Ashutosh Varshney, Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy

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The Odyssey of an Improbable Democracy

Independent India was born with multiple projects. Three projects were especially important: securing national unity; bringing dignity and justice to those at the bottom of the social order; and eliminating mass poverty. These were by no means the only projects of the founding fathers, but they were viewed as critical. Freedom was not simply to be intrinsically valued, though there was some of that to be sure. A free India would also allow its citizens to achieve some cherished and worthy goals.

In and of themselves, these three missions—national unity, social justice, and elimination of mass poverty—were not unusual. Indeed, with some variations, these were familiar themes on the political agenda of many other countries that became independent after the Second World War. The uniqueness of the Indian experiment lay in the political framework within which these projects had to be pursued. India's founding fathers committed themselves to a universal-franchise democracy. Vote was not to be based on differentiations of gender, class, or ethnicity. Universal franchise came to the West after the Industrial Revolution—that is, after incomes had reached a substantially high level. India was to practise it at a very low level of income, long before an economic revolution had come about.

In other newly decolonized nations, too, democratic commencements were common, as many instituted the vote and political freedoms. But democracy was not a primary, or an unwavering, commitment elsewhere. If the Asian, African, Latin American, (or even Southern European) elite thought that democracy was coming in the way of achieving the objectives of national unity, social justice or prosperity, in many places it was tossed aside in favour of an authoritarian, quite ardent, embrace. By the 1960s, country after country had abandoned its democratic pledge.[1] In contrast,

with the solitary exception of nineteen months during 1975–77, India's democracy survived.

Fifteen national elections and many more state-level elections have been held till now. The probability of a democratic collapse is minuscule. Democracy has become the institutionalized common sense of Indian politics: no one thinks any longer that there is any other way of coming to power. Comparative evidence, examined at length below, makes it clear that, *for the first time in human history, a poor nation has practised universal franchise for so long*—already for over six decades.

The long swathe of democratic experience allows us to answer some important questions. Has India's democracy aided, or impeded, the pursuit of national unity, dignity and justice, and elimination of poverty? The essays in this book, written over a period of two decades and now revisited, argue that the battles are half won. Keeping the nation together is perhaps the greatest achievement of Indian democracy, though democracy alone has not made that happen: a combination of force and persuasion has been used to quell insurgencies and riots. Democracy has seriously attacked caste inequalities in the South, but in the North the process has only recently acquired force. Mass poverty remains the greatest failure of Indian democracy. Since 1991, the rate of decline in poverty has accelerated, and a real measure of prosperity has reached the middle classes for the first time in modern Indian history. But, anywhere between roughly one-fourth and over one-third of India—depending on what measure is deployed—remains trapped in various forms of poverty. Begging bowls, hungry faces, emaciated bodies—young and old—continue to greet the rising curve of prosperity. In recent years, corporate players have enthused a great deal over India— indeed, signs of business dynamism have been all too evident. But those who look at poverty, primary and secondary education, and public health find economic growth figures entirely, or substantially, unsatisfactory. They bemoan India's social lag.[2]

What accounts for these partial successes? And how, in turn, can we understand the surprising longevity of Indian democracy? The essays presented in this book seek to give an account. Since the essays are mostly about how democracy has affected the pursuit of the larger ends—national unity, social justice, poverty, and economic welfare—I will touch on them only briefly in this opening chapter.

My main focus here will be on the origins, the longevity, and the unfinished quests of Indian democracy. The statistical sophistication of recent democratic theory presents the exceptionalism of India's democracy with stunning clarity. It is clear that India's democratic longevity is less a consequence of some objective characteristics of Indian society, culture, or economy—the factors normally invoked. Rather, India's democratic success is primarily a consequence of politics. Leaders and political organizations, going back to the freedom struggle in the first half of the twentieth century, have played a salutary role. Without centrally bringing their role into our analysis—especially those from the pre-independence and early post-independence period—India's democratic longevity cannot be understood. The leaders and their

organizations did not carry larger impersonal forces of history. They made democracy.[3]

The quality of Indian democracy generates a great deal ofconcern, and rightly so. The desire to improve the ethical and civic fibre of democracy is a feeling shared by a large number of Indian citizens, and the intellectual and political energy that has time and again gone into a moral or civic enhancement is substantial. 'Argumentative Indians' have often debated and critiqued the existing democratic practices. Movements expressing dissatisfaction with the democratic process have repeatedly emerged.

But a prior question needs to be posed and explored. Comparative experience, in retrospect, suggests that India's democracy was unlikely to be stable. A Pakistani- or Indonesian-style political history was more likely. Both these nations were, like India, desperately poor at the time of independence, and both were unable to stabilize democracy in the first half-century, or more, of their post-independence history. We need to ask why Indian democracy has lasted so long, as much as what is wrong with it.

National Projects: What Was to Be Done?

Let us, however, begin with a brief overview of the three great national projects—national unity, dignity and social justice, and elimination of mass poverty. Why were they so important?

The first project was principally focused on keeping India's linguistic and religious divisions in check. India was linguistically and religiously so diverse that liberation from what the leaders repeatedly called 'fissiparous tendencies' was absolutely necessary. The immensely violent partition of India on grounds of religion had only served to underline how important the creation of a national feeling was. Both joy and agony had attended India's freedom. The British left after nearly two centuries, but India's partition led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. And, in search of safety, millions had to leave their homes and become migrants. National unity, as a consequence, became an abiding concern in politics. Unity simply could not be assumed.

The second project—dignity and social justice—called for attacking the inequities of the caste system, a lasting feature of Hindu society which constituted over 80 per cent of the country after partition. An independent and modern India could not possibly live with the notion that, depending on the caste in which one was born, a human being's rights and responsibilities would be different; that discrimination would continue to be practised as in the old days; and that roughly one-fifth of the Hindu community, whose touch would pollute those hierarchically above, could be called 'untouchable'. A modern polity could not accept radically different bundles of rights based on birth.

The third project sought to bring basic material comforts—food, clothing, health and shelter—to the millions of Indians living in shocking squalor and deprivation at the time of independence. When the British left India after ruling different parts of the country for a century and a half to nearly two centuries, a mere 15–17 per cent of India was literate and, though reliable poverty statistics do not go as far back as 1947–48, it will not be implausible to suggest that at least half of the nation's population was below the poverty line and millions above it were also quite poor.[4] The enormity of the problem required a concerted and systematic attack.

How do we know that these objectives were central to national political life? In modern times, a nation's fundamental missions are normally enshrined in its Constitution. But, relying on legal exactitude, constitutions have a way of lending a prosaic touch to missions that are conceptualized as grand, enduring, and politically and emotionally compelling. Constitutions are not sites of splendid rhetoric rendered in captivating metaphors. Able and imaginative political leaders often construct such rhetoric, representing the heroic idealism of founding moments.

As it turned out, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and a leader next only to Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement, was remarkably capable of delivering national missions and political aspirations in prose fitting the spirit of the moment. In a speech delivered on the stroke of midnight, just as India was about to be free of British rule, a speech famously entitled 'Tryst with Destiny', this is how Nehru began:

> 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 measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.[5]

Having thus sketched the historic significance and depth of the moment of freedom, Nehru, in less rousing prose, began to lay out the principal projects of modern India:

> The future beckons to us. Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavour? To bring freedom and opportunity to the common man . . . to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.

Towards the end of the speech, he turned to religion that had so tormented India's freedom movement and led to the birth of two nations, India and Pakistan. He did not wish to speak of the violence that had already broken out, and that had also kept Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, away from the capital. While India was celebrating freedom, Gandhi was making valiant attempts to restore peace in Calcutta, a city of great political significance to modern India, but one awfully torn by Hindu–

Muslim riots. Formulating the problem of Hindu–Muslim relations more generally, Nehru said:

> All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.

All selections of prime national goals tend to have an element of subjectivity. The listing above is no exception. Based on the Constitution, major speeches and the basic political disputes of post-independence politics, the identification of national unity, social justice, and elimination of poverty as India's fundamental national projects reflects my understanding of what was central. Other listings may be different, at least partially.

In particular, some will point to national security and India's international standing as a major national objective. Though Nehru was intermittently India's defence minister,[6] he always kept the portfolio of external affairs. For seventeen years, Nehru was not only prime minister, but also India's secretary of state, as it were. Nehru clearly attached a great deal of importance to foreign policy. He even invented the concept of non-alignment in international affairs, seeking to stay away from the encircling blocks of the Cold War.

The significance of defence or foreign policy is beyond doubt. But both have been important primarily to India's elite politics, not to the nation's mass politics.[7] Both have indirectly helped or hindered mass welfare, but neither has directly determined election results in India. As India's power grows, the direct political significance of defence or foreign policy might well change but, as of now, they have not played the same role in mass politics as religion, caste, or poverty. As Tellis puts it, India has always viewed itself as a developmental state, hoping the problem of national security would go away: national energies have never quite concentrated on security or foreign affairs.[8] Even after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, the incumbents did not lose power in 2009. That is in part because villages continue to have a preponderant weight in election politics, and neither national security nor foreign policy is an issue of overriding importance in rural politics. Until India is significantly more urban, this situation is unlikely to change dramatically.

Defining Democracy

On what grounds can we claim that India is a democracy? To many, this might appear to be an unnecessarily pedantic matter. Is it not obvious that India has been democratic for over six decades, holding regular elections, allowing freedom of press, judiciary, faith, association, and movement? The matter is not so straightforward.

Critics of India's democracy have often called it a procedural, not a substantive, democracy. Indeed, there has been a long tradition of inquiry going all the way back to Karl Marx, which critiques elections, elected institutions, and freedom to elect as being wholly inadequate. This tradition insists that democracy should be defined in terms of some larger goals—for example, economic equality. If citizens are not relatively economically equal, the freedom to elect can only be illusory. Following this tradition, Jalal has argued that even though Pakistan—often ruled by the military—has had very few elections, and India has always had elections and civilian rule, there is no fundamental difference between the polities of India and Pakistan. Both societies are highly unequal, which makes elections deceptive and unreal.[9]

This view is implausible for two reasons. First, greater equality deepens a democracy, but inequality does not make it impossible. The *deepening* of democracy and the *presence* of democracy are analytically separable. Following this reasoning, Heller has argued that the state of Kerala has a deep democracy, whereas other states of India—let us say, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh—are not so deep.[10] But democracy exists both in Kerala and Rajasthan.[11]

Second, and more generally, even if we claim that democracy is not about elections, but about some larger goals, we cannot escape the necessity of the elective principle. For how do we know which goals a society really wishes to strive for? Some may prefer freedom; others, equality; still others, dignity for all. Unless societal objectives are subjected to an elective principle, they will necessarily be chosen in an authoritarian manner. Lee Kuan Yew's goals for Singapore—prosperity, equality, a merit-based society—are laudable. Singapore has also achieved them quite substantially, but the goals he chose have never been seriously questioned or debated in elections. As a result, Singapore cannot be, and has never been, called democratic.

Given that a hierarchy of goals is very hard to establish *for society as a whole*, as opposed to individual life, democratic theory embraces an institutional or procedural definition of democracy. Indeed, Dahl's twofold principle—contestation and participation—has become the classic definition of democracy. Contestation signifies the freedom with which the ruling party—which normally has control over the police and bureaucracy—can be challenged in an election. Participation covers franchise—whether all citizens have the right to vote and can effectively vote.[12] Dahl argues that such polities have existed mostly in Western societies, but notes that 'a leading contemporary exception . . . is India, where (democracy) was established when the population was overwhelmingly agricultural, illiterate and . . . highly traditional and rule-bound in behavior and beliefs.'[13]

The Improbability of Indian Democracy

The improbable success of India's democracy has been talked about for a long time.[14] But the newer concepts and the statistical evidence provided by Przeworski

and his colleagues allow us to see India's democratic exceptionalism in a fresh light.[15] The biggest surprise about Indian democracy is income-based.[16]

The claims of Przeworski *et al.* are based on the most comprehensive data set ever constructed on democracies and dictatorships. The data set covers 141 countries between 1950 and 1990. In this period, there were 238 regimes—105 democratic and 133 dictatorial. Of the 141 countries, only 41 experienced a regime transition from democracy to dictatorship, or vice versa. The remaining 100 countries—67 dictatorships, 33 democracies—witnessed no change.

Of all the patterns that Przeworski *et al.* have identified, the following have special relevance for India:

1. Income is the best predictor of democracy. It correctly predicted the type of regime in 77.5 per cent of the cases; only in 22.5 per cent, it did not.[17] No other predictor—religion, colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, international political environment—is as good on the whole.

2. India is in the latter 22.5 per cent set. Indeed, if we consider only decolonized countries, the claim for India can be made even more specific and precise. Democracies that emerged from decolonization survived only in India, Mauritius, Belize, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Of these, the most surprising case is India, which 'was predicted as a dictatorship during the entire period' (1950–90). 'The odds against democracy in India were extremely high.'[18] All other poorer exceptions had higher income than India.

3. Some other countries have defied the pattern on the obverse side. They were rich enough to be democratic earlier. Those that became democracies later than their income levels would have predicted include South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, Portugal, and Spain. Income would also have predicted Mexico to be a democracy in the early 1950s, not in the late 1990s. And Singapore 'had a 0.02 probability of being a dictatorship in 1990', but it is still authoritarian today.[19] If India is the biggest exception on the low-income end, then Singapore is the biggest surprise on the high-income side.

4. A relationship between growth rates and the probability of a democratic breakdown can also be ascertained. Democracies that grow at rates lower than 5 per cent per annum collapse at a higher rate than democracies whose economies grow at rates faster than 5 per cent per annum.[20]Again, India is a big exception, but for a specific period. India's

economic growth rate has been higher than 5 per cent per annum since 1980 but, in the period 1950–80, Indian economy grew at only 3.5 per cent per annum. This larger statistical relationship, too, would have predicted a collapse of Indian democracy between 1950 and 1980. Had Indira Gandhi's Emergency lasted longer than eighteen months (1975–77), India would actually have followed the larger trend.

A new conceptual framework undergirds these statistical patterns. Przeworski *et al.* draw a sharp distinction between the 'endogenous' and the 'exogenous' conceptions of democratization. The endogenous view is that democracies are more likely to emerge as countries become wealthier. The exogenous explanation distinguishes between emergence and survival. Democracies can be established for any number of reasons, but they are likely to last mostly at higher levels of income.

Przeworski *et al.* challenge the endogenous view.[21] They argue that wars, the death of dictators, economic crises, foreign pressure, or the end of colonial rule can all lead to the establishment of democracies. However, evidence shows that democracies tend to collapse in poorer countries, but survive in wealthier countries. This view, called the exogenous view, distinguishes birth from longevity, emergence from survival. Essentially, the origins of democracies are not economic, but survival mostly is.[22]

Why this should be so is unclear. The analysis of Przeworski *et al.* is not causal, it is only about identification of patterns. But they do partially rule out the validity of one explanation: education. At higher levels of income, education levels tend to be higher, and it is sometimes suggested that a more educated citizenry is more tolerant of dissent, leading to an acceptance of democratic values. '*At each level of education*,' they find, 'the probability of democracy dying decreases with income .' Hence, for reasons that are not easy to identify, 'wealth does make democracies more stable, independently of education.'[23]

While scholars continue to investigate the reasons why democracies are so hard to sustain at low levels of income, a couple of hypotheses are worth entertaining.[24]

In poor societies, governments tend to be heavily involved in the economy, either as direct producers or service providers, or as regulators. Political power can greatly enhance one's economic chances and those of the group associated with the winner, while loss of power can spell doom. It is not uncommon for this doom to include imprisonment and forms of extreme vengeance. In contrast, at high levels of income, opportunities can be pursued in many sectors which are not controlled by the government. Political defeat does not entail a rapid and comprehensive closure of opportunities. Defeats are easier to accept when they do not lead to painful economic sunsets or harsh punishments.

Of course, economic reasons alone do not exhaust the explanations for why politics in poor democracies become such a do-or-die contest. Group persecutions may also take place on religious or cultural grounds. For its beliefs, the small group of Ahmedis

was declared non-Muslim in Pakistan by an elected regime in the 1970s. In a currently democratic Indonesia, too, Ahmedis are being targeted for their religious doctrines. Such a problem especially affects minorities. In India, the Muslim minority in Gujarat was targeted in the 2002 riots and the Sikh minority in Delhi, in 1984. The police and civil service can sometimes nakedly representmajoritarianism, believing that majoritarian feelings should brook no legal obstacles. The majoritarian logic of democracy can thus undermine its liberal logic, hurting minorities and dissenting groups and individuals. Richer democracies are not entirely above this problem, but countervailing power—through the media and courts—can be created with less difficulty.

Be that as it may, India's democratic surprise is now much clearer than before. By their very nature, statistical arguments tend to be probabilistic, not deterministic.[25] They establish the odds, not certainties. India's democracy was highly improbable, but not impossible. We need to ask: What made the improbable so real?

Explaining Longevity

The reasons for the survival of Indian democracy—some of which are examined in Chapter 2—are both structural and political. The structural reasons essentially deal with some enduring features of Indian society; the political reasons have to do with the way leaders and organizations dealt with those enduring features, constructed strategies, and developed institutions. In the account given below, leaders will play a central role.

Keohane has remarked that scholars have been silent, erroneously, on the role of leaders in bringing about change.[26]

The concentration has been on the economy, culture, and society. Focusing on India, Kohli echoes Keohane and has come closest to the argument developed below:

> Indian democracy is . . . best understood by focusing, not mainly on its socio-economic 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.[27]

The Identity Structure of Indian Society

On the whole, class cleavages, class coalitions, and class conflict have been historically regarded by scholars as the main structural reasons for democratization.[28] Certain types of class structures and coalitions impede the evolution of democracy; some other types promote it. Economic inequalities are often the centrepiece of such analyses.[29]

Of late, ethnic or communal cleavages—as opposed to class cleavages—have received a lot of attention. Dahl did present some early thoughts about the links between cultural cleavage patterns and democracy,[30] but these links remained underexplored. The new thinking is that even in the birth of democracy in Western Europe, religious and ethnic cleavages and structures can be shown to have played a significant role.

> Rather than class being the single variable that explains how and why democracy came about, scholars can see how religious conflict, ethnic cleavages, and the diffusion of ideas played a much greater role in Europe's democratization than has typically been appreciated.[31]

The idea of the impact of ethnic or communal cleavage structures on democracy has obvious relevance to India. For decades, it has been a familiar trope of scholarship on Indian politics that class has played a secondary role in determining political patterns and struggles; language, religion and caste have been far more influential.

What is the relationship between identity-based cleavages and democratic longevity in India? India's identity structure is dispersed, not centrally focused; and the identities cross-cut, instead of cumulating. Such structural features have political consequences.

Dispersed and Cross-Cutting Identities

Horowitz proposed the seminal conceptual distinction between *dispersed* and centrally *focused* ethnic structures.[32] Identities in dispersed systems tend to be locally based and many such identities exist. Centrally focused systems tend to have fewer salient identities, which have a nationwide resonance. As a consequence, conflict tends to escalate throughout the system. In dispersed ethnic structures, ethnic conflict remains localized and does not have a national spillover. The Centre can handle one group at a time in one part of the country without worrying about the nightmare of having the entire polity get affected.

Sri Lanka's Sinhala–Tamil conflict has a centrally focused quality, as does the Malay–Chinese conflict in Malaysia, and as did the East–West conflict in pre-1971 Pakistan. In India, all identity-based cleavages are regionally or locally concentrated. Most major languages have a geographical homeland in the federal set-up. Linguistic conflicts are thus typically confined to one part of the country or another. Religious cleavages are not too different. The Sikh–Hindu religious cleavage is confined basically to the state of Punjab and to some other parts of North India; the Hindu–Muslim cleavage rarely affects the South in a violent way;[33] the insurgency in Kashmir remained confined to the Kashmir Valley and did not spill over to include all Muslims. The 'sons of the soil' movements in Assam, Mumbai and Telangana, remained region-based or city-based. Even the caste system is local or regional in

character. Castes typically split state politics, generally not allowing any given state to become a cohesive and united political force against the Centre.

Analytically separable, but equally important, is the cross-cutting nature of Indian identities. Cumulative cleavages create greater potential for conflict escalation; cross-cutting cleavages tend to dampen conflict.[34] Sri Lanka is a classic case of cumulative cleavages.

Tamils are not only religiously, but also linguistically and racially, distinct from the Sinhalese.

India's four principal identities—language, religion, caste, and tribe—tend to cut across one another. Depending on the location, the first language of a Muslim could be Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, or Malayalam, to name a few. The same characteristic marks the Hindus. Moreover, the Hindus are split into thousands of castes.

Despite the many diversities of India, insurgencies have been few and far between.[35] Conflicts, of course, keep simmering, sometimes creating the impression that the political system is breaking down. Yet, violence dies before long, and democracy returns to normalcy. If the battle had been between keeping democracy alive and letting the nation break down, perhaps India's democracy would have faced sterner tests. A centrally focused and cumulative identity structure would have created much greater concerns for national integrity. A dispersed and cross-cutting identity structure may generate many more conflicts, but the intensity of conflict rarely reaches a level constituting an existential threat to the entire nation. As a consequence, India cannot easily become a Yugoslavia (which did not have a democracy in the first place).

The question of nationhood is important in yet another important sense: political. It was not merely the dispersed and cross-cutting structure of identities which prevented a deadly clash between democracy and nationhood. It is also that democracy benefited from the construction of nationhood during India's freedom struggle. India was not only an unlikely democracy, but also an unlikely nation.[36]

The construction of nationhood—made possible by the national movement and led by Gandhi—was a political enterprise; as was the consolidation of the nation after independence, led by Nehru, through political practices and institutions, especially the Constitution.

Nationhood and Democracy

Two kinds of historical discourses are relevant to a discussion of Indian democracy: one, a theoretical claim that nationhood is a prerequisite for democracy; and two, a conventional observation that India's radical diversities made nationhood virtually impossible. Since India could not be a nation, it followed as a syllogism that it could not be a democracy either.

Let us examine this through the arguments put forth by John Stuart Mill, often viewed as the father of modern liberalism; John Strachey, a leading administrator of colonial India; and Mark Twain, a literary giant, whose reflections about the impossibility of Indian nationhood were stimulated by his visit to India. The focus, then, shifts to how the Gandhi-led freedom movement sought to deal with such important claims, and how politics overcame arguments about structural or theoretical improbability.

Mill's Assertion

John Stuart Mill was among the first to argue that democracy was not possible without a national feeling. 'It is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities.'[37] Mill thought linguistic diversity was a special, virtually insuperable, 'hindrance to nation-making'.[38]

Mill's proposition can be translated into today's language. Regular democratic elections are about who should run a government of the nation, not about whether one should accept the nation at all. The latter can be decided by *referendums*, but *elections* are analytically distinct. If regular elections turn into battles over sovereignty, they are likely to be bloody, might unleash unmanageable passions, and render considered voting judgements virtually impossible. For periodic elections to have meaning, the basic political unit should not be in question. That is why national feeling is a prerequisite for democracy to function.

Mill, of course, had another argument about who could have—or who deserved—representative government. He spoke of 'two classes' of colonies: 'Some are composed of people of similar civilization to the ruling country: capable of, and ripe for, representative government: such as British possessions in America and Australia. Others, like India, are still at a great distance from that state.'[39] If so, what sort of government should 'Others, like India' have? A 'vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization.'[40]

There are, thus, two arguments here. One, nationhood is a prerequisite for a democracy; and two, colonies with a European ancestry, such as Canada and Australia, could have a democracy, but Indians came from an inferior civilization, and only when they reached an advanced state under British tutelage could they attain democracy.

In recent times, Mill's second argument has been subjected to detailed intellectual scrutiny.[41] And it is less relevant to our discussion here.[42] The civilizational or cultural arguments are not taken seriously by students of democracy any longer.[43] In the 1950s and 1960s, cultural arguments enjoyed their heyday.[44] But empirical evidence now is stacked against cultural prerequisites. Stepan shows that even predominantly Muslim

countries—often viewed as entirely inhospitable to democracy—have had democracies outside the Arab world.[45]And as already mentioend, Przeworski *et al.* show that income predicts more than 75 per cent of democratic instances. Culture plays a very small role.

The more important of Mill's two arguments is that nationhood is a prerequisite for democracy. Could India develop a national feeling, or was it simply an assemblage of inveterate localities, each locality speaking a different language? Language, according to Mill, was key to nationhood.

Strachey's Observation, Twain's Anxiety

Whether India could become a nation was also often debated by the powerful bureaucrats of the British Empire. John Strachey, a member of the British Governor General's Council, was one of the most prominent official voices in the late nineteenth century. In his oft-cited words, written in 1888, 'there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India possessing, according to any European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious'; and 'that men of the Punjab, Bengal, the Northwestern Provinces and Madras, should ever feel that they belong to one Indian nation, is impossible. You might with as much reason and probability look forward to a time when a single nation will have taken the place of the various nations of Europe.'[46]

This argument essentially proposes that India was a civilization like Europe, not a nation. Just as Europe has so many nations, the various units of India could conceivably become nations, but India could not be a single nation. A civilization is a cultural construct and does not require political unity. Building a nation—to use Gellner's famous words that will mark several essays in this volume—is 'to endow a culture with its own political roof'.[47] That roof, Strachey argued, could not be built over all of India.

Roughly similar claims were made by Mark Twain. After travelling in India in 1896, Twain was filled with admiration for India, but also concluded that Indian unity was impossible:

> India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history . . . India had . . . the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects; she had mines, and woods, and a fruitful soil. It would seem as if she should have kept the lead, and should be today not the meek dependent of an alien master, but mistress of the world, and delivering law and command to every tribe and nation in it. But, in truth, there was never any possibility of such supremacy for her. If there had been but one India and one language—but there were eighty of them! Where there are eighty nations and several hundred governments, fighting and quarreling must be the common

business of life; unity of purpose and policy are impossible . . . patriotism can have no healthy growth.[48]

From Improbability to Reality: Gandhi's Construction

It is this challenge—turning a civilization into a nation, generating patriotism and unity of purpose—which the freedom movement, under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, accepted as its own. It sought to build what came to be called 'unity in diversity'. This project was hugely political. In 1920, a freedom movement, which came to mobilize millions against British rule across the length and breadth of India, was launched. A mass movement would construct a nation, despite the odds.

In and of itself, conceptually speaking, the construction of Indian nationhood was not a novelty at all. As Chapters 4 and 6 argue, the new literature on nation-making, born nearly a hundred years after Strachey and Twain, shows that *all* nations are politically constructed. Path-breaking work by Weber demonstrates that a conscription army and a public school system turned peasants into Frenchmen over the course of many decades in the nineteenth century.[49] At the time of the French Revolution, very few spoke French outside Paris. In an equally seminal work on British history, Colley argues that four factors—shared Protestantism, a Catholic enemy in France, search for commercial opportunities and Empire—transformed a troubled Union of England, Scotland and Wales into a British nation over a period lasting more than a century (1707–1837).[50] The relationship between Scotland and England was especially conflict-ridden.[51]

Gandhi and most of his colleagues basically began to see that European-style nationhood was not conceivable in India.[52] If they sought linguistic uniformity—a requirement in Mill's conception of nationhood—it would only lead to destruction and violence. In India, diversities were far too rooted, historically. Not only linguistic but other forms of diversies would also have to be accepted as natural. Instead,*a second layer of all-India identity would be created*, leading to what we call hyphenated identities today. Indians would be Gujarati Indians, Bengali Indians, Muslim Indians, Hindu Indians, so on and so forth, not undifferentiated Indians. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, a straight line could not be created out of the crooked timber of India. Erasure of diversities would destroy India, not make it stronger.[53]

In particular, unlike Europe, language was systematically delinked from the concept of nation. Multiple languages and multilingual leaders were seen as an inevitable part of nation-building in India. If citizens could learn several languages, communication and fellow feeling were possible.

It is entirely conceivable that if the leaders of India's freedom movement had insisted on a 'one language, one nation' formula, there would have been as many nations in India at the time of British departure, as there are in Europe today. But that was not to be. In a radical formulation, Gandhi even accepted English as an Indian

language. When asked whether English would continue in a free India, despite its association with the British, Gandhi famously argued:

> I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.[54]

Gandhi also delinked nation from religion. 'If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their home are fellow countrymen.'[55] And in another radical formulation, he argued that the British could be part of a hyphenated India: 'It is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them'.[56] A layered or hyphenated concept of national identity made such conceptual formulations possible.

It is with these ideas that the political roof over the long-lasting cultural configuration called India was politically constructed. Peasant armies—or the public schools—were not the principal institutional vehicles of nation-making, as in France. Rather, the Congress party played a functionally equivalent role. The Congress party became the organizational centrepiece of the freedom movement. After Gandhi's rise, as early as 1920, the party was conceptualized as a federation of linguistic units. District and provincial offices of the party were opened, a membership drive was launched, cadres and an institutional presence were developed all over India during the 1920s. By 1937, the party had won power in seven out of eleven provinces, though admittedly in limited-franchise elections. Between 1920 and 1937, the party managed to penetrate much of India.

The Congress party called itself an inclusive, umbrella-like party, to which all were welcome so long as the basic principles of the nation attracted them. However, the Congress was unable to win over the Muslim community fully. In the end, a significantly large proportion of Muslims embraced the Muslim League, which led the movement for Pakistan. But it is noteworthy that when the British left India, only two nations emerged, not many. Mill, Strachey and Twain would have been surprised if they had lived till 1947. It was a substantial, if not full, victory of a concept of nationhood that did not insist on singular identities, but allowed layered or hyphenated identities.

It is noteworthy that Gandhi himself was not very fond of representative government. His ideal polity was one that had local village republics, more in line with direct—not representative—democracy.[57] But the freedom movement he led built a nation that established the foundations of post-independence democracy. In retrospect, without the freedom movement, India's nationhood is inconceivable. Perhaps, there would have been many nations. How many would have had democracy is a question too radically speculative and, therefore, unanswerable.

Be that as it may, viewing diversity as national strength, not as a source of national weakness, turned out to be critical. Politics, thus conceptualized and executed, created the Indian nation, against all odds. And democracy became a possibility, once a nation was constructed.

From Improbability to Consolidation: Nehru's Nurturing

The next huge political act was the consolidation of democracy after 1947. Here again, political leadership, especially the role of Nehru, was critical. Though more can surely be said, the Nehru period (1947–64) of Indian democracy is well researched.[58] My own view is presented in Chapter 2. Others too have written in detail.[59]

It is not clear how many early post-independence leaders, other than Nehru, were intensely committed to the democratic project.[60] Perhaps many were but, because of how much Nehru has been researched, we understand him better than we do the others. 'Our democracy is a tender plant,' said Nehru, 'which has to be nourished.'[61] It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that if Gandhi is the father of Indian nationhood, Nehru is the father of Indian democracy. Their colleagues and the organizations they built were indeed most valuable, but *someone had to lead*.

In India's contemporary public discourse, there are passionate arguments about Nehru's role. A large part of the debate is influenced by the way the Nehru dynasty came to occupy the highest rungs of Indian polity. In modern times, a family-domination of political parties is never viewed with unalloyed joy. However relevant dynasties might be to shoring up political organizations in the short-to-medium run, they are inherently anti-modern. They generate strong reactions.

But, whatever the view of practitioners and activists, scholars clearly need to separate Nehru's role from that of his family, especially since the family acquired its current status only after his death. In retrospect, it is clear that there were four keys to India's democratic consolidation: the unique position of the Congress party, elections, the primacy of the Constitution, and minority rights. Nehru played a vital role in each.

Modern democracy is inconceivable without political parties. But what do we know about the role of political parties in the early—as opposed to the later—stages of a democracy? Huntington, Kohli and Weiner have made the significant point that, when a democratic polity begins to get institutionalized, it helps if there is at least one political party which feels confident about winning power.[62] Early democracies with too many contenders for power find it hard to institutionalize themselves. India's ruling coalitions since 1998 have sometimes had twenty political parties or more. Had that been true in the 1950s, democracy could well have died. The fact that the Congress party had no effective challengers to its power right through the Nehru years paradoxically strengthened democracy. There were intense political disputes, but they were primarily inside the party.[63] As the Congress party further penetrated villages and

districts after independence, such disputes were natural. But because they were contained within the framework of the party, their intensity did not generate unbearable pressures in the polity. Kothari's term, 'Congress System', best represented the management properties of the polity under Congress dominance.[64]

A commitment to elections also set important norms. Described as a leap in the dark, India's first general elections in 1952 were the biggest elections in history. There were 173 million voters, of whom 75 per cent were illiterate. Hence, party symbols—bicycles, lamps, lanterns, flowers, animals—were put on the ballot. The elections took almost six months. A million officials were deployed.[65] 'Nearly 81 million votes were cast in around 1,32,600 polling stations . . . In 1952 this was a particularly dramatic assertion of India as a democratic nation. No other Asian or African part of the British Empire had yet gained its freedom, and here was India proving itself to be the world's largest democracy, despite earlier assumptions that India was unfit or unready for democracy, or that democracy could never take root in Indian culture and society.'[66] Two more elections, in 1957 and 1962, before Nehru's death, both contested freely and vigorously, deepened the legitimacy of the electoral process in Indian consciousness. Yadav reminds us:

> Within two decades of the inauguration of democratic elections based on universal adult franchise, the phenomenon of elections had ceased to surprise the students and observers of Indian politics . . . It is therefore worth remembering that historically this apparently natural, taken for granted, world of elections is a recent import and quite extraordinary development in the Indian society.[67]

Constitutional primacy was tested in several ways. There were repeated clashes between the executive and the judiciary over land reforms. Nehru was committed to land reforms in agriculture, but the courts kept identifying the right to property as inviolable. Instead of attacking the judges and appointing pliant ones, Nehru went through the constitutionally assigned process of overturning judicial verdicts: namely, getting a super majority—not a simple majority—of the legislatures to approve the legislation contested by courts. Battle lines at the highest levels of the polity were constitutionally drawn. When an unchallenged and hugely charismatic leader adheres to constitutional rules—despite many inconveniences and despite the fact that he could get away with violations—important norms get institutionalized. This Weberian insight is very relevant in understanding Nehru's significance. By attaching his charisma and authority to constitutional rules, Nehru made them stronger. His constitutional record is not unblemished, but it is very substantial.[68]

The relationship between minority rights and democracy was also central. Irritating many in his own party—including his deputy prime minister—Nehru relentlessly argued that democracy could not be equated with majoritarinism in a multi-religious, multilinguistic society. A majority of seats was the key to running a government in a parliamentary democracy, but a government so elected had to be responsible for the security and rights of all, especially those of the minorities. An 'insidious form of

nationalism', argued Nehru, 'is the narrowness of mind that it develops within a country, when a majority thinks itself as the entire nation and in its attempts to absorb the minority actually separates them even more.'[69]

Given that Pakistan had already emerged as a homeland of Muslims and that India's partition was hugely violent, anti-Muslim sentiment had reached the highest reaches of his party and administration.[70] If the Hindu minority in Pakistan was being massacred, should not India, a Hindu-majority nation, take revenge, asked some . Faced with an awful situation that contesting nationalisms have repeatedly produced, Nehru never tired of arguing that defence of the Muslim minority in India did not depend on how the Hindu minority was treated in Pakistan. India's founding principles were simply different. India was committed to a multi-religious nationhood. It could not be made Hindu majoritarian, just because Pakistan, a nation made for Muslims, was not unfailingly committed to the welfare of non-Muslim minorities.

> Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have to deal with this minority in a civilized manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic state. If we fail to do so, we shall have a festering sore which will eventually poison the whole body politic and probably destroy it.[71]

This was, then, a claim that Hindu majoritarianism was a threat to both national and democratic survival. Without a steadfast commitment to minority rights, India's democracy would be in serious peril.

After Nehru

Nehru died in 1964. Nearly half a century has passed since then. How do we understand Nehru's legacy? An understandable response would be that the first seventeen years of Indian democracy required meticulous nurturing. If democracy had failed then, a restoration would have been hard. The highly probabilistic linkage between democracy and income would have become a reality.

This response, while not entirely untrue, is not exhaustive. A legacy can be ruptured. Indeed it was, by no other than Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, in 1975, when an internal emergency was announced; the Constitution was suspended; opposition leaders were jailed; press freedoms were taken away; judicial independence was compromised; strikes were outlawed; and the slogan, 'India is Indira and Indira is India', was made to reverberate in many corners of India.

Either it was sheer miscalculation that Indira Gandhi calledelections in 1977 and managed to lose them, or India's most un-Nehru-like prime minister had somehow internalized a basic democratic norm—that electoral legitimacy was required for continued rule. The announcement of the 1977 elections remains shrouded in ambiguity.

Be that as it may, the post-Nehru survival of democracy may only in part have to do with the institutionalization of norms. Nehru's role in stabilizing the early democratic years is absolutely critical, but the same significance cannot be extended to later years.

In India, it is widely argued that the democratic integrity of the last two decades has been, most of all, preserved by two of India's premier and independent institutions of oversight—the Supreme Court and the Election Commission. Both have repeatedly fought the predatory instincts of politicians, whenever such instincts have surfaced in politics. As India spent more and more years under democracy, these institutions began to take their constitutionally assigned role increasingly seriously. They have repeatedly emerged as two of the most popular institutions in polls.[72] The Election Commission, in particular, has developed substantial mass legitimacy. Armed with that knowledge, it has made sure that elections are not stolen in India. Incumbents, who have often rigged elections in many other polities, are repeatedly defeated in Indian elections.

To this popular and correct explanation, one more needs to be added, especially for the last two decades. Despite the many criticisms that can be made, India's political parties have become the mainstay of democracy. There are so many parties in power—at the state and the central level—that a multilateral balance of power has come about. At any given point, half or more state governments are run by parties that are not part of the ruling coalition in Delhi. As a result, if the ruling party—at the state or central level—becomes dictatorial or predatory, enough countervailing power is available in the system to oppose it. Parties can easily mobilize citizens, initiate court challenges and launch press campaigns. It is not that power cannot be abused in India today, but that its outer limits get clearly defined. Democracy just cannot be easily suspended any more. All political parties accept that, some willingly, some not so willingly, but all in substantial measure.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a hyper-mobilized society was often viewed as a threat to democracy.[73] Huntington famously argued that an excessively demanding society could outrun the capacity of polities to respond, making democratic breakdowns likely.[74] India is hyper-mobilized, much of it by political parties. Hyper-mobilization might make Indian democracy very noisy, even chaotic, but in many ways, it also keeps democracy going.

The Unfinished Quests

Some of the unfinished quests of India's democracy concern the three great post-independence projects: national unity, dignity and social justice, and the elimination of mass poverty. Others have become important of late.

National Unity

After India's independence, the problem of national unity had three dimensions: linguistic divisions, religious differences, and insurgencies. Linguistic and religious heterogeneity was not to be erased, but accommodated in a capacious national framework. Insurgencies had to end, or insurgents made part of the democratic political process.

Of the three, managing linguistic diversity has been India's greatest success. Language was a very divisive issue right through the 1950s and 1960s, causing a great deal of mobilization and violence, so much so that some thoughtful observers of Indian politics were willing to argue in the early 1960s that language-based conflicts might lead to India's break-up.[75] In contrast, in some circles today, India's language policy is viewed as a model worthy of emulation in multilingual countries.[76]

As Chapter 6 argues, by assigning a state to each major language, a linguistic federalization of India took the sting out of language-based disaffection and hostilities. The three-language formula, by making educated Indians multilingual, also made interstate communication and national consolidation possible. Stepan, Linz and Yadav have used the concept of state-nation to explain India's linguistic success.[77] The concept, essentially, means that India did not erase regional linguistic identities; rather, by accommodating them and by creating national-level institutions in which people from varied backgrounds could participate, the polity deepened the national feeling.

Some problems of federalism do remain—for example, the states' demand for a larger share of the national revenue, as well as demands for new states. But language has more or less lost its conflict-mobilizing potential. Cities of great inward migratory flow might in future see language-based conflict, but it is unlikely to be a state-level conflict. A city-level conflict is less dangerous.[78] New states would now be formed mostly on grounds of governance or regional underdevelopment, not on claims of linguistic disregard and discrimination.

Religion remains a matter of concern for India. The fact that, despite India's partition on religious grounds and the countless partition-related deaths and migrants, India was able to accommodate its Muslim minority in the polity was, in large measure, a tribute to Nehru's policy towards minorities. Anti-Muslim hysteria in parts of North India required resolute state conduct, at least at the highest levels of the polity. Had Nehru given in, India could have become a Sri Lanka–style polity, with minority rights as a 'festering sore', a phrase Nehru often used.

But, as Chapter 4 argues, problems remain. Hindu nationalism is a great force in Indian politics today, and some of its basic impulses continue to be anti-Muslim. Moving forward, a key question is whether ideological purity, or the coalition-making requirements of Indian democracy, inducing ideological moderation, would dominate the thinking and actions of Hindu nationalists, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP). Chances are that democracy would triumph and the anti-Muslim core of the ideology would be moderated, as it was when the BJP-dominated coalition ruled India (1998–2004). But if ideological purity, for some unexpected reason, comes to rule Hindu nationalists, another terrible chapter will reopen in Indian politics.

Riots have reduced in frequency and intensity, but have not entirely disappeared. But an attack on minority rights, should it happen, will make terrorism, not riots, more likely today.[79] In addition, India's democracy has to continue to think about how to fight quotidian anti-Muslim prejudice. It is not a unique Indian problem. Many societies have had to find ways of dealing with prejudice and discrimination against minorities. India will have to find its own solutions, especially as it grows richer and more resources become available to groups for organizing their politics and interests. As Indian power grows, the way Indian democracy deals with its minorities will also be watched closely by the international system.

On insurgencies, too, the glass is half-full. As Chapter 6 argues, India has always had a three-pronged policy with respect to insurgencies: an armed counter-insurgency campaign; a bigger allocation of resources for areas of insurgency; and an invitation to insurgents to participate in elections and, if they win, to let them run the state government. On the whole, given its size and diversity, India has witnessed very few insurgencies. A Maoist insurgency in Central India has surfaced of late. The Lokniti data shows it is not as widespread as was assumed. Indeed, it is highly locality-specific.[80] No American-style civil war has ever taken place. But the three constituents of the policy, noted above, have not always been combined well. What the judicial mix is in each case remains a problem that India's democracy has not fully resolved. Counter-insurgency sometimes gains a quite unproductive upper hand over the two other components .

Dignity and Social Justice

Given the enduring and deep inequalities of the caste system, covering a little over 80 per cent of India that is Hindu, the problem of providing dignity and social justice to citizens has primarily been conceptualized as a problem of affirmative action: of providing reservations—legislative, educational or administrative (in the public sector)—to the lower castes: the other backward classes (OBCs), the scheduled castes (SCs, or Dalits), and the scheduled tribes (STs, or adivasis).[81] Initially, nationwide reservations were only for the SCs and STs in the legislatures, education and government services. OBC reservations were left to the states. But by the early 1990s, OBC reservations in government services became nationwide and, by the middle of the last decade, OBC reservations in higher education, too, became nationally mandatory.[82]

What have been the results? Has dignity been delivered to those who were deprived of it? Has social justice?

First, as Chapter 3 argues, the dignity gains of Indian democracy are substantial. The daily degradation of the lower castes that traditionally accompanied the caste system has declined, though not altogether disappeared. Rudolph and Rudolph were the first to note the changing trends in South India in the 1950s and 1960s,[83] and even today, as argued in Chapter 7, the change is greater in the South than in the North. But there are gains all around. The emerging research on elected local governments, now in existence for over a decade and a half, reinforces this claim.[84]

It is also evident that the political empowerment of the lower castes has primarily brought this about. When political parties representing the interests of the lower castes come to power, or become powerful players in the polity, extreme prejudice and overt maltreatment, if detected, can be vigorously punished. Indian politics has undergone an OBC revolution.[85] In some parts of India, Dalit empowerment is also appreciable, though, on the whole, the OBC gains are much greater than the Dalit gains.[86] Prejudices may continue to operate at a subtle level, but political power has begun to correct the most awful aspects of the caste system, so widely documented by scholars and activists. As Chapters 3 and 7 argue, India's democracy has become a great ally of the lower castes.

Second, however, the economic effects of political empowerment remain ambiguous. The OBCs do not have legislative reservations, and their administrative and educational reservations were confined to the Southern states until the 1990s. But, as Chapter 8 argues, their share of the small business sector—where millions of Indians are occupationally located—is by now quite close to their estimated population share. Economic results for the OBCs appear to have paralleled their political rise, at least to some extent. But the SCs and STs, despite having legislative, administrative and educational reservation all over India since 1950, have continued to lag economically. Though there is some evidence of increases in their economic consumption,[87] the political empowerment of SCs (and STs) has not translated into substantial economic entrepreneurship. The recent rise of SC millionaires is a remarkably slender exception.

Third, let us examine what in North America has come to be called the politics of civil rights—access to public spaces and institutions, and the struggle against discrimination. Such politics in India is called the politics of dignity (*sammaan ki raajniti*). Adapting the philosophical arguments of Rousseau and Tocqueville for India, Mehta has argued that in a society of deep-seated and enduring inequalities, the politics of dignity can often degenerate into the politics of retribution (*badle ki raajniti*), both in terms of policy and behaviour.[88] Politics starts to devalue collective projects of national interest, privileging narrower projects of group interest. When lower castes come to power, upper castes can be targeted in all kinds of ways—in government appointments, educational admissions, public contracts. The new lower caste political bosses can also treat upper-caste civil servants quite shabbily, mirroring

to some extent, though not wholly, how they themselves had been historically treated by the upper castes.

There are two issues here that need to be separated: ethical and psychological. Ethically, retributive shabbiness in human conduct is entirely undesirable. But, psychologically, it is possible to locate a short- and a long-term dynamic here. When lower groups rise in a deeply hierarchical society, short-term behaviour can be quite insulting, as they avenge earlier violations of their dignity by the upper castes. But once the psychological needs of gratification have been met, a new equilibrium can set in, lacking the earlier aggression and offensiveness.

South India epitomizes such a divergence in short- and long-run dynamic quite well. In the 1950s, anti-Brahmin agitations routinely insulted 'Brahmin gods' in the most offensive manner and the rhetoric had an unsettling adversarial shrillness about it.[89] But as lower castes became confident of their power, the shrillness receded and many Brahmins eventually became part of lower caste parties. Something similar may well be under way in parts of North India.[90]

Similarly, public policies can also move from entirely group-based to those that represent, or build, cross-group alliances, especially as political parties and leaders look for breadth in support for gains in electoral competition. Generally speaking, beyond defence and foreign policy, it is hard for public policy to cover all interests, not only in India but in all democracies, but how many groups it can represent normally depends on electoral calculations. And such calculations do not remain static. Retributive policy andbehavioural aggression are best viewed as a problem of transition to a new order.[91]

Poverty

The inability to conquer mass poverty remains the single greatest failure of Indian democracy. But in what way it represents a failure requires analysis.

As Chapter 9 argues, democracy does not eliminate poverty; economic policies and processes do. The question, therefore, is whether India's democracy came in the way of economic policies that could have attacked poverty better. More than half of India's population might have been below the poverty line at the time of independence but, even today, depending on the measure one adopts, about a fourth to over a third of the population suffers from poverty.[92] China's poverty profile in the late 1940s was not significantly different, but it has had significantly greater success in dealing with poverty.[93]

It is customary to split the discussion of poverty in India into two phases: the years 1950–80, when central planning operated, and the three decades since then, when economic policies began to embrace markets. Chapter 10 presents available evidence to show that no appreciable dent in poverty was made in the first period, whereas the second period has witnessed a considerable decline in poverty. In many circles today,

therefore, central planning is blamed for India's unimpressive poverty-alleviation record. During 1950–80, India's per capita income grew at a little over 1 per cent per annum whereas, in the three decades thereafter, the per capita income grew at over 4 per cent per annum, roughly four times the earlier rate.

The argument about the failure of central planning is not wrong, but incomplete. For it is noteworthy that in the 1950s and 1960s, no models other than planning held sway in policy and economic circles. As Hirschman has argued, due to the Great Depression of the 1930s and the extraordinary success of the Soviet Union in transforming itself into an industrial giant in three decades through central planning, markets held little attraction for the newly decolonized countries.[94] Sachs and Warner also show that at the time of their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, only eight developing countries could be called open economies. The list included Singapore and Malaysia. All others were centrally planned.[95]

The key question, then, is: Could India have moved vigorously towards a market-led economic growth model before the 1990s?[96]

Did democracy delay India's embrace of markets?

That is indeed the case, substantially if not wholly (Chapter 10). In poor democracies, direct methods of poverty-alleviation tend to be much more politically attractive than the indirect market-based ones. An argument about income redistribution—a direct method—works better in election campaigns and mass politics than an argument that a higher growth rate—made possible by markets—might benefit the rich now, but would also help the masses later. The irony, of course, is that, without high growth, enough resources to run redistribution programmes cannot be easily generated.

The incentives and constraints of mass politics in a poor democracy, thus, tend to be aligned against the markets, a problem that continues to hobble the onward journey of market-oriented reforms in India. Economic reforms resonate well in India's elite politics, but not in mass politics, where arguments about mass welfare, however constructed, hold sway.

These constraints can be overcome with imaginative political leadership and commitment. Just as the post-1947 political leadership did not wait for India to reach the right level of income to institute democracy, a more sustained push for markets could also be made. The key is to argue that markets can enhance mass welfare. Of course, markets alone may not attack mass poverty sufficiently rapidly and some other measures, including investments in mass literacy, public health, and anti-poverty programmes, may be necessary, but without a growth-enhancing embrace of markets, mass poverty cannot easily be attacked, nor can resources for education, health, and anti-poverty programmes be generated.[97]

India has still not witnessed a national-level mass politician, who can make a *political* claim on behalf of markets and integrate it as part of an election campaign.[98]

24

Elections and Accountability

As already stated, Indians have deeply internalized the idea of elections. 'Like tea, cinema or cricket, there is something about elections that makes it appear like an age-old Indian passion,' even though elections are 'a recent import'.[99]Further, defying democratic theory, which says the poor tend to vote less than the rich, by now India's poor often vote more than the non-poor do.[100] Ahuja and Chhibber show that the poor think of voting as a dignifying right.[101]

If electoral competitiveness and people's participation in elections were the only yardsticks to judge a democracy—as the democratic theory discussed above says—India would qualify as a great success.[102] Over the last two decades, the incumbents have repeatedly lost elections. Since incumbents can control the state machinery, which conducts elections, it is clear that elections are genuinely competitive and, popular will, barring individual exceptions, is clearly expressed.

What happens between two elections, however, can be very different. India's democracy has become Janus-faced. Political power is used at the time of elections to please citizens. Between elections, it is often used to treat citizens in an unfeeling manner. Empowered at the time of elections, the citizen often feels powerless until the next elections arrive.

No one fully understands how to restore greater accountability in Indian democracy. A great deal of intellectual effort in the coming years will almost certainly be spent thinking about it. Comparative cases—how other societies have dealt with the problem of routine accountability—will be probed for instruction. Greater accountability of government and politicians would make democracy deeper.

Meanwhile, three dimensions of the problem are worth registering: freedom of speech, gender, and corruption. All three are connected to the idea of electoral issue salience: political parties respond only to those issues that have a clear electoral salience regardless of how important the other issues may be on some other grounds.

Democracies are routinely guided by the twin imperatives of popular sovereignty and freedom of speech. The two can come into conflict, as they historically have in many democracies,[103] but the fundamental commitment to both in principle must be kept. Over the last many years, considerations of popular sovereignty have repeatedly trumped freedom of speech in India. Since freedom of expression is critical to liberalism, an argument that India's democracy, while electorally vibrant, is becoming increasingly illiberal is gaining ground.

Thus, Salman Rushdie can be forced to cancel his participation in a literary festival because it would hurt Muslim sentiments; a cartoon of Ambedkar can land authors—who use it in a school textbook—in trouble because it would harm Dalit feelings; scholars can be threatened for writing research tracts or articles that go against Hindu nationalist beliefs; remarks by a leading intellectual that lower caste political parties

can be quite corrupt when in power can lead to a demand by lower caste politicians and intellectuals that he be legally prosecuted for insulting lower castes.

In each of these cases—constituting only a few of the many over the last two decades—an argument about ascription of injury to an electorally important group curtailed freedom of speech. Sometimes, of course, the principle of free expression can be attacked even when no group is 'hurt', but more often than not, the grounds for truncating freedom of expression are the assumed—or actual—sentiments of a group considered putatively important to electoral outcomes.

Similarly, some other issues of vital importance to citizens can be ignored because their electoral relevance is unclear, in doubt, or negligible. Like race in American democracy right up to the Second World War, when lynching of Blacks was not uncommon,[104] gender violence in India has acquired alarming proportions. However, the response of Indian democracy has been quite inadequate. Quite illustrative was the politics following the brutal rape of a young woman in the nation's capital in December 2012. The rape galvanized thousands of citizens, both men and women, leading them to weeks of protest. Though legislative action was initiated later, no political party came forward to express solidarity in the first weeks of the protest. The underlying calculation was that gender violence was irrelevant to rural vote, which continues to constitute more than two-thirds of India's total vote. It is not that gender violence does not take place in the villages, but such violence does not swing votes in rural India. An issue of great relevance to women, thus, continues to be marginal to mass politics.[105]

A final set of issues concerns corruption. As India has become richer, corruption too has grown. The problem has two dimensions: the routine corruption of the street-level bureaucracy and the spectacular corruption in the higher decision-making circles. Both reduce the quality of Indian democracy.

Entry into schools and treatment in hospitals may often depend on whether a politician or a bureaucrat can call on a citizen's behalf, or whether the citizen has resources for a bribe. The police may not register a case of crime unless a bribe is paid or someone in a position of power makes a phone call. Corruption also marks the issuance of driving licences, property registration, enrolment in the employment guarantee scheme, and the payment of wages. The list can go on.

Spectacular corruption concerns 'rent seeking' provision of licences and permissions to businessmen by government decision-makers, both politicians and bureaucrats; or alternatively, the entrance of politicians and bureaucrats into the world of business, to provide illegal—or unethical—benefits to businessmen as well as themselves.

Some of these problems are generic to high growth. Whether it is India or China today, or the US during the Gilded Age (1865– 1900), the first sustained flush of high economic growth is often accompanied by large-scale corruption.[106]

Consider some of the details of the Gilded Age corruption in the US. They read like the many stories of corruption reported from India in recent years. In Washington, during the administration of Ulysses Grant (1869–76), the vice-president, the treasury secretary, the attorney general and Grant's private secretary, among others, were indicted for financial misconduct. At the state level, 'I wanted the legislatures of four states,' declared railroad baron Jay Gould, 'so I made them with my own money.' New York's customs house was a den of corruption; and so was Tammany Hall, the seat of the city's government. In a famous passage, George W. Plunkitt, a legendary oft-elected 'boss' of New York's Tammany Hall, said:

> Everybody is talking these days about Tammany men growing rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawing the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. . . . Yes, many of our men have grown rich in politics. I have myself, but I've not gone in for dishonest graft—blackmailing gamblers, saloon keepers, disorderly people, etc. . . . There's an honest graft . . . Let me explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's going to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place. I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particularly for before. . . . Or supposing it's a new bridge they're going to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and drop some more money in the bank. . . . Wouldn't you? It's just like looking ahead in Wall Street or in the coffee or cotton market. It's honest graft, and I'm looking for it every day in the year.[107]

While the problem of corruption may have generic properties, polities have to seek their own corrective solutions. Through the legislative process, India's democracy is beginning to respond, but a very important aspect of the problem—campaign and party finance—remains unresolved. India's political parties are primarily, if not entirely, financed by businesses, but not in a manner that can be called legal or ethical.[108] Without a reform of campaign finance, the problem of corruption in India's democracy cannot be fully tackled.

An interconnected problem is the lack of intra-party democracy. Inter-party competition is vigorous, but intra-party competition is not. Party officials are appointed by the leaders, not elected by party members. During 1920–73, the Congress party used to have regular internal elections, a practice dropped since then. Most other parties followed the post-1973, not the pre-1973, Congress model. Scholars have argued that campaign finance and lack of internal democracy are interlinked.[109] Be that as it may, internally democratic parties will undoubtedly make India's larger democracy deeper.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the gap between the ideals of democracy and the actual political practices in the US, Huntington wrote: 'Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its realities. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.'[110]

With the exception of 'disappointment', the same lines can be written about India's democracy. Surveying a history of two centuries, Huntington was disappointed, though he remained rooted in the hope of further reform. India is in its seventh decade under democracy. A deeply hierarchical and poor society has come quite far. But it needs to go much further. A battle for deeper democracy is under way.