

1

On the Diversity of India's Democracies

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When Selig Harrison wrote his book on India in 1960, he feared that Indian nationalists would experience democracy as a barrier to the country's development.¹ Any nationalist, he wrote, would wish for the rapid development of the country. But such a 'nationalist in a hurry', as Harrison calls him, would be faced with a difficult choice, and he might be tempted to drop the messy decision-making processes of democracy in favour of the rapid and clean decision-making processes, and clear priorities of a more autocratic government. Harrison's fear was shared by many, and pessimism on behalf of democracy in this poor, mostly illiterate, and ethnically heterogeneous giant was widespread.²

Yet, fifty-odd years after Harrison's book was published, democracy in India is still with us. And it seems to be flourishing. Atul Kohli writes that democracy 'has taken root', and Sumit Ganguly characterizes it as 'the only game in town'.³ These characterizations are supported by the *State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA)* report.⁴ The extensive surveys behind the report show that popular opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of democracy. This historically alien system of governance enjoys a very healthy 95 per cent support among those questioned. Although there are methodological issues to be raised with surveys covering this huge and complex country, it is safe to assert that almost all Indians today believe that the country should be governed by elected leaders. And these sentiments are translated into practice during elections. The voter turnout in the general elections in

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1. Selig S. Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960.
 2. Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, New York: Ecco, 2007.
 3. Atul Kohli, ed., *The Success of India's Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Sumit Ganguly, 'Introduction', in *The State of India's Democracy*, ed. Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
 4. The report hails from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in collaboration with International IDEA and the Department of Sociology, Oxford University. *SDSA Team. State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

India over the last 30 years compares favourably with those of the presidential elections in USA. Despite the complexities of Indian society, there is a high degree of positive identification with the state and pride in being its citizen.⁵

Of course, Harrison's expectations and those of most observers were predicated on an idea of what an ideal democracy was like; and that ideal was very much built on an understanding, however flawed, of how democracy worked in the West. With those ideas in mind, democracy in India and its survival, and to some extent its way of working, has appeared difficult to categorize and understand. Democracy in India has been characterized as 'a riddle' and 'a paradox', and Atul Kohli writes that it 'defies theories'.⁶ Perhaps he is right. But then perhaps it is the theories that need to be re-examined. As N.G. Jayal points out in her introduction to *Democracy in India*,⁷ democracy in India must be understood on its own terms, and not on theories built on the experiences elsewhere, masquerading as universal scientific theories.⁸ The point is pertinent. The Indian experience of democracy is rarely found in standard textbooks on democracy,⁹ in spite of the fact that more people live under democratic rule in India than in Europe and North America put together; and despite the fact that India's experience with democracy is as old as that of much of Europe. True, some European democracies are old and can trace their ancestry back to the nineteenth century or even earlier. Others, however, are more recent additions or have at most a very chequered history of engagement with democracy – like Spain, Italy and Germany and most of Eastern Europe. Against this backdrop, the Indian experience with democracy can be of no less interest than that of the West. This is acknowledged by the *Journal of Democracy* editors M.F. Plattner and Larry Diamond, and constitutes a motivating force behind the *SDSA* report.¹⁰

What India does to our understanding of democracy remains under-researched and there is, in particular, a need for in-depth and sociologically sensitive investigations into the meaning and practice of democracy in India.

5. Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

6. Arend Lijphart, 'The Puzzle of Indian Democracy', *Democracy in India*, ed. N.G. Jayal, 2001; Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*, ed. Ashutosh Varshney, New Delhi: Sage; Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

7. N.G. Jayal, ed., *Democracy in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

8. Adam Kuper, ed., *Conceptualizing Society*, London: Routledge, 1992.

9. Linz Stepan and Yadav, op. cit.

10. Marc F. Plattner and Larry Diamond, 'Acknowledgements', *State of India's Democracy*, p. viii; *SDSA* Team, *State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Equally interesting is the reverse question: what has democracy done to India? How has this alien and elite-imposed, and for long elite-controlled system of government altered India?

The contributions in this volume attempt to shed light on these questions, and address the meaning and practice of democracy at different levels in India, to help us understand democracy and democratic practice. Our main proposition is that there is no single Indian democracy, but several Indian democracies, that this originally foreign system of government and representation has adapted to and been adapted into a great variety of cultural, political and historical experiences, in which different practices have emerged.

A HETEROGENEOUS DEMOCRACY ...

Let us investigate the relationship of democracy to Indian society. First, it is important not to underestimate the role of democracy in India today. In the same way that colonial India to some extent was ruled and shaped by 'the steel frame' of the Indian Civil Service, India today is ruled and shaped by the steel frame of democracy. At least in the narrow sense of democracy as an electoral system, democracy is everywhere, most of the time. The polity is shaped by democracy's insistence on regular elections, by its rhetoric of voter supremacy and elected leaders as servants, by imperfections and chaotic processes, and of decision making by protest and compromise. Today, most parts of India experience at least three elections in the course of five years: local level panchayat or municipality elections, state assembly elections, and national elections. It is argued, with good reason, that people today are well accustomed to the 'rituals' of elections, to the cut-outs, the loudspeakers, the election meetings, the wall-paintings, slogans, flags and posters, and the line up to vote.¹¹

The force of the democratic setup is such that society itself changes under the persistent presence of electoral logic. People of the same castes are rallied together to form not just electoral alliances, but super-castes with new names and innovative marital patterns. Much of India's northern heartland is engulfed in what has been termed as 'a silent revolution', where those who were at the bottom of the social ladder are now asserting their presence.¹² It is also argued that voters

11. Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, London: Hurst, 2003.

12. Jonathan Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Stuart Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

increasingly think of themselves as citizens and not subjects, with new forms of rights thinking and issue-based activism continuously emerging.¹³

Yet, in spite of the familiarity with the ritual of elections, its popularity can equally be seen as hollow and support for democracy as fundamentally flawed and brittle. In a wider sense of what democracy is about, including respect for institutions, equal opportunity and tolerance, the situation is not so easily defined. One of the main riddles in the workings of contemporary Indian democracy is the high voter turnout coupled with the low esteem in which most voters seem to hold politicians as a class. The *SDSA* report suggests that close to half the Indian population (45 per cent) has little or no trust in political parties. Among all state institutions, political parties fare the worst – worse even than the police.¹⁴ Only 36 per cent express some or high trust in political parties. And yet, 60 per cent vote.

The same report suggests that a large majority of Indian voters are in fact ‘weak democrats’, inclined to accept strong leaders and autocrats. The authors of the report acknowledge that in South Asia, autocratic forms of government can be understood as democratic by a majority of the population. They also observe that among South Asians, the ‘sanctity of the institution is underplayed’ (government institutions and procedures of the state are undermined by ‘populist contempt’), and that South Asians are ‘inadequately attentive to the rule of law’. The authors of the report use the term ‘blind spots’ to denote these qualities of the Indian voter, suggesting that the citizens tend to ignore the sanctity of formal institutions and of the rule of law.¹⁵

Another paradox is that the very high voter turnout and high support for democracy is not reflected in what may be considered to be democracy’s twin brother, namely, equity. Even after more than 60 years of democracy, Indian society is still grossly unequal, with mass poverty that strengthens deeply entrenched social hierarchies. People are equal as citizens and as voters, but in terms of social standing, ownership, entitlements and even before the law, they are unequal. Why does this situation persist, and why does this lack of progressive change not translate into a different voting pattern? Why do poor voters not vote for more effective pro-poor politics?

There are certain partial explanations for this state of affairs. The middle classes and the rich have other ways of influencing the state and bureaucrats. And for the poor, voting is often a question of pride, of being able to vote in the first place. Voting can also be a matter of group identity, ethnic belonging or caste (whichever

13. *SDSA*, op. cit., pp. 92, 57.

14. *SDSA*, op. cit., pp. 92, 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

term one prefers), by which electoral success carries its own reward.¹⁶ But these partial explanations still leave us with important questions. Why have the poor embraced a political system that after six or seven decades of operation has still not given them all that much?

India's democracy presents us with one last cause of wonder: the absence of a common cultural identity to support the system, that feeling of cultural 'we-ness', commonality and belonging that comes with shared symbols, shared narratives and shared sentiments. A common cultural identity, an imagined idea of a common history and a fate, is thought to be necessary for sustaining popular support for a political system that at its heart encourages the expression of conflict. A common cultural identity will help create bonds of loyalty that allows different interests to be expressed, and maintain respect for the losing party, for the minority. Yet, India's cultural variation is so enormous as to be mindboggling. True, there are symbols, institutions and events that are shared by many, and in contrast to Europe, India is one country, one state. Ramachandra Guha makes the point that even if there are many axes of conflict in India, there are nonetheless some elements that tie it together. Democracy with its practices and focus is one of these elements. Other elements include the formal government institutions, a history of wars with its neighbours, the personality of certain leaders, and cricket and Bollywood.¹⁷ He is of course right, and his list could possibly have been longer. Nevertheless, India is still closer to the heterogeneous salad bowl of Europe than the melting pot of multi-ethnic USA. In fact, it may well be argued that continent-sized India's cultural diversity exceeds that of Europe. India has twelve languages spoken by ten million native speakers or more, sometimes many more, a situation which is quite comparable to Europe. Each state again is divided into castes, clans or religious denominations, plus 'tribal' populations, which add to a diversity that is not found in Europe. Also, religious differences are often accentuated, violent, even exploited.¹⁸ Added to this are class and socio-cultural distinctions. The cultural outlook of the urban middle class of India is very different from that of the rural poor of Bharat just a few miles away, or even from that of their servants. In this sense, the cultural spectrum of the Indian society is probably much wider than that of most European countries.

Yet, for all its diversity, at a fundamental level India remains one state and a democracy. This situation does indeed unhinge the supposition that democracy

16. Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

17. Guha, op. cit.

18. Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

can thrive only in ethnically homogeneous nation states. India is democratic and heterogeneous and proves the supposition wrong. This observation also leaves us with other questions: is there something special about this democracy, something unique that links its democracy with heterogeneity?

... OR LOCAL DEMOCRACIES

A comparison with Euro-America will help shed some light. We know that the manner in which democracy is understood and practised in Scandinavia is very different from how democracy is understood and practised in Italy, just as French democracy is different from German democracy and Swiss democracy is different from British democracy. For example, the French Gaullist tradition of a distant and powerful president would be unsavoury to most people in the Nordic countries, whose preference is for down-to-earth politicians, while the strict moral standard Americans apply to their elected leaders does not appeal to most Europeans. The question then poses itself: if democracy has many acknowledged differences in Euro-America, does it not follow that it would be even more diverse in the more heterogeneous India?

Let us keep this last point at the back of our minds for a little while, and return briefly to the two other riddles – that of a high voter turnout versus lack of trust in political parties, and the high level of support from the poor for seemingly low rewards. The problem with these two riddles is that they appear as riddles mainly in the aggregate. Certainly, in some states, the poor have not received much in terms of material benefits from the state in spite of a high level of electoral support. It is equally true that in some other states the picture is not so bleak. If social indicators are an indication, as they should be, then Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh are states, according to Jean Drèze¹⁹ and Amartya Sen's reading, which have fared quite well.¹⁹ In general, states in the south and parts of the west have done much better than some of the northern states. It is observed in several of the southern states, that a high voter turnout among the substantial mid-level sections of the population has indeed changed the political scene. The Brahmins are no longer in control and it is the populous middle-ranking castes that dominate the scene by using their numerical weight in a political system where numbers count. In these places, democracy seems to work, at least no less effectively than in some countries in Euro-America. In other Indian states, voting patterns and

19. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, 2011, 'Putting Growth in Its Place', *Outlook*, November 2011.

preferences based on group identity and identity politics, for instance, throw light on the functioning of democracy.

There is probably some regional variation behind the *SDSA* figures as well, regarding trust in political parties or the degree to which citizens are 'inadequately attentive to the rule of law'. Is this also a riddle in the aggregate? There is certainly a great extent of regional variation in cultural and political identity between the different regions of India, as well as variation among the social strata. The fact that there are only two national political parties of mass following in the country, and that they together accounted for only half of the votes cast in the 2014 election, and much less in earlier elections, means that at least one in two voters votes for a party that is not national. This is a crucial pointer to the political importance of regional variations, even given the federal setup of India. Then there is the difference in the educational level between states, or in the prevalence of civil society organizations. One would be surprised if these regional variations do not entail differences in popular understanding of the rule of law and democratic practices.

The relationship between the national framework and regional political cultures is a complicated one and it can be argued that the regional has been given much less prominence than what is its due. In his book *Democracy and Discontent*, Atul Kohli points to democracy as the primary cause behind the weakening of India's governance capacity, what he terms as 'deinstitutionalization'.²⁰ Kohli's focus was on Bihar, Gujarat and West Bengal, underlining the differences in the political choices made by the different political parties.

An interesting set of studies that predates Kohli is Rajni Kothari's edited volume of essays investigating the relationship of caste to democracy.²¹ What Kothari's collection shows us is that each case of mobilization was built dynamically on specific local constellations. Thus, the efforts to build broad electoral alliances based on a reformed Rajput identity in Rajasthan was fundamentally different from the mobilization of service castes in the Kamma and Reddy rivalry in Andhra Pradesh. Although the mutual adaptation of caste and democracy was a common theme, the concrete expression differed from one region to the other, and gave rise to different constellations and different agendas. Kothari's cases alert us to the need for understanding political culture in its local setting. As such, India accommodates diverse and separated democratic practices or, to put it bluntly, democracies.

20. Kohli, *op. cit.*

21. Rajni Kothari, ed., *Caste in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970.

VERNACULARIZATIONS, THE MAKING OF DEMOCRACIES

Nandini Sundar's anthropological history of Bastar further underlines this point.²² Her study shows how the dynamics of migration and establishment of a rudimentary state in the nineteenth century and earlier, among other ways through rituals, created the particular circumstances in which several twentieth century uprisings were brought about and must be understood. The singular incident of a revolt under the leadership of a mad king against an uncaring state in the early 1960s, is not a strange freak incident, nor is a 'traditional tribal' protest against the modernizing state. These were events that developed from the dynamics of local history and society, coupled with the demands and intrusions of the modern state and immigrant populations.

Other studies underline the same need for understanding democratic practice in the context of local dynamics. The growth of rural communism in West Bengal and its local entrenchment in rural parts of Burdwan district can best be understood in the context of modern Bengali literature and the compulsions of the rural middle class. Popular participation in political processes was not a role appropriated by the rural poor, but rather facilitated by a village elite seeking to recast itself, in a very Bengali mould.²³

Lucia Michelutti's study on the 'muscular politics' of the Mathura Yadavs shows that India's federal democracy not only allows articulation of difference, but also allows this diversity to affect the workings of its democracy. 'We are born politicians', the Yadavs claim; 'Politics is in our blood.' These ideas, Michelutti shows, go hand in hand with bodybuilding, wrestling, leather jackets and certain Bollywood-inspired mannerisms. Their form of politics is tied to physical pressure, violence if necessary. Mathura Yadavs claim that their dominance in local politics is a natural state of affairs in a democracy and yet their style is very different from how politics is conducted, say, in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala or the North East. Similarly, Jeffrey Witsoe's study of crime and politics in Bihar points out that state formation in the era of Lalu Prasad Yadav consisted of structures of power and of identity in which caste-based politics made sense to most people.²⁴ The importance of caste to the individual, to group identity, to the distribution of state assets, would have surprised people in neighbouring West Ben-

22. Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854–2006*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

23. Arild E. Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal's Rural Communism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

24. Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, page 10.

gal. And even if the elements of caste, politics and crime are in evidence in some mixture in almost all parts of India, there clearly are big differences in the extent to which it has been allowed to flourish under the protection of a chief minister. Yet, when the Yadavs of Michelutti's study insist that their form of doing politics is democracy, she is forced to acknowledge this insistence by coming to terms with the slow and yet popular appropriation of a once alien system to local political structures. She introduces the term 'vernacularization' to denote the process by which political structures are adapted to existing cultural practices and social patterns. Vernacularization is a process wherein new alien practices become rooted, popularized, but are changed in the process.²⁵

A potential new turn in the vernacularization of democratic practices, albeit on a different level, is seen in the recent urban mass mobilizations. Prominent in this respect is the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as an offspring of the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption bill campaign. It has been argued that the campaign for the first time united large sections of a new middle class, from legal activists via a rightist corporate middle class to neo-Gandhians.²⁶ Despite the heterogeneity of this class in terms of income and values, the campaigners were able to appeal to the differing interests by a rhetoric that catered to the desires of diverse sections of the Indian middle class. As Ravinder Kaur shows, not only were ordinary citizens 'mobilized around the "plight" of the common man [. . . but also] a different kind of rationale had spurred corporate actors into activism to eradicate corruption and "governance deficit" in public life'. The united forces of heterogeneous middle class groups supported by corporate actors were initially seen as representing an opposition to electoral politics. However, with the foundation of the AAP, individuals connected to the campaign sought to make the endorsement a political force within electoral politics. This particular case of mass movements uniting new groups and subsequently venturing into party politics might be an urban twist to the vernacularization of democracy in India. To what extent the mobilization around gender issues spurred by the tragic Delhi gang rape case in December 2012, and the anti-corruption movement that led to the AAP's election victory in Delhi in late 2013 and again in 2015 might influence the future political landscape of India remains to be seen.

The point to note is that these very different democratic realities are the outcomes of very different histories. They are not stories about a system of govern-

25. Vinay Sitapati, 'What Anna Hazare's Movement and India's New Middle Classes Say about Each Other', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. xlvi, no. 30, 2011, pp. 39–44.

26. Ravinder Kaur, 'Nation's Two Bodies: Rethinking the idea of "new" India and its other', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2012, p. 617.

ment being implemented equally in different localities, nor are they stories of the government being appropriated by a particular all-India class. These are stories about the asymmetric political system being adapted and appropriated in different ways in different parts of the country.

The study by Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*,²⁷ gives much support to this line of thinking. The authors argue that Indian federal democracy's ability to foreground the regional and accommodate diversity is the main reason for its survival as a trusted and supported political entity. By not attempting to create a symmetric federation in which each state has identical rights and obligations, the Constitution opened up spaces for negotiations between the centre and various (political) communities, creating what they call an asymmetrical federal state. Harihar Bhattacharyya suggests further that in practice India's states system and fragmented society has created what we may call fragmented citizenship, where access to the state and its provisions is dependent on ethnic identity rather than a national citizenship.²⁸ A state consisting of several 'nations', with differing rights and obligations based on bargains and compromises, allowed Indians to retain multiple and complimentary identities. True, areas of alienation do exist, as well as outright failures. The cases of Jammu & Kashmir and the Maoist unrest are but the most striking examples of how India's federal democracy has not been able to accommodate radical differences. The argument by Stepan et al., nonetheless, foregrounds the need to be sensitive to India's ability to accommodate diversity within the formal structures of the state. Our point here is to add that this diversity also stems from regional political histories and cultures, from an accommodation not only of static constellations, but also of a variety of forces, local and national, in constant interaction.

The deepening of democracy in India is an uneven process, made possible by what at least initially was a conscious attempt to accommodate the country's diversity. What takes place in different localities varies greatly and renders the concept 'vernacularization' meaningful. It needs to be broadened, though, to include its embeddedness in local histories and the many vernacularizations. Such embeddedness should not be taken to mean that political practices emerge from the straitjacket of some pre-colonial cultural logic, but that political practices are shaped in local tensions and dynamics. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that all societies have their own particular history of engaging with the state and

27. Stepan, Linz and Yadav, op. cit.

28. Harihar Bhattacharyya, "'A Nation of Citizens' in a Fragmented Society?", in *The Politics of Citizenship, Identity and the State in South Asia*, Harihar Bhattacharyya et al., eds., New Delhi: Sanskriti, 2012.

the outside – in the form of different types of actors, for instance state actors such as kings and administrators, or non-state actors such as moneylenders and businessmen, or sadhus and migrants, or semi-state actors such as missionaries and NGO-activists.

This is not to ignore pan-Indian trends, but to emphasize the need for investigating and being sensitive to deep local histories and trajectories that form the perceptions and practices of democracy. The pan-Indian sensibilities are also important. The democratic setup itself – with its regular elections, the election commission and the tiers of constituencies, the news, scams and scandals, the Delhi focus, and the all-Indian judicial system – informs and influences the local one.

The spectacular victory of the BJP and Narendra Modi in May 2014 appears, at least on the surface, to suggest that the national has become so crucial in Indian politics that it overrides the regional and the local. Modi's victory was comprehensive in the sense that he (or his party) won in a very large number of states. It was also comprehensive in the sense that he secured support from a wide section of Indian society. The scale of the victory was one thing; the other was that it was very much Modi's victory. As Chhibber and Verma and other commentators have pointed out,²⁹ Modi himself was a major attraction for voters across the country; or rather it was the vision of a future that he represented that made such an impact on the electorate. This suggests that the BJP's win was not the agglomeration of a wide variety of different interests, motivations and voting patterns. If voters in state X had voted for the BJP because of its Hindutva agenda, and voters in state Y voted because of its economic agenda, the thesis of a heterogeneous India would have been easy to sustain. But when a fair proportion across the states votes for one vision rather than several, that thesis is somewhat more challenged.

So, does the victory of May 2014 and Modi's position suggest that India is moving away again from the post-Congress phase that Palshikar et al. identified,³⁰ that of a relatively modest-sized main party and a host of smaller regional parties? Are we witnessing a jump from the post-Congress phase to an entirely new phase?

There are good reasons to be cautious about such a hypothesis, though. First, in an ahistorical perspective, Modi's victory is certainly impressive, but not unprecedented. In the entire post-independence period, including the 1996 election, the Congress consistently won a larger share of the votes than what Modi and the BJP

29. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma. 'The BJP's 2014 "Modi Wave": An Ideological Consolidation of the Right.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIX, 39, 2014.

30. Suhas Palshikar, K.C. Suri and Yogendra Yadav, eds., *Party Competition in Indian States: Electoral Politics in Post-Congress Polity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.

secured in 2014. Even in the dramatic election of 1977, that forced the Congress party out of office for the first time, the Congress still secured close to 35 per cent of the vote against BJP's 31 per cent in 2014.

Moreover, for a significant period of time, the Congress was a truly national party that was represented in every nook and cranny of the country, and that secured members of parliament from almost every state. In this perspective, it would seem that the national has always been a significant part of Indian voting behaviour. These decades were followed by a period in which regional issues could no longer be contained within one organization, and increasingly the Congress lost votes to parties that fed on these regional issues. It was this development that brought to light the great variety of political cultures that, we have argued, is a hallmark of Indian political life. However, it did not create it.

Second, as Chhibber and Verma point out,³¹ the support for the BJP is not pan-Indian. It was at its strongest in the north and the west of the country; for the rest the BJP's support remains circumscribed, both socially and geographically. This does cast doubt over the proposition that we have witnessed the return of a one-party dominant system. The regional parties are still there, very much in the fray, waiting for the opportunity to come back, and they continue to represent the variety of sentiments, interests, and social divisions that they have fed on for the last few decades. The Bihar results in November 2015 suggest surprising constellations, and local dynamics still matter. A majority of the Bihar population never voted for the BJP, even in 2014; they were just split. Alliance building is the art of politics in India, and a vital art. Social variation is not likely to lose its political significance in the future. The run-up to the formation of the Telangana state is another example of the conflict of interests that cannot easily be sorted out within the framework of a single party such as the BJP. In fact, the party did not represent an alternative during the entire duration of the Telangana controversy.

The different political, economic and other ways in which the individual states are challenged will also remain. One may be more exposed to climate change and drought, while the other to the demands of its citizens for industrial jobs. A third may struggle with lawlessness and corruption. Even so, Modi may well be able to win the next election as well, if he can retain his grip on approximately 30–35 per cent of the electorate. We must also remember that politics is the art of the possible and, as Lars Tore Flåten points out in his essay in this collection, the BJP has a previous record of not only trying to appeal nationally but also, and at the same

31. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma. 'The BJP's 2014 "Modi Wave"', *op.cit.*

time, has the ability to project an image of being regionally grounded and being able to speak in the local idiom.

However, the pan-Indian trends are by necessity interpreted and appropriated locally, so that democracy appears and works in different ways in different states and localities. While processes of vernacularization have resulted in support for state autonomy and democracy, the mutual pull between the unifying and the particular is evidently a painful and never-ending process.

THIS BOOK

A very good expression of the varieties of democratic practice that exist in contemporary India is found in the contrast between the cases described in the two chapters by Guro Aandahl and Alf Gunvald Nilsen in the present volume. The situation that Nilsen describes from Madhya Pradesh is one of an oppressive state, characterized by what he calls 'everyday tyranny'. This is a nominally democratic political system that has been appropriated by local elites and used to their advantage. At the same time, as he very interestingly shows, individuals among the oppressed, together with activists from outside of the immediate community, work to reform the local state, and use the rhetoric and legal system of the state to the benefit of local peasants. There is a certain 'plasticity' in the workings of the state power, as he points out, meaning that at least parts of the state machinery can be moulded and manipulated into something less oppressive. Some of these efforts are successful, some are not, and Nilsen advocates an 'instrumental' engagement with the state for subaltern groups, thus acknowledging that the state is not *The State* – singular and impenetrable.

The diversity of the Indian state and its polity is further exemplified in the contrast of Nilsen's case with that described by Aandahl in her chapter. Her ethnography derives from the Gujarati villages supposed to be grateful receivers of costly irrigation water harvested from Madhya Pradesh and the Narmada River. Aandahl's argument is with the understanding of massive dams and irrigation projects as the instruments of an almost despotic modernizing and technocratic state machinery overruling local societies. However, her evidence suggests that a much more nuanced understanding is necessary, she admits. The political clout of villagers is considerable in a democratic state, albeit disorganized, and the engineers who represent state power are easily disempowered by local villagers who have 'cards to play' – pressuring their elected representatives or simply refusing to play along. The state and the way it works, she shows, are influenced to a very consid-

erable extent by peasants' groups, who mould it to fit their interests. True, these are not the poor subalterns of Nilsen's study; these are middle-caste landowning peasants' groups who with confidence call upon the MLA, the MP or even the minister and demand the transfer of a local bureaucrat. The political weight is placed much more broadly and much closer to the ground than in Nilsen's study, underlining the huge difference in how the state engages with the citizens in Gujarat on the one hand and in Madhya Pradesh on the other.

Pamela Price and Dusi Srinivas' chapter adds considerable nuances to our overall argument when showing that villagers in Andhra Pradesh are informed not by a single stratagem as they approach the ballot, but by different sets of values or compulsions. Price and Srinivas group these values into two sets termed 'the patrimonial' and 'the programmatic'. The first is informed by the world view in which the rich and powerful provide sustenance and protection, and the second is informed by a fair understanding of the possibilities and rights enshrined in the democratic setup of the state. As Price and Srinivas conclude, there seems to be a significantly greater expression of a self-conscious independence on the part of the ordinary voter than was indicated by another study carried out in the same region fifteen years earlier. At the very least, this indicates substantial dynamism in local society, adding energy at the village or local level, even at individual and household level, to the diversity of political understanding.

The importance of the distinction becomes clear when we consider how ideas of legitimacy and popular understandings of the role of the elected representative influence situations at more aggregate levels. This is brought out in Kenneth Bo Nielsen's study of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. Nielsen's interest is in how she, as a woman, could carve out a position for herself in the male-dominated sphere of Indian politics, a story worth telling in itself. In doing so, he also shows that the political figure she has become or is portrayed as, is very much a Bengali construct. She is *didi* and in some ways also Durga. She is a product of a specific Bengali culture and society. Comparing her to two other female chief ministers brings out the point even more clearly. Jayalalithaa from the south, Mayawati from the north, and Mamata Banerjee in Bengal make for excellent comparison, and he finds that their styles are surprisingly different. Mamata's simple lifestyle contrasts strikingly with those of both Jayalalithaa and Mayawati. In this context, it may also be recalled that the public lifestyle of both the two previous chief ministers of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, was also simple and unassuming. None of the three – Basu, Bhattacharya, and Banerjee – style themselves in the same mould of largesse, opulence and riches as do

both Jayalalithaa and Mayawati (who are nonetheless very different from each other).

It is almost surprising how little attention has been given in literature to the implications of such differences, to what may be called 'vernacularizations' – in the plural. And one rather unexpected implication concerns the nation's security policy. In his chapter, Geir Heierstad points out that although the increased influence of the local (in the sense of state-level) has been widely recognized as important in the shape of coalition politics, less attention has been devoted to what he calls 'the emergence of a process of democratization of foreign policy'. The more sensitive attention to at least the nearest of neighbouring states is a natural collateral of increased state influence over the central government. Heierstad shows this to be particularly acute in places such as Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. In West Bengal, the chief minister gained much popular kudos for her refusal to take part in the ceremony to sign the water sharing agreement and thus 'jeopardize' West Bengal's interests.

If local tastes matter this much, how then do national parties garner support? Lars Tore Flåten's very interesting reading of one of Lal Krishna Advani's yatras shows how this national level leader sought to establish linkages between the national and the regional. This was an informed politician's recognition of both the cultural diversity of the nation, and of the appeal of regional and local symbols. What Flåten shows is that Advani made conscious efforts to merge sets of symbols and icons that had emerged out of one particular region with the symbols and icons of not just another region, but several. Flåten coins the term 'symbolic engineering' to denote these efforts, a term that points to how creative and innovative processes are used to link regional and non-regional identities.

Several of the chapters so far underline the diversity of the country, in particular the inter-state diversity. These are counterpoised by the contributions by Kathinka Frøystad and Sten Widmalm, who add nuance and understanding to how this diversity both challenges and is managed by the nation-state. Widmalm's concern is with tolerance and relationships between groups. He investigates the complex history of mass mobilization in India and questions the democratic credentials of these mobilizations. Populist leaders, communal riots and lack of development efforts are among the ill consequences he identifies. He enquires into the effects of the democratic setup itself on society, and in a closely argued case, suggests that the diversity of India's society itself is no guarantee for plurality or democracy. With its emphasis on the workings of institutions, forms of tolerance and trust, the nature of elite-non-elite relations, and the possibilities inherent in the unevenly implemented process of decentralization, Widmalm's chapter underlines the chal-

lenges inherent in the variety of political practice in India. A heterogeneous society creates different outcomes, through politicized groups forming alliances and bonds of loyalty, only to see these fall apart and new alliances form.

The potential for mass mobilization, good or bad, is a major factor behind cries for censorship, which have been increasingly heard in recent years. Kathinka Frøystad's chapter reminds us of what the diversity of Indian society, with warts and all, requires of political acumen and care. Her focus is on the balancing of freedom of expression against prevention of expressions that may cause riots and destruction. This is a difficult exercise. It is also clear, as she shows with several examples, that the reaction is often an unreflected and kneejerk response to cries from reactionary quarters. Yet it is the difficulty of this balancing that she finally points to, as it is not only a question of 'how' democratic or 'which' kind of democracy, but also a question of whose right it is to allow expressions that might lead to mayhem and death. It is to the credit of the Indian state that it is able to consider the complexity of the situation and local dynamics in its responses.

Thus, it is not only a spatial or geographical complexity that emerges, but also the complexity of a state that works at different levels. When using the turn of phrase 'India's democracies' we have sought to highlight the very diverse workings of the state, geographically and socially, and at different institutional levels of the state. It is a testimony to this complexity when Frøystad shows how decisions by courts at one level are contradicted by courts at a higher level, or when Nilsen shows that the state apparatus is oppressive at local level, but amenable to reason and even compassion at another. Villagers shot at by the police or by local goondas later receive promises of compensation from higher institutions of the state. In Aandahl's chapter, 'the state' wants engineers to implement the grand plans, and at the same time allows voters to influence politicians in a way that is contrary to the design of the same plan. As she rightly points out, it is difficult to identify 'the state'. So is 'India's democracy'.

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