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SYMBIOSIS AND RESILIENCE
The dynamics of social change and transition to democracy in India

Subrata Kumar Mitra

India’s democracy, with its vast spread, astounding depth and resilience, is remarkable.1 By the standard of post-colonial states and transitional states, this is a relatively rare achievement. The centrality of democratic competition in the political process – all political positions in India are elective and nearly all the political forces of the country compete on equal terms in general elections, supervised by an independent Election Commission – is comparable to Western liberal states. With sixteen, largely fair and free general elections already to its credit, few would question India’s status as a consolidated democracy. What makes India’s democracy work? Why has a common origin from British colonial rule led to dissimilar outcomes in India’s neighbours which have found it difficult to sustain democratic regimes.

I argue in this chapter that India’s democracy is neither a sham2 nor idiosyncratic.3 Rather than being sui generis, India’s successful transition to democracy is the outcome of general variables like path dependency, adroit institutional arrangement, political management and strategic policy reform. India’s democratic process comprising elections, political campaigns, social movements, political contestation through the judicial process and indigenous forms of protest, conflates Western liberal forms and indigenous political traditions. This has created a hybrid political system that fosters a sense of enfranchisement, empowerment and entitlement among the citizens, who have legislative and judicial means to hold the government accountable. India’s democracy generates – and feeds off – a widely dispersed sense of social justice, efficacy, legitimacy and political trust. It survives in open competition against its competitors – anti-system parties and extremist ideologies – because it delivers, if not for all and all the time, then, at least for most, and most of the time.

Following decolonization, India in 1947 faced the challenge of transforming subjects into citizens and a poor, diverse and hierarchical society with low literacy and fresh memories of Partition violence into a democratic political system. Though the country sorely lacked the ‘pre-conditions of democracy’, it still made a successful transition to parliamentary democracy. In India today, support for the ballot rather than bullet, cuts across social classes, castes and party affiliations. The scale, regularity and effectiveness of India’s elections have shown the initial apprehensions about the sustainability of democracy in an illiberal context
to have been baseless. Despite continued insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and in the North East, sporadic terrorist attacks with the support of local sympathizers, no one seriously questions the main foundation of Indian democracy, namely elections as the exclusive basis of power and legitimacy.

The reciprocal relation of dynamic social change and democratization of power, and popular elections as the great leveller, are the most significant facts of modern Indian politics. Building on the legacy of social mobilization and the largely non-violent struggle for Independence under the overall leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the underprivileged groups at the margin of India’s hierarchical society have learnt to use the ballot for upward mobility. In consequence, democracy and social change, deeply entangled in a symbiotic process, have become an integral part of the agenda of the modern state, regardless of which political party happens to be in power at a given point of time. Democracy has thus emerged as the most effective method to weave the many strands of the country’s complex heritage together in order to produce a nation. The process has become self-sustaining as new generations have replaced those who were part of the anti-colonial agitation, and has become a constitutive element of the post-colonial institutional arrangement.

Transition to democracy and its consolidation

Ironically, the seeds of a modern democratic system were first planted in India by the British colonial rulers. Sustaining effective rule over a country of continental dimensions with a diverse population required two elements indispensable to a colonial regime, namely, law and order, and some form of representation to generate consent by the subject population. Both of these eventually became the building block of post-colonial democracy. A series of acts of the British Parliament facilitated an increasing involvement of the Indian population through restricted franchise. Colonial rule guaranteed property rights for the elites and recourse to judicial redress in civil and criminal issues for all. The Indian middle class, urban and English educated, grew steadily in numbers and constantly clamoured for representation in various advisory institutions to British colonial rulers, and jobs in colonial bureaucracy. From 1885, the Indian National Congress established by Sir Alan Octavian Hume, a retired civil servant, gave an organizational focus to India’s struggle for eventual independence from British rule. Gradually, its leadership passed from the hands of the liberal urban middle classes to leaders from the provinces, who were more adept with the vernacular idioms of politics, and to peasants and workers which broadened the scope of the social agenda. Thus, gradually, though very limited in nature, the modern ideas of individual rights including the right to property and proper legal redress, rudimentary representation and the right to association became part of India’s political discourse.

This had deep implications for India’s social structure which was organized on the basis of status, and reciprocal social obligations between holders of land and service castes. A new, political linkage made its appearance whereby rural society got steadily polarised between owners of the means of production and workers, creating fissures in the traditional jajmani system, based on status, and structured along the lines of exchange of services. A new sense of aspiration for upward mobility above and beyond station at birth set in, giving rise to the new social function of the broker between the modern state and traditional society. When Independence finally arrived and a new Congress government took power in Delhi, a rudimentary democratic structure was already in place.

This brief incursion into the history of the entanglement of the incremental devolution of power and social change under British rule is important for a comparative understanding.
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of the resilience of Indian democracy. To explain India’s successful transition from colonial rule to electoral democracy I offer a dynamic neo-institutional model of economy–society–state interaction (Mitra 2005, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). In this model, the new social elites, themselves the outcome of a process of fair and efficient political recruitment through democratic elections, play a two-track strategy and institute processes of law and order management, strategic social and economic reform and accommodation of identity.

The model seeks to explain why structural changes, from colonial, semi-colonial or communist rule to popular democracy, socialism to capitalism or upper-caste hegemony to multi-caste competition, do not always result in political anarchy. The presence of decision-making elites with deep social roots in charge of institutional arrangement of the state, and with an eye for governance, can make the difference. A comparable process was not at work in successor states like Pakistan and Sri Lanka where political elites, in the absence of the need to establish political bonds with workers and peasants, could not play the role of intermediating between state and society effectively. The absence of an indigenous elite with social legitimacy and ministerial experience led to a crisis of authority in transitional societies once the colonial rulers depart which causes the army and the bureaucracy to move in to fill the void. This can have disastrous consequences for post-colonial democracy.

In contrast to Pakistan, such was not the case in India. Political representation and social mobilization were present in Indian politics towards the last stage of colonial rule in an embryonic form. Both got a boost with the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1947. Since then, electoral participation has steadily increased; more important, the nature of power at the disposal of local and regional bodies has grown dramatically since Independence. Under the overall supervision of an independent Election Commission, Indians today vote in elections to the centre, State and local governments, and at each level, decision-making power is increasingly in the hands of elected politicians. In a calculated move, India’s leaders put everything on the auction block of electoral politics right at the outset, in the first general election of 1951–1952. Even the very definition of the nation, its physical boundaries, and the basic principles of its economic organization were not considered over and above politics. The result, as we shall see below, was that the great school of democracy quickly multiplied the numbers of its enthusiastic pupils and continued to produce both knowledge and skill even when the first generation, identified with the coming of Independence, left the scene.
The first general election to the Lok Sabha was a veritable adventure in democracy. This was the first time that a mammoth electorate of 173.2 million electors was going to the polls. The voter registration, identification and, finally, the conduct of the polls were all to be conducted by the recently established independent Election Commission, with an electoral organization staffed by men and women drawn from many different branches of the public services because no specialized bureaucracy had been foreseen by the Constitution for this purpose. Subsequent elections have maintained the largely peaceful character of the polling process though the deployment of the army has become routine in recent elections. India’s elections have assumed gigantic proportions, and have earned an international reputation for being largely free and fair. The level of participation in India’s parliamentary elections which has stabilized around 60 per cent is lower than the longer-established and more affluent democracies of Europe. There is, however, considerable regional variation in levels of participation. These trends are particularly visible in elections to the lower houses in the federal States. The level of participation in these elections has also gone up from the modest 45 per cent turnout of the first election to over 60 per cent in more recent elections. Electoral participation in the politically disturbed North East is among the highest in India. In the elections held during 2002–2006, the level of electoral participation in some of them – such as Manipur (90.2 per cent), Nagaland (87.9 per cent), Mizoram (78.7 per cent), Tripura (78.7 per cent), Assam (75.7 per cent) – has produced spectacular results.

Elections and political parties generate a tandem effect between them: one tends to reinforce the other. The introduction of limited franchise by the colonial government towards the end of the nineteenth century had spurred political competition for the seats, leading to the mobilization of the electorate on communal lines. This has an important legacy for contemporary Indian politics. The party system of contemporary India is the result of the six decades of growth under British rule prior to Independence. It is a complex system with the continuous presence of the Congress party in the national political arena, the emergence of a powerful Hindu-nationalist movement, the world’s longest elected communist government at the regional level and the occasional lapse into authoritarian rule which, nonetheless, did not become terminal as in the case of the majority of post-colonial societies. The picture becomes much clearer if we divide the post-Independence period into the ‘one-dominant-party system’ period (1952–1977) and its subsequent transformation into a multi-party system. The relative ease with which India developed electoral democracy and a competitive party system might appear puzzling to those unfamiliar with the pre-Independence record of the Indian National Congress with regard to taking part in elections and its legacy of sharing ministerial office under the ‘Government of India Act’, 1935. Should the individual be the basis of political representation, or should organic groups based on religion, caste and ethnicity form the basis of representation, and as such, the exercise of power, is a question that had created heated debate among sections of Indians when the notion of restricted franchise was first mooted towards the end of the nineteenth century. The leaders of the Congress party deeply schooled in Locke and Mill had opted early for the same norms of electoral representation as in the British Parliament that they were familiar with and which they much coveted. However, politicians from outside the group of Hindu, upper-caste groups that dominated the Congress party thought otherwise. They feared the tyranny of the majority which they suspected would be the likely outcome of the introduction of electoral democracy based on majority rule. Not surprisingly, political parties which drew their main support from among Muslims and the untouchable groups were keen on proportional representation, which they thought would be a safer basis for the protection of their interests and identities.
In the event, British policy makers were caught in a double bind – between majority voting rules that they were familiar with – and respect for minority rights, which enjoined the adoption of proportional representation. However, even as the Indian National Congress resented the adoption of proportional representation as the basis of restricted franchise, it nevertheless participated in the elections under colonial rule, gaining in the process valuable experience of electioneering. The issue was finally settled through two fortuitous events. The Partition of India removed the Muslim League as a main player in the Indian political arena and a trenchant advocate of proportional representation. The second event was the famous ‘Poona Pact’ of 1936 between Gandhi and Ambedkar – the celebrated leader of India’s ‘untouchable’ castes, so called because of their ritually ‘polluted’ status – who was one of the main advocates of proportional representation. The agreement finally led to the setting aside of a quota of seats for the untouchables, and subsequently, tribal communities, under a rule known as ‘reservation of seats’. There were thus no obstacles against the principle of majority voting after Independence. The ‘Representation of People Act’ of 1947 gave due recognition to this rule as the basis of all elections in India except those to the Presidency and the upper house in the central Parliament and State legislatures.

India’s electoral campaigns are an excellent demonstration of how political parties develop their strategies to cope with elections based on single member constituencies and franchise based on individual preferences with the existence of castes, tribes and other groups based on collective identities. Factions, short-term alliances of individuals and increasingly, broad-based coalitions are some of the consequences of this complex process of electoral mobilization. Elections and party competition have played a double role by empowering both individuals and groups leading to the continuous creation of new groups and coalitions. The paradoxical co-existence of modern elections and caste alliances and caste consciousness is yet another outcome of the process of electioneering.

Rather than inhibiting the growth of party competition, social conflict, interwoven with political conflict, deepens political partisanship. However, elections based on first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral rules, operating in large, single member constituencies which are usually multi-caste and often multi-religious in character, ultimately lead to political moderation on the part of competing parties. Elections with limited franchise under British rule had facilitated political transition by acting as the institutional context in which power was transferred to elected Indian leaders. This experience had become an integral part of the culture and tradition of the Congress party which was able to transform a minority of votes to a majority of seats in the early elections – thanks to a divided opposition. However, that was no longer possible towards the end of the 1960s in State legislative elections and from 1977 in parliamentary elections at the national level because in the meantime, the idea of political coalitions – an efficient method of transforming votes to seats – had become common currency among parties opposed to the Congress party. Its inability to come to terms with this new development cost its electoral prospects dearly as one can see from the electoral outcomes in the 1990s. However, the Congress party eventually learnt to play the coalitional game and was handsomely rewarded for its efforts in the parliamentary elections of 2004, and in 2009 winning enough parliamentary seats in order to form the government.

Post-Independence acceleration of social change led to a smooth transition of leadership when the generation from the freedom movement was replaced by younger leaders, many of whom came from upwardly mobile, newly enfranchised, lower social classes. The entry of the peasant-based, backward caste parties in the 1960s and the Bharatiya Janata Party, widely seen as the party of business and industry, into government brought these groups closer to power. All sections of Indian society thus have links to the structure of power.
at one time or another, if not in the national arena, then at least in one or more regional
governments. Drawing on survey data provides the basic information about the distribution
of support to the main political parties across social formations.

The social base of the Congress party cuts across all social groups and cleavages of India,
making it India’s quintessential catch-all party. Nevertheless, Congress has relatively greater
support in the lower social classes and among religious minorities. The social profile of the
Hindu-nationalist BJP presents a sharp contrast. Initially, it was very much a party of the
‘Hindu-Hindi-belt’ which normally indicates the north Indian Gangetic plains. Of late, it
has spread out of this regional base and formed government in the West (Gujarat), and the
South (Karnataka). The BJP continues to be a party of the upper social order and Hindu
upper castes, but has nevertheless already succeeded in extending its reach to the former
untouchables, backward classes, tribals and even to a small section of Muslim voters as well.
By the standards of its national support base, the Left consisting of both the Communist
parties (CPM and CPI) attracts proportionally more support from the lower social classes
as well as support from the more educated voters. The rise of India’s regional parties is a
comparatively recent phenomenon. Like the Congress, in the regional context these parties
cut across all social groups and compete with the Congress for the same social base, except
for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a social group sandwiched between the Hindu
upper classes and the former untouchables. The leaders of many of India’s regional parties
are drawn from the OBCs which correspond to the service castes (shudra in terms of the
varna category). At Independence, the introduction of universal adult franchise empowered
underprivileged social groups with a new political resource. The right to vote by secret
ballot, exercised at a polling booth conveniently located at a public place where one could
vote freely, created an environment which was helpful for political participation. The right
to vote in secrecy and without coercion acted as a direct challenge to social dominance
posed by newly mobilized lower castes and religious minorities who felt empowered thanks
to the value of the vote.

Social mobilization and its political containment, largely though not exclusively, within
the framework of political institutions appear to have taken place in India as two independent
but ultimately convergent processes. The pace of social change has accelerated through
social reform legislation, recruitment of new social elites into the political arena and the
political mobilization through electoral participation. Their overall impact on the stability
of the political system has been moderated by intermediary functions and parties at the
regional and local levels. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have described the process as vertical,
differential, and horizontal mobilization. Typically, as the marginal social groups discovered
the negotiable value of the vote during the early years after Independence, they became avid
players in the political arena at the local and regional levels. Established Jajmani systems –
reciprocal social bonds based on the exchange of service and occupational specialization
– broke down to create new groupings. Finally, caste associations, based on shared social
and economic interests emerged as links between parties and the society. This has created
useful room to manoeuvre in the hands of national, regional and local elites.

In sum, based on the previous discussion, one can ask, what makes Indian democracy
work, and why does it fail, sometimes? What significance does India’s counter-factual
democracy hold for general theories of democracy transition and consolidation? Three
arguments that follow help us understand how India’s democratic process has acquired the
capacity to learn from its lapses and take corrective measures which makes it self-sustaining.
Electoral mobilization and unfettered participation

Regular and effective elections, based on universal adult franchise to all important offices and institutions at the central, regional and local levels of the political system are one of the most significant factors to explain the success of India’s electoral democracy. India’s powerful and independent Election Commission, ably supported by the Supreme Court and a watchful and litigious civil society, ensures that elections remain largely free and fair. Elections have helped induct new social elites in positions of power, and replace hereditary social notables. The electoral process from its early beginnings about six decades before Independence has grown enormously, involving a massive electorate of about 815 million men and women (2014), of whom, roughly 60 per cent (66 per cent in the 2014 election) take part in the polls. The fact that terrorist attacks and insurgency have not been able to thwart competitive elections speaks to the strength of India’s electoral processes.

While the constitutional structure of India’s elections has remained more or less constant over the past six decades, the electoral process – evidence of the dynamism of social empowerment – has undergone significant changes. The general elections of the 1950s were dominated by traditional leaders of high castes. However, as the logic of competitive elections sank in, cross-caste coalitions replaced ‘vote banks’ that were based on vertical mobilization, where dominant castes dictated partisan preferences to lower social groups. ‘Differential’ mobilization of voters, which refers to the coming together of people from different status groups, and ‘horizontal’ mobilization, where people of the same status group coalesce around a collective political objective, have knocked vertical social linkages out of the electoral arena. Today, sophisticated electoral choices based on calculations that yield the best results for individuals and groups are the rule. Electoral empowerment has brought tribes and religions in all social strata into the electoral fray.

Differential and horizontal electoral mobilization of socially marginal groups has resulted in policy changes that further demonstrate the deepening of democracy in India. Successive governments have introduced laws to promote social integration, welfare, agrarian relations and social empowerment. Over the past two decades, broad-based political coalitions have forced more extreme forms of Indian politics, such as the champions of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or for that matter, linguistic and regional interests, to moderate their stance.

Election-reinforcing institutional arrangements and countervailing forces

India’s record at successful state formation and, more recently, the progressive retreat of the state from controlling the economy, but without the ensuing chaos seen in many transitional societies caught in similar situations, speak positively of the validity of the country’s institutional arrangements which effectively protect India’s electoral democracy. These institutional mechanisms are based on constitutional rules that allow for elections at all possible levels and areas of governance, and therefore promote, articulate and aggregate individual choice within India’s federal political system. Since the major amendment of the Constitution in 1993 that created an intricate quota system, India’s 600,000 villages have become the lowest tier of the federal system, bringing direct democracy to the doorstep of ordinary villagers and guaranteeing the representation of women, Dalits, backward castes and tribal members.

The juxtaposition of the division and separation of powers, the fiercely independent media and alert civil rights groups, and a pro-active judiciary, have produced a level playing
field to facilitate democratic politics. Many of these are colonial transplants that have been adapted by repeated use and re-use to local custom and need (Mitra 2011a). It is significant to note that India’s main political parties do not question the legitimacy of India’s modern institutions. Although they differ radically in their ideological viewpoints, parties such as the Communist Party, Hindu-nationalist parties like the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party, all share the norms of democracy. Not even parties that draw their strength from mobilizing religious cleavages or class conflict issues object to democracy. Therefore the right to democratic participation is no longer considered an exotic idea.

**Asymmetric but cooperative federalism**

India’s federation has simultaneously succeeded in differentiating the political and administrative landscape of India, while holding on tightly to the unity and integrity of the state as a whole. Cooperation among units widely different in size rather than the dominance of large regions or, indeed, of an almighty central government is a striking feature of the Indian federation. The boundaries of the federal States have been re-drawn on the lines of mother tongue, making regions coherent cultural and political units. The fears of ‘balkanization’ (Harrison 1960) that marked the rise of language movements in the 1950s have not borne out. Meanwhile the regional arena has emerged as the most crucial unit of India’s electoral arena and has endowed regional parties with an extra measure of power.

The Indian state has devised an ingenious system of enhancing stability of the political system through a combination of federalisation and other forms of power-sharing. By creating new regional and sub-regional governments, federal units can be rearranged. Short-term, constitutionally permitted central or even army rule can substitute representative government when the regional political system is unable to sustain orderly rule. Such emergency rule at the regional level is usually withdrawn when the need for the suspension of the normal functioning of parliamentary politics is no longer tenable. The legal responsibility for law and order rests primarily with the regional government, but is under the watchful eye of the centre. While the State governments control the regional police, the Constitution of India provides for their superseding by direct rule from Delhi when they fail to maintain lawful governance.

In brief, the successful transformation of a colonized population into citizens of a secular, democratic republic, has contributed to the sustainability of electoral democracy. The main strategy has consisted in the encouraging of rebels, the alienated and the indifferent to become national stakeholders. The strategy’s components are: (a) India’s institutional arrangement (the Constitution), (b) laws meant to implement the egalitarian social visions underlying the Constitution, (c) the double role of the state as a neutral enforcer and as a partisan supporting vulnerable social groups in producing a level playing field, (d) the empowerment of minorities through law and political practice, including India’s personal law which guarantees freedom to religious minorities to follow their own laws in the areas of marriage, divorce, adoption and succession, and, finally, (e) judicialization which safeguards individual and group rights.

Such is the power of electoral dynamics in India and so deep-rooted is the process that even when democracy fails as in the case of violent riots, insurgency or governmental instability, these remain localized and soon enough, electoral democracy bounces back. In response to such cases three points deserve our attention. First, so far, India has been generally successful in containing, if not solving such protracted issues as the secessionist movements in many of India’s regions, including Jammu and Kashmir, within the structure of the democratic
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constitution. Second, the cleavages and conflicts tend to be local and regional rather than national. They also tend to be cross-cutting where those who are opposed to one another on one cleavage might find themselves in alliance on a different issue, rather than cumulative where advantages as well as disadvantages cumulate in specific social groups. Finally, the rhetoric of the leaders of such movements, even when radical and strident, is deeply ensconced within the conceptual framework of electoral democracy. Rather than leaning towards religious fundamentalism, they point more towards power-sharing, in sharp contrast to millenarian-totalitarian movements such as Afghanistan’s Taliban or Sri Lanka’s LTTE.

Institutions and social mobilization as the twin bedrocks of democracy

While India’s democratic achievements are impressive, the size of the electorate or regularity of elections are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a functioning, democratic society. What matters much more in global ranking today is the ability of democratic regimes to sustain good life. In the age of global flow of culture, the very definition of good life itself has changed. More than merely the basic needs, dignity of the individual, sanctity of the sacred, and cultural freedoms have emerged as additional criteria for basic minimum material needs. India’s record on basic needs is quite dismal, bypassed by several Sub-Saharan African countries that do not boast democratic rule, not to talk of East Asian ‘tigers’ (Drèze and Sen 2013). However, as we have seen, the widespread discontent arising out of these issues rather than cumulating in a revolutionary movement to overthrow the system, is transformed by India’s competitive political system into political resources at the disposal of competing political parties which in the long run enhances the legitimacy of the democratic political system. The biggest challenge that India’s democracy faces today is how to achieve these goals without reneging on the very premises of electoral democracy.

Strategic social and economic reform, within the framework of the Constitution as suggested in Figure 2.1, can vastly enhance administrative efficiency and political legitimacy. Of course, measures like ‘direct cash transfer’ or the ‘Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act’ where the state guarantees at least 100 days of paid work to at least one member of families below the poverty line have helped broaden the social base of democratic rule. A further armoury in the repertoire of the state is the discovery of what people in their localities consider sacred, and to weave that into the larger structure of the modern state.

The management of religious institutions and practices, under the federal division of powers, is currently on the State List under the federal division of powers. However, it is high time to move that to the Concurrent List so that national legislation and a national coordinating body for the country as a whole, responsible for orderly management of religious affairs for each religion in the country, can be put up. The authorities responsible for law and order management can then have proper interlocutors within each religion to negotiate issues like construction of new places of worship or renovation of existing ones, regulating practice when it impinges on the public sphere and, most important of all, in negotiating acceptable solution when it comes to conflict on ownership of places of worship. Appropriate, functional, innovative institutions, seamlessly connecting the modern state and traditional society, conflating time tested wisdom with new, global knowledge can deepen and broaden the scope of electoral democracy.

Three factors – an awareness of the usefulness of political parties, overlapping social bases and overall value consensus among party supporters – explain why this unusual combination of partisanship, governmental coherence, and policy continuity despite governmental change
has been possible in India. In addition to the modern forms of interest articulation, there are also indigenous variations of this as well. The tradition of unconventional direct action has spawned many variants. Demand groups supplement their political repertoire with several modes of direct action. These include forms of direct collective protest action which include satyagraha, hartal, bandh, dharna, gherao, jail bharo and rasta roko. These are supplemented by social movements. For example, the Chipko-movement in northern India fought for the protection of the Himalayan forests.

This has led to the emergence of a new social class of mediators in the political process, generally called the ‘social activists’, who are often upper and middle class in their social origin but who identify themselves with the lower orders of society, a whole variety of social strata ranging from the untouchable castes to the destitute among the tribes and ethnic minorities. There is a new genre of ‘movements’ in India which, while having an economic content, are in practice multidimensional and cover a large terrain. This includes the high-profile environmental movements, the women’s movement, the civil liberties movement, movements for regional self-determination and autonomy and the peasants’ movement. Other groups focus on peace, disarmament and denuclearization. Movement politics has appeared as the ‘power of the powerless’. The synergy between political mobilization of potential beneficiaries and vote-seeking political parties has become the engine for change in India, leading to game-changing social legislations.

Conclusion: institutional re-arrangement to deepen electoral democracy

Despite its continental dimensions, massive elections, its social context of ethnic and conflict-ridden diversity and deeply embedded inequalities based on caste, gender, religion and tribe, India has succeeded in the consolidation of electoral democracy. This has been brought about through a political process ensconced in a hybrid political culture that dovetails modernity and tradition. At the heart of the political process are hinge institutions like the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, the Parliament and a few others that seek to generate a level playing field where power can be shared by a constantly increasing body of stakeholders who constitute India’s political community. But, what can be done about democracy-corroding pathologies such as corruption, terrorism, policy paralysis and hard core poverty, without compromising the canons of democracy in the process?

As one can see in the contained but enduring insurgency in Kashmir and the North East, Maoist violence in Central and Eastern India, and sporadic Hindu–Muslim conflict, India still faces the challenge of how to reconcile democracy, governance and collective identity. India’s social and economic cleavages sometimes manifest themselves in complex combinations of ethnic conflict, secessionist movements, inter-community violence and terrorist attacks. There is nothing inherently anti-democratic about the vast majority of such political acts. In India, even putatively anti-democratic actors like convicted terrorists appeal through normal channels of judicial redress for their democratic rights. If one overlooks the element of rank opportunism in the use of democratic means by those opposed to parliamentary democracy and takes into consideration the vigorous defence put up for them by India’s active civil society and judiciary, one can understand how this eventually deepens and broadens the scope of the democratic political system and process. Context matters. After all, politics in India, as indeed politics anywhere, is about the relentless quest for power. But, for reasons of path dependency and the other factors discussed above, more than in most transitional societies it is in the Indian context that democracy has become the fortuitous side-effect of the normal competition for power. We
learn from the Indian case that electoral democracy can turn rebels into stakeholders. The crisis of electoral democracy can be an opportunity to engage in some serious institutional redesigning to keep the ball rolling, and protect the gains of democratization.

Indian democracy has made great strides in terms of the expansion of participation from the core groups to whom the British had transferred power and generated an inclusive community where different social groups can compete under equal conditions for the exercise of power. The success of India’s democracy, properly understood, has important significance for democracy in South Asia, as well as for broader democracy theory. It shows that strategic reform, accountability and social policies that balance efficiency with justice, can sustain the progress in democracy and development in a post-colonial context. India’s successful conflict-resolution, compared to other new democracies has been immensely helped by the fact that social groups tend to overlap, and that key intermediaries for conflict-resolution such as the judicial system and party politics have been available for a considerable length of time prior to Independence.

In the final analysis, elections are necessary but not sufficient to make democracy work. One needs a continuous adaption of institutions to the changing environment so as to make them relevant and appropriate to sustain a level playing field. This is the general lesson to be learnt from the Indian experiment.

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Notes

1 For many, as Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta argue, India’s democracy remains a ‘curiosity’ and an ‘outlier’, when seen in the light of ‘most theories of democracy that look at structural variables – such as class structure, extent of ethnic diversity, level of income and education – to predict the prospects of a country instituting and remaining a democracy’ (Jayal and Mehta 2010: xv).

2 Indicators of the success of India’s democracy such as the sense of political efficacy on the part of ordinary citizens, a widely spread sense of legitimacy and trust in political institutions, garnered from meticulous survey-based evidence are seen as the main assets of democracy in India (Kohli 2001, State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) 2008, Mitra and Singh 2009).

3 ‘The default explanation’ is to argue that Indian democracy is a sui generis phenomenon, a case of Indian exeptionalism (Jayal and Mehta 2010: xv). See Mitra (2013a) for my critique of Indian exceptionalism.

4 Most prominent among them are Selig Harrison (1960) who predicted the end of parliamentary democracy in a miasma of ethnic strife and balkanization, Barrington Moore (1966) who anticipated peaceful paralysis or worse, and Ayesha Jalal (1995) who saw dangerous common trends of authoritarianism, based either on personal rule or party ideology, in both India and Pakistan.

5 Neo-institutionalism is a theory, which explains the way institutions emerge in certain contexts as well as the way they interact with and affect the society. See North (1990).

6 For a dissection of the paths not taken that lowered the chances of democracy transition and consolidation in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, see Sahadevan and DeVotta (2006); Spencer (2005) Oldenburg (2010); El-Khawas (2009).

7 For party system and elections in India see: Mitra (2011a, 2013b); Sridharan (2010); Adeney and Saez (2005).

8 Vertical mobilization refers to political linkages that draw on and reinforce social and economic dominance. Horizontal mobilization takes place when people situated at the same social and
economic level get together to use their combined political strength to improve their situation. Differential mobilization refers to coalitions that cut across social strata. See Rudolph and Rudolph (1967).

9 For the formulation of these ideas in terms of an analytical framework on elections and social change in India based on a model of electoral norms and organizational structures corresponding to them, see Mitra (1994), 49–72.

10 For an application of this concept as a framework for strategic protest as a form of political participation in India, see Mitra (1991).

11 See McMillan (2010).

12 See Rajamani and Sengupta (2010).

13 Satyagraha means in Sanskrit ‘holding the truth’, and was employed most famously by Gandhi against British colonial rule; hartal means strike action; bandh – collective cessation of public activities; dharna – a form of sit-in strike; gherao means ‘to surround a decision-maker’; jail bharo – to fill the jails in a form of radical protest; rasta roko – Hindi for stopping the vehicular traffic as a part of a protest movement (see Mitra 2011a).


17 The transformation of the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare into the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which won the assembly elections in Delhi and formed the government is a good example of the power of India’s electoral democracy to induct new values and leaders into the political arena. The victory of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the parliamentary elections of 2014 has similarly transformed right-wing, conservative and radical nationalists into an accountable and moderate party of government. See Mitra (2013b) and Mitra and Schöttli (forthcoming).

References


