

**Amit Das Gupta.** *Serving India: A Political Biography of Subimal Dutt (1903–1992). India's Longest Serving Foreign Secretary.* New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2017. 613 S. INR 1795.00, cloth, ISBN 978-93-5098163-4.

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There is a growing interest in Indian diplomatic history and in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of the 1950s and 1960s. This is fed in part by the greater availability of government archival records and private papers. The present study is a detailed biography of Subimal Dutt, one of the early stalwarts of the newly established MEA and who served in the 1970s as India's first head of mission in the recently created Bangladesh. Dutt moved to the Ministry of External Affairs just before independence in July 1947. His earlier career as an officer of the prestigious Indian Civil Service (ICS) was divided between Bengal and in New Delhi in the Government of India.

With the coming of independence, the newly created MEA required personnel, and officers of the ICS were a natural pool from which to draw them. His selection can in part be attributed to its head, Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, under whom Dutt had earlier served in the Ministry of Education, Health, and Lands. Jawaharlal Nehru retained charge of the MEA throughout his tenure as prime minister. Sir Girija was its civil service head but with a distinctive position of secretary general, unlike other ministries of the cabinet which were headed by secretaries.

By the time Dutt joined the MEA he already had some twenty years' experience as a civil servant. His first appointment was as commonwealth secretary, a post he held until 1952 when he moved to Bonn as India's ambassador to the then Federal Republic of Germany. His tenure here was relatively short—about two years—and he returned to India for personal reasons and was appointed as commonwealth secretary again. In 1955 he was appointed foreign secretary—a post he was to hold until mid-1961—hence the subtitle of the book, "India's Longest Serving Foreign Secretary." This, however, does merit some qualification. The post of foreign secretary as it exists today really emerged with the abolition of the post of secretary general (SG) in 1964 as the highest-ranking civil servant in the MEA and the head of the IFS. Subimal Dutt as foreign secretary was essentially number two and as such his long tenure is not comparable with those in the future. The abolition of the post of SG in fact marked a larger change, as post Nehru the cabinet had a separate foreign minister.

After his service as foreign secretary Dutt moved to Moscow as ambassador to the Soviet Union. His stay here was, like in the FRG, short, lasting less than a year and a half and cut short because of a personal tragedy. In India, Dutt was

appointed secretary to the president, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, from which position he moved to the West Bengal Vigilance Commission, the state's anticorruption watchdog. He held thereafter a number of other posts in the Government of India before being appointed vigilance commissioner of the Government of India in 1968. In early 1972 he found himself offered the post of the first high commissioner to Bangladesh and this turned out to be his longest diplomatic posting, extending for almost two and a half years. From 1974 Dutt lived a life of retirement until his death in 1992.

This is an exhaustive, and, it may be said, exhausting biography of Subimal Dutt. The amount of detail contained in its six hundred pages is in part accounted for by a considerable compendium of Dutt's private papers and equally by the industry with which the author has mined the archive of the Ministry of External Affairs and other sources. It would be a fair comment that all the administrative details of Dutt's different deployments and postings—promotions; pay; intra-office intrigues, tensions, and frictions; plus all the other minutiae of a Indian civil servant's life—receive almost as much attention as the substantive and policy issues he dealt with. There is in addition sufficient detail on the somewhat reticent and self-effacing Dutt's interface with friends, rivals, superiors, and subordinates much of which he diligently recorded in a personal diary. Internal intrigue and personal rivalries in the Ministry of External Affairs—of which there was, and is, a considerable amount but perhaps no more than in any large organization—also therefore figure. Woven into this narrative, and drawn from Dutt's personal diaries, is also a great deal of personal detail about him and his family. All this alongside the more specific issues of foreign policy and bilateral country relationships of Dutt's different charges makes for a book which is exceptionally detailed with of course the attendant risk of missing the wood for the trees.

To an extent my sympathies are with the author. The early period of India's diplomatic history is a fascinating and relatively understudied one, especially the internal dynamics of the government body responsible for foreign policy and its institutional and work culture. Then, too, the posts he held—commonwealth secretary and foreign secretary—make Dutt an important bridging figure between the Prime Minister's Office (effectively also the Foreign Minister's Office) and the MEA. Finally, the mass of private papers Dutt has left make him an irresistible figure for historical research. The problem, however, is that Dutt himself for a large part of his career had no real interest in foreign affairs. Too often he interpreted and concentrated his role as making the MEA "a smoothly running machine," a task which he evidently took on with much relish. About his first stint as commonwealth secretary Das Gupta comments, "it makes sense to characterize Dutt more as an ICS than an IFS officer.... The MEA was just another office" (p. 149). In his postings abroad, both in Bonn and then in Moscow, the reticent and self-effacing Dutt does not appear at ease. While there were others similar to Dutt, there were many who were not and for long stretches of his career Dutt was to find that often the initiative was seized by other ICS contemporaries, figures such as Badruddin Tyabji, Y. D. Gundevia, and K. P. S. Menon, who would passionately commit themselves to the subjects in their charge, or even M. J. Desai (whose influence came from the close links he had with Nehru's confidant, Krishna Menon). Das Gupta is possibly accurate in portraying Dutt as one who "did not spend much time musing about general trends in international affairs, but saw the handling of India's foreign affairs as a day to day affair" (p. 387). Das Gupta's aim, however, appears to have been to provide as detailed an account of the functioning of a civil servant as possible and in this he succeeds in large measure. The problem in his biography then becomes sifting through a mass of detail in a civil servant's career to identify general themes or key

issues. There is also the attendant risk of taking the subject's evaluation of his role and contribution in the decision-making process at face value since not all the actors involved separately kept a record of their readings of different issues and their handling.

In the treatment of Dutt in the MEA as commonwealth secretary alongside related administrative details, the picture that emerges is of him as largely divorced from the central issues that dominated the external concerns of the GOI at the time. In large part this was because of the two larger-than-life figures—Nehru and Secretary General Bajpai and later his successor, who between them handled the policy- and decision-making on all critical issues. But possibly his overall personality also came in the way of his taking a personal initiative to demonstrate his capacity to take charge and deliver on a particular issue. In Dutt's charge fell largely a plethora of miscellaneous and routine issues. In the period of the Bengal crisis of early 1950, a tense period in India Pakistan relations, Dutt was certainly in the picture because of his Bengal background and experience. But he dealt largely with the domestic aspects of handling large-scale displacement issues. On the diplomacy associated with Pakistan and the final outcome in the form of the Nehru Liaquat Pact on Minorities, a significant milestone of the time, he appears to have played no large role although Das Gupta occasionally appears to suggest otherwise. Similarly, on the very sensitive issue of rescuing abducted women, Dutt found himself unable to keep pace with the activist firebrand Mridula Sarabhai and her unorthodox approach. If there was an issue in which he asserted himself it was the sensitive but largely administrative issue of the downsizing the Indian High Commission in London—sensitive because this was High Commissioner Krishna Menon's fiefdom and he was very close to Nehru.

Dutt's next tenure in India extended to about seven years—about a year and a half as common-

wealth secretary and then as foreign secretary and number two in the civil service hierarchy of the MEA. In the four chapters (some two hundred pages) that deal with this period, both administrative detail and the big issues of the time—Pakistan, the Suez Crisis, Hungary, relations with the US and the USSR, and finally, the growing gulf with China—figure prominently in the narrative. Dutt appears to have become surer of himself as he grew closer to Nehru. It would appear a good relationship with Nehru's principal assistant, the upstart Mathai, helped greatly in this too. Then there is Krishna Menon, Nehru's principal advisor on foreign affairs although designated as minister without portfolio. For Dutt, he was both a powerful interest to be kept on board, flattered and propitiated but whose anti-US and pro-communist inclinations also had to be dealt with and resisted. We have a full account of all these factors and in their minutest detail. The overlap of the Suez and Hungary crises in October 1956 saw a debate, both in the public domain and also in the MEA, that India was prepared to be critical of the UK and French intervention in Suez but not so about Soviet intervention in Hungary. When India voted against a US-sponsored resolution on Hungary instead of abstaining, which was the official view in MEA, Krishna Menon was regarded as responsible. Nehru, however, backed Menon in this, although some time later the Indian position was recalibrated. Dutt, in Das Gupta's account and by his diary entries, was in disagreement with the position taken on Hungary and even considered resigning. Das Gupta sees Dutt trying hard to prevent the Menon-led "disaster" on Hungary but not being able to do so. There was of course an alternative view in the MEA then, and held much later too, that there was a fundamental difference between former imperial powers intervening in a former colony and a great power intervening in its immediate backyard.

The chapters on Dutt's tenure as foreign secretary depend greatly on his personal papers and diaries, some still privately held and others de-

posited in the Teen Murti Library in New Delhi. The treatment of this period details the intricacies of the issues that Dutt dealt with and it does appear that on many key issues he was more of an observer than a key advisor. The list includes the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom, where the secretary general or the ambassadors in the respective capitals dealt directly with Prime Minister Nehru. Similarly, on Pakistan the foreign secretary rarely if ever was involved in the substantive diplomacy of the period. An area which sees a departure from this pattern is the crucial Sino-India border dispute where Dutt supervised the groundwork of the negotiations of what was the ultimately failed summit of April 1960. This to a great extent meant systematizing and compiling Indian historical claims on the boundary although in the summit itself the details never came up for discussion. In Das Gupta's reading, Dutt's "key role in the border dispute between early 1958 and late 1960 cannot be overestimated" (p. 388). While this may be the picture that emerges in Dutt's account, it may need to be supplemented by other views.

Dutt's civil service career in the MEA ended with the short posting to Moscow. Dutt's longest diplomatic assignment in fact came a decade later when he was sent to Dacca as India's first high commissioner to newly independent Bangladesh. He was chosen for this assignment both because of his Bengal background and his reputation for being a stickler for rules and not one who would let the heady atmosphere of early postliberation Bangladesh go to his head. This was possibly the one diplomatic post Dutt most enjoyed and left with regret. It is also in this book densely documented, largely on account of the details in Dutt's private papers, and the picture that we get is a fascinating account of the difficulties India faced in building bridges in territory that had until a few months earlier been part of Pakistan.

The sheer length of the book may deter all but the most conscientious scholar. Amit Das Gupta is,

however, to be commended for the industry with which he has reconstructed the life and career of an otherwise largely forgotten civil servant.

Editorial note: The original review misidentified the nation whose intervention in Suez stood to be criticized by India. It was the UK, not the US.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
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