



BOOK REVIEW: NOTE BY NOTE: THE INDIA STORY

AUTHOR: V. K. ANANTH*

Note by Note: The India Story 1947-2017. By Ankur Bhardwaj, Seema Chishti, Sushant Singh: Publisher: Harper Collins Publishers (Uttar Pradesh, India, 2018) xxii + 327 pp., Rs. 499 (Paperback), ISBN 978-93-5277-010-6.

5.1: INTRODUCTION:

The past few years have seen journalists venturing with books; it did happen in the 1970s and when Kuldip Nayar and B.G.Vergheese added perspective to their experience to record events they witnessed. The trend spilt into the 1980s as well and Inder Malhotra's biography of Indira Gandhi brought on record the life and the times of one of India's most prominent political leaders. These, indeed, were different from an earlier era when the business of writing books was left to those in the academia.

5.2: THE CONTEXT:

Note by Note: The India Story 1947-2017 by three professional journalists can be counted in this series and yet falling short in many ways. This is an effort with two-and-half themes on hand. It is about a narrative history of the social, political and economic dimensions of India's story since 1947; and an attempt to chronicle them in terms of the time and in a linear way. The second theme is an attempt to chronicle Hindi cinema and locate them in terms of the substantial changes in the technique and the evolution of film making technology over the seventy years. And the half of the two-and-half themes is about Hindi film music over the years.

* Associate Professor, Department of History, Sikkim Central University, krishnananth@gmail.com.



The last part of the themes is familiar story from the episodes that our private TV channels telecast, repeat and re-repeat on weekends and whenever there is very little they have by way of breaking news. These episodes mark a high level of professionalism and with the advantage of the medium – commentaries, interviews with composers and script writers and these interspersed by playing the tunes – unravel the times and the music and the experience is far too better than reading through the prose that sets the stage for each of the seventy chapters in the book under review.

Let me now come to the two other themes. The authors could have done this better by taking up the cinemas that were churned in the respective years as their core concern and seen them through the prism of the social, economic and the political narratives of the year. They do this but only fleetingly and the reason is their predetermined sketch – to tell the story through a specific song in that year – rather than pick up the ore from the larger canvas. It is, indeed, important that the ore (quantity) determines the end product (quality) and where the ore is of restricted quantity the quality of the end product too is bound to be affected.

As to the third of the themes, the authors have done pretty much justice. The second part of each of the seventy chapters is done by way of straight-forward narration of the political, economic and social events in the year and this indeed is useful, particularly to a generation that has grown up in the era of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. I would call this the *Dil Chahta Hai* generation; a generation that saw mobile telephony and satellite TV just when they were in their teens and slid into the smart phones and youtube viewing even before they were past their teens. The book does talk about *Dil Chahta Hai*, a 2001 film but in a fleeting manner.

The treatment of the third theme – the social, political and the economic issues -- is certainly done in a crisp and racy style. Interestingly, this is an area in contemporary history that has developed pretty much, notwithstanding the sense of hesitation among historians to tread their own immediate past, in the past decade. The authors seemed to have used the various published works available to a large extent. And yet there are gaps and instances where they have gone wrong with the facts.

The story of reservations to the OBCs, otherwise known as the Mandal story, is too sketchy in the book. The authors, even while talking about the earliest of the legal wrangles in this story (M.R.Balaji vs State of Karnataka) in 1962 (on page page 76 while narrating the



events of 1963 have blissfully left out the decisive verdict on this aspect – that caste is a legitimate way of looking at social and educational backwardness – in the Indra Sawney case in 1993. This indeed is a yawning gap and also a commentary on the dilemma that those who professed progressive views and yet were shy admitting the inequality that caste promoted in our society. Plenty of those are in journalism belong to that school and the three authors too seem to.

5.3: SOME LAPSES IN THE BOOK:

Let me list out a few factual mistakes in the narrative: The Constitution (First Amendment) Act was in 1951 and not 1950 as is stated on page 20; the Supreme Court had upheld this, including the anti-zamindari aspects of the First Amendment in 1951 itself, in the Shankari Prasad Deo case. The authors, however, convey (page 31) that the land-reforms laws were struck down in 1953. This had happened in 1950 (Kameswar Singh case) and the First Amendment set that right. Similarly, Indira Gandhi, in the AICC session at Bangalore, had pushed Jagjiwan Ram as her candidate for the post of president and her proposal was defeated at the Congress Parliamentary Board. V.V.Giri was a development after the AICC and not as conveyed by the book (on page 101). Sikkim, similarly was made part of India in 1975 and not 1974 as stated in page 128.

The authors, again, have rendered a popular notion – the Shah Commission Report are not officially available till date – into a fact (on page 146); the fact is while the three volume report was removed from a host of places across the country, those who did that had left the copies in tact in the library in Parliament House. This, I will state with some authority, because I had got all of it photocopied as late as in 2008. And had come to hear, even after that, of the copies gone missing from everywhere. The reports were placed in Parliament by the Janata Government along with an Action Taken Report and these are available.

There are, indeed, such important facts of history that have not been mentioned by the authors: The First Press Commission Report in 1953, the rigged elections in Jammu and Kashmir in 1987, the role that Jagmohan played in the worsening of the crisis in Jammu and Kashmir, that J.S.Bhindranwale was a creature of the Sanjay Gandhi-Zail Singh duo in the 1977-79 interlude, that Charan Singh along with Madhu Limaye played a crucial role in breaking up the Janata Party, etc.



5.4: CONCLUSION:

Notwithstanding these and the many gaps, the book is useful and written in racy style. It does leave the space, which the authors could consider, to work on a book linking cinema to the political trajectories in independent India. And if they decide to take up such a project they will have to concede that India is not just about Delhi and its neighbourhood; that used to be when the Moghul empire was at its peak and after Shah Jahan had the Red Fort built. India, after Bahadur Shah Zafar is a larger area and the cinema in Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram and Hyderabad are as important than those that come out of Mumbai.