Why Democracy Survives

[Ashutosh Varshney](#)

[India Defies the Odds](#)

India has long baffled theorists of democracy. Democratic theory holds that poverty, widespread illiteracy, and a deeply hierarchical social structure are inhospitable conditions for the functioning of democracy. [1] Yet except for 18 months in 1975-77, India has maintained its democratic institutions ever since it became independent of Britain in 1947. Over those five decades, there have been 12 parliamentary elections and many more state assembly elections. Peaceful transfers of power between rival political parties have occurred seven times at the central (i.e., federal) level. Since 1967, the party that ruled in New Delhi has *not* ruled in nearly half of the states. Since 1977, moreover, incumbent governments have been repeatedly defeated in elections. The press has remained vigorous, free, and unafraid to challenge the government, as even a cursory sampling of morning newspapers will show. The judiciary, despite periodic pressure from the federal executive branch, maintains institutional autonomy. Election turnout keeps rising, exceeding the levels typical in several advanced Western democracies. Having started at 45.7 percent in the first general elections (held in 1952), turnout now often rises above 60 percent.

Predictions of an imminent collapse of India's democracy have continued since the 1960s. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy in June 1975 and declared a state of emergency, it seemed that India was finally starting down the path that most of the world's poorer democracies had already traveled. Yet democracy returned 18 months later, and emergency rule proved to be a conjunctural aberration rather than an emerging structural trend.

To be sure, danger signs remain. When unpopular ruling parties are thrown out, hope that the new incumbents will govern wisely and well **[End Page 36]** too often gives way quickly to anguish, marked by troubling questions. How long can democracy survive if public trust in India's political

leaders continues to decline? How long will short-term benefits--rather than long-term insight--determine the behavior of politicians? Scholars speak of India's democracy as ungovernable, and clearly its health is not what it was in the 1950s and 1960s. [2]

But one should not expect a textbook model to work if there has been a serious rise in political participation and a near-breakdown of the caste hierarchy that long acted as the glue of the social order. Indeed, rising participation by once-marginal groups such as the "lower" castes is, if anything, a sign of how much the democratic process has succeeded. Rising political participation, its desirability on grounds of political inclusion notwithstanding, nearly always comes at the cost of disorder. [3] Therefore, the yardsticks for judging India's democratic health today should not be derived from the glory days of the 1950s. "Lower" castes, tribes, minorities, women, and citizens' groups are all exercising their democratic rights to a degree that was unheard of in the 1950s and 1960s. That India still practices democracy is in and of itself unique, and theoretically counterintuitive.

The closest parallel cases among developing countries in terms of democratic longevity seem to be those of Venezuela since 1958 and of Costa Rica since 1948. Both, however, are many times richer than India, and therefore less anomalous in the view of democratic theory. Given all this, it is hardly surprising that no less an authority than Robert A. Dahl cites as a leading contemporary exception to democratic theory "India, where polyarchy was established when the population was overwhelmingly agricultural, illiterate, occupationally much less specialized than in a [developed] country, and highly traditional and rule-bound in behavior and beliefs." [4] Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset come to the same conclusion in their multivolume survey of Third World democracies. [5]

Finally, the historical novelty of Indian democracy was noted by Barrington Moore:

Economically [India] remains in the pre-industrial age. . . . But as a political species, it does belong to the modern world. At the time of Nehru's death in 1964, political democracy had existed for seventeen years. If imperfect, the democracy was no mere sham. . . . Political democracy may seem strange both in an Asian setting and one without an industrial revolution. [6]

Why has Indian democracy survived amid these unfavorable conditions? Building in part on work done by such scholars as Bashiruddin Ahmed, Rajni Kothari, James Manor, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, and Myron Weiner, I would frame the answer to this question in four parts. The first part is *historical,* and seeks to draw out the **[End Page 37]** democratic implications of the processes of party formation and nation-building that went on during the period of the independence movement. The second is *economic,* and suggests links between India's strategy of economic development and its democracy. The third connects the structure of India's *ethnic configuration* to its democracy, while the fourth and final part looks to the crucial role of *political leadership* in the period just before independence, when democratic norms were institutionalized even though taking democratic rights away from certain parties and citizens would have been relatively easy.

A "Post-Postcolonial Reconstruction"

In the 1950s, any suggestion that British colonial rule had facilitated postcolonial Indian democracy would have been dismissed as preposterous. As time passed and the "post-postcolonial" era set in, however, more dispassionate analyses became possible. Writing in 1985, Myron Weiner pointed out that "an impressive number of erstwhile British colonies," including India, "have maintained British-style democratic institutions for all or most of their postindependence history," while "not a single former Dutch, Belgian, or French colony currently has democratic institutions." [7]

Seeking to account for democracy's success in India, Weiner cited the political experience that indigenous leaders were able to gain as they were allowed greater governmental participation during colonialism's last phase, as well as the characteristics of the leading political party (the Indian National Congress) that emerged during the national movement. Weiner was correct on both counts, but recent comparative scholarship on the topic of nationalism suggests a third reason. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, the independence movement, under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru, and the Congress party, turned what previously had been only a cultural unit (as summarized by the concept "Indian civilization") into a cultural-political unit--a nation. [8] Without this transformation, Indian democracy would have been still-born: There has to be a political unit before there can be a democracy.

Bringing nation-building into the picture changes the argument about the links between British rule and Indian democracy. It was not the British legacy per se, but rather the strategic interactions that took place between British authorities and national-movement leaders that laid the foundations of democracy. No historical explanation can be complete unless it takes the "agency" of India's freedom movement into account.

The British began local-level experiments with partial self-rule in the 1880s, and turned over provincial governance entirely to indigenous politicians in 1935. Between 1937 and 1939, and again in 1946, the Congress party was able to add state-level governance to its long experience in local governance. Thus when the Congress finally **[End Page 38]** came to power at all levels of government beginning in 1947, it had years of invaluable seasoning under its belt, giving India an advantage unknown to many other decolonized nations.

The Congress itself had changed in significant ways since its founding as an urban, upper-middle-class grouping in 1885. Gandhi transformed it into a mass party in the 1920s, in the process giving it what Weiner identifies as the institutional groundwork of a competitive political party. It began opening district and provincial offices to spread its message and organization more widely across the vast subcontinent, launched membership drives to augment its ranks, and held intraparty elections for leadership positions. Because of Congress's popularity and its rule-based internal functioning, no competitor with a similar nationwide mass base ever arose to challenge it for the leadership of the national movement. Congress felt safe, and the Indian national movement was spared the intense internecine conflict and even open warfare that would scar several of the national movements in Africa and cripple democratic functioning after the advent of independence

in the early 1960s.

Prior governing experience and security of rule were not the only reasons for the ease with which the Congress party embraced democratic procedures. India's history after 1920 also demonstrates the political relevance of the distinction between a civilization, which is a cultural unit, and a nation, which merges the cultural and the political. As Ernest Gellner famously put it, nation-building means putting a political roof over one's cultural head. India has not always had such a roof: When the British conquered the subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had the help of many local allies, and the Crown's suppression of the north India mutiny of 1857 caused no repercussions or uprisings in the south.

This began to change early in the twentieth century under the leadership of Gandhi, as mass mobilization took place through the instrument of a cadre-based party. In 1920, the civil disobedience that followed the massacre at Amritsar in the northern province of Punjab was not just regional but India-wide. By the 1930s, Congress was establishing and deepening its presence in virtually every part of India. Embracing the idea of a free and united country, millions came out to protest, and thousands went readily to jail.

India as a nation was conceived and constructed in opposition to the British. The independence movement was at the same time a nation-building movement. Just as schools and the army had turned "peasants into Frenchmen," [9] the Congress party under the leadership of Gandhi and Nehru not only protested British rule, but also turned locally and regionally oriented folk into Indians. [10]

The immensely painful partition of 1947, even though it was not what the leaders of the freedom struggle wanted, nonetheless helped **[End Page 39]** democracy by mooting the Muslim League's demands for separate electorates; communal quotas in representation and administration; a one-community, one-party arrangement; and other hallmarks of consociationalism. [11] Congress was committed to minority rights, but insisted on the framework of an adversarial, liberal democracy. The creation of Pakistan effectively ended the clash within India between consociationalism and majoritarianism in favor of the latter.

Even if British rule facilitated Indian democracy by providing a framework of parliamentary institutions, the notion that democracy is a British legacy is a mistake. Pakistan has the same background, but has been under implicit or explicit military rule for much of the period of its independence. How does one explain this variation? Is the military dictatorship in Pakistan also an inheritance from Britain? Clearly, one must look *between* the common historical background and the contem-porary situation. The intervening factors in this case are the strategies and commitments of India's national movement. Along with the British authorities (and after 1940 the leaders of the Pakistani movement), the leaders of the Indian national movement were key players in politics. They were not acting out a British script, but writing their own.

When Indians launched their struggle for greater democratization and self-rule, the British need not have responded by inviting Indians to run local and provincial governments, or by allowing the Congress party to function, or, to put it bluntly, by letting Gandhi and Nehru stay alive. That the

British were not more ruthless, however, was more a systemic consequence than a result of their generosity. The national movement's deliberate embrace of nonviolence made the idea of using force to crush it counterproductive and unacceptable to many British people themselves. [12] None of this would have been true if the national movement had turned violent, and the British would have had few qualms about using lethal force to crush it. Instead, the most they could do was to throw people in jail, which was hardly enough when hundreds of thousands were willing to go.

Moreover, the national movement made the British doubt the legitimacy of their rule by questioning nothing less than their pride in their own political institutions. The British had long enjoyed pointing to the legitimacy of their institutions--a mere 150,000 colonial officials were after all ruling almost a quarter of a billion Indians in the early 1920s. How, then, could the British deny self-rule to the Indians, who were actively affirming the value of Britain's free and democratic political institutions by demanding that the institutions be kept in place, but with Indians ruling India through them? As a democracy trying to run an empire, Britain found that its liberalism was increasingly coming into conflict with its imperialism. It is important to note that the Indian national movement highlighted this contra-diction just as self-consciously as it adhered to nonviolence. Thus an **[End Page 40]** understanding of the strategy chosen by the Indian leaders is necessary for understanding why the British acted as they did. Democracy was fought for by Indians, not just given on a platter by the British.

Industrialization, Agriculture, and Democracy

Economic arguments about democracy have been of two types. Seymour Martin Lipset first proposed an intuitively simple correlation between wealth and democracy. [13] Though this largely remains true, it is not helpful in understanding India, which is one of the exceptions. A second kind of argument was made by Barrington Moore, who probed economic history to unearth the processes that generated democracies. [14] He was more successful at explaining why India was unable to achieve economic modernization than he was at accounting for its ability to become a democracy before undergoing industrial development.

Modern democracies, Moore observed, emerged *amid the process of* European and American industrialization. Both industrialization and democratization were transformations without precedent. Democracy subverted the hereditary principle of rule; industry transformed what had been essentially rural societies. Moore's analysis led him not only to his famous dictum "no bourgeois, no democracy," but also to a second dictum that can be summed up as "yes peasants, no democracy." For while the emergence of a bourgeoisie can bring about industrialization, it cannot by itself bring about democratization. The latter also depends on what happens to rural society in the process of industrialization--or as Moore put it, on whether agriculture is commercialized, and how.

Why is commercialization of agriculture necessary? Economic theory from Adam Smith to Arthur Lewis provides an answer. If a society is predominantly rural, as all societies are in the early stages of industrialization, then most or all of the surplus necessary for industrialization must come from

the countryside. A commercialized, as opposed to a stagnant, agriculture can provide the necessary surplus: a *labor surplus* to man the new working class in the industrial sector; a *food surplus* to feed the working classes in emerging towns; and a *savings surplus* to fund industrial investment.

Commercialization of agriculture means the liquidation of the peasantry (not necessarily in the literal sense, *'a la* Stalin's murder of the *kulaks,* but as a class), since peasant-dominated agriculture and low-productivity agriculture have generally been synonymous. Moving from economic to political analysis, Moore concluded that "the elimination of the peasant question through the transformation of the peasantry into some other kind of social formation appears to augur best for democracy." [15] Over two centuries, the enclosures in Britain forced peasants into cities and turned them into an urban proletariat. **[End Page 41]** The United States never had a peasantry, only a commercial farming class. The peasantry survived in the Soviet Union, China, Japan, and Germany--and all four countries experienced dictatorship during the course of their industrialization.

What makes India an exception is that democracy has survived even though the peasantry has not disappeared. One reason, surely, is the advent of the Green Revolution, which has boosted agricultural productivity so effectively that India, often threatened by food shortages in the 1950s and 1960s, has enjoyed surpluses since the late 1970s. In brief, technology has made peasant agriculture productive enough to blunt the contradiction between industrialization and the existence of the peasantry.

This explanation is fine as far as it goes, but India had been a democracy for two decades by the time the Green Revolution arrived in the late 1960s. The 1950s, moreover, saw the initiation, under Nehru's leadership, of a state-led heavy industrialization program. Were the resources for industrialization extracted from the countryside? In fact, Nehru and his planners struggled with precisely this problem. Among the solutions that Nehru proposed were nationalizing the foodgrains trade, gathering small peasant farms into larger cooperatives, and compulsory government purchases of foodgrains "at fixed and reasonable prices." Nehru was persuaded, however, to abandon the first two measures and substantially to scale back the third by Congress party leaders at the state level, who were much better informed about the political realities of rural India.

In effect, Nehru chose democracy over development (or at least the model of development that he was initially inclined to favor). Guided by the advice of the Congress cadres from the several states, he realized that one could not give suffrage to rural India and at the same time extract huge quantities of food from it at below-market prices. By not forcing the issue, the Congress party avoided putting democracy at risk. For the first 20 years of planning, resources for industrialization came not from agriculture, but from urban savings and foreign aid (including wheat from the United States). [16]

Although the Green Revolution, by finally solving the problem of surpluses, deserves some credit

for the preservation of democracy, credit must also go to Nehru and other political leaders of the 1950s and 1960s who resisted the urge to force the pace of industrial development when peasant agriculture was stagnant. Settling for a slower road to industrialization during this period was vital to the maintenance of democracy.

The Ethnic Configuration

Ethnic rather than class conflict has been the most persistent, visible, and virulent source of political violence in the developing **[End Page 42]** world, with the qualified exception of Latin America, [17] and has been behind democratic breakdown in Lebanon, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka, among other countries. [18] India has hardly been spared, having suffered from (among other things) Hindu-Muslim riots; caste-based strife; insurgencies in Kashmir and the northeast; "sons-of-the-soil" movements in Assam, Telengana, and Maharashtra; and language-based riots in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet democracy has endured. Why?

Scholars who have studied ethnic conflict in different societies suggest a valuable distinction between *dispersed* and *centrally focused* ethnic configurations. [19] In a dispersed configuration, there is a plethora of locally or regionally specific identities; the centrally focused configuration features a small number of identities that cut across the whole country. In the former, generally speaking, ethnic conflict remains localized; the center can often maneuver between the fighting groups while seeming to stand outside the conflict. In the latter, the ubiquity of the cleavage tends to foster heightened conflict throughout the system, threatening the integrity of the center. Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Tamil conflict has a systemic quality; so does the Malay-Chinese conflict in Malaysia; and so did the East-West conflict that eventually broke up Pakistan and spawned Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka, democracy was badly eroded all over the country in the early 1980s, and still has not returned to the Tamil-dominated north. In Malaysia after the ethnic riots of May 1969, the political leadership deepened the pro-Malay character of the polity, regulating the Chinese minority more than before, including its role in the economy. By extending quotas to the private sector, Malaysia became even more consociational than it had been at the time of independence.

In India, all ethnic cleavages except one are regionally or locally specific. The Sikh-Hindu cleavage is basically confined to Punjab and other parts of the north. The Muslim insurgency in the Vale of Kashmir has never spilled over to include all Indian Muslims; likewise, violence in the northeastern state of Assam killed hundreds in the early 1980s but never went beyond state borders, and so on. As a result, Punjab and Assam burned while life in the rest of India went on more or less as usual. Even the all-pervading caste system, so intrinsic to the entire Hindu society, is locally based. Caste riots in one part of the country do not necessarily affect other parts. In Tamil Nadu, an anti-Brahmin movement forced a large number of Brahmins out of that southern state, but Brahmins in the north were unaffected. Indians speak over 20 languages and many more dialects. There are numerous tribal groups, but altogether they form only 6 percent of the population and are widely dispersed over central and eastern India.

When dispersed ethnic conflicts keep breaking out, it is easy for observers to get the false

impression that the system is breaking down, even when the center is holding. Parties mobilized around ethnic issues **[End Page 43]** may cause turmoil in one state, but nowhere else. In a dispersed system, even an insurgency gets bottled up in one area; democracy may be suspended there while the rest of the country continues to function under more or less routine democratic processes with no threat of systemic breakdown. Federalism also helps, for as the case of Sri Lanka shows, in a unitary state all grievances wind up aimed at the center. It is not surprising that the years when the leaders of the post-Nehru Congress party were striving to centralize an essentially diverse and federal polity also saw the advent of such severe stresses as the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir.

The only cleavage that has the potential to rip India apart is the divide between Hindus and Muslims. History bears awful witness to the hatred, violence, and disruption that can surround this split: the partition that created Pakistan in 1947 cost the lives of between 200,000 and 500,000 people, and forced about 12 to 15 million more to migrate. India today is home to more than 100 million Muslims. Though accounting for only a modest 11 percent of the country's total population, they give India the fourth-largest Muslim population in the world (after Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), and form the largest group of Muslims in any country where Muslims are not a majority. The geographic distribution of India's Muslims, moreover, magnifies their political significance. According to the 1991 census, they are a majority in the northern states of Jammu and Kashmir; make up about 22 percent of the eastern state of West Bengal; form 16 percent of Uttar Pradesh and 14 percent of Bihar in north-central India; and in the south make up 21 percent of Kerala and 11 percent of Karnataka. In a number of cities throughout the country, they constitute considerably more than 20 percent of the local populace. Thus unlike the Hindu-Sikh problems confined to Punjab or the tribal insurgencies limited to the northeast, a serious worsening of Hindu-Muslim relations anywhere could harm such relations everywhere.

During the first two decades of independence, Hindu-Muslim conflict was dormant because migrations to Pakistan rendered India's Muslim community leaderless and because Congress under Nehru's resolutely secular leadership maintained a multireligious character. Since the mid-1970s, however, a Muslim middle class has emerged, while the Congress party, watching its preeminence recede, has compromised its once-firm secularism for the sake of electoral calculations.

In particular, rising communalism among the Hindu majority makes the situation potentially unstable. Chauvinism received its most **[End Page 44]** virulent expression in the demolition of the Baburi mosque at Ayodhya in December 1992. The new force of Hindu nationalism is represented in electoral politics by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which currently leads the coalition government in Delhi.

According to the Hindu-nationalist ideology, India's secularism has degenerated into ethnic and religious pandering, with the state held hostage by assertive minorities. Especially worrisome to Hindu nationalists is what they call Muslim disloyalty to India. The Hindu nationalists understand India as a Hindu country, and maintain that it can recover its strength only through a reassertion of

"Hinduness"--seen sometimes as a cultural phenomenon, at other times as a religious one. [20]

If the BJP ever managed to implement its ideology, India would leave the democracy-friendly realm of what Dahl called "subcultural pluralism" and enter the more dangerous one of "cultural dualism," with a Hindu majority lording it over a non-Hindu minority. If at that point India's minorities were to accept Hindu political dominance, India would be set on the Malaysian path (a regulated democracy with the bounds of political competition laid down by the dominant group). Minority restiveness, on the other hand, could bring about a Sri Lankan scenario. Bitter intercommunal hostility would always be at or near the boiling point, with the machinery of law and order acting in a rabidly communal manner across large parts of the country.

The ideology of Hindu majoritarianism *(Hindutva)* is not likely to come to power, for a variety of reasons. Muslims have thus far chosen democratic and nonviolent means of opposing the BJP; caste differences still often take precedence over Hindu unity; and nonelected institutions such as India's powerful courts argue that secularism is a basic principle of the Constitution and as such beyond change by ordinary legislation. Even though the BJP heads the current coalition government, its vote share has not gone up significantly since 1992. It managed to assemble its alliance and come to power only by dropping such key Hindu nationalist demands as the construction of a new temple on the site of the razed Ayodhya mosque; the adoption of a common civil code to supersede all the "personal laws" of the religious minorities; the termination of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir (India's only Muslim-majority state); and the liquidation of the National Minorities Commission. India's ineradicable pluralism has induced the BJP to scale back its anti-Muslim rhetoric; to build coalitions across caste, tribal, linguistic, and religious lines; and to seek electoral alliances with regional parties in states where an ideology based on Hindu-Muslim differences makes no sense. It is only because of its willingness to make such alliances that it leads the ruling coalition today. Given that ideological moderation has carried the BJP to power, while ideological extremism would have kept it in pariah status, there is now good reason to expect that the BJP will avoid **[End Page 45]** becoming radicalized. As a result, the deep concerns that were raised by Hindu majoritarianism in the early 1990s are steadily declining.

Institutions, Ambitions, and Ideology

Comparative studies of democracy have noted the key role of leadership. [21] Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Sukarno in Indonesia, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan, Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, and Indira Gandhi in India all undercut democracy by suspending freedoms, jailing political opponents, rigging elections, prolonging their rule through constitutional manipulations, and promoting executive-branch powers at the expense of legislatures and judiciaries.

A democracy cannot function if the institutional logic of the system is made subservient to the personal ambition or the ideological predilections of political leaders. Leaders must accept institutional constraints on their decision making. In a parliamentary system, this means accepting the sovereignty of parliament, working within the constitution of one's party, opposing adverse

court rulings only through proper constitutional channels, and if the system is federal, respecting the degree of autonomy afforded to state governments.

In many and perhaps most postcolonial societies, the leaders who came to the fore during the independence struggle had so much prestige that, far from being compelled to subject themselves to democratic norms, they could easily have reversed the process and could have fixed or changed norms and procedures according to their own personal preferences. India was fortunate that its first generation of postindependence leaders resisted such temptations, and displayed instead a remarkably democratic temper.

For the sake of analytic convenience, let us momentarily view Nehru as representing this entire group of leaders. When his colleagues in the Congress party disagreed with him on key policies or programs (proposed agricultural cooperatives, the reorganization of states along linguistic lines, the role of the public sector in the industrialization drive), Nehru did not expel the dissenters, but let intraparty forums resolve the dispute. When the courts turned down his land-reform program on grounds that the right to property was a fundamental tenet of the Constitution, he did not attack the judiciary itself. Rather, he went through the constitutionally provided amendment process, seeking the approval of two-thirds of parliament and a majority of the state legislatures in order to gain the authority he needed to enact his plan. Nehru did not appoint state-level party chiefs or state chief ministers, leaving them to be elected instead by the local Congress party units in each state.

Nothing illustrates Nehru's regard for democratic norms better than **[End Page 46]** his handling of the language controversy in the early 1950s. Indians use more than 20 different tongues, and the language question is a politically significant one. Even before independence, Congress had committed itself to language--on the basis of which states were to be redesigned--as the underlying basis of federalism. Nehru's private correspondence clearly reveals that he was deeply ambivalent about these plans, in part because he regarded unfinished tasks like poverty alleviation, economic development, and national consolidation as far more urgent. As popular linguistic movements arose, however, he finally gave in and returned to the prior commitment of the party.

A result of Nehru's democratic predilections was the manageability of the political system. Since the state leaders were elected, not appointed by Delhi, the elective principle *within* the party regularly produced leaders who had stature, a base of their own, and considerable command over the state. They could manage regional political disorders. In a later decade, when Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi went against all of the above principles and sought to centralize the party, she only succeeded in ensuring that disputes and disorders from every state would become Delhi's problem. A top-heavy central government was unable to manage a continent-sized and culturally diverse polity. With the institutional properties of democracy eroding, disorder and democracy came to coexist.

Let us now drop the assumption that Nehru represented an entire generation of leaders, and that

they were all strongly for democracy. Perhaps Nehru's emergence as the topmost leader was a monumental fortuity. In the womb of postindependence Indian history lay two other tendencies. At various times in the 1930s and 1940s, Subhas Chandra Bose and Vallabhbhai Jhaverbai Patel were both serious competitors to Nehru. Calling a democratic and nonviolent national movement too weak and admiring the strength of fascism, Bose turned to Japan and Hitler's Germany as allies in an attempt to overthrow British rule by force. Although Patel's pre-1946 political career showed no sign of frustration with Muslims, he became disenchanted with secularism in his later years, and openly demanded that any Muslims wishing to stay in India after the formation of Pakistan should take a loyalty oath. He was also given to the use of force, or to what Hindu nationalists today call "the full assertion of state authority." Bose died in 1945, Patel in 1950. Given their political trajectories, one shudders to think what kind of political system India would have evolved if they and their ilk had dominated the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, of course, neither was able to displace the top leadership of the national movement and change the party's basic commitments, which says something about Congress's democratic leanings. Nonetheless, it is good to recall Bose and Patel, if only to underline the point that had some accidents changed the nature of the elite, India's political life could well have been different. **[End Page 47]**

Recent scholarly writing on democratization has discussed the post-transitional "honeymoon," when new democratic leaders enjoy maximal freedom of action. National-liberation leaders' standing as fathers of the nation made their honeymoon longer and their political autonomy greater. Bold choices shaping new structures could be made. The democratic temper of India's first-generation leaders contributed handsomely to building up the system's democratic base. Once such a solid base was in place, it became hard completely to undermine the democratic edifice, as Mrs. Gandhi's failure showed. Her attempt to centralize politics and suppress dissent in formal politics only led to a flowering of political activity in civil society, as groups feeling marginalized formed organizations outside the state and mobilized the people, thus exerting democratic pressure on the state.

Liberal Hypocrisy?

Scholars have often argued that the biggest threat to India's democracy comes from the deinstitutionalization of the party system--in particular, the decay of the Congress party and the inability of opposition forces to provide a cohesive and effective alternative. The logic of this argument is simple: How can representative democracy continue to function without solid and stable parties? At some point, the bubble may burst.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a long-forgotten factor--religion in public life--posed another big threat. The BJP, a disciplined party with a solid organization, emerged as a political alternative to Congress. The new party thus partially filled the organizational vacuum, but its Hindu nationalism brought religion explicitly into public life. The first generation of postcolonial leaders had maintained a plausible distinction between religion and the public realm. There was an element of "liberal hypocrisy" to this, for in a deeply religious society, all kinds of religious symbols, if not appeals, were used at the time of elections anyway. There was also, however, a consequentialist

rationale for the distinction: no party could think of turning religious antagonism into an *explicit* plank of its ideology, or into the ideological basis of state governance. Implicit use of religion was not as threatening as its explicit use in politics.

This liberal hypocrisy--the BJP calls it "pseudosecularism"--was frontally challenged as religious nationalism tried to make an open entry into politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That the brazenness of Hindu nationalism has been more or less disciplined by India's democratic politics expresses yet again how deeply ingrained the democratic tradition has become. The BJP has come to power, but it has done so in alliance with several mainstream parties. The moderates within the BJP have the upper hand, and the odds that an ideologically pure Hindu nationalism can win are very low. If in the **[End Page 48]** future the *ideology* of Hindu nationalism were somehow to triumph at the polls, the hard work of the first generation of leaders and the many structural strengths of Indian democracy would be seriously tested.

Ashutosh Varshney, associate professor of political science at Columbia University, is the author of *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India* (1995), and *Civic Life and Ethnic Conflict: Hindus and Muslims in India* (forthcoming).

Notes

1. This essay engages in a dialogue the theoretical works--all in the liberal democratic tradition--of Robert A. Dahl, Samuel P. Huntington, Seymour Martin Lipset, Barrington Moore, and Dankwart A. Rustow. The best summary of liberal democratic theory and its problems is Huntington's essay "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Summer 1984): 203-35. The *magnum opus* is Dahl's *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). I lack the space to deal with the alternative tradition of democratic theory that implausibly tends to equate democracy with socialism. For an example of the latter, see Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Jalal argues that liberal political institutions are not required for democracy, so long as all citizens *in reality* have equal access to power and resources. This analysis leads her to find no differences between the "formally" distinct, but "really" similar polities of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

2. Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Ungovern-ability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

4. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 253.

5. "India, despite the steady erosion of democratic institutions . . . continues to stand as the most surprising and important case of democratic endurance in the developing world." Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries,* vol. 3, *Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989), 1.

6. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 314.

7. Myron Weiner, "Institution Building in India," in *The Indian Paradox* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), 78. The essay first appeared in 1985.

8. The Indian nation, to be sure, is not perfect; there have been secessionist challenges. But it should be noted that India has faced its strongest separatist challenges in areas *not* penetrated by the Congress party during the freedom movement--especially the northeast and Jammu and Kashmir.

9. See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

10. The "subaltern" historians argue that peasants and other marginalized groups had their own ways of interpreting the freedom movement's message. These scholars admit the popularity of Gandhi and Nehru, but insist that different sections of society viewed things through different lenses. See Sahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma," *Subaltern Studies,* vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1-55. As collective-action theory explains, a multiplicity of motivations is true of most large-scale mobilizations and may even be a requisite of success. Participation in collective action can lead to new collective units and identities, original motives notwithstanding.

11. This crucial historical background is overlooked by Arend Lijphart when he contends that India has been a consociational democracy since independence. See Lijphart, "The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation," *American Political Science Review* 90 (June 1996): 258-68. This is also a gap in Jalal's interpretation in *Democracy and Authoritarianism*. In Jalal's analysis, there is not only no distinction made between democracy and socialism, but also no difference drawn between liberal and consociational democracies.

12. See the fascinating account of the diaries of Police Commissioner Curry in Denis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Non-Violent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia Univer-sity Press, 1993). Having to hit nonviolent protestors was making many British officers in India psychologically sick. Gandhi had known that this might happen, and had reckoned it more effective than a violent assault on the British.

13. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69-105. For a different perspective, see Dietrich Rueschemeyer, et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1992).

14. Moore, *Social Origins*.

15. Ibid., 422.

16. Ashutosh Varshney, *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in*

India (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

17. Jorge Domínguez, ed., *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (New York: Garland, 1994).

18. Even the left has begun to recognize the emerging primacy of ethnic (or national) over class conflicts. Among the most iconoclastic statements from the left are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

19. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

20. On the ideology of Hindu nationalism, see my essay "Contested Meanings: Hindu Nationalism, India's National Identity, and the Politics of Anxiety," *Daedalus* 122 (Summer 1993): 227-61.

21. See, for example, Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, *Democracy in Developing Countries,* vol. 3, *Asia,* 3