

VICEROY HOUSE
TO
RASTRAPATI BHAVAN
A Reflection on Indian Presidents





*Viceroy
House*

to

*Rastrapati
Bhavan*

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Biswaranjan Sarkar



PUNASCHA

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By Biswaranjan Sarkar

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*In the cherished memory of my parents,
to my family for their enduring support,
and to all who inspired this endeavour-
this book on the Presidents of India
is dedicated with profound respect and gratitude.*

PREFACE

This book is born out of the conviction that the office of the President of India is far more than a ceremonial symbol in our democracy. Since the Republic's inception, from Dr. Rajendra Prasad to Shri Ram Nath Kovind, India has seen fourteen Presidents who have, without exception, brought dignity, wisdom, and gravitas to this high constitutional office. Through the ebb and flow of governments, amid political storms and administrative trials, successive leaderships – whether in power or in opposition – have, for the most part, preserved the sanctity of this high office by entrusting it to individuals of rare distinction and merit. In learning and integrity, in political wisdom and secular spirit, in administrative skill and an unwavering sense of justice, each President has left an indelible mark, enriching and reaffirming the very soul of India's democratic ethos

The idea for this book grew from a deep admiration for the individuals who have held the highest constitutional office in our democracy – the Presidents of India. As I began to explore their lives, it became evident that their story could not be told in isolation. The grand official residence, Rastrapati Bhavan, where they have lived, steeped in history and elegance, forms an inseparable part of that narrative. The Rastrapati Bhavan, originally built as the Viceroy's House following the capital's shift from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911, forms a majestic backdrop to this narrative. Commissioned under Lord Hardinge and completed over 17 painstaking years, it is not merely an architectural marvel but also a silent witness to the evolving story of the Indian Republic. Majestic in scale and heritage, this architectural treasure, one of the largest official residences in the world, stands as a silent witness to the evolving story of our Republic. This mammoth architecture reflects not only the grandeur and design sensibilities of its time but also the influences of British aristocracy. Since Independence, this grand edifice has stood as a symbol of democratic

continuity, even as the country navigated the complexities of a multilingual, multicultural polity. Generations have come and gone, but the Rastrapati Bhavan's dignity has never wavered.

The immediate trigger for this book, however, came in 2017 when the nation saw an extraordinary moment with the election for the 14th President of India. In a historic turn, both the ruling NDA and the Opposition, led by the Indian National Congress, chose to field candidates from the Dalit community—Shri Ram Nath Kovind and Smt. Meira Kumar, respectively. What unfolded was not merely a political contest, but a rare and profound moment in the country's democratic story—Dalit versus Dalit for the highest constitutional office. It was against this backdrop that the seed of this book began to stir in my heart.

My mind wandered back further, to the mid-1980s, may be 1985 or perhaps 1986, when fate first brought me to Delhi for work. That visit led me to the grand gates of Rastrapati Bhavan, where I went to meet the acclaimed artist Shri Jogen Chowdhury, then serving as the Chief Curator of the Rastrapati Bhavan's art gallery. His residence, set slightly apart from the imposing main structure, still offered a breathtaking view of the grandeur and quiet dignity of that historic estate. The first sight left me awe-struck. Through his gracious hospitality, I had the rare privilege of glimpsing a few corners of that magnificent home—never suspecting that decades later, I would feel compelled to pen down its stories and the lives of those who walked its halls.

Another vivid memory surfaces—this time in 1992, during the tenure of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. Shri Pranab Kumar Mukherjee, then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, was immersed in his work late in an evening. A lit pipe rested between his lips, a familiar signature of his persona. At the request of a journalist colleague, I had gone to meet him. It was past 8 p.m., the corridors nearly silent, when we entered his office. My colleague engaged him in deep conversation over politics and economics for more than an hour, while I sat quietly, absorbing every detail. Pranab Babu's warmth towards me, a near-stranger, and his astonishing memory—his precise recollection of events and dates—left an indelible impression on me.

These two encounters, years apart yet bound by the aura of Rastrapati Bhavan, often return to me as I write these pages. How extraordinary it is that the artist I once met in those hallowed grounds would later serve in Parliament as a member in Rajya Sabha, and that the sharp, pipe-smoking statesman I met in a quiet office would one day become the President of

India. Even as I pen these lines, I am reminded of the honour bestowed upon him—the Bharat Ratna—announced on Republic Day of 2019. These moments, steeped in grace and history, are the quiet threads woven into this book.

In attempting to present a comprehensive picture of the Presidency, I realised it would be incomplete without delving into the Rastrapati Bhavan itself – its architectural grandeur, colonial legacy, and symbolic resonance in contemporary India deserve special mention. I have tried my best to cover various aspects related to the office: the President’s constitutional powers and responsibilities, election process, the privileges and their role in shaping the nation’s political trajectory. Equally, the content offers insights of the historical moments, including internal conflicts within political parties, the Emergency and the changing dynamics between the President and Prime Minister. I would like to clarify that this book does not limit itself solely to the life stories of the Presidents of India. I have made an effort to present a comprehensive understanding of the neutral yet often debated role played by the Presidents in shaping and upholding the democratic rights of the numerous recognised political parties of this multi-faceted nation.

Each of these elected Presidents has outshone the others in terms of wisdom, character, educational background and mental strength. Their superior political and administrative skills have, of course, been given due emphasis throughout. While writing this book, every time I came across new information about these distinguished personalities, I was deeply impressed by their unique traits, something I have tried to share with the readers. Each chapter attempts to enrich the narrative with factual accounts from the eventful tenures of these prominent citizens, which I believe will engage the readers. One thing is certain — although the President’s role, as defined by the Constitution, is meant to be that of an independent entity, the process of their election is entirely a political one. In reality, most Presidents in this country have been elected based on the preferences and choices of the ruling party. In this context, it is only natural that the discussion turns to the century-old Congress Party's internal divisions, the clash between the President and the Prime Minister and the period of Emergency. From renowned philosophers, educationists, social reformers, diplomats, nuclear scientists, eminent lawyers, leaders of the trade union movement to seasoned political figures, this book tries to present a well-rounded picture of how these individuals carried out their presidential responsibilities with prudence and dignity. Their intellect, restraint, and political maturity have often been pivotal in preserving democratic balance, particularly in times of crisis.

Some may ask: why this book, and why now? In an era of increasing political fragmentation and the growing influence of regional parties, I felt it was important to revisit these personalities and the quiet strength they have brought to Indian democracy. The public has always been curious about Rastrapati Bhavan — its grandeur, its secrets, and most importantly, its occupants. This book seeks to satisfy that curiosity and, perhaps more importantly, to inspire respect for the ideals and traditions the Presidency represents.

Through the pages of this book you will meet the Presidents of India not merely as office-bearers, but as individuals who have left their imprint on the nation's conscience. For over seven decades, a handful of men and women have walked the marbled halls of power, carrying on their shoulders the hopes of the world's largest democracy. My hope is that, by the final chapter, you will see both the office and the home not as distant symbols, but as living testaments to the resilience, dignity and enduring spirit of Indian democracy.

Researching and writing this book was both challenging and rewarding. I drew upon books, essays, news articles, digital resources, and archival material. While every effort has been made to ensure factual accuracy, any errors are entirely mine. I am deeply grateful to the many friends and well-wishers who supported me with their insights and encouragement. Their names are too numerous to list, but I remain ever thankful for their generosity.

A special word of thanks is reserved for Shri Jogen Chowdhury, doyen of Indian art, who first introduced me to the grandeur of Rastrapati Bhavan, perhaps sowing the seeds of this book.

December 12, 2025

Biswaranjan Sarkar

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VICEROYS OF INDIA AND THEIR TENURE

Lord Canning	1858 – 1862
Lord Elgin	1862 – 1863
Lord Lawrence	1864 – 1869
Lord Mayo	1869 – 1872
Lord Northbrook	1872 – 1876
Lord Lytton	1876 – 1880
Lord Ripon	1880 – 1884
Lord Dufferin	1884 – 1888
Lord Lansdowne	1888 – 1894
Lord Elgin II	1894 – 1899
Lord Curzon	1899 – 1905
Lord Minto II	1905 – 1910
Lord Hardinge II	1910 – 1916
Lord Chelmsford	1916 – 1921
Lord Reading	1921 – 1926
Lord Irwin	1926 – 1931
Lord Willingdon	1931 – 1936
Lord Linlithgow	1936 – 1944
Lord Wavell	1944 – 1947
Lord Mountbatten	1947 – 1948

INTRODUCTION

If 17 years were needed to construct a house with the involvement of 23,000 labours and that too on a land comprising of 5 acres, one can easily visualize the vastness and architecture of the said house. More so, when 70 crores of bricks, 30 lakh cubic feet of stones, proportionate quantum of steel and sand had to be used for this specific construction over the years from 1912 to 1929 all these testify and instigate the natural query; What was that building ? Why is it so talked about? In a sudden thought, it is not so easy to make an idea of the extensive nature of the building. But it is a reality. It happened and still very much is in existence and in use. This is about our Rashtrapati Bhavan in the Capital of India, the second largest residential house in the world, the first being the Curial Palace, the residential house of the president of Italy, in the city of Rome. Spread over 330 acres of land, the residential house of the Indian President consists of 340 rooms, erected and scattered around this four-storied magnificent building. The world's largest democracy should have a befitting residence for its President like the one that we have. Thanks to the British royalty. We often criticise the British people for disallowing Indians to have their delayed Independence, but traditional aristocracy was very much in their blood. When in 1911 it was decided by the British Government under Lord Hardings that their Indian Capital would be shifted from Kolkata to Delhi, the Englishmen focused on one thing. In order to keep up the royal grace, a proper residential house needed to be constructed for the use of the British Viceroy in India. Despite this decision, against the order of Lord Hardings, the intended architectural plan of the proposed Viceroy House, now known as the Rashtrapati Bhavan after India achieved its Independence, had to be curtailed because of shortage of available monetary resources. The area of the proposed