

***India Rising: Fresh Hope, New Fears.* By Ravi Velloor. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2016. Softcover: 368pp.**

*India Rising* is a deft chronicle of India during 2004–14, an eventful decade marked by several major developments in Indian politics. During this period, the left-centre United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ruled India. The decade which started with the unexpected victory of the Congress-led UPA, went on to become a “Dysfunctional Diarchy”, with executive power split between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of Rajiv Gandhi. As the Chairperson of the UPA coordination committee and President of the Congress party, she firmly controlled the levers of power. The book ends with the decimation of the Congress party in the general elections of 2014 in which the Congress failed to secure enough seats in the Lok Sabha to formally claim the title of the official opposition. With a gripping narrative style and innovative design, the book is an exciting addition to new writing on India, by an ace journalist with privileged access to the seats of power and scenes of action, crucial to the narrative.

Velloor’s selection of the salient facts of the decade — adroitly chronicled in a precise timeline (pp. 31–33) — shows a fine balance of the UPA at its most effective and at its nadir. There were moments of glory for the UPA such as the opening of the “first bus service in 60 years between Srinagar, capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir” in 2005 (p. 30), the signing of the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and India in 2006, and the posting of 9.4 per cent rate of growth in March 2007, “the strongest in decades” (p. 31) all of which were legacies of the NDA, its vanquished predecessor. Then there were moments of triumph like the passing of epochal legislation such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that ensured a safety net for the rural population in 2006, surviving the trust vote on the nuclear deal in 2008, and the return of the UPA to power in 2009 with an enhanced majority. Then we see the UPA at its nadir as the government of Manmohan Singh unravels with the rupee going into a free-fall, corruption scandals rocking the government in rapid succession and anti-corruption movements gaining in momentum. Most of these facts are well known, but Velloor’s is a decadal history of a novel kind. Rather than recounting the history in a monotonous narration, Velloor invites his readers in to the scene of action and allows the

dramatis personae to say it as it was, in their own words, and in terms of the context and motivations that drove them. He has seen the Indian Air Force violating Sri Lankan territorial sovereignty in 1987, dropping emergency aid to the beleaguered Tamils of Jaffna, from the cockpit of the leading plane; he has been to the morgue to survey the bodies of victims of the Mumbai terrorist attack, and looks away as he is shown the body of the lone female victim from Singapore; and he has witnessed the most of the other salient points, both high and low, of this eventful decade. That gives his narrative its gripping quality. His uncanny sense of the telling fact, observed at first hand, narrated with the sure-footed confidence of a mountain goat negotiating a treacherous precipice, and his deep insight into the character and motivation of the main characters are a pleasure for the general reader and a puzzle with regard to the received wisdom for professional students of Indian politics.

The first impression that some readers might get from *India Rising* is a sense of an ominous ring to its main title. *India Rising* rhymes with “India Shining” — the eponymous slogan of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the campaign of the 2004 parliamentary elections. The claim had disastrous consequences for the BJP, which lost the elections and stayed out of power for the decade that followed. Velloor’s subtitle — *Fresh Hope, New Fears* — reinforces this sense of foreboding, and equivocation, about India, which some cynical commentators describe as a country that is “constantly emerging, but never quite arriving”. Happily, former Singapore’s Foreign Minister George Yeo’s insightful and robustly optimistic foreword dispels any such misgivings right at the outset.

Yeo — an old India hand, thanks to his long involvement with India–Singapore relations — draws attention to the two most important lessons of the book. He endorses Velloor’s argument that India is at a “sweet spot” — being courted by China and the United States — and thus, endowed with a pivotal role. It follows that, suitably managed, India can play a globally significant role by balancing a rising China, spreading out beyond its conventional boundaries and the United States, in search of new allies to contain the challenger to its global dominance. This projection is stymied by the second main assertion. India is not a state like any other, for India is a civilizational state, at its most effective when tolerant of differences, accommodative and not overtly given to power politics. Therein lies the main conundrum of *India Rising*: how can a post-colonial democracy achieve stability, growth and nationhood without the tremendous violence that has accompanied each of these achievements in the liberal democratic West during its long march from feudalism to the modern world?

In keeping with the remit of the book, Velloor raises more questions than he answers. That India is *rising* is obvious from the rate of growth, the ubiquitous Indian business traveller in foreign countries and the galaxy of the high and mighty who now routinely call by India's capital and growth poles, like Bengaluru. What causes this rising and how sustainable is it? Velloor points to the self-corrective capacity of the state in terms of anti-corruption institutions and movements. But, on the capacity of the economy to regenerate, he is less explicit, except to hint at a form of *democracy* that pours resources into the sustaining of vote banks rather than into long term, productive investment (p. 151). On state–society relations, while Velloor draws attention to the political significance of the Muslim population of India (Velloor gives it as 15 per cent; the actual percentage is 13.3) for India's identity, he does not give any evidence of how integrated the Muslim population is with the Indian mainstream and how much access it has to the levers of power. While India's pivotal role, located at the “sweet-spot”, straddling China and the United States is described in great detail, no indications are given as to how India might act and with what consequence. The dilemma of national power versus global morality — quintessential of Nehru's non-alignment and Panchasheela, the rule of five good principles — doggedly follows Velloor's account of the UPA's foreign policy during the decade that he analyses. His portentous last sentence (“In Modi's strengths also lie India's fragility”, p. 358) remains cryptic more than illuminating.

On the whole, as a critical observer of India, Velloor combines unsentimental lucidity with critical empathy, so that the characters of his narrative emerge not as demons, villains or saints but as humans, struggling to make sense of the difficult world in which they are placed, making the best choices they can under the challenging circumstances they face. Readers — including diplomats, statesmen, business travellers and tourists, academics who lack access to Velloor's world, and the plainly curious, who wish to understand what makes India such a resilient and, despite its chaotic outer layer, an orderly society — will benefit from it enormously. Its compelling narrative style and the delectable conflation of fact and imagination makes it an engaging book, and a challenging source for deeper research.

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