

The Ministry of Home Affairs and Indian Democracy

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The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is virtually a shadow government within the Indian government. It is an official entity like none other, with national reach. This is not by accident as Subrata K Mitra narrates with rare elegance. As a former head of Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute, he brings a strong dose of Germanic thoroughness. His 20-year research enhances the book's depth and perspicacity.

This is an important work: 450 pages of text, 390 pages of narrative, and almost 60 pages of extracts from important home ministry documents, a vital source that brings to life the theme. The book's title is explained in the preface. Stealth "refers to the art of maintaining public order with the minimum use of force" and finding ways to enhance "stateness to minimise the resistance to public order" (p xix).

Home is India's national order keeper par excellence. Its complex organisation, nationwide reach and control over the tasks of intelligence gathering, police, and the civil service are testimony to its salience in India's domestic politics, internal security, union-state relations, and administration ... Stealthy governance seeks to conflate popular representation and order-keeping ... It entails tracking the forces inimical to political order, understanding their motivation, and coping with them through diplomacy, negotiation, accommodation, and when all else fails, a swift stroke of the hammer. (p 7)

Mitra adds: "This liminal space between legality and legitimacy is where the Home Ministry belongs" (p 80).

The MHA's origin is traced to a "no-name" department of the East India Company set up in 1748 (p 65). It gained power from the outset, transiting to a home department in 1843. It transmuted itself into one of the most powerful agencies of the new independent government under the charge of Vallabhbhai Patel—India's first home minister. Post independence, the MHA became a national order-keeper. It may be surprising that compared

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with a cluster of 11 major and small countries around the world, rich and poor, India has the lowest prison incarceration rate per 1,00,000 of population—just 33; Germany is next with 75; and others are in the hundreds. But sadly, within this, the unsentenced are the highest as a percentage (p 11).

Faced with policy choices, Indian officialdom looks to "satisficing" (a word the author takes from Herbert A Simon, a management expert). "When a solution cannot be determined because of a lack of information on all alternatives, the goal is to meet the minimum expectations" (p 31). My 35 years in an Indian public service suggest this as an apt description for Indian governance.

The 12 chapters in this book are built around four themes. The first consists of Chapter 2 that examines the manner in which the East India Company practised its colonial rule, providing the foundation on which both British India and the post-colonial Indian state built further. The second cluster (Chapters 3–7) looks at the colonial era and then gets to the major transformation of 1947–50 when the Constitution of India took shape. This was the time of norm creation and innovation as also a three-year period of collaborative competition between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Patel. Two other chapters look at the end of one-party domination that came in 1977 after the post-Emergency elections and a subsequent steady decline in stature of the home ministry.

The third cluster (Chapters 8–10) looks at the three entities on which the MHA depends, namely institutions, processes, and agencies that together allow the MHA to sustain orderly and democratic rule.

The final cluster (Chapters 11 and 12) looks at limitations of the model of governance by stealth through the optic of the performance of the home ministry during the national emergency of 1975–77 and other crises. Let us examine each cluster in detail.

Mitra notes three limitations: first, the work is selective, not providing a chronological history. Second, it focuses on the union government, with only a few examples of regional politics, like the secessionist movements in the North East and the Tamil separatism. Third, the 30-year rule for secret files declassification limited his access to classified papers.

Colonial Period and Post-independence Reshaping

In the first cluster, Chapter 2 looks, in broad brush strokes, at how at the transfer of power, colonial rules were transmuted into Indian governance norms. The arguments presented in this book predate the cacophony, chaos, and confusion that dominates today's public culture, thanks to the ubiquitous smartphone and the endless output of the social media. (The index has no entry for social media.)

A 10-page segment titled "What Holds Together" needs to be read in the original. It is well-argued, but is perhaps too sophisticated. It does not quite take into account a subcontinent-wide system that is chaotic and much too diverse to be classified into neat boxes (pp 50–59). For instance, the last of these seven points is: "Fire power of the democratic state." Is it now excessive? Should it be dialled back?

In the second cluster (Chapters 3 to 7), Mitra gets to historical detail and identifies three successive strands in the colonial theory of the governance of India. Perhaps this analysis is too gentle. Even during the utilitarian or liberal phase, say with its apogee around 1840, the key British objectives were to deny any real historical or cultural personality to India and to treat it as *tabula rasa*, without any authentic heritage of its own. And in the post-1857 third phase, strong British thinking was to deny that India had any capacity for self-rule even while a faint-hearted, gradual transition to parliamentary reform went on.

Another deeper problem with Mitra's analysis is that it makes no mention of the rapacity and thoroughness with which Britain plundered India, not only through one-sided trade deals that benefited only the British East India Company and its successor after 1857 but also that plunder went into the 20th century. In 1932, low agriculture product prices (partly a consequence to the Great Depression 1929 plus colonial price management) forced the Indian peasants to sell some of their traditional hoards of gold to Britain's delight.

Another striking point (Chapter 3) is how the MHA (organigram on p 82) gives the home secretary full command over the entire ministry. (It resembles the Ministry of External Affairs where the foreign secretary is supreme.) That is unlike the finance ministry where now six departments function in a quasi-autonomous fashion. Mitra stresses that the home governance is limited to the Prime Minister, the home minister, and the home secretary.

We take for granted the 1947 transfer of power. But there is no example of the entire top surveillance force of a colony whose main target was the country's independence movement, transforming itself overnight into a loyal institution, at the service of those very individuals. How did things fare later on? Mitra details the slow decline in the quality of the home ministers. During Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975–77, the “governance by diktat” replaced stealth and the equation between the civil service and political leaders evolved unfavourably in terms of governance quality. The civil service also lapsed into bad habits, driven by the lure of post-retirement appointments. Yet, a core of values has survived a mix of idealism and loyalty to the notion of service. This paradox is linked with the enduring, sterling role of the Union Public Service Commission. Two sets of quotations are hilarious (both from T S R Subramanian's book *Journeys through Babudom and Notaland: Governance in India*), a dialogue between an unnamed minister and the Uttar Pradesh (UP) chief secretary and UP chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav's speech to the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officers (pp 119–22).

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine the reshaping of the public services and how the MHA set the mould in a manner where the “genie of Hindu nationalism was kept inside the bottle of the nation state” (p 132). Patel was the guiding force in establishing both the salience of the MHA and in moderating Hindu nationalism during that foundational phase (Chapter 6). Another crucial action was the system of circulation of civil servants—notably of the IAS, the Police Service, and the Forest Service—between the union and the states. Today, this is a matter of contention, especially with states ruled by parties other than the one at the union. This civil service circulation is at the core of India's cohesive governance.

Mitra views the rising tide of political unrest after 1974 as the prelude to the Emergency declared on 25 June 1975. And after the March 1977 elections, the MHA was equally prompt in its actions revoking the legacy of the Emergency. “Remarkably, despite the switch back to democracy, the draconian MISA lived on” (p 211).¹

Mitra's seven-page account of the events of the 1984, the MHA's “nadir,” is a painful reading (pp 216–23). He sets the stage briefly with the June 1984 army action at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's October 30 assassination, and the ensuing four days of riots, particularly in Delhi. He relies mainly on the language of the Ranganath Misra Commission report of February 1987 and the Nanavati Commission report of 2005, describing the horrors of those cascading failures of national governance and their impact on the MHA.

Managing Contentious Issues

In the third cluster, the author circles back to consider in depth three sets of issues: the manner in which the MHA deals with contentious issues between states as also involving states and the centre, the handling of religious disputes, and the legacy of the Emergency.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 look to the institutions, processes, and agencies that hold the Indian state together. What has prevented India from Balkanisation and lapse into autocracy? Why is the standard

response of “unity in diversity” inadequate? This issue gets to the very heart of an enduring India, not only since independence but also over the millennia.

Mitra examines control over the public space. This includes banal examples like the regulation of public holidays and actions that prevent the emergence of subnational movements, facing clamour over regional autonomy. Consider the successful negotiations with dissident movements through discreet actions. Censorship is another mechanism handled by the state governments but coordinated by the MHA.

Chapter 8 examines the key role of the MHA on issues between states with regional boundary issues and engaging with insurgents, particularly in the North East, with varying degrees of success. The reorganisation of the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Militia in 1962 is studied in depth, demonstrating the MHA's focus on the long term. The MHA beavers away at integration, sometimes using the centre–state civil service network to push the boundaries of what can be done in situations where different parties rule the states and the centre. This is an elegant overarching construct that we sometimes miss out when looking at quotidian affairs.

Chapter 9 looks at the “governance of the sacred,” religion and language. From the outset, Nehru and his colleagues faced the advocates of the Hindu religion and the Hindi language and those who wanted “secular–democratic–socialist–left” solutions. One example: the “Devaswom Board” composed of elected leaders and civil servants; they filled the institutional blank between the colonial structure and the “private sphere” (p 259). That was necessary given Hinduism's lack of a central ecclesiastical entity. Religion is not formally the MHA mandate, but it still manages to guide the state through this minefield. Mitra's subtle message is that we should look beyond the events of communalism to understand how an Indian collective identity is managed. A contemporary example is of the word, “martyr,” applied to fallen soldiers that has religion-linked connotations. The MHA explained to Parliament in 2022 that it prefers to call them “fallen heroes,” “laid

down their lives,” “killed in action,” “supreme sacrifice for the nation,” armed force “braves,” “bravehearts.” This exemplifies ingrained caution over religious language.

Chapter 10 looks at the MHA’s “fire-power,” tabulating the paramilitary security forces at its command (pp 288–89). It is the monopoly instrument for the legitimate use of violence. The book documents the 1961 Liberation of Goa. During the foundational decade, an elite consensus permitted blending force with principles. But subsequently that understanding went missing at times, both in high politics and among the general public.

In the final cluster, the author logically takes us back, in Chapter 11, to the 1975–77 Emergency and its deleterious impact on domestic governance. “An emergency is a liminal space between orderly rule and anarchy” (p 330). He notes that no conspicuous punishment was given to those responsible for the Emergency or its excesses. He believes that a majority of civil servants remained true to their creed. “This added to the resilience of this system, filtered out political excesses, and kept a semblance of ordinary rule” (p 335).

The author closely examines three events in this penultimate chapter—the demolition of Babri mosque in December 1992, the insurgency in Kashmir between 1988 and 2019, and the Maoist movement covering the years 2005 to 2019. Using published data and public reports, each is analysed dispassionately. His conclusion was that without elite consensus, it becomes difficult to move forward. He examines the different commissions of enquiry, their recommendations, and the action taken. Mitra concludes that the coping capacity of the state is broadly adequate.

In Conclusion

Chapter 13, the conclusion, reverts to the core theme: the MHA’s institutional longevity, its radical transformation at independence, and its exalted status where it is “also ... a creator of the state.” Some telling phrases are used, namely the “dynamic equilibrium” of the Indian state; holding the state “without explicitly contravening the norms of federalism”; how “disconnectedness” followed the

split in the Congress party; and how its capacity shrank after 1975. Home is part of the resilience story of India’s democracy (pp 372–74). The final pages address home and Hindutva: stealth is necessary for political order, but is it sufficient? The author wonders that 30 years from now it will be interesting to see, from the inside, how the abbreviation of Kashmir’s special status, citizenship laws, and farm laws were handled. He asks, can collective mindsets of the stakeholders—essentially the leaders, officials, and voters—permit a return to governance by stealth?

The method of presenting select original documents takes the reader to the author’s sources. It is effective, again indicative of deep research. An important omission is how modern information and communications technology has had an impact on the MHA and complexified the stealthy governance challenge. We now see in the application of foreign currency regulations on societal organisations, including think tanks, a more bare-knuckle approach to governance.

The United States Chief Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr said that

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

This is Mitra’s achievement. He works through the hugely complex narrative of India’s domestic governance with fluid grace. But this erudition is not in your face. Each conclusion is backed by analysis, all packaged in a digestible form. His footnotes are more reader-friendly than what we often see, given academia’s penchant for endnotes usually tucked away at the book’s very end. Only an octopus can tackle that with ease.

In sum, this book is an important work that will endure as a comprehensive study of a vital institution. It is a rich addition to the literature on Indian governance.

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NOTE

- 1 Maintenance of Internal Security Act of 1971, amended with tougher provisions in 1975.

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