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Indian Summer

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Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire

Author: Alex Von Tunzelmann
Publisher: London: Simon & Schuster Ltd.
Year of Publication: 2007

Reviewed by: Muhammad Zaher Shah*

The focus of the book, *Indian Summer*, is mainly on five persons, namely, Lord Mountbatten, Edwina Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Mohammad Ali Jinnah. It takes a deep look into their private lives and showing how they were influential in helping India to attain independence and how the events led to partition. It is also full of the anecdotes of the wrongs committed by the British officials and its consequences for them. Similarly, it tells about different roles played by different characters which finally led to the unpredictable and unwanted partition. The tragic events, resulting from migration, are highlighted as well. The author, very beautifully sums up the book when she says that on the midnight of August 15, 1947, 57-year old Jawaharlal Nehru looked younger, more energetic and enthusiastic than he had ever looked, when he uttered some of the most memorable and wonderful lines ever said:

> *"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny. And now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge; not wholly or in full, but substantially. At the stroke of midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."*[1]

Alex von Tunzelmann is a British historian and columnist. She was born in 1977 and was educated at Oxford University. She has worked primarily as a researcher and lives in London. She has published two books: *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire*, telling about the liberation of India from the British Empire. The second one is *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder and Cold War in the Caribbean*.[2]

Talking about the book under discussion, she starts with the comparison of the British state in England and the Mughal Empire in India in the 16th century. It is stated that during that period, British state

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in England was a very weak and feeble state as compared to Mughal India. Then, how the British rose to power in India is narrated.

It also digs deeper in the private lives of Nehru, Mountbattens and Gandhi. It speaks about the love affair of Nehru and Edwina in a very attractive and romantic way. She says that Nehru was in love with Edwina Mountbatten. She was the restless spouse of India's last British Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten. It was never thought that with the demise of British Empire, Edwina would soon leave Delhi with her husband and go away from Nehru. She says that Edwina had no other choice but to leave. The day when Edwina left has been described by Nehru as the saddest day of his life. But it was not known that their intimacy would grow so strong. Exchanging letters, then, took place till the end of their lives. Another fact which is highlighted is how Gandhi used to mix politics with religion and his principles and how unsuccessful his methods proved to be at times.

The book throws light on Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a barrister and how he got a separate homeland for the Muslims. According to Tunzelman, earlier in his political career, Jinnah was the foremost proponent of the Hindu-Muslim unity but due to Gandhi's Hindu spiritualism and the use of religious symbols in politics by other Hindu leaders, he was disappointed and thus, shifted from the stance of unity to the stance of division. That is why he demanded Pakistan at all cost.

The cost, in the shape of economy and lives, proved to be so high that its magnitude went beyond the power of comprehension. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, who had never before experienced the horrible Indian summer, was appointed to draw the boundaries between the two countries. He did so nervously while sweating in his beautiful house. Once the job was over, he caught the first flight to home. He had little knowledge that the new lines would soon push the land to holocaust.

Then the holocaust that happened after independence as a result of migration is highlighted. When Pakistani leaders were raising their cry against the injustice done to them by Radcliff Award, Hindus and Sikhs celebrated its birth by butchering Muslims who were migrating to Pakistan. Streets were littered with corpses; raped women had their breasts branded with their rapists' names; children were burnt alive. Delhi is one of the examples where rioters stormed into a high school where students were taking their matriculation examinations. Muslim boys were separated from the rest, taken into another room, and slaughtered like animals.

Tunzelman says that the mutual hatred was so strong that when the suffering Punjabi Hindu women, lucky to have crossed into India

alive, saw Muslim mothers lying dead with dead babies clasped in their arms, they openly rejoiced the scene with delight.

It is said that there was no humanitarian assistance. It was only Edwina who was more concerned than the viceroy, her husband. She would visit the refugee camps, arrange for medicines, and fearlessly confront the mobs. Meanwhile her intimacy with Nehru strengthened as they witnessed the horrors – both were often seen, hands held together while surveying burning villages and rotting bodies. Sarcastically, the writer says about their love affairs, "if Garcia Marquez had written this book, the title would have been *Love in the Time of Massacres*".

Millions were murdered that summer but the important death took place with the onset of the winter. One chilly afternoon in Delhi, a Hindu fanatic who thought Gandhi was too soft on Muslims, shot him with a pistol. As he fell down on the ground, the old man who preached non-violence, advocated celibacy, and hated to use alcohol, had his values came to an end with his death as people were killing each other; his greatest disciple, Nehru was noticeably busy in immoral acts, and his funeral ceremony was attended in a drunken state by his son, Harilal. Seven months later, Jinnah, who missed becoming a martyr, as several attempts were made to assassinate him, suffered from tuberculosis and passed away.

Lady Edwina Mountbatten, who continued her extra-marital affair with grace and dignity, died during a tour in Borneo. Nehru's letters were found strewn across her deathbed. Her husband, Lord Mountbatten, lived for some time when he was blown to bits by a bomb planted by the Irish terrorists.

Lastly, Nehru, placed as hero in the book, shattered and broken-hearted after Edwina's death and the spectacular defeat of India by China in the 1962 China-India war, died of heart attack - 15 years after making his midnight speech.

She narrates the story with poignantly that to this day millions mourn for Gandhi, Jinnah, and Nehru but nobody mourns for the millions who were killed that Indian summer. She quotes Stalin that perhaps he was right when he said that– the death of one man is tragedy, the death of millions is statistic.

Indian Summer follows a strange style of writing where mentioning dates and numbers are considered less important and non-issues like what the kings ate and the queens wore, is given more space. Then to highlight the love of Edwina for Jawaharlal Nehru, which kept her away from her handsome and attractive husband, is no more needed. The style of writing, of course, is attractive but the language used is very obscure and at times incomprehensible for a common reader. On the

other hand, the credit which she gives to the three lawyers, Jinnah, Gandhi and Jawahar, for their intellectual and untiring capabilities, is appreciable. Again, the book deserves to be given weightage for the reason that an ample place has been given to narrate the horrors of the partition resulting from migration.

On the whole, it can be said that Alex Von Tunzelman has presented a new style in history writing. All the facts that could have been controversial are written so politely that one will enjoy while going through it. The story of Indian independence is narrated like a novel with facts. Similarly she, being a British, is impartial while mentioning different characters. So, if anyone is interested to read more about Indian history, this is a very good book to read.

Notes & References

[1] Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2007), 2-3

[2] Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder and Cold War in the Caribbean* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011)