

# THE SUCCESS OF INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

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# 1 Introduction

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*Atul Kohli*

As India held a general election in late 1999, the *New York Times* (October 8, 1999) editorialized about India's democracy in glowing terms:

As 360 million Indians voted over the last month, the world's largest and most fractious democracy once again set a stirring example for all nations . . . India's rich diversity sometimes looks like an obstacle to unity. But the latest election has proved that a commitment to resolving differences peacefully and democratically can transform diversity into a source of strength.

Even discounting journalistic overstatement and oversimplification, the editorial pointed to a significant phenomenon: for more than five decades India's democracy has succeeded against considerable odds. This volume seeks to explain how democracy has taken root in India amidst a low-income economy, widespread poverty and illiteracy, and immense ethnic diversity. How did India do it? What general lessons are drawn from this singular but significant experience?

The success of democracy in India defies many prevailing theories that stipulate preconditions for democracy: India is not an industrialized, developed economy; Indian businessmen and middle classes do not fully control the country's politics; India is anything but ethnically homogeneous; and India would probably rank low on a number of attributes of "civic culture." Indian democracy is thus best understood by focusing, not mainly on its socioeconomic determinants, but on how power distribution in that society is negotiated and renegotiated. A concern with the process of power negotiation, in turn, draws attention to such factors as leadership strategies, the design of political institutions, and the political role of diverse social groups, or, in short, to the interaction of the state and society. A central theme of this volume is how the central state in India deals with a variety of politicized social groups – ethnic, class, caste, or regional – that periodically demand a greater share of resources, autonomy, and self-government.

India's democratic record suggests that two related sets of political processes have guided the management of power conflicts in that

country. First, a delicate balance has been struck and re-struck between forces of centralization and decentralization. And, second, the interests of the powerful in society have been served without fully excluding the weaker groups. The record on both of these fronts is far from perfect; the failures have actually put a great strain on Indian democracy. Nevertheless, accommodation of those who mount powerful challenges by granting them greater autonomy and/or a share of resources has been central to a strengthening of democracy.

As federal democracies go, India is a relatively centralized state. While many critics have made this observation, the fact is that demands for decentralization only make sense within the context of centralized authority; authority and power, like wealth, have to exist before they can be distributed. Over the years, as democracy has spread, numerous mobilized groups in India have demanded further redistribution of power. These demands were often resisted, sometimes wisely and at other times unwisely and at a great cost. Overall, however, enough concessions were made so that the Indian political system by now possesses significant decentralized traits. Notable features of these are to be found in the practice of federalism, in the changing character of local governments, and in the evolving constitutional design.

No electoral democracy can long survive without protecting the interests of the powerful, whether these be propertied groups, groups with high status or groups with effective political organization. Long-term exclusion of weaker groups is also not healthy for a democracy. How has this balance been managed in India? While the rhetoric of the Indian state has often been redistributive – socialism, abolition of traditional privileges, reform of the caste system, and populism – political practice has been considerably more conservative, eschewing any decisive redistribution. The Indian state has thus been criticized both for its excessive socialist commitments and for its failure at substantial redistribution. However, the political impact of these twin tendencies – radical in tone, conservative in practice – may well have been benign, strengthening democracy: the powerful in society feel well served by the system but weaker groups do not feel totally excluded or hopeless, at least not so far.

This volume, then, analyzes India's democratic record by focusing on the interaction of the central state with politicized social groups, especially around demands for a greater share of resources and autonomy. The organizing proposition of the volume is that India's democracy has been strengthened by a political process that has facilitated a modest degree of redistribution of power and of other valued resources such as status and dignity, even if not of wealth.

### **India's "successful" democracy**

After more than five decades of periodic elections in which all political offices are contested, and in which all adults are qualified to vote, there is little doubt that democracy in India has taken root. Moreover, India enjoys free and lively media, freedom of assembly and association, and considerable scope to express political dissent and protest. Even India's founding national party, the Congress – which increasingly came to resemble a dynasty – has by now been voted out of power, replaced by other challengers. It is in these procedural or political senses of the term that India's democracy has succeeded, and that this volume mainly seeks to explore.

A more demanding assessment of the substantial accomplishments of India's democracy would clearly be more qualified and would require a different volume. For example, one could focus – though this volume does not – on how well India's democratic governments have fared in promoting economic growth. India's economic growth has generally been slow to modest, averaging 3–4 percent between 1950 and 1980 and 5–7 percent over the last two decades. Some analysts have suggested that this sluggishness is a result of ideologically motivated, excessive state intervention in the economy (Bhagwati 1993), whereas others have argued that this outcome is best understood with reference to the fractious nature of interest group politics in India (Bardhan 1984; also see his chapter below). Similarly, one could criticize – as other volumes have (Kohli 1987; Dreze and Sen 1995) – the feeble capacity of India's democratic state to alleviate mass poverty. The performance of India's democracy can also be faulted in other specific policy areas – for example, provision of primary education (Weiner 1991), or more broadly for governing poorly (Kohli 1990).

The success of India's democracy that this volume both celebrates and analyzes is less about its substantial accomplishments and more about its institutionalization. Critics may well ask: why focus “merely” on procedural issues? Several answers can be offered. First, a scholastic response of sorts is that no one volume can do everything. Second, some of the essays below indeed explore how “deeply” India's democracy has or has not taken root, and thus touch on questions of substantial outcomes. Finally, and most importantly, however, is a positive response: democracy is a valued end in its own right, and thus worthy of serious study in its own right. Whether democracy facilitates prosperity, or peace, or other “good things” are propositions worthy of a serious debate but far from settled. If citizens across the world clamor for democracy, it is not necessarily because of what democracy may bring

them, but because they share a widespread contemporary urge towards self-government. Among poor countries of the world, India stands out as the most significant country that has successfully harnessed this urge into a functioning democracy. How and why India has succeeded is thus an issue of considerable scholarly and general interest.

Finally, this broad question of how and why democracy has taken root in India can be usefully subdivided into at least three interrelated but analytically distinguishable questions: how did democracy originate in India?; what factors helped democratic institutions consolidate?; and what forces propel or inhibit the process of democratic deepening in India? The question of democratic origins in India focuses attention on the role of political elites, and forces us to study earlier periods, especially political processes in the first half of the twentieth century. The issue of democratic consolidation, by contrast, concerns more recent developments and is a broader one; it involves understanding why and how democratic institutions came to be embraced by the political public, including the opposition elites and organized groups. And, finally, the struggle for democratic deepening is an ongoing one. Here one wants to analyze the processes whereby India's unkempt masses are actually incorporated into the democratic system, that is, come to feel some loyalty to it, participate in it, and hope to benefit from it. This volume addresses these issues of democratic origins, consolidation, and deepening in turn.

### **The origins of Indian democracy**

India's "transition" to democracy in the 1940s is understudied and ought to be further researched. Historians have often left such issues to political scientists, and the latter often do not concern themselves with the "past," the domain of historians. Based on limited study, one argument in the relevant literature suggests that India's democracy is mainly a legacy of British colonialism (for example, Weiner 1989: chs. 5 and 7). This argument immediately runs into the problem of why democracy has not fared as well in so many other former British colonies, including in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the argument is a serious one and merits some attention, especially because the impact of British colonialism varied across its colonies. India inherited a number of political traits from British rule that can be argued to be significant for India's future democratic evolution: a relatively centralized state,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While some scholars may have trouble visualizing a ready connection between centralized authority and democracy, it is useful to recall the important argument of Samuel Huntington (1968) that political order precedes and is often necessary for the subsequent emergence of democracy.



including a well-functioning civil service; early introduction of elections; and socialization of the highest political elite in values of liberal democracy.

As a contrast to this emphasis on the colonial legacy, other scholars emphasize the role of the Indian nationalist elite and nationalist movements in the birth of Indian democracy. Such an approach may focus more on the social origins of the nationalist movements or on their political characteristics. Barrington Moore (1966), for example, interpreted India's nationalist movement as a "bourgeois revolution" of sorts that helped clear the path for democracy. This Marxism-inspired hypothesis also requires further study, especially because it may help explain the India–Pakistan contrast; after all, the Muslim League that spearheaded the movement for Pakistan in the first half of the twentieth century was led by landed aristocrats who often had trouble mobilizing popular support. A more political argument may well focus on the important role of the nationalists in creating a "nation" in India (Varshney 1998), and/or on the practice of inclusive democracy within the nationalist movement.

The first essay in this volume by Sumit Sarkar contributes to this debate involving the respective roles of British colonialism and of Indian nationalists in the origins of Indian democracy. While acknowledging some British role, Sarkar instead emphasizes the role Indians played in shaping their own version of democracy, especially the combination of full adult franchise, secularism, and federalism. The British may have introduced some electoral politics but they also resisted mass adult suffrage. Adult franchise was eventually pushed forward by Indian nationalist leaders working closely with politicized Indian masses. Given India's diversity, crafting a unified nationalist movement also forced Indian leaders to develop conceptions of "unity in diversity" that eventually led to a federal structure – a structure that was quite distinct from what the British had in mind. And finally, the same diversity, but especially the Hindu–Muslim divide of the subcontinent, pushed nationalist leaders to counter the colonial divide-and-rule politics by crafting a pragmatic, political secularism that offered symmetrical treatment to various religious communities.

In addition to emphasizing the indigenous roots of Indian democracy, Sarkar develops a second important theme: Indians were not of one mind. Observing both long-term political trends over the first half of the twentieth century and analyzing the more specific political debates that preceded the formation of the Indian constitution in the 1940s, he analyzes two broad political tendencies. On the one hand, he notices that some Indian leaders argued simultaneously for full adult franchise,

real political equality for a variety of religious communities, and genuine federalism with some decentralization of power. This was the political position of real democracy with the emphasis on suffrage, secularism, and federalism; a modified version of this position prevailed at the foundation of the sovereign Indian republic. On the other hand, however, Sarkar also notices that there was a significant dissent from this position, marked by silences on issues of adult suffrage, overtones of pro-Hindu religious politics, and a preference for a unitary, centralized state. This tendency can be characterized as one that preferred a more limited democracy. These early divisions among Indian elites lead Sarkar to suggest that there may be an elective affinity in India for democracy, secularism, and federalism. The contemporary implications of this significant historical observation are worthy of reflection: does the recent shift in India towards a more pro-Hindu politics threaten Indian democracy and federalism?

### **Political institutions and the consolidation of democracy**

While many former colonies in Asia and Africa started their sovereign journey as democracies, open and competitive politics took root in only a handful. India is the most significant example of democratic consolidation in a postcolonial setting and begs the question: how and why did India succeed? As one may imagine, there is no simple answer, only a large complex one made up of many parts, some of which are analyzed in detail in this volume.

When trying to understand how and why Indian democracy has taken root, it helps to think of India's recent political evolution in three distinct phases. Institutions and practices of democracy found considerable acceptance during the first phase, which was dominated by Nehru and which lasted from, say, about 1950 to the mid to late 1960s. Aside from Nehru's own commitment to democracy, India benefited in this phase from the presence of two very important institutions: a well-functioning civil service and a popular ruling party, the Indian National Congress (or Congress). The civil service constituted the heart of the state that India inherited from the colonial period, and India's "new" civil service was essentially built on this colonial base (Potter 1986). This civil service contributed to effective government and imparted political stability.

The Congress, by contrast, had spearheaded a successful national movement and, as a result, enjoyed considerable popularity and legitimacy. These new rulers of India, especially Nehru, utilized this inherited political capital wisely, accommodating rival elites within the larger

political umbrella that was Congress (Kothari 1970b). Moreover, while Nehru and others employed the rhetoric of socialism, political practice was considerably more conservative (Frankel 1978: chs. 1 and 2). The Congress Party, for example, built its political networks on the back of the powerful members of society – often the landowning, upper castes – exchanging state patronage for electoral mobilization (Weiner 1967). This strategy enabled the Congress Party to succeed for a while, at least long enough for practices of democracy to take root.

Indian democracy was also helped by the fact that Indian political society in this early phase was not all that mobilized, certainly far less than in the subsequent decades. Political conflict mainly took the form of claims and counterclaims by rival elites, especially regional elites demanding a greater share of power and resources *vis-à-vis* the central government. These conflicts could have proven difficult but were successfully accommodated by creating a federal system that recognized linguistic communities as legitimate political components (see the chapters by Dasgupta and Manor below). Elite versus mass conflict in India in these decades was, however, minimal. What class conflict existed was limited to a few regions. Given India's political heterogeneity, such conflicts seldom spread from one region to another. Mobilization of lower castes was also in its infancy and was limited to a few southern states (see Myron Weiner's essay below). Most of India's poor were lower-caste, landless peasants. These groups were generally dependent for their livelihood on those above them, the landowning upper-caste elites. These vertical ties of patronage and dependency, in turn, constrained the political behavior of poor, illiterate Indians.

Democracy has often had undemocratic roots. India's case has been no different, at least not on this score. An effective civil service and relatively low levels of political mobilization meant that, unlike numerous other postcolonial experiments, Indian democracy was not seriously debilitated at the outset by poor governance and multiple political conflicts. The Congress Party further provided the key governing institution that not only transformed nationalist legitimacy into a ruling force, but also incorporated rival elites into a loosely knit organization and promised future incorporation to India's unkempt masses. While the Congress repeatedly won elections during this first phase and dominated India's political landscape, a broader political change was also underway: institutions and practices of democracy took root.

The second major phase during the 1970s and 1980s was dominated mainly by Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi. Indian politics during this phase became considerably more turbulent, even temporarily threatening democracy. As the memory of anticolonial nationalism declined,

numerous new elites entered the political arena, challenging Congress's hold on power. A rapidly growing population also produced a new generation of potentially mobilizable citizens. The spread of commerce and democracy started undermining the vertical ties of clientelism that had constrained the political choices of the lower strata in the past. India's economic development was also relatively sluggish and elitist, leaving a majority without any significant improvement in living conditions. The political situation was by now ripe for dramatic changes.

After Congress's popularity declined in the second half of the 1960s, Indira Gandhi recreated the Congress during the 1970s and the 1980s as a much more populist and personalistic organ. The old Congress Party, with its modest organizational base, was destroyed in this transformation, creating a significant institutional vacuum in the Indian polity (Kohli 1990). Indira Gandhi instead promised "alleviation of poverty" to India's poor masses, generating considerable popular support. She used this popularity to concentrate power in her person, further undermining existing institutional constraints on the use of power. Indira Gandhi appointed loyal minions to significant political offices across the country, squeezed whomsoever challenged her, and when the opposition itself became strident – as it did in the mid-1970s – imposed a "national Emergency" for two years (1975–7), limiting democratic practices and bringing India's democracy to the brink (Brass 1991).

Indira Gandhi's personalistic and populist politics definitely weakened some of India's democratic institutions. The old Congress Party was transformed into a personal tool that went into a slow but steady decline following her death. The civil service was politicized. Centralization of power also weakened the federal system, evoking strong opposition in some regions that did not readily accept loss of autonomy (Kohli 1997; also see the chapters by Dasgupta and Manor below). As in many other democracies, personalistic power simultaneously created a viable political center but weakened institutional politics.

The balance sheet of political developments during this phase, however, was not only towards the weakening of Indian democracy. Contrary trends also deserve to be underlined. First, elections were held regularly throughout the period, and political power remained a function of securing popular majority support. Even Indira Gandhi's personal power was a function of her widespread electoral appeal to India's poor masses. It was a need to reconfirm this legitimacy that pressured her to call elections after a brief authoritarian interlude (1975–7). The fact that she was voted out of power following the Emergency only confirmed the efficacy of Indian democracy: those who tamper with the basic system will lose popular support. Second, and related to the first

point, following the Emergency, a number of India's political groups – for example, some of India's communists, who had hitherto held an ambivalent attitude towards democracy – realized how much there was to lose without liberal political freedoms, and became recommitted to democracy. And, finally, Indira Gandhi sharply politicized the issue of widespread poverty in India. Even while she failed to deliver on her promises to the poor, Indira Gandhi thus broadened the scope of Indian democracy towards a greater inclusion of the lower strata.

Indira Gandhi's assassination in the mid-1980s, and that of her son Rajiv Gandhi a few years thereafter, brought to an end the era of Congress's dominance via family rule. While democracy had taken by now a firm foothold in India – note that even the assassination of the highest leaders was “dealt with” by yet another round of elections to select alternative leaders – the quality of government that this democracy was capable of delivering remained rather uncertain. The critical issue was the absence of cohering institutions amidst a rapidly politicizing society. The third and current phase that began around 1990 has thus been characterized by a variety of national-level political experiments to find a substitute for the old Congress Party rule, especially by the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The decline of Congress's hegemony has been met by two important political developments: the rise of the BJP, especially in India's Hindi-speaking “heartland” that comprises states in north-central and western India; and the growing significance of regional parties, especially in southern India, but also in such other “peripheral” states as West Bengal, Punjab, and Kashmir. The BJP is a right-leaning, religious-nationalist party that has successfully mobilized support by simultaneously demonizing India's religious minorities, especially Muslims, and championing causes that appeal to the majority Hindus. Over time, however, the BJP has had to moderate its strident religious nationalism, both to broaden its electoral support and to seek coalition allies. These and related issues are analyzed below by Amrita Basu.

Regional nationalism has greater appeal than Hindu nationalism in many of India's “peripheral” regions. A variety of regional parties have thus become quite significant over the last decade or two. Since many of these parties arose in opposition to the Congress, they often built their power base around intermediate castes – the so-called “backward castes” in India – that the Congress had failed to incorporate. Championing the cause of their respective regions, and especially of the middling groups within the region, these parties often tend to be ideologically fickle. When it comes to participating in national politics, they can swing more to the left, or to the right, depending on the

political opportunities available, and on the ambitions and convenience of their respective leaders.

This third and most recent phase of Indian politics has thus been characterized by considerable governmental instability. Whereas India's first eight general elections were spread out between 1950 and 1990, India held five general elections in the 1990s alone. The efforts to discover a viable substitute for Congress's dominant role are clearly proving to be difficult. Underlying this instability are two sets of forces. First, regional parties face the problem of collective action: they find it difficult to cooperate to form national governments on their own; and, second, the BJP has so far failed to garner sufficient support to form a national government. The BJP's religious extremism – while popular with some – was also an obstacle for the party in gaining coalitional allies. It was only when the BJP moderated its position towards the end of the 1990s that a number of regional parties joined it as allies, forming a national government that is currently in power as this volume goes to press.

Once again, however, it is important to juxtapose other recent institutional trends that can be viewed as supportive of democratic consolidation in India. First, as difficult as efforts to find a substitute for Congress rule are proving, it is healthy for Indian democracy that the hegemony of a single party, especially via family rule, has come to an end. Second, the BJP has been forced to moderate its ruling strategy. This is a singular victory for Indian democracy, underlining the fact that the logic of democratic institutions is by now clearly stronger than that of extremist forces. While there can be no certainty that the BJP will remain moderate in the future – extremism does happen, even in democracies – the odds set by India's current institutional matrix are against it. And, third, the new ruling arrangement in India represents a combination of centralization – represented by a relatively well-organized and hierarchical political party, the BJP – and decentralization – represented by a variety of regional allies. This arrangement is considerably more accommodating than the centralized system of Indira Gandhi; it may also prove to be less conflict-generating.

Against this general background of political developments in India, five essays in this volume provide more detailed analysis concerning how a variety of political institutions have helped Indian democracy take root. The first two essays are on the Indian federal system. How India has created a successful federal polity in a multicultural setting is a subject of considerable importance. Dasgupta probes the subject deeply in his paper, focusing on the underlying political processes of negotiation and collaboration between national and regional elites. Among the

themes that he develops, three are worth underlining. First, evoking a theme from Sarkar's essay, Dasgupta suggests that the original design of Indian federalism was helped by the nature of the Indian nationalist movement. National unity was built while incorporating India's considerable multicultural diversity. As a result, India's Congress Party, even though a hegemonic party in the early decades, balanced centralizing and regional forces within its fold. This institutional development provided long-term "political capital" for crafting a successful federal system. Second, India's constitutional design – though mainly centralist – was also flexible enough to accommodate regional ambitions over time. Initially these constitutional balances reflected the real political balances manifest in India's national politics; over time, however, constitutional provisions became a force in their own right, molding the political process itself. And, third, the evolution of Indian federalism has been helped by the spread of democratic politics. Within the framework of a centralized but accommodating state, democracy has enabled regional forces to successfully press their demands. These successes were manifest early in the area of identity politics, namely, in the reorganization of India along linguistic lines, and over the last three decades in the struggle to share economic resources between the national and state governments.

Manor also analyzes Indian federalism in this volume, but more from the standpoint of Indian states. Manor's paper seeks to answer two main questions. First, why have relations between New Delhi and India's various state governments usually remained manageable? Second, why in some cases have things gone spectacularly wrong, so that violent separatist movements have developed and center–state relations have broken down?

To answer these questions, Manor's paper considers the various "management" strategies used by Indian governments in different times and places. He first focuses on two "reasonably typical" Indian states – Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They are analyzed to show that center–state relations have never become wholly unmanageable in such "mainstream" states, even when national leaders abandoned accommodation and bargaining for commandist approaches. He argues that, in addition to politics of accommodation, sociocultural and other conditions within states help greatly to keep relations manageable. Indeed, he goes further, suggesting that no genuine separatist movement has ever arisen in a sizable Indian state (with a population of over 25 million).

His analysis then turns to three regions where breakdowns have occurred – Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and India's Northeast. The

disasters which engulfed the first two of these regions were avoidable. These were the result of ill-advised, illiberal, commandant interventions from New Delhi. Conditions in those states differed from “mainstream” India in ways that made breakdowns, separatism, and ghastly violence possible – though not inevitable. In the Northeast, however, recurrent breakdowns, violence, and separatism were and remain inevitable. Even the most enlightened and accommodating “management” strategies from New Delhi could not have avoided such episodes – much of the time in nearly all of the Northeast. Manor concludes with a discussion of the realization – among many senior political figures in New Delhi over the last decade – that accommodative approaches are essential in dealing with all regions – troubled and untroubled.

Moving down the government hierarchy, what role does local government play in Indian democracy? Subrata Mitra investigates this question. The answers he provides in his paper are supported by an original and detailed survey of political attitudes within India. Mitra argues that, over the years, local governments have become more and more significant in India’s governance. This process has enabled the political incorporation of village-level elites and masses. Not only have the links between the “center” and the “periphery” thus been strengthened, but new political resources have also been infused into the Indian political system. As a result the legitimacy of India’s democratic institutions has deepened.

Within this broad picture, Mitra further documents that the effectiveness of local governments varies across India’s diverse regions. Surveyed respondents evaluated local governments more positively in some states such as Maharashtra and West Bengal than in, say, Bihar. Mitra suggests that local governments are most effective when local institutions enjoy the trust and confidence of local elites on the one hand, and where local elites remain accountable to the local electorate on the other hand.

The last two institutional essays focus on emerging trends. Given the institutional vacuum created by Indira Gandhi’s personalistic and centralized rule, what institutions or processes have filled the gap? Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph focus on the role of the Indian constitution or, more appropriately, on the role of some constitutionally provided institutions. They take as their backdrop a view that both the Indian polity and the economy have experienced significant decentralization in recent years. These deeper changes, combined with less deep ones such as unsavory leadership practices, have weakened some of India’s central political institutions, especially a strong and stable executive. One of the reasons why this weakening has not been highly debilitating is because India has a reservoir of other constitutionally approved institutions. The



Rudolphs discuss the important new political roles of the judiciary, the presidency, and the Electoral Commission. Under conditions of a strong executive, the political significance of these institutions in India is generally dwarfed. In recent years, however, especially in the 1990s, these institutions have mitigated and moderated the potential damage that coalitional instability within national governments may have caused.

Finally, based on extensive fieldwork, Amrita Basu provides an analysis of the BJP as a political force in India. She argues that it helps to think of the BJP both as a social movement and as a political party. Whereas the BJP as a movement tends to be more radical – i.e., more extreme in its Hindu nationalist commitments – the BJP as a political party often moves towards the political “center.” The paper both documents the BJP’s back and forth movement from a more to a less extreme right-wing force within Indian politics, and seeks to explain these swings.

Basu suggests that the BJP chooses to be more or less radical strategically, especially calculating that, given specific political circumstances, one political stance is likely to yield greater electoral dividends than the other. Thus, for example, the BJP and its affiliates mobilized India’s Hindus in the early 1990s as a movement that culminated in the destruction of a mosque; the BJP gained considerable electoral benefits as a result. However, when party leaders perceived that returns on extremist politics were declining, they engineered a centrist shift. More recently, therefore, the BJP has offered itself as a party of stability and good governance, a political position that has catapulted it to the position of India’s ruling party.

While the BJP in the last few years of power has acted moderately, Basu’s analysis implies that this moderation is by no means irreversible. For now the BJP is hemmed in by its coalitional partners. However, the movement versus the party dialectic, which is deeply rooted in the BJP, can readily swing back, away from the logic of a ruling party to more of an extreme religious–nationalist movement, pushed in part by “true believers” and, for the rest, by a need to further bolster its electoral prospects.

### **Social demands and democratic deepening**

Democracy ensures formal–legal and not socioeconomic equality. A growing embrace of citizenship rights by common Indians has, over time, given rise to numerous demands for more power and resources. Democratic institutions both facilitate such demands and are challenged

by them. The balancing act that may facilitate the slow but steady deepening of democracy is never easy, and India is no exception. How has this process of democratic deepening evolved in India?

Over the last five decades, democracy in India has not only taken root but it has spread wide and deep. Before providing a thumbnail sketch of how this process has evolved, it is important to underline both its incomplete and complex nature, as well as its normative ambiguity. The spread of democracy has implied that norms and practices of democracy – not only independent voting, but also expressing dissent, and forming associations to press demands – have been embraced by more and more people, including those at the bottom of India’s social structure. The resulting “million mutinies,” however, have not always been well coordinated or organized; so far, they have not facilitated any significant redistribution of wealth or income. Nevertheless – to add yet another complexity – it may well be the case that this spread of democracy has prevented further skewing of India’s distributional patterns. The political impact of democracy’s spread has also been ambiguous. Democratization has weakened India’s rigid social inequalities and thus made India’s democracy more meaningful for the lowly masses. At the same time, however, the “million mutinies” have also stoked hundreds of political fires and provided ready material for populists and demagogues to exploit.

During the 1950s, a majority of India’s citizens did not fully exercise their political rights. The idea of political equality and of democratic rights was rather alien amidst the age-old inequalities of a hierarchical rural society. Congress’s early dominance of Indian politics rested heavily on the deference that Congress’s allies, India’s rural elites, were able to command from their social “inferiors.” Over time, however, the spread of commerce and the repeated practice of democracy has eroded the dependencies of social “inferiors” on their “superiors,” releasing numerous new actors for political mobilization. The political impact of this shift was already evident in the second half of the 1960s, when a variety of opposition parties mobilized these newly available political actors to challenge Congress’s dominance.

Within Congress, Indira Gandhi was among the first to grasp all this; her populist sloganeering was aimed directly at new groups emerging from under the influence of traditional rural elites. Such appeals in effect closed the circle by stimulating further mobilization among the rural lower classes whose new activism it was meant to exploit. Her failure to reduce poverty in the 1970s and early 1980s made it difficult for her to consolidate her position with her new supporters among the rural poor, who then became susceptible to new forms of political

mobilization. Their dissatisfaction has found diverse expressions over the last two decades that often vary from region to region.

For example, in the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the mobilized but unincorporated poor provided ready support to movie-stars-turned-politicians who combined personal and populist appeals to garner popular support (Subramanian 1999). In other states, such as West Bengal and Kerala, the poor have been more systematically incorporated by reform-oriented communist parties (Nossiter 1988; Heller 1999). Where caste inequalities were deeply rooted – as in the Hindi heartland states – the political emergence of the lowest groups has brought forth new forms of lower-caste politics (Varshney 2000; also see Weiner’s essay below), either spawning new caste-oriented political parties that cater exclusively to such groups (as in Uttar Pradesh), or precipitating violent reactions from threatened higher castes (as in Bihar).

Along with the poor, the middling groups of rural Indian society have also become more politically active over the last two decades. These groups – especially the so-called backward castes – are the mainstay of the nationwide “reservation” movement, which demands that certain shares of government-controlled jobs and educational opportunities be “reserved” for applicants from certain castes (see Weiner’s essay below). Demands of this sort often began with a “top-down” quality: leaders voiced them in the hopes of gaining votes from among the large membership of the backward castes. Over time, of course, backward caste members have become politicized, pressing their own case. Not surprisingly, such an upsurge has provoked a backlash from the higher castes. Some of the political turmoil of the 1980s in states like Gujarat and Bihar could be traced to such caste conflict. The issue took on national significance in 1990 when the then prime minister, V.P. Singh, announced a major shift in national policy designed to favor the backward castes. Protest riots led by high-caste students broke out all over northern India, seriously weakening the government, and paving the way for the emergence of the BJP.

Another movement among middle-level rural groups has demanded higher prices for agricultural products and lower prices for production inputs like fertilizer, electricity, and credit. Such initiatives appeal to peasants who have prospered under the government’s “Green Revolution” policies and now wish to transform their new riches into political clout. Fueling their activism is the conviction that the state has favored the urban upper classes while neglecting the farmer.

Finally, note should be made of a variety of nonelite urban groups and movements that Indian democracy has spawned and that are politically

active in India (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: chs. 10, 11). Labor in India is relatively well organized, especially in the public sector. Labor unions, however, are often politically fragmented along party lines and are not as effective as they might be if they acted in unison. Students, especially university students, are similarly quite active politically but are fragmented along party lines. A variety of lumpen groups, especially unemployed youth in northern India, have joined right-wing proto-fascist movements in recent years – such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS (see Basu’s essay below) – that in turn have provided support for the BJP, India’s current ruling party. A number of movements that seek to promote a specific cause – e.g., women’s movements, environmental movements, tribal movements, Dalit movements (or the movements of the untouchable castes) – also dot India’s political landscape (see the essay by Katzenstein et al. below).

The last three essays in the volume provide more detailed analysis of a few key themes concerning such growing social activism and democratic deepening in India.

Myron Weiner provides an overview of how India’s caste system has interacted with democratic politics. Two of his arguments especially need to be underlined. First, India’s democracy has proven to be inclusive, accommodating members of lower and middle castes into the political system. At the same time, however, and this is a second key argument, inclusiveness has not always facilitated public policies that may benefit large numbers of the lower and middle castes. How is this apparent tension to be explained and what may be its long-term implications?

Myron Weiner identifies several long- and short-term trends that help explain why India’s lower castes have been successfully incorporated into the democratic system: the long-term spread of anticaste ideologies; the competitive political mobilization of middle and lower castes, first by the Congress Party itself and, over time, by numerous other parties; and an extensive use of “reservation policies” – India’s version of affirmative action policies – that have created quotas for middle and lower castes in politics, bureaucracy, and educational institutions. The resulting inclusiveness, however, has ironical limits that were also noted above: the presence of underprivileged castes in positions of power has not resulted in the pursuit of broadly egalitarian public policies. Weiner explains this outcome by underlining that the politics of caste is often the politics of dignity; goals sought are less broad-based education or health, but more respect, equality of treatment, and symbolic gains. As a result, inclusion of caste leaders into visible positions of power has often satisfied – at least so far – the demands of lower-caste groups. Over time, however,

further “class”-like divisions within castes, the growing assertiveness of various castes, and the failure of the Indian state to provide such public goods as primary education and health could become future sources of political conflict.

Pranab Bardhan, in his essay below, discusses the issues of “poverty” and “equity” within the context of Indian democracy. He underlines some of the detrimental consequences for development and democracy of equity politics, or what he describes as a “passion for group equity that rages among the common people in India.”

Equity politics hurts both development and democracy through a variety of mechanisms. According to Bardhan, numerous economic interest groups within India clamor for a share of public resources. The more the government satisfies these groups, the less it has available to undertake crucial investments that require public money. The resulting bottlenecks hurt economic growth. The political accommodation of various castes, mainly via granting them reserved quotas in public services and in the public sector, has also impaired India’s development; excessive “reservations” have diminished the efficiency of governmental performance. And, finally, demands for group equity have hurt the democratic process itself by constantly exposing government decision-making to particularistic pressures.

From these observations, Bardhan does not conclude that “equity politics” always has negative consequences for development and democracy. His suggestions are instead limited to the specific manner – top-down, aimed at symbolic politics, and often unorganized – in which the “rage for equality” is playing itself out in India. He goes further: he suggests that if equity politics focuses on asset redistribution (such as land reforms) within the context of accountable and well-organized local governments, it could be combined with both efficiency and a stronger democracy.

Beyond the politics of caste and class, as noted above, numerous social movements also inhabit India’s political landscape. Mary Katzenstein and her co-authors help interpret this phenomenon, suggesting that, on balance, social movements strengthen India’s democracy. More specifically, their essay proposes three important arguments that are worth underlining. First, social movements in India can be usefully categorized as movements that have mobilized primarily around identity issues – caste, language, religion – and those that mainly pursue specific issues and/or interests, e.g., women’s, environmental, and/or economically oriented movements. These two broadly distinguishable sets of movements represent their concerns in India within different institutional arenas: whereas identity politics is often expressed via electoral

politics, interest-oriented movements have operated mainly within the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Second, and related to the first argument, interest- and issue-oriented movements have often remained local and regional movements. By contrast, given the salience of identity politics in India's diverse social setting, movements that mobilize identities have on occasion established themselves as national movements, often through electoral mobilization. And, third, there are yet other movements that do not engage the state directly. These movements often work at the grassroots and aim mainly to change local realities, often by changing the consciousness of one group or another. Taken together, these myriad movements deepen India's democracy and ensure that slippages away from democracy will remain temporary and minimal.

### **In sum**

The essays in this volume raise numerous important themes that cannot be readily summarized in a brief space. Nevertheless, three main themes can be underlined as "conclusions."

First, this volume is no blind celebration of India's democracy: all the warts and blemishes of the country's democratic record are on display. Among India's problems, analysts point to sluggish economic growth, continuing and massive poverty, growing coalitional instability, regional problems, and the prevalence of a variety of social conflicts, including violence against lower castes and religious minorities. However, none of the analysts consider these problems to be serious enough to require nondemocratic solutions. India's democratic political system is an established fact and the efforts of the analysts in this volume are focused both on how to explain this outcome, and on how the performance of India's democracy may be improved.

How and why India's democracy has become such a well-established fact is, of course, the central theme of this volume. Like all complex outcomes, more than one factor has contributed to the establishment of India's democracy. Some of these factors are of long-term duration and do not readily suggest any "policy" implications for those wishing to learn from India's record. Other factors, however, indeed lead to meaningful lessons.

It is hard to imagine that if India's multicultural diversity was to be organized as an enduring single state, it could be organized as anything else but a federal, democratic polity. It was helpful for India that, early in its modern history, British colonialism established a relatively centralized state and, within that frame, introduced proto-democratic institutions and practices. Indian nationalists further played a critical role, first

by crafting the “unity in diversity” that was India’s nationalist movement and, second, by pushing for full democracy by instituting mass adult suffrage and tolerance for religious and cultural diversity. These historical preconditions of India’s democracy may not be easy to reproduce.

The fifty-year history of the sovereign Indian republic, however, is replete with instances of power negotiations that indeed lend themselves to lessons for others. Most significantly, within the framework of a centralized state, accommodation of group demands has repeatedly strengthened India’s democracy. And, conversely, excessive centralization, especially at the expense of the rights and demands of one group or another, has just as often backfired. Some examples, discussed in detail in the chapters below, will suffice. India’s democracy was strengthened by crafting a federal structure that gave political power to Indians who speak different languages. Federal structure was further strengthened when the demands of one region or another were partially accommodated rather than flagrantly resisted: the examples of the Punjab and Kashmir provide the most dramatic instances. The creation of local governments and the accommodation of lower castes and of a variety of grassroots movements similarly point towards the deepening and strengthening of democracy.

It is also important to qualify the thrust of this argument. Excessive accommodation of a variety of demands can at times backfire. What one analyst called the “passion for equity” in India has also hurt India’s economic development and contributed to the deinstitutionalization of its polity. Successful accommodation of demands often presupposes an effective central state. When accommodation itself leads to fragmentation and threatens the viability of a centralized state, then other problematic political responses may follow; the rise of right-wing religious nationalism in India is at least in part a response to such perceived fragmentation.

These qualifications aside, an important lesson from India’s successful democratic record is this: within the framework of a centralized state, moderate accommodation of group demands, especially demands based on ethnicity, and some decentralization of power strengthens a democracy.