

ARGUING DEMOCRACY: INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICS  
IN MODERN INDIA  
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The idea of democracy, brought into being on an Athenian hillside some 2500 years ago, has travelled far – and today attaches itself to a growing number of political projects. In everyday political talk, as well as in the specialised fields of the political and social sciences, terms like “spreading democracy”, “promoting democracy”, and – of course – “imposing democracy”, have become ubiquitous. Underlying such talk is a belief in democratic universalism – the idea that, as Larry Diamond, erstwhile advisor to Paul Bremer in Iraq, has put it: “Every country in the world can be democratic.” Yet, even as the ambition is asserted to spread democracy across the globe, our conceptions of what democracy *is* have narrowed: to a “checklist” model, a prescriptive blueprint, based almost entirely on Western experience.

We can perhaps sympathize with the impulse towards determinacy in defining democracy, in the face of the term’s wayward history, an impulse that wishes to avoid a relativist dissipation of democracy’s meanings. However, the peripatetic life of the democratic idea suggests the increasing inadequacy of a history written from within the terms of the West’s experience. Today, the idea has been drawn into quite other historical vortices, giving rise to political experiences that are transformative of the idea itself.

Democracy as a political idea draws its appeal and power from its promise: from its resolute openness to the future, not from its ancestral pedigree. There is no special normative or analytical privilege that historically prior forms of democracy can hope to command. Nor will the prior forms be more practically useful in the years ahead. Rather, in thinking about the possibilities of democracy across the world, the political experience of countries like India will probably be a more valuable resource than the cases of, say, the United States, France, or Britain.

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So, I'd like to talk about India's democracy – the largest and arguably most significant experiment with democracy since the late eighteenth century. Habitually noted as a success of some sort, the Indian experiment is just as often absolved from serious interrogation. Following the political congratulations, intellectual condescension all too often settles in – in large part because the Indian case seems too exotic to understandings based on the Western experience. Indeed the emergence of India's democracy is a direct challenge to the axioms of classical theory – particularly those that stress social homogeneity and political unanimity.

In India, a country of countless dense allegiances and loyalties, democracy both as a form of government and as an idea is – as the jargon has it – consolidated. Since independence in 1947, the country has held 14 national elections and many more in its regional states, and dozens of peaceful alternations of government have occurred. In this respect, India's political system has succeeded in institutionalizing uncertainty. Democracy as a type of government, a political regime of laws and institutions, has achieved a real – which is to say, inherently problematic – existence. Equally significantly, the *idea* of democracy has penetrated the Indian political imagination. Rising popular belief in democracy is manifest in several ways – surveys for instance. In 1971, 43% of Indians expressed their support for parties, assemblies, and elections; in 1996, almost 70% did so. At independence, India had a tiny political elite; today around 10 million Indians contest elections, at all levels of the political system – people with direct material interest in the preservation of democracy. The social backgrounds of India's political class are fast changing, as large numbers of Indians, especially those lower in the social order, stream into the electoral arena – pushing up turnouts to consistent levels of 60% and more.

Consider also the scale. In the classic modern debates about the possibilities of democratic government in large societies, in late eighteenth-century America and France, their respective populations were three and 25 million. In India's most recent national elections, held just over three years ago, around 400 million Indians – the great majority of them poor – engaged in a free act of collective choice. It is worth pausing over this bare figure. It represents, of course, the largest exercise of democratic election in human history.

In an era of imposing democracy, it is important to recall the extent to which, everywhere, democracy starts from and emerges out of local and practical problems – and from arguments over how to address these. And while the subject of how India's democracy came to be is obviously too vast for a single lecture or essay, I would like to reconstruct for you – partially and selectively – the responses of some of India's best minds to the political

predicaments in which they found themselves and how the responses became part of the intellectual foundation of modern India.

The dilemmas Indians faced early in the twentieth century were these: How to create a representative political order at all – how to represent the collective entity/fiction, “India”? And: how to enable within such an order the articulation of internal differences among its many elements – how to represent “Indians”, who were also always something else as well – Tamils, Muslims, Adivasi, Brahmin? Indian intellectuals had thus to devise an order of political representation that could lay claim to self-rule – while also articulating internal differences.

This problem of how to create an idea of “the people or nation” (a representation of unity) that also could enable difference is a central problem of modern, large-scale democracy. From the French revolution and its long aftermath, to the many – mainly failed – attempts to establish representative democracy in post-colonial situations, it has bedevilled democratic efforts in the modern world.

The problem has usually been posed in terms of sequence – first establish unity (by use of violent means if necessary – terror or civil war), *then* think about how to represent difference, plurality: where in fact the latter is, all too often, deferred and ignored.

In India, I would argue, the line of thinking and practice from Tagore via Gandhi to Nehru approached this problem differently: not as one that could be broken down into a sequence, or stages, but one where the imperatives of unity and difference required simultaneous articulation into a complex political form. The Indian argument met, early on, with spectacular failure – the Partition of India. But on the whole, and over time, it has proved a pretty effective way of dealing with this core problem of modern democratic politics.

I would like to divide my remarks into three parts: First, I start by outlining the initial predicament of Indian intellectuals under colonial rule – one defined by India’s enormous diversity and social divisions, which denied the possibility of a common politics. Second, I turn briefly to how intellectuals like Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru attempted to address this predicament, developing a sense of identity as provisional, layered, and subject to revision. Finally I shall suggest how some of these ideas – which are quite different from Western conceptions of national identity and democracy – fed into the political and institutional architecture of post-independence India, in the form of the Indian constitution.

In short, I hope to show how intellectual arguments evolved to provide a background conceptual vocabulary for the problem of giving a representative form to India’s diversity.

Since this lecture is in the context of a series that has tried to make clear the wider significance of the Human Sciences, I hope my approach will suggest why and how historical understanding is not merely a supplement to social scientific understandings of Indian politics – it is not optional, but rather indispensable for any such understanding.

A couple of points at the outset: when I refer to Indian “intellectuals”, I do not intend a sociological sense (as say, did the American sociologist Edward Shils in his 1950s study of India). I am simply using the term to mean political actors who self-consciously reflect on their own actions – and who also reflect on their own reflections, and on each others’ reflections. I am referring, that is, neither to mere academic theoreticians (who do not act), nor to politicians – who are not in the habit of sustained, self-conscious reflection. The second point concerns the forms of political thinking and argument in India. If one asks: what sort of political self-knowledge can be found in India, what intellectual reflections on politics might be seen as sustaining Indian democracy, one has to acknowledge that, in contrast to Western traditions of political theory and practice, there are no founding texts of Indian democratic thought, no rich textual field that is focused on a distinct object or field of study, politics – or on questions of the state or democracy. Consider modern France – where, as I’ve tried to show elsewhere, revolutionary history and historiography served as the form and terrain for political thinking and theory: unless one recognizes this distinct configuration, one cannot understand the peculiar shape and rhythms of French political thought. In modern India, are there no properly theoretical texts of politics – the exception is Gandhi’s remarkable 1909 work *Hind Swaraj*, perhaps the most radical and original political text written by anyone, anywhere, in the twentieth century – but that would require a separate discussion. On the other hand, one striking feature of Indian discussions of politics in the twentieth century is their intimate, personal nature – letters and autobiography, for instance, are two important forms in which political thinking is enacted.

## I

The idea of devising a self-governing representative political order for India – one through which its people could live in freedom – was, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a possibility nearly inconceivable. For the space in which Indian intellectuals found themselves was defined by a denial of politics. This denial was an effect of two fierce and mutually reinforcing factors: British colonialism and the nature of the Indian social order.

Colonial subjection rested on a refusal to grant selfhood to Indians, in either collective or personal form: Indians did not constitute a nation, nor were they in any proper sense individuals. What defined them was in the first instance their racial difference, followed by their divisive communal identities – the many religions and still more castes of the sub-continent, attributes that resisted the demands of both nationhood and individuality. India, seen as a collection of mutually threatening communal identities, could not achieve any “national representation”. From the colonial administrator John Strachey’s declaration in 1885 (the year of the foundation of the Indian National Congress) that “there is not, and never was an India, nor even any country of India possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious; no nation, no ‘people of India’”, to Churchill’s remark some 50 years later that “India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator” (1931), the British consistently denied the possibility of a collective Indian self or nationhood.

In the British view, this collection of disparate communities could only be pacified and given stable form in the colonial order. That order professed liberal principles and claimed to bestow peace and the rule of law. Yet the rule of law, when exercised in despotic manner, was vulnerable to self-contradiction.

Over time, the British established a restricted arena of government and set the scale and terms of Indian participation in it. Although British imperial ideology held aloft a principle of the development of self-government, especially for the white settler colonies, that principle was circumscribed in India. Narrow circles of “representative government” were created (beginning at the municipal level, then gradually expanding to the provinces), based on the view that electorates should be divided along community lines, in order to protect smaller and weaker communities. Into this circle were admitted a small educated class of Indians – expansion was promised, but at velocities controlled by the British. The British thus retained control over the rhythms of Indian life, in what has been called the “waiting room” theory of history.

But the imperialists were not the only problem. Indeed, they were simply exploiting the indigenous social and religious divisions of India, divisions that themselves seemed equally to preclude the possibility of politics. The caste order systematically segmented groups and linked them together in a codified, hierarchical division of labour. It was designed to resist the intervention of the state and state-made law, and it treated politics as extraneous. Religious differences, especially between Hindus and Muslims, similarly impeded imagining

a politics for India – how could these religious divisions be united into a common political subject able to rule itself?

Thus, before Indians could even contemplate self-rule, they faced a prior task: to formulate *who* the subjects of such rule might be – to identify a subject capable of any politics at all. This in turn, required the creation of a representative form: of a collective idea or entity in whose name rights could be claimed, actions performed – and to which others could feel allegiance. This task has proved one of the great obstacles to the emergence of democracy in post-colonial territories everywhere – from Nigeria, through Algeria, to Indonesia. And for Indians, there were few resources to draw upon when considering large-scale collective identity. Limited potentialities existed, for example, in the traditional idioms of kingship – and it is striking how few Indians resorted to kingly idioms. Although Indian intellectuals searched the vocabularies of both traditional and modern politics for appropriate terms, the readiest term available – the “nation” – was, in the Indian context, as much beset by problems as it promised any solutions. For India seemed to lack all the ingredients required by Western definitions of the nation.

Still, by the early twentieth century, an argument over nationhood had developed. Some upper-caste Hindus accepted the diagnosis that India’s internal diversities and particularisms were disabling, and wished to efface these. Impressed by the prowess of European nationalisms, these thinkers saw homogeneity as the only possible basis for nationhood and hoped that a common religious identity would be the glue. As the Hindu nationalist party manifestos of the 1990s were later to put it, “one nation, one people, one culture”. The importance of Western ideas in shaping this religious nationalism is important to underline. The ideologue of *Hindutva*, the ideology of today’s Hindu nationalists, V. D. Savakar, was a non-believing Brahmin from western India, an admirer and translator of Mazzini, who founded a secret society modelled on Young Italy (its members, planning to assassinate the Viceroy, learned bomb-making from a Russian revolutionary in Paris). Aurobindo Ghose, educated at King’s College, Cambridge, returned to rediscover and propagate what he saw as his spiritual traditions. Meanwhile, Swami Vivekananda, similarly steeped in European thought, urged upon his young Indian followers the “three Bs”: beef, biceps and the Bhagavad Gita. Adherents of this perspective saw democracy in a pragmatic light: it would be a means to ensure the permanent dominance of a Hindu majority. Meanwhile other thinkers were working to indigenize notions of democracy.

The attempt to find local roots for democracy was not unique to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hindus. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, thinkers advanced claims that democ-

racy was not an invention of the Enlightenment, but had its roots in – variously – ancient French, German, or English customs and practices. In the Indian case, an eruption of new works found democratic antecedents in Hindu and also Buddhist village communities with their own councils and deliberative assemblies (*panchayats*, as well as *sabhas*, *sanghas*) – an attempt at indigenization which continues to have its contemporary adepts.

The notion of a unified, homogenous Hindu community was located in an idealized village community. Almost immediately, this pastoral vision was challenged by lower-caste movements – movements that testified to the caste divisions and conflicts among Hindus. The leaders of the lower-caste movements shared none of the high castes’ romanticism about village life. Instead they looked to central power, the colonial state, for protection from the upper castes, as well as advancement through quota policies and separate caste-based electorates – where the lower castes (and religious communities) could vote for their own candidates. To some lower-caste intellectuals, such as B. R. Ambedkar, democracy, understood as universal suffrage in electorates that were not divided, in fact undermined their hopes for remedy against historical injustice.

Religious minorities also saw democracy as a threat. As early as the 1880s, Muslim intellectuals were concluding that it was impossible to devise a democratic representative order that incorporated both Hindus and Muslims. In a united India, with a central state, Muslims would be a permanent minority. Men like the educationist Syed Ahmad Khan, and later the poet Mohammed Iqbal and the politician Mohammad Ali Jinnah, read Western liberals like John Stuart Mill closely. They were troubled by arguments such those advanced by Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government*. “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities,” Mill had written, “each fears more injury to itself from the other nationalities than from the common arbiter, the state. Their mutual antipathies are generally much stronger than jealousy of the government” (Chapter 16).

## II

How then to constitute a collective subject in the face of such antipathies, and how to find appropriate forms of self-rule? These problems preoccupied in different ways three of twentieth-century India’s major intellectual figures, Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru. I want to say a little bit about the responses each man came up with – and in all three cases I shall need to simplify from considerable complexity.

Tagore's engagement with Western ideas of the self, freedom and politics led him to devise a social philosophy that stands as an alternative to liberalism in its European definitions. Unlike many other non-Western reactions to liberalism and its practices, Tagore's redefinition was not based on a culturalist or nativist rejection of liberalism's premises. Indeed, he shared liberalism's universalist ambition, as well as both its critical attitude toward inherited authority and its commitment to experiment and revision when it came to the choice of political and ethical ends. But he rejected Western liberal understandings of the nation as homogeneous.

To Tagore, India's apparent "backwardness in politics", its absence of a clearly defined national essence and of a state, was in fact its strength. It had allowed India to avoid the instabilities of European politics – a politics based on constant negotiation between rivals, and in which numbers become the court of appeal. In such systems, Tagore argued, "government has to pass law after law to keep the warring, heterogeneous elements somehow patched together" – as if unity could be achieved "by enacting a law that all shall be one" ("The Message of Indian History", 1902). Instead of following the nationalist impulse to avoid danger by removing foreign elements, Indians needed to articulate into an alternative political principle their historical capacity to absorb and order. External elements could be "bound together by a basic idea" – the idea of India as a space of diverse self-descriptions. Tagore authored what would eventually become India's de facto motto, "unity in/through diversity", an idea that would later be articulated by Nehru in *The Discovery of India*, a book Nehru wrote just before he took charge of the Indian state.

In many ways, Tagore's view of India was a poetic fiction, an aspiration. It certainly was not an account of empirical, sociological reality. But his writings were read by the elite, his songs sung by the masses in many parts of India, and his fiction managed to carve a deep trace both in Indian public life and on the imagination of independent Indian state.

Mahatma Gandhi, the figure who towered over Indian intellectual and political life in the first half of the twentieth century, also engaged with liberal premises and shared Tagore's ambition to work out an alternative universalism. Gandhi's arguments are often viewed as primarily religious and as anti-political. On the contrary: he had a radical idea of politics – one that extended well beyond the domain of state institutions and practices. He helped to politicise identities, by challenging Indians to conceive of themselves not – as held by the British, or by the orders of caste and religion – as fixed and immutable, but as containing a significant element of contingency, a potential space for self-reflection and

self-transformation, and therefore for freedom, outside the imposed identities of state and society.

For Gandhi, the State itself was anti-political – since it was founded upon violence and imposed order on what were seen as unruly identities of caste, tribe, region, religion. These, seen as rivals to the state, had to be subdued. So Indian self-rule did not involve capturing and using the instruments of the state, nor even devising a representative political order. Instead, it involved a process of self-transformation – as he traced out in his autobiography. Because self-rule was an internal, personal condition, not one manifest in the accountancy of numbers, democracy as practised in the West, with its majorities and minorities, held no lessons for India. “The essence of democracy,” he asserted, “did not lie in numerical strength, but in the spirit behind even one person. Every man could represent a whole democracy” (CW vol. 65).

Gandhi’s first mass political campaign – the 1920 Khilafat movement – demonstrated both the power and the limitation of his conception. Orchestrating Hindus and Muslims into a united movement, he insisted (as Faisal Devji has argued) that religious alliance was founded not on bargaining and on the conditionalities of contract – as in liberal theories of interest – but on friendship and assistance between those who otherwise had cause to fear one another. However, this period of religious unity was short-lived, and Gandhi’s future efforts to recreate it were to founder.

Gandhi’s approach to the problem of caste inequality was also based on reform through persuasion and personal example. In his ashrams, he sought to create small communities of mixed religions and caste, built on notions of trust and personal friendship. Although his broader movements to abolish Untouchability made an impression among upper-caste Hindus, his efforts inspired scepticism among the lower castes themselves, as well as among India’s Muslims. Ultimately, the more modernist and classical liberals – men like the leader of India’s “Untouchables”, Ambedkar, and the Indian Muslim leader Jinnah, both broke with Gandhi – disbelieving in the possibility of representing difference and conflict with a common political order. In Jinnah’s case, the ultimate result was the Partition of India.

Nor did Gandhi’s anti-statist, small-scale and personal conception of politics have much purchase on the idea of a democratic Indian state – the conception that the Constitution set out to elaborate. But Gandhi’s politicisation of the self, his insistence that identity was not trapped by religious or caste allegiance, as well as his paternalist sense of the need to attend

to the general welfare of all Indians: these were a crucial part of the intellectual inheritance of those whose extensive deliberations resulted in the 1950 Constitution.

### III

Nehru is the link between the ideas of Tagore and Gandhi and their effective translation into the habits of an independent Indian state. Nehru was in command of the Indian state for the first seventeen years after independence and faced most directly the dual task of devising within the structure of a modern state a representative form that could give unity while also expressing difference. Before he became Prime Minister, however, he, like Gandhi, used autobiography to develop his ideas of personal and national selfhood.

More conventional nationalist autobiographies (of which there are many Indian examples) trace the author's path towards an integrated, heroic self, ready to do battle against colonial rulers. But we find in neither Gandhi's nor Nehru's autobiographical writings a fully achieved personality. Instead, a fragile and provisional self is revealed – a self which for both men is the site of political struggle. Nehru particularly liked to portray himself as a product, not of cultural fusion, but of tension, for the various elements he identified within himself – Kashmiri, Brahmin, Persian/Mughal, English, scientific, emotional, Indian and internationalist – conflicted more often than they agreed. As he put it, "I became a battleground, where forces struggled for mastery." Importantly, he did not see the idea of the nation, or of nationalism, as a means of reconciling once and for all these interior conflicts.

Nationalism, recent academic theorists insist, is the global diffusion of a standardised, modular form devised in the West – whether in the Gallic version of a community of common citizenship, or the *volkisch* idea of a shared ethnic or cultural origin. Some historians argue that Indian nationalism is a "derivative" form, a local instantiation of a universal model. In fact I think a quite different reading is possible, which would show that distinctive ideas of the individual and collective self are worked out by some Indian intellectuals. For instance, Nehru's understanding of the link between culture and power avoided the liberal presumption that individuals could transcend their cultural inheritance, and remake themselves however they – or their state – saw fit. Equally, though, he steered away from the perception of cultures as self-enclosed wholes, as hermetic communities of language or belief – a view that itself sustains two different positions: on the one hand, the conservative idea of the state as an instrument at the community's disposal, and on the oth-

er the more benign view of the state as a curator of cultural exhibits, responsible for preserving communities.

Rather, cultures as he saw it were overlapping forms of activity that had commerce with one another, mutually altering and reshaping each other. This, Nehru insisted, was one of the most vivid insights to be gleaned from a study of India's history. India was a society neither of liberal individuals nor of exclusive communities or nationalities, but of interconnected and historically accreted differences – as he had put in his image of India as being “like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie have been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously”.

As Indian independence approached, the pressure on Nehru and his counterparts to turn their ideas into a trustworthy representative order escalated. The challenge, articulated by Jinnah, of how to protect Muslim identities in the face of the majoritarian threat posed by universal suffrage in undivided electorates, would in the end defeat the Congress Party and its conception of nationalism. And it was against this background of Partition that Indians set about trying to re-formulate the terms of a representative political order that would be trustworthy to its diverse peoples. The 1950 Constitution is perhaps the most elaborate expression of India's democratic self-conception. It is best seen not as a strong ideological statement of a logically consistent world-view, but rather as a force field that tries to stabilize a range of contradictory considerations.

The Constitution was the product of three years of collective deliberations – over 7,500 amendments were proposed, 2,500 were moved, and a document of almost 400 articles emerged – one of the longest of its kind. This Constitution had not been won by the masses in an act of collective self-creation: indeed, it bore little trace of the imaginative concerns of ordinary Indians. Rather, it was a gift of a small set of India's elites. Its drafters were chosen by indirect election on a narrow 14% franchise, from electorates set by the British. Upper-caste and Brahminic elites of the Congress Party dominated – mostly lawyers, virtually all male. There was no organized Muslim presence. Still, the document attempted to address the difficulties of creating a democratic representative order amidst India's diversity.

The Constitution recognized as the primary form of political representation the vote. As individual citizens, Indians were accorded fundamental civil and political rights, including the franchise for all adults – creating a single, undivided electorate of around 200 million people. But if universal suffrage recognized the first-order diversity of interests among in-

dividual Indians, there were, both in the Constitution and in its early years of practical enactment, also several instruments designed to recognize their differences as defined by group allegiances. One might call these instruments a system of second-order diversity.

These political mechanisms were designed to organize India's uneven social diversity into a coherent representative form: to offer minorities protections from majoritarian will, to give the ex-Untouchables (who came to be known as Dalits) remedies against upper-caste oppression, and to recognize the presence and dynamism of a mass of cultural, linguistic and individual identities: instead of trying to build structural barriers and walls of separation, it chose provisional and inherently political methods – flexible, but always open to contest and liable to be unstable.

Three second-order forms of representing diversity should be particularly noticed. The Constitution-makers – fearful of further partitions along ethnic or religious lines – had initially wanted to see the federal principle as simply an administrative tool to distribute powers between centre and region. They feared that aligning the claims of linguistic and cultural identities with territory would threaten further division of the country. But in fact when, in the 1950s, demands were made for such alignment – in the form of linguistic states – Nehru conceded them. And, contrary to initial fears, this served to stabilize and integrate the Union. The point is that regional identities were not seen as requiring absorption within an encompassing Indian one. And indeed the Constitution enabled the state to recognize new identities, to accede to claims of various cultural groups for their own regional states and governments.

More generally, on the issue of language – a subject that has vexed nationalisms everywhere – the Constitution and its subsequent managers achieved a sustaining compromise. Instead of adopting a “national language” (and there were strong pressures for Hindi to be so adopted) the decision was taken to defer any such choice and to create a category of “official languages” – in which public business could be done. Alongside Hindi and English, India has a “schedule” or list of around another 22 nationally recognized languages – a list that has expanded over the past six decades at virtually no political cost. The status of English and Hindi, meanwhile has been subject to parliamentary review every 10 years – which has allowed their continued use and acceptance on pragmatic grounds without giving them a permanent and irrevocable status. The result has been a remarkable diversion of the energies of linguistic nationalism.

Second, the Constitution rejected the divided electorates favoured by the British to protect religious groups. Now, in order reassure the minority religions, especially Muslims

(who even after Partition formed some 12% of India's population), that elected majorities could not legislate in defiance of minority wishes, the Constitution gave religious minorities the option to be governed by their own customary civil laws – a situation of legal plurality was created. And while the document declared the ultimate ambition of a unified civil law code, fulfilling that ambition was indefinitely deferred – left to the vagaries of politics. Nehru, given his views about the mutable, transactional nature of cultures, had hoped and expected that these protections would change and that individuals and their communities would in time opt for a common civil code. Here, his optimism proved misplaced. In later decades Hindu nationalists were able to use such special provisions as fodder for their attacks, while conservative Muslim clerics have found in them a means to control their flock.

Finally, and most crucially, the Constitution abolished the millennial caste order, delegitimizing it with the stroke of a pen. Henceforth, the decennial national Census ceased to record any caste data, denying the caste system official recognition. And yet, the social reality of caste was simultaneously acknowledged – in order to help erase its effects. A legislative policy of “Reservations”, positive discrimination, was established for those lowest in the caste order, as well as for India's large tribal populations. This policy assigned “reserved” seats in the legislatures, as well as quotas in state employment and education. Such measures too were seen as temporary expedients, to be periodically reviewed and ultimately dispensed with.

By such constitutional means, the fundamental markers of identity – language, caste and religion – were granted a degree of fluidity and revisibility. This provisionalism rendered language, caste, region and religion into primarily political rather than cultural categories – a major shift in their character.

The techniques of compromise and deferral instanced the refusal to anchor Indian identity in any single trait or set of traits. The tactic of temporising in response to calls for decisive definitions of a uniform Indian identity – for instance from advocates of Hindi as the national language, or Hindu reformers who wished to abolish multiple legal codes in favour of a common one – has been seen as a potential weakness both from the perspective of Western theories of nationalism (theories that guided the thinking of Hindu nationalists) as well as from liberal theory. In fact, it was one of the more creative and enabling aspects of the nationalist imagination installed after 1947. It inscribed as a constitutional habit the practices that had made the Congress Party successful as a national movement –

practices that were themselves informed by the ideas and arguments of the major intellectual figures of the movement.

#### IV

Let me come in conclusion to some failures and paradoxes. In important respects, India's ambitions to represent its social diversity within a democratic order have often fallen short. India has experienced episodes of violent regional secessionism (Punjab, the North East, Assam); incidents of caste violence (in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan); periods of savage religious killings and mayhem (Bombay, Gujarat); and always, of course, the unending despair of Kashmir.

And yet: set this unhappy sequence against the other historical cases of large, agrarian ancien régime societies – France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China. Beside these examples, the violence India has experienced over the past sixty years seems something of a historical discount. Much of the recent discussion of democratic transitions has focused on the shift from authoritarian regimes and dictatorships to democratic ones: that is, a shift from *one* modern regime to *another* modern regime form. But India's transition to a democratic regime and its consolidation is quite different and cannot be mapped by the terms of the existing "democratic transitions" literature. In fact, what we see in India is an *historical* or *epochal* shift, from an ancien régime to a modern political form – which makes it truly a transition of Tocquevillean proportions. Such shifts are wrenching, often bloody affairs: think again of the violent histories (both internal and external) of America and France since the eighteenth century, as they struggled to make themselves democratic nation states.

Of course, India remains rich with potential for further failure. The ideology of Hindutva endures – the dream of dealing with the problem of difference by abolishing it. Its counterpart is a fragmenting identity politics, preoccupied with difference, which evades altogether the task of building any common political project. Yet, paradoxically, the very things that Strachey, Churchill and so many others had claimed precluded India from becoming a nation may in fact have proved fruitful material for this task – for two reasons. Diversity has made it difficult to entrench majoritarian or dominant identities. And second, diversity has forced India's political elites to be inventive – they could not create a sense of nationhood simply by imitating existing models.

In a second paradox, it is precisely the workings of India's democracy that have created identities that threaten it, by leading to majoritarian excess. The identities of religion and caste that figure increasingly in Indian politics are the creation of democratic politics, and not the intrusion of the primordial; and as such they will have to be contained and disarmed by the resources of democratic politics itself. Thus India today is a field where ideologues of Hindutva and the advocates of lower-caste emancipation must confront one another – and others; a field where there is a regular, open competition to persuade people to see themselves in one way or other – as Hindu, low caste, poor, Bengali. In this sense, India has become a profoundly politicised society – perhaps the most so in the world. This has turned the Indian world upside down – so that today, we see Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh helping to vote into power a Dalit (ex-Untouchable) woman as their Chief Minister.

Indian democracy has been in part an argument over the terms through which to represent diversity – an argument over what it is to be Indian. The intellectual tradition I have held up for your consideration here saw Indians as necessarily condemned to politics – not because they believed this was a medium through which to achieve utopian ends, but because this was the available means to find freedom. Freedom meant, in the first instance, being able to choose who they were and how they wished to be seen. The invention of a representative order which has enabled that sometimes dangerous liberty is not the least valuable acquisition of the Indian democratic experience.

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