

Indian Democracy

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Origins, Trajectories, Contestations

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction. Trajectories and Crossroads: Indian Democracy at 70 <i>Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anand Vaidya</i>	I
1. Democratic Origins I: India's Constitution and the Missing Revolution <i>Sandipto Dasgupta</i>	13
2. Democratic Origins II: The Minority Question in South Asia <i>Anupama Rao</i>	26
3. Democratic Origins III: Violence and/in the Making of Indian Democracy <i>Sunil Purushotham</i>	39
4. Democratic Origins IV: Comment <i>Ajay Skaria</i>	51
5. The State and/of the Media in Modi's India <i>Siddharth Varadarajan</i>	58
6. Writing Counter-insurgency, Conflict and Democracy <i>Nandini Sundar and Dolly Kikon</i>	72

INDIAN DEMOCRACY

7. Democratic Trajectories I: Congressism, Anti-Congressism, and Composing the ‘People-as-a-Whole’ <i>Subir Sinha</i>	87
8. Democratic Trajectories II: Merit and Caste in Contemporary India <i>Ajantha Subramanian</i>	102
9. Democratic Trajectories III: Ritual Inclusivity in Turbulent Times <i>Kathinka Frøystad</i>	114
10. Democratic Trajectories IV: Comment <i>Manali Desai</i>	127
11. India’s Democracy: Contest for the Nation’s Core <i>Kavita Krishnan</i>	133
12. Feminism and the Politics of Gender <i>Raka Ray and Srila Roy</i>	151
Conclusion. Indian Democracy and Its Prospects: 2019 and Beyond <i>Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anand Vaidya</i>	170
<i>About the Editors</i>	178
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	180
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Index</i>	187

Introduction

Trajectories and Crossroads: Indian Democracy at 70

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‘Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge,’ Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, declared in his speech to the country’s Constituent Assembly as the midnight hour approached on 14 August 1947. The following day, India was to enter the ranks of sovereign nations, having been subordinated to British rule since 1858. Nehru went on to outline a grand vision for the country, now free of the colonial yoke:

Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavour? To bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.¹

Needless to say, in Nehru’s eyes the stakes were tremendously high: ‘We have hard work ahead. There is no resting for any one of us till we redeem our pledge in full, till we make all the people of India what destiny intended them to be.’

INDIAN DEMOCRACY

In 2017, as scholars, pundits, and commentators in India and abroad mapped the complex trajectories of Indian democracy across the seven decades that had unfolded since independence, one singular fact was consistently highlighted: the remarkable stability, longevity and vibrancy of India's democracy. The coming of national independence witnessed the introduction of universal franchise and a system of electoral democracy that – with the exception of the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977 – has remained stable for close to seventy years. One of the chief reasons for this is the fact that Indian democracy has struck deep popular roots: the country's elections are the largest exercises in universal franchise anywhere in the world, and the poor and the marginalised exercise their right to vote more eagerly and in greater proportion than India's middle classes and elites.

Yet, if it is undisputable that India's democracy has stood the test of time in a remarkable manner, it is equally clear that the aspiration of ensuring justice and fullness of life to all its citizens has been betrayed in very fundamental ways. This is arguably most starkly evident in the fact that, in the seventieth year of India's independence, 57 billionaires owned as much wealth as the poorest 70 per cent of the population.² It is a betrayal that is also manifest in the fact that, in addition to being vastly overrepresented among the poor, India's Dalits and Adivasis still suffer discrimination, stigma and violence on an everyday basis at the hands of dominant groups. It is unmistakably apparent in the persistence of gender injustice, which is regularly inflicted on the bodies of Indian women and girls through ubiquitous acts of sexual violence. And it is a betrayal that blights the lives of those subaltern groups who inhabit Kashmir, the Northeast, and the forested areas of central India,

where counter-insurgency operations by the state render even the most basic democratic precepts null and void.

At the time of writing, with the general election of 2019 looming, there is also a clear sense that Indian democracy is at something of a crossroads. In April 2014, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept to power in a general election that installed Narendra Modi, the market-friendly strongman of the western state of Gujarat, as Prime Minister. Since then, the party has increased its electoral sway: whether based on majorities or coalitions, at the time of writing the BJP's dominance in electoral politics extends beyond the national level in Delhi to 20 of India's 29 states.³ Its grip on power is particularly strong in the northern Hindi heartland. This scenario, combined with the prospect of a second term and further consolidation of power, is profoundly disconcerting. Modi's victory in 2014 has been followed by an authoritarian turn in Indian society and in the country's public sphere – majoritarian violence against Muslims and other marginal groups has proliferated; dissidents, journalists and activists are subjected to harassment, silencing and murderous violence. Meanwhile, BJP loyalists are elevated to positions of authority in national institutions of education and culture in ways that render the state itself an extension of Hindutva power. This is not to suggest that Indian democracy is at immediate risk of unravelling. It is, however, to acknowledge that we are at a perilous conjuncture in the world's largest democracy.

This book emerges from a set of conversations that took place in Oslo in 2017 to assess these issues, as well as the broader contours of popular democracy in India 70 years after the country's independence. That symposium brought together academics, activists and journalists to work through this conjuncture, to better understand the history that brought us to

it and the openings it provides. This book and its companion website provide a record of those conversations in the hope that a fuller reckoning with the challenges of this moment can provide a way out of it.

Two Indias

'It is a matter of great pride to us', Narendra Modi told the heads of state, corporate tycoons and global celebrities that had gathered in Davos for the World Economic Forum 2018, 'that the largest democracy on earth is also the fastest growing major economy.'⁴ This message reflected his domestic image as '*vikas purush*', a man of development. Indeed, Modi's landslide victory in the general election of 2014 – the BJP won 282 of the available 543 seats in parliament – was in no small part based on a promise that his rule would bring '*acche din*' (good days) to the people of India.

Modi's rhetoric, however, stands in contrast to his government's troubling track record. First of all, India's GDP growth slowed down quite considerably in 2017 compared to the previous year, and as a consequence India lost its status as the fastest growing economy in the world. More importantly, however, India's considerable economic growth is underpinned by a development process that is both uneven and unequal. Economists Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze have shown that India's social development indicators are weaker than those found in far poorer neighbouring countries. India has a higher infant mortality rate, shorter mean years of schooling, and a lower rate of literacy for women than Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Moreover, 44 per cent of all Indian children are malnourished – more than twice as many as in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ This is first and foremost due to the fact

that very little of the country's growing gross national product is being invested in the expansion of social infrastructure and social protection for its most vulnerable citizens. India's position in the global rankings of all indicators is falling – except for ease of doing business.

In addition to this, India's economic growth is failing to generate sufficient employment – manufacturing employment has stagnated, and 81 per cent of the working population eke out a living in the informal sector, where incomes are low, working conditions poor, and employment tenuous and unstable.⁶ Weak social development indicators and jobless growth are part of a larger picture characterised by persistent poverty and deepening inequalities. According to the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, over 60 per cent of India's population live on less than US\$3.10 per day. And poverty, in turn, is marked by caste: 65.8 per cent of India's Dalits, who predominantly earn a living as wage labourers, and 58.3 per cent of the country's lower castes, are poor. This is compared to 33 per cent of the rest of the Indian population.⁷ At the same time, the richest 1 per cent of the population captures an astounding 22 per cent of all income and holds 73 per cent of all wealth in the Indian economy. As economists Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty have noted, this is a level of inequality not witnessed in India since the late colonial era.⁸

Hence, in its seventieth year of independence, India seemed to be witnessing the re-emergence of the two Indias decried by the nationalist and dissident economist Dadabhai Naoroji in the early years of the twentieth century: one prosperous, the other poverty-stricken. In other words, whereas formal democracy, embodied in universal suffrage, regular competitive elections, and legally codified and enforced rights of association, has stood its ground well, there is still much that is

wanting in terms of the ability of subaltern groups to exercise their rights and advance substantive redistribution and recognition. This pattern of uneven and unequal development has to be understood in relation to India's paradoxical political trajectory in the wake of independence.

Democracy and Its Impasses

At the country's birth in 1947, Indian democracy was controlled by the country's elites, and it remained so for several decades. It was overwhelmingly men from the upper castes who controlled the levers of power in the Congress party, which had spearheaded the mass movement for independence since the 1920s. Congress in turn secured its dominance through alliances with landowning high-caste groups in the countryside. These groups controlled whom the lower castes and Dalits voted for in national and state elections. Consequently, the world's largest democracy was also a conservative democracy – that is, a political regime that did not prioritise substantive redistribution and recognition for its subaltern citizens.

This conservatism was rooted both in the struggle for national liberation and, as Sandipto Dasgupta notes in chapter 1, in the making of the country's constitution. Whereas the mobilisation of India's rural masses and nascent industrial working classes gave significant momentum to the demand for freedom from colonial rule, Congress under Indira Gandhi remained an elite-led movement. As a consequence, it time and again reined in the collective action of subaltern groups. Consequently, more radical demands for redistribution and recognition were consistently deflected in the period stretching from the Non-Cooperation Movement in the early 1920s to the Quit India Movement in the early 1940s. In the aftermath of

independence, popular radicalism was subjected to increasingly coercive forms of demobilisation at the hands of the Indian army – the Telangana movement discussed by Sunil Purushotham in chapter 3 being a case in point – and the Constituent Assembly rejected fundamental transformation in favour of piecemeal modification of India's socio-economic, political and cultural hierarchies.

This system has changed in many ways. Congress dominance has been eroded as lower castes and Dalits have emerged as independent political actors. This process – which has been dubbed a silent revolution – began in the 1970s, when low-caste groups who had established themselves as prosperous farmers in the wake of India's land reforms formed their own political parties. These parties became a force to be reckoned with in northern India in the 1980s and 1990s and have formed national coalition governments on several occasions. Dalits followed suit and mobilised through the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) – a party that has ruled the politically important state of Uttar Pradesh for long periods, both alone and as part of coalitions. In the same period, elite hegemony was also destabilised by new social movements that challenged both the ideology and the edifice of the postcolonial state. These movements aspired to champion the needs and interests of subaltern groups that had been excluded from the realm of parliamentary politics, mobilising around issues that had been peripheral to the mainstream of Indian politics. As Srila Roy and Raka Ray discuss in chapter 12, the feminist movement politicised issues such as violence against women, religious fundamentalism and communalism, and the economic marginalisation of women, and sought to bring about legal reforms to advance gender justice. In doing so, the women's movement challenged the way in which patri-

archal power was inscribed in the workings of the Indian polity and wider society.

The silent revolution propelled by lower caste groups and Dalits, and the oppositional projects of India's new social movements have certainly left an imprint: political power and influence have been transferred from higher to lower orders, and groups who were previously invisible and unheard now have a presence and a voice in India's democracy. Yet it is not clear that these dynamics have decisively shifted the tectonic plates of power in India's body politic. For example, Uttar Pradesh was ruled more or less continuously by the BSP and the lower caste Samajwadi Party between the early 1990s and 2014. Despite this, social indicators among the lower castes and Dalits in the state are far worse than in the rest of India. It is primarily the more prosperous, landowning sections among the lower castes who have reaped the benefits of changing political power equations. In contrast, more than 40 per cent of all Dalits in Uttar Pradesh still live in poverty. Also, as events such as the 2013 Delhi rape and the 2018 kidnapping, gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl from a Muslim nomadic community in Indian-occupied Kashmir testify, gendered forms of violence and inequality persist despite important legal reforms. In turn, they continue to animate new forms of feminist organising and mobilising. As for the tremendous maldistribution of wealth and income in India today, this is symptomatic of the fact that, over the past three decades, neoliberal policies have fuelled multiple processes of accumulation by dispossession in favour of the country's economic elites. In short, despite its longevity and stability, and its deep popular roots, Indian democracy is still riddled with impasses.

A Perilous Conjuncture

The coming to power of the BJP in India in 2014 has brought about a perilous conjuncture in the trajectory of the Indian republic. This is not so much due to the economic policies of the regime: as many commentators have noted, the Modi regime has followed in the footsteps of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that preceded it by seeking to advance and consolidate neoliberalism. Rather, what sets the current government apart from the UPA regime that ruled from 2004 to 2014 is its pursuit of a majoritarian agenda of authoritarian populism.

Modi and the BJP are part of a Hindu nationalist movement – the Sangh Parivar – with roots stretching back to the 1920s. Consisting of a wide spectrum of organisations that work both inside and outside the realm of parliamentary politics, this movement aspires to make India a Hindu nation. The movement is clearly antagonistic towards religious minorities, and this has repeatedly resulted in anti-Muslim pogroms – for example in Gujarat in 2002, where Modi, as Chief Minister, presided over the systematic and brutal murder of more than 2000 Muslims by violent gangs led by Hindu nationalist activists. In the campaign for the 2014 elections, Hindu nationalism was toned down in the BJP's political agenda: Modi touted a message of '*Sabka Sath; Sabka Vikas*' ('Everyone Together, Development for Everyone') and projected himself as a national saviour who would be scaling up the Gujarat growth miracle to the national level. Modi combined this message with a putative anti-elitism that pivoted on opposition to the corrupt dynastic politics of the Congress party and his own credentials as someone who had risen from a modest social background to the pinnacle of national political power. Propagated widely across the country

with the help of generous corporate support, this narrative resonated not just with the urban middle-class groups that have traditionally cast their vote for the BJP, but also with a portion of the lower-caste groups and Dalits relegated to the margins of India's fast-growing economy.

After the elections, however, Hindu nationalism has returned with a vengeance. A majoritarian cultural politics has crystallised around issues such as cow protection, the communal policing of inter-religious love and of women's sexuality, the rewriting of school textbooks to bring them in line with Hindutva historiography, and the promotion of religious reconversion among Muslims and Christians. Moreover, since Modi took charge in 2014, violence against Muslims and other marginal groups has proliferated. This violence takes the shape of spontaneous lynchings, where vigilante groups attack individuals – most often Muslims or Dalits. Over the last eight years, India has witnessed 63 such attacks, which often end in murder. More than 96 per cent of these attacks have taken place under the current Modi regime. Muslims constitute more than 50 per cent of those who have been attacked and 86 per cent of those who have been killed. In this way – through an insidious deployment of rhetoric and violence – the Modi regime constructs the ominous Other that authoritarian populism depends on in order to forge popular consent around an exclusionary conception of the nation and national culture. Communal rhetoric and violence have been conjoined with systematic attacks on political dissenters – activists, public intellectuals, students and journalists – who are accused of being 'anti-national' and subjected to harassment. Indeed, the targeting of dissenters goes beyond harassment to encompass murder, as was shown most recently when the progressive journalist Gauri Lankesh was shot to death outside

her home in Bangalore in September 2017. The fact that there are tangible links between the murder of Gauri Lankesh and the killings of M. M. Kalburgi, Govind Pansare and Narendra Dabholkar – activists and scholars who challenged Hindutva dogma within vernacular public spheres – simply underscores how the public sphere in India is currently under authoritarian siege from above.

In short, the Modi regime is consolidating an authoritarianism that pushes civil dissent and collective claims-making to the margins of political life, circumscribes the ambit of constitutional democracy, and inflicts violence on subaltern groups and religious minorities. It is arguably more important than ever, therefore, to pursue expansive and critical conversations about the trajectories of Indian democracy: from its origins in struggle, via its contradictory present, to its possible futures, also in struggle.

That is precisely what this book does, by bringing together scholars, activists and public intellectuals to probe a wide range of questions: How did class and caste power shape the making of India's postcolonial democracy? In what ways were the particularities of the freedom struggle inscribed in its Constitution, and how can we understand the constitutive role of violence in the making of the Indian republic? What are the prospects of popular politics in the zones where counter-insurgency trumps democratic legality, and what visions of the future are at stake in democratic struggles in India today? How have women's struggles in and through the feminist movement expanded democratic meanings and practices? What challenges does the media confront in India and how can it animate the pulse of the country's democracy? The book also investigates the contemporary life of caste in discourses of merit, the lineages of the rise of the Hindu right, and the status of secularism in the

INDIAN DEMOCRACY

context of a revived Hindutva project. All this is done with a view to generating intellectual resources that can be mobilised in defence of India's democracy in the current moment, and that can feed insurgent conceptions of what a more substantive democracy might look like.