

The Idea of India

By Sunil Khilnani

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal
Khilnani (politics, Univ. of London) offers a penetrating analysis of the spread of democracy to ever more diverse segments of the Indian body politic. Juxtaposed to this trend is the breakup of the Congress Party's hegemony and the subsequent growth of regional political parties. With the ebbing of congressional power and the elimination of its Socialist economic constraints, the Indian economy has embraced greater growth as the number of Indians living below the poverty line diminishes. Khilnani attributes much of this growth to India's cities, which emerge as paradoxical points of exclusion and economic dynamism when compared with rural India. In the process, national identity has in Khilnani's vision been subsumed by regional political focuses, urban and rural divisions, and greater religious identification. Hence, India's future will necessitate the continuance of a viable democracy sustaining the economic, cultural, and social diversity of the subcontinent. The author skillfully draws out the ironies and paradoxes of Indian history with a subtle, illuminating prose. For informed readers.?John F. Riddick, Central Michigan Univ. Lib., Mt. Pleasant
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From Kirkus Reviews
A profound meditation on the meaning and significance of India, which, Khilnani (Politics/Univ. of London) argues, has a far wider relevance than it is conventional to suppose. The relevance comes in part, of course, from the fact that India is the most populous democracy in the world and that it, unlike most of the countries that became independent in the postwar period, remained a democracy, with the exception of a 22- month ``emergency'' imposed by Indira Gandhi. This is curious, because there was little in India's history to prepare it for democracy, and its independence caused the fearful bloodletting of Partition, when Pakistan broke away. Khilnani calls Partition ``the unspeakable sadness at the heart of the idea of India,'' which raises the question of whether it was a division of one territory between two nations or peoples, or the breaking of one civilization into two territories. He believes that the survival of democracy is largely attributable to Nehru's exemplary adherence to democratic and parliamentary procedures during his long ascendency from 1947 to 1964 and that democracy has now ``irreversibly entered the Indian political imagination.'' But the understanding of democracy has changed. Government have become more centralized and powerful, the stakes have become much higher, the studious secularism and religious tolerance of the earlier period have become more tenuous, and violence has grown. Democracy has come to mean adherence to the electoral process. In his most perceptive essays, Khilnani explores this new conception and what it now means to be an Indian. His analysis of the economy is less satisfactory and fails to give a sense of where India is going since it shook off what was called ``the Hindu rate of growth,'' and whether, amid all the other roiling issues, economic rationality can prevail. An intelligent, well-written. and original contribution to the analysis of a country that, perhaps because it has been a good deal less troublesome than China, has received disproportionately less attention. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

“A splid-and timely-book . . . Spirited, combative and insight-filled . . . Khilnani has woven a rich analysis of contemporary India and its evolution since indepence. I am inclined to agree with [him] on the robustness and staying power of the secular idea of India.” ?*Amartya Sen, The Times Literary Supplement*

“A masterful rebuttal to all cultural romantics and religious chauvinists . . . [A] splid book about definitions of the Indian nation.” ?*Ian Buruma, The New York Review of Books*

“Especially brilliant is Khilnani's attempt to understand the changing nature of India by studying its urban constructs.” ?*Chitra Divakaruni, Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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