (even destroying their places of worship), but in his case military shortcomings were obscured by architectural triumphs. Shah Jahan created the greatest Mughal monuments,
including the Taj Mahal, the famous Pearl Mosque in Agra Fort, the Royal Mosque (Jama Masjid, biggest and best mosque in the world) and the Red Fort in Delhi. But this passion for building eventually led to his downfall, and his son Aurangzeb had him imprisoned for the last 7 years of his life—partly to stop him spending any money.

Aurangzeb (1658-1707) was the last and the adamant of the great Mughal emperors. He was a pious puritan, who dressed simply, lived frugally and died having given strict orders for a modest tomb. Aurangzeb was also a single-minded religious zealot who systematically murdered his brothers and their sons, extended the empire's boundaries even further in order to replace as many Hindu temples with Muslim mosques as possible, and reduced his non-Muslim subjects to second-class citizens. In later years, after much spilling of blood, he realised that he had sown the seeds of the Mughal Empire's destruction.

After Aurangzeb, came a long line of insignificant, wastrel and weak kings. The dynasty developed and finally came to an end under the profligate Mohammed Shah, nicknamed the 'Merry Monarch', who was still drinking, fornicating and generally having a ball in Delhi's Red Fort when the Persian invader, Nadir
Shah, suddenly dropped in. He arrived in 1739, stripping Delhi clean of its wealth, massacring 150000 of its civilian population, and in 5 short months' stay, wrecking her system of administration. To load all the booty he had collected and take it back home to Persia, he employed 1000 elephants, 7000 horses and 10,000 camels.

The Mughal king he left behind now ruled just the four walls of Delhi's Red Fort, but the bell had tolled for the Mughals a lot earlier. When the blood-thirsty Aurangzeb began to assert his Islamic stamp on the Mughal Empire he provoked the Hindu revival—under the Maratha monarch Shivaji—which was to lead to its downfall. By the middle of the 18th century, authority over practically the whole of Hindustan outside the Punjab had passed to the Marathas. It was only when Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) broke their power at Assaye (1803) that the British finally became the leading power in India, and only when the Maratha Empire was finally extinguished (1818) that the East India Company became the effective sovereign of the country.

The Mughals, a sad postscript, had come to blows with the British some time earlier, in 1757, at the
battle of Plassey. Their defeat here signalled the birth of a new (and final) imperial power in India—the British Raj.

The Raj

The British were not the first Europeans to arrive in India—that privilege went to the Portuguese. In 1498 Vasco da Gama landed at modern-day Kerala, commencing a century-long trade monopoly for the Portuguese, and establishing the base for their later conquest of Goa (1510), then Daman and Diu. The British first appeared in 1612, establishing a trading-post at Surat in Gujarat. For the next 240 years Britain's interest in India was administered not by the crown or the government, but by the London-based East India Company. They founded bases at Madras (1640), Bombay (1668) and Calcutta (1690). To consolidate them, and to establish its trade dominance in India generally, the British had to deal with the Dutch and the French, both of whom had similar trading-posts in the country. The French took Madras in 1746, but lost it back to the British in 1749. Their power in India ended with the surrender of Pondicherry in 1761. The Nawab of Bengal took Calcutta in 1756, but lost it back to Robert Clive in the following year. In the south, the 'Tiger of Mysore' Tipu Sultan (and his father Hyder Ali) inflicted a
series of defeats on the British, they were overcome in 1799. With the defeat of the Marathas in 1803, it only remained for the Company to fight the two Sikh Wars and gain control of Punjab (1849) to put the final seal on empire. The British had come to trade but the need to seek more markets and protect sources of supply lead to an imposition of an alien administration supported by an ever expanding army.

The success of the British was partly the result of Mughal collapse and subsequent Hindu disunity, but owed more to their policy of toleration towards the conquered. Following Akbar's lead, they made little attempt to interfere in Hindu religion, customs or culture; rather, they made it quite clear that they had come just for trade. Many Indian princes no doubt threatened by the disciplined British army, decided to take a break from in-fighting and to accept British suzerainty. They included most of the Rajput princes, the relics of the Mughal Empire like the Nizam of Hyderabad (at the time, and for a long time to come, among the richest individuals in the world) and various survivors of the defeated Maratha confederacy.

The British achieved the closest thing to an Indian empire yet (even the most powerful of prior
civilisations had not encompassed all of present-day India), but the country remained just a motley of separate states, each one ruled in name by a Prince, Nawab or Maharajah, but in actuality by the residing British Viceroy or Governor-General. The first of these crown-appointed officials, who replaced the old Company Governor-Generals, which had begun with Warren Hastings in 1774, was Lord Canning in 1859; the last was Mountbatten in 1947. With their rule established, the British went into large-scale iron and coal mining, tea production, coffee and cotton growing, and generally exploited India's vast, largely untapped natural resources. In order to facilitate this exploitation they developed an extensive system of railway, massive irrigation and agricultural programmes, and (some say most importantly) a code of civil law. Actually, it was far from democratic since the conquerors always held the privileged position, but it did ensure an element of equality among the Indian themselves. And this was in a country where Hindu law had previously differentiated strictly between Brahmin and non-Brahmin, where Islamic law had one set of codes for Muslims and quite another for infidels. The British also instituted the bureaucracy of the civil service and while keeping the Indians at a comfortable distance from any real power within it- set about creating
an Indian middle class with an increasing responsibility for it. Ultimately, knowledge of ideas and institutions brought an intense desire for self-government.

But the first sign of Indian disaffection against British rule probably had little to do with Independence. The Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 had, in fact, no real discernible cause apart from greased bullets. Somehow, a rumour spread among Muslim and Hindu troops serving with British forces that new bullets being issued were greased with pig (unclean to Muslims) and cow (sacred to Hindus) fat. Too slow to deny this rumour, the British soon had 47 mutinying Indian battalions on their hands. The Mutiny erupted at Meerut, near Delhi, and spread rapidly across north India. The sepoys, actively assisted by disaffected Sikh forces, visited Delhi, dug up the phantom Mughal emperor there (Bahadur Shah) and appointed him reluctant Emperor of Hindustan. His rule lasted just 6 months. There were repeated massacres and sieges on both sides before the Mutiny ran out of steam. In January 1858 Bahadur Shah was sentenced by a British military tribunal to life imprisonment, and with his departure into exile the great Mughal dynasty came to an ignominious end.

The Mutiny was the cause of the transfer of India from the rule of the East India Company to sovereignty of the British Crown. It had been an
unexpected blow to British confidence, and it was one which both sides never forgot. The Indian Mutiny had been crushed, but the spirit of rebellion remained alive and slowly began to grow. Resistance was centralised in a sudden, wholesale reform of Hinduism itself. Previous attempts to rally Indians round the banner of the Hindu religion had always foundered on the rocks of caste—the exclusiveness of the Brahmins gave them no feel for the mass popular pulse. But a few determined visionaries—Ram Mohun Roy, Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda and even the European Mrs Annie Besant—led a series of important reforms designed to revive Hinduism as a truly modern religion, and thus to totally reorganise (and standardise) totally Hindu society. The movement for social reform ran alongside a parallel movement for national identity and freedom. The latter was fed by a number of timely developments, including the discovery of India's antiquity (excavation of Indus Valley civilisation); the revival of Sanskrit and renewed appreciation of its classics like the Bhagavad Gita; and the repatriation of Buddhism, with the coming to light of its long-lost literary, artistic and philosophical achievements. Hindu history and heritage was refound, largely through the researches (ironically) of Western scholars, and this contributed significantly to the
evolving national self-image of India as a whole. Other groups, such as the Muslim, also began to develop a sense of national pride and seek self determination.

The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, was destined to give the British their most prolonged opposition. It began by trying to unite all the communities in India under one banner, but this was not always possible. The Muslims, in particular, still regarded themselves as a race apart, with their traditions rooted outside India, and were alarmed by the growth of Indian nationalism and its demands for political freedom. Faced by the prospect of a Hindu-dominated free India, they founded the Muslim League in 1906 and began making demands for a separate communal electorate for themselves. The Anglo-Muslim alliance of 1906 was a decisive development: it split India into two nations. Hindus and Muslims were embarked on two entirely different courses. In 1909, perhaps the greatest mistake the British ever made, the Morley-Minto reforms initiated the creation of separate Muslim electorates which directly paved the way for the partition of the Indian Empire.

Gandhi and Independence

The cry for independence, which had become nationwide by the turn of the century, was muted by the
arrival of the First World War. Then it burst forth again—this time as an insistent roar—under the charismatic leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Soon to be styled the Mahatma (Great Soul) of the nation, Gandhi arrived in India in 1915, following a long period of fighting on behalf of human rights in South Africa. Gandhi fervently believed in Hindu-Muslim unity: at no time did he contemplate India as an exclusively Hindu state. His life and thoughts were a direct reflection of the 'Karma Yogin' (saint in action). His campaign for the abolition of untouchability, his famous fasts compelling Hindus and Muslims to live together in harmony, his ideals of ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (passive resistance), and his own life of extreme austerity were all in strict accordance with Hindu traditions. He focused on the movement for independence after the disgraceful massacre of peaceful protesters by armed British troops at Amritsar in 1919, and turned the movement from an ineffective middle-class one to a village-based one of irresistible power.

As the clamour for independence reached its peak, Gandhi was forced to fight a rearguard action against the revived Muslim League under Mohammed Ali Jinnah. After 1936 a demand began for the creation of an independent homeland for Islam, and the fight was on for a
partitioned India. The Second World War brought matters to a head. When in 1942 the Mahatma launched his last great struggle, two things became clear: first, that independence was the only settlement possible with Indian nationalism after the war; second, that partition was inevitable. Jinnah outmanoeuvred both the British and the Indian Congress. When, on 9 August 1942, Gandhi uttered the words in every Hindu's heart and told the British to 'Quit India', Jinnah followed with the demand to 'Divide and Quit'. Against their better judgement the British were forced to do just this. It was a simple case of partition or civil war. As bloody clashes between Muslims and Hindus mounted in frequency and intensity, even the Congress—after a few months' experience of coalition of government (1946-47)—realised that partition was inevitable. As the new British Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, issued the date for Independence—14 August 1947—the old Indian spokesman, Mahatma Gandhi, left the political scene, darkly predicting chaos.

It was worse than chaos. In 1947, the Indian subcontinent had its eastern and western extremes sliced off to form the two wings of Pakistan, one of which is present Bangladesh. But at the time of partition, the new India contained over 35 million Muslims, while the new
Pakistan housed vast numbers of Hindus. The problem was worst in the new border states of Bengal and the Punjab, which had very mixed populations and a long history of intercommunal antagonism, and which were both neatly chopped in two by partition. The situation was explosive, and when, during the weeks following Independence, the mass exodus of Hindus and Muslims, uprooting homes in now 'alien' states and travelling to their new homelands, began, it was the signal for bloody and prolonged carnage on an unimaginable scale. Trainloads of Hindu and Sikh emigrants going east were stopped and butchered by Muslims, while parties of Muslims fighting their way west suffered the same fate from Hindus and Sikhs. Around 10 million people were 'exchanged' following Independence; some 500,000 perished en route.

Such was the extent of the holocaust that Jawarhalal Nehru, Gandhi's political disciple and the first Prime Minister of India, made an unexpected plea for help to the ex-British Viceroy, Mountbatten. 'Ours is the politics of agitation, not of government' he declared. 'Please come back and help us out till we find our feet!'. Mountbatten returned and the crisis was soon overcome. Only in Kashmir was a satisfactory long-term solution not found. The region was claimed by both Pakistan and
India, and since neither would give way over it, the UN was forced to step in and divide it with a demarcation line. But Kashmir continues to be a strong bone of contention, neither side having ever agreed to an official state border.

On 30th January 1948, the last act in the bitter-sweet drama of Independence, Gandhi was assassinated. Shot three times by a Hindu fanatic, he died a disappointed man—his dream of an undivided, free India never realised.

Since Independence:

Fortunately for India, Nehru was a capable successor. Following Independence, he steered the country on a balanced course which made the initial transition to self-government both quick and painless. His favourite word may have been 'dynamic', but his political, economic and social outlook was basically conservative (some say, even static). The developing countries need peace for their development', he stated. They need at least two decades of uninterrupted peace.' To ensure this, he adopted a strict policy of non-alignment with other world powers. For the first 9 years of his premiership,
it worked. But at heart Nehru was a convinced socialist, more than somewhat influenced by Marxism, and he tended to lean markedly in favour of the communist world rather than the democracies. For a non-aligned country to align itself heavily on one side put India at a disadvantage, and lost her both friends and influence over the years. Then in 1956 Russia invaded Hungary. Nehru was forced to show his hand (India was the only non-aligned country to support the USSR's move), and henceforth nobody took his non-alignment seriously. The final humiliation took place in 1962, when Sino-Indian border clashes led to the threat of a Chinese invasion. Nehru made pleas for military aid to both East and West, but while Britain and the US promised immediate help, the USSR stood on the fence of 'non-alignment' and simply advised restraint.

Domestically, Nehru's record was far better. He used a charismatic persona and an unchallenged majority to build up a strong, cohesive central government and thus to consolidate the nascent unity of India. He also made important, progressive social changes, especially with regard to the liberalisation of policies for women. Despite criticism, he also retained good relations with the British excolonisers, and encouraged both a free press and an independent judiciary.
He was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri (for just 20 months), a meek but (when the occasion called for it) surprising strong-willed leader. His premiership was overshadowed by Pakistan's twin attack on India in the Rann of Kutch and in Kashmir in 1965. Shastri, who had never felt that Nehru was militant enough, abandoned India's longstanding policy of peaceful neutrality and retaliated with force. But he was essentially a man of moderate views, and his untimely death shortly after the Pakistan armies had withdrawn spelt the advance of extremism in the country.

A feature of Indian politics is its emphasis on 'personality' leaders. A second has been the failure of these leaders to surround themselves with strong, capable lieutenants. Mahatma Gandhi was an exception. He had begun grooming Nehru for power as early as 1929, realising perhaps the truth of the old Buddhist precept, that a master's prime duty is to create a disciple even stronger than himself. But Nehru himself failed to do this and the vacuum of young generation leaders in the Congress following his death left it seriously out of touch with the masses. Inevitably, the old and the new had to fall out, and Congress was doomed to split.
Into the political breach created by Shastri's death, stepped Indira Gandhi, Nehru's only daughter. She was elected Prime Minister in 1966. Her landslide victory at the polls was partly due to her extravagant promises of bread for the masses, but doubtless owed more to the magic of the name 'Gandhi' (though no relation to the Mahatma), coupled with the right amount of forceful 'personality'. Subsequent reelection in 1971, swept in on a tidal wave of warfever created by Pakistan's treatment of East Pakistan and the subsequent of an independent Bangladesh, confirmed her in a dangerous situation of unchallenged power. By 1975 as attempts to suppress the free and to muzzle the judiciary gave way to more openly fascist policies, serious opposition to her rule surfaced. She retaliated with the so-called state of emergency, freeing herself of regular parliamentary restraints and functioning virtually as an unchallenged ruler. This enable her to push through a number of positive economic reforms and generally improve efficiency. On the other hand, the imprisonment of protesting elements and the disastrous sterilisation and 'people's car' programmes initiated by her son, Sanjay, set the nation against her. (The idea behind this was to produce a car made in India costing Rs 10,000, but the programme failed and the enterprise was nationalised in 1978. Suzuki now own 50%
of the factory.) Under the illusion that the people would support her whatever she did, she unwisely went to the polls in 1977 and lost.

In the place of Indira and Congress came the conservative Morarji Desai and his uncohesive Janata 'People'. Inadequate to the task of government, unable to stop inflation spiralling, Janata broke apart in 1979, and Indira Gandhi returned triumphant in 1980. She tried and failed to deal with escalating social problems including rife corruption, police brutality, persecution of untouchables and Hindu/Muslim/Sikh intercommunal unrest. And her drastic solution to Sikh unrest in the Punjab, culminating in the armed occupation of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, eventually cost her her life. She was shot by an assassin's bullet in October 1984.

The circumstances of her death ensured her son, Rajiv Gandhi an unprecedented victory at the polls in December 1984. In early 1985, everyone was confidently predicting great things of the young Rajiv. 'If the man is not assassinated first,' joked one prominent official, 'he will challenge caste, remove poverty and rid us of corruption.' Within three years Rajiv Gandhi was under attack in his own country. People were sceptical of his promise to usher India into the 21st century by means of a technological revolution. Many Indians see technology as a
threat to jobs, and it was almost with glee that Delhi newspapers announced, in 1987, that two defence scandals had surfaced: the Swedish Bofors company admitted paying millions of pounds in 'commission', and a 7% 'agent's fee' had been involved on a German submarine deal. Members of Rajiv Gandhi's own family were implicated, and his own image as 'Mr Clean' was tarnished beyond repair. To make things worse, he embroiled himself in several regional conflicts, starting with Tamil Nadu (where his peacekeeping force sent to Sri Lanka, was nicknamed 'Indian people-killing force' by resentful Tamils), and later with Pakistan, West Bengal, Kashmir and the Punjab, where his soft approach brought forth a growing voice of disapproval. Rajiv Gandhi lost the next general election in 1990.

For the second time since Independence the Congress Party found themselves in opposition. A coalition government led by V.P. Singh, who had earlier been Finance Minister and Defence Minister under Rajiv Gandhi, tried to form a united government and weather the storm created by Congress rule. Failing miserably in its task, the National Front government was replaced by an interim minority government under Chandra Shekhar. This led to fresh elections in May 1991. Congress under Rajiv Gandhi,
were confident of winning because the National Front government had been unable to govern, and many of its policies were thought to have divided the country. Congress saw themselves as a party of unification. What the result would have been under normal circumstances will never be known, for Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated on 21st May 1991. Congress was returned to power as the largest party in Parliament but was without a majority. P.V. Narsimha Rao, an elderly, experienced Congress politician became the next Prime Minister and has had to face the effects of years of misrule. The new government instituted major economic reforms to stabilise and open the Indian economy to the world market.

Today India is still struggling towards a clear, solid identity— with unity as its prime objective. No amount of self-criticism, however, can disguise some truly remarkable achievements since Independence in 1947. India is presently one of the top industrial powers in the world. Her government and her legal, educational, and military institutions are strong. She is agriculturally self-sufficient, and making rapid strides in space-age technology (in Delhi, computer technology now helps the railways make 45000 seat reservations a day).