Democratic Politics and Social Change

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Two events drew international attention to Indian politics in the year when India officially celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its independence from the British empire. The first was the outcome of the 12th general election to the Lok Sabha, the popular chamber of the Indian parliament, held in March 1998. For the fourth time in succession, it was a 'hung' parliament with no single party anywhere close to majority. But it was clear that the Bharatiya Janata Party –- usually described to the foreign audience as a party of right wing Hindu fundamentalists – and its numerous recently acquired regional allies had done better than others. After years of inching towards it, the BJP finally came to power at the centre. The event was noted even outside India with concern, for it aroused the fears of rolling back of some of the achievements of plural democracy in India. To many it appeared like yet another third world state on the slippery slope of ethnic majoritarian politics.

The second event came soon thereafter. The new and rather shaky BJP government decided to end India's 24 year old nuclear ambiguity by conducting five nuclear tests in May 1998, declaring that India was a nuclear weapon state and demanding an entry to the exclusive nuclear club. The club was not amused and a spate of economic sanctions and abuses followed. "Just when you thought the world was safe ... India's Nukes" proclaimed the cover story of the Time magazine, depicting India as nothing short of a rogue state. The friends of India bemoaned the fact that India had decided to go against the current of history. That the tests enjoyed considerable popular support in the country, strengthened the doubts entertained by many about the future of India as a moderate liberal democracy.

These two events probably were not the two most significant landmarks in the history of Indian politics. These were certainly not the most representative events to depict the larger trends of democratic transition in the 1990s. Yet, the logic of short attention span reserved for countries like India will ensure that, for a long time to come, the 'global' image of Indian democracy will be formed by the television footage associated with these two events. In the current international information (dis)order democracies outside the first world are routinely judged by norms drawn from the history and the contingencies of the present of democracies in the West. Right from its inception Indian democracy has had to to respond to an agenda which bears only a tangential relationship to its inner trajectory and account for its life in a register kept to write someone else's history. A fair assessment of India's democratic experience must, therefore, be anchored in an understanding of the Indian model of democratisation in its specificity. I begin by describing that model. I then map how it fared in what I see as the three phases of democratic politics. Finally, I come back to a synoptic assessment of its success, its distortions, its inherent weaknesses and the challenges which confront it.

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Fifty years ago when India began the journey, it was easier to describe its destination and the route, for the privilege of describing it lay without much contestation with a small section of

India's westernised elite. All of them did not think alike, but their differences were not unbounded. There was a significant overlap underlying the various differences of ideologies and social contexts. The model of Indian democracy was founded on that consensus. Since then, the number of those who wish to participate in the process of defining the Indian model has increased phenomenally, thanks no doubt to the success of the processes initiated by the original inheritors to the legacy of the British Raj. Moreover, our awareness of the complexities of mass ideologies and the crooked logic of collective action has rendered the question of the meaning of the Indian model less amenable to a confident answer.

At first sight, the initial design of the Indian democratic entreprise might not look original at all. So many of the attempts to articulate the vision of democracy in an independent India appear as a desire to imitate the experience of liberal democracy in the West. The speeches and the writings of the nationalist leadership and the debates of the Constituent Assembly are full of fond references to the democracies in the West. Indeed, the basic design of the Indian Constitution was consciously borrowed from the European and the American tradition. The parliamentary system of relationship between the executive and the legislature, the federal structure for governing the interaction between the centre and the states, the idea of fundamental rights, an independent judiciary to safegaurd these rights and the constitution itself... all this would sound very familiar to the students of constitutional history of the West. A large number of the provisions of the constitution retained verbatim the corresponding provisions in the Government of India Act of 1935, the political design evolved by the colonial masters.

Yet the Indian constitution was not a simple imitation of the British model or any other existing constitution, for no attempt at copying can be free of value addition.Elements picked up from various Western models (parliamentary system from Britain, judicial system and bill of rights from the US, Directive Principles from Ireland and so on) were combined together in a unique mix. Besides, various specifically Indian elements were introduced by way of 'redefinition' of some of the familiar Western ideas and institutions. Community rather than individual was acknowleged as a possible basis of citizenship in the affirmative action policies of the state. Secularism was redefined in a specifically Indian manner. These and many other examples demonstrate that creativity in the garb of imitation has been the preferred mode of political innovation in modern India. Right from the begining, the Indian model of democracy involved a selective usage and subtle adaptation of the language of modern liberal democracy.

The constitution, however, was not the core of the innovative aspect of the Indian path to democratization. Its essence lay in the unwritten political model that informed the practice of democracy in the last five decades. The Indian model, as its most shrewd interpreter Rajni Kothari argued in his magnum opus *Politics in India*, involved the primacy of the political and a redefinition of the boundaries of the political. Thus politics was not just one of the areas which the Indian elite sought to transform. It was at the heart of India's tryst with modernity. In a bold move that broke from the political models available at that time, the Indian elite chose to pursue multiple goals simultaneously: to make democracy work; to create a single political community in a large and diverse society; to pursue Western style economic development; and to bring about fundamental changes in the society.

They opted for political democracy, more specifically the constitutional-representative-democratic-republican form of government, in a society which lacked any historic precedent of such governance at the scale they confronted. By opting for democracy they also exposed themselves to radical egalitarian expectations of a political community of equals, a community in which the people were ruled by none but themselves. Some of them did realise that this was a distant ideal from the form of government they had established. The second goal was built into the first one: the survival of democracy in the face of the amazing diversities which defined India required the creation of a single political community across the recently acquired political boundaries of the Indian state. The lessons of the partition of territories between India and Pakistan were too painful a reminder of the need for what was called then national integration and later nation-building. This was a newly acquired need. The creation of a modern public sphere gave birth to this seemingly impossible requirement to bring together a huge number of communities which have had little to do with each other. The modern public sphere also provided the resources for meeting this requirement.

In the realm of the economy, the Indian elite opted for western style development in the hope that the path to development was open to anyone who cared to step in. They may not have hoped for a miraculous entry to the world of consumer goods for everyone, but they did expect a substantial and speedy economic growth in aggregate terms. The economic goals included a reduction in the historical gap that distinguished India from the developed world and a substantial trickle down of the gains of economic growth to the worst off. Finally, they aimed at bringing about fundamental changes in the structure of the society they inherited. Even those who did not share the radical desire for the abolition of traditional social hierarchy and its inequities did look forward to mitigating the worst effects of the caste system. At any rate, the goal of social modernisation that would transform the traditional, 'parochial' beliefs of the masses into modern, 'cosmopolitan' values was widely shared.

Democracy was not just one of the goals, it was also the principle instrument of realising all these goals simultaneously. The power of a modern state, the mobilising capacity of universal adult franchise, the dynamics of competitive politics, the firm grip of a system of political institutions, and the vision of an enlightened elite were the main elements in the politics centred approach to modernisation adopted by India. The colonial state had expanded considerably the boundaries of the political and had annexed for politics the crucial self-reflexive privilege of deciding what the boundaries of the political were going to be. The nationalist movement expanded it further by including within the political domain various social and economic issues which the colonial power had steered clear of. The modern Indian state was to exercise power over this wide arena and bring about the social transformation necessary to the realisation of the four-fold goal mentioned above. Its reach was to be made effective by a wide range of bureaucratic apparatus, while the constitutional institutions would ensure that the game was played according to the rules. The introduction of universal adult franchise was meant to draw in a hitherto unprecedented number of participants to the game of governance as also secure their acceptance of its outcome. Open electoral competition was the dynamo to harness the energy of the political actors while political parties were to streamline this energy for purposes of creative transformation. The enlightened political elite was supposed to steer the way, keeping its gaze fixed on the larger, if distant, goals.

All this was not spelt out anywhere, at least not in the formal text of the Constitution. Looked at from a distance of fifty years it is easy to read a clear design in what must have been a mix of prudent judgements, half-examined convictions and sheer hope. The above formulation of the 'Indian model' draws heavily upon Rajni Kothari's subtle interpretation of the working of democratic politics in the first two decades of independence. Kothari insisted that the historical trajectory of Indian politics must be assessed against this 'model'. In arguing for the Indian model to be the starting point of the discussion, he had already parted company with the then dominant mode of thinking about democracy in non-western societies. Cast in a somewhat simple universal framework of modernisation , the dominant approach measured political development by the extent to which a traditional society had come to resemble the political system of the advanced societies of the West. Western democratic theory has changed considerably since then, but the check-list models of democracy which expect non-European societies to take the same route as the West still persist. To that extent, the approach implicit in Kothari's work still provides a useful starting point for any attempt to assess the experience of the last fifty years.

At least some of the designers of this Indian model were acutely conscious of the fact that they were stepping in an uncharted territory, that they were attempting something for which there was no precedent. The Indian elite had already done to the received western models of democracy what the Indian masses were to do to their own model. By selective adoption and adaptation, they had already begun creolisation of the idea of democracy, a process which was to have profound historical consequences for the real life career of this idea in India.

III

Establishment of democracy was an invitation by the Indian elite to the ordinary Indians to join them in playing a new game. It is true that the invitation must not have come as a surprise to keen observers of nationalist politics in the decades prior to independence. In opposing the British rule, the nationalist leaders drew upon the most progressive strands of modern European thinking. No wonder, democracy was an article of faith for them. Besides, the last two decades before independence were marked by intensification of popular movements that gave rise to expectations of self-rule among the lower orders of society. All this left a very narrow range of options for the Indian elite when it came to choosing the form of government. Yet those options were more than is realised now. Pakistan's choice of what in effect was a Viceregal system illustrates the options open then. The establishment of democracy in India was undoubtedly a bold invitation, for the rules and the possible consequences of this game were not entirely clear to the elite, and more importantly, they did not know the players they had invited to join very well.

The history of Indian politics since independence is the story of how the Indians accepted the invitation and discovered this new game, at first with hesitation and amusement and then with an obsessive fierceness. It is a history of what this encounter did to them and to the game itself. What happened afterwards is not difficult to anticipate. After the initial unease, the guests felt at home in this new setting and then changed the rules to suit their taste. For the first few years everyone felt guilty about demanding language to be the basis of political

reorganisation of the federal map of India, but very soon it became an indisputable principle. The invited players now turned their back to the hosts and started enjoying themselves. It was a different game now. It took a life of its own and was played for purposes substantially at variance with the textbook versions or the intentions of the original hosts. Devi Lal, the farmer leader from Haryana and the Deputy Prime Minister during 1989-90, was frank enough to admit in a press conference that he had not read the election menifesto of his party. Not that earlier everyone read the menifestos, or those who did cared about it, but two decades ago it would have been a major political scandal. That this news appeared as no more than a small diary item indicates the sea change in India's political culture. It indicated that the consequences of the game of democracy were turning out to be radically different from what anyone had intended or anticipated, throwing up a new set of opportunities and constrains for which there were no well known precedents in the history of democracy in the West.

It is a comment on the imaginative charms of the original model that Indian politics is still understood as a series of deviations from it, that every deviation is seen as a sign of decline and disorder. This tendency contributes to the predominant way of telling the story of Indian politics. It goes something like this. The first decade and a half were a golden period when a charming prince called Jawaharlal Nehru ruled this country. His rule saw economic growth, rule of law, political institutionalisation, secular policy and a far sighted foreign policy. His death in 1964 was followed by a steady and then rapid decline during the reign of his progenies, real and otherwise. The reign of his daughter, Indira Gandhi, was characterised by institutional decay, a growing authoritarian streak, intolerance towards ethnic minorities and the beginning of an aggressive and narrow foreign policy. Finally, in third phase, local chieftains and thugs took over, leading to complete chaos and continuous crises. The democratic institutions are in a mess, regional powers have gained at the expense of the national parties, sectional demands and exclusivist politics dominate the political agenda. The rise of the BJP to power and the latest series of nuclear explosions in a sense complete the story of an impending political crisis, of a dream lost.

The storyline is simple but powerful. Like all stories of its kind, it has the power to give meaning to any event, big or small, and to supply the yardstick for distinguishing normal from deviation. Like all stories, it looks at things from one vantage point and whispers a moral in our ears. Thanks to its charms and the English speaking upper caste origins of those who publically articulate ideas about Indian democracy, this narrative continues to dominate the imagination of all the political analysts, academic or otherwise. Implicit in this dominant story of Indian democracy, or for that matter in the contemporary democratic theory, is what may be called a hardware approach to democracy: democracy is above all an institutional mechanism that can be made to work properly in any setting, given the right conditions of installation.

I think the story of Indian democracy can be told differently. The challenge of understanding India at fifty requires that we tell this story differently. It requires that we treat democracy like a language or a software that cannot even begin to work without establishing a firm protocol of shared symbols with its users. If it has to have a life, democracy must exist in and through the minds of ordinary people, it must learn to work its way through the beliefs and values they happen to have. It is necessary to change our approach, for the palace-eye-

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view of politics has hidden from us for far too long the story of popular contestation of designs imposed from above, of the participatory upsurge of the lower orders of society, of the less known attempts to weave dreams of social emancipation in the language of modern democracy. It is crucial to contest the dominant story, for its moral is deeply, if subtly, anti-political.

IV

The first phase, the famous 'Congress system' of the 1950s and 1960s, was characterised by a wide gulf which separated the all-powerful westernised elite from popular beliefs. In this period the Indian National Congress, the party that led the national movement, dominated the political scene. It won all the national and practically all the state level elections in this period. India was undoubtedly a democracy, for the rulers were being elected by the people in a system of open and fair competition among different political parties. But in the realm of ideas it hardly respected the democratic principle of equal respect. 'Guided Democracy' was a euphemism used by leaders like Mohammed Ayyub of Pakistan's and Sukarno of Indonesia to describe their versions of semi-authoritarian regimes preferred by them in the post-colonial setting. That, of course did not apply to the decision making structure of Indian democracy. But in terms of ideas, Indian democracy was firmly guided in the first phase.

The democratic invitation, which meant an invitation to participate in the new spectacle of elections, was accepted by an ever growing number. The turnout jumped from 46 per cent in the first general election in 1952 to 55 per cent in the third election in 1962 and to 61 per cent in the fourth one in 1967. The new entrants had begun to defeat the English speaking inhabitants of the Indian state. The linguistic states were forced down Nehru's throat in the mid-fifties.Charan Singh, the farmer leader from Uttar Pradesh, successfully defied Nehru's proposal for Soviet-style cooperative farming.

Yet the structure of the game basically followed the rules set by the hosts. There were deviations and distortions. The inquiry against Pratap Singh Kairon, Nehru favourite chieftain in the Punjab, revealed the extent to which corruption had already been institutionalised. But on balance the game was manageable, or at least recognisable. The first Backward Class Commission recommended reservations on caste basis, but its Chairman Kaka Kalelkar bent backwards to ensure that its recommendations were not implemented. The matter could be silently buried in the parliamentary records. There was no dearth of political opposition to the Congress rule. There were the Socialists and the Communists as well as the right wing opposition parties. The Communists actually managed to come to power in 1957 [?] in the state of Kerala, the first time a Communist party anywhere in the world won a democratic mendate and the first time the central government shamelessly dismissed a legitimately elected government in a state. But in cognitive terms, barring some followers of Gandhi and the indigenous socialism advocated by Rammanohar Lohia, there was little dissent to the vision of democracy shared by India's English speaking elite.

Nehru's school-teacher-like mannerism symbolised the didactic relationship in which the political elite stood vis-à-vis the ordinary people in this first phase. If we focus on the flow of ideas, it clearly was a one-way traffic The ordinary citizens were autonomous in this realm

only to the extent to which they misunderstood, deliberately or otherwise, the ideas they received from above, a privilege lower orders of society have enjoyed throughout history. From a certain vantage point, it was a fairly satisfactory state of affairs. If you were born in the right kind of family, took care to keep away from the heat and dust of this country and took a telescopic view of things, Indian democracy could appear very much like an authentic or at least a 'developing' liberal democracy.

The insulation of democracy from popular beliefs gave it a certain breathing space, an initial settling in period for the new set of institutions. The legacy of nationalism meant that the new regime enjoyed a high level of popular legitimacy even if the people did not quite understand what they were supporting. Thanks to these favourable conditions, the modern Indian state could not only inherit the powers of the colonial state but also expand considerably the scope of its activities to cover what was regarded earlier as the private or the societal domain. Rather than be dictated by the relations of production, politics was very much in a position to fundamentally alter the property relations. In the first decade after independence, the Indian government passed a series of land reform laws all aimed at changing the pattern of land ownership. There already was, to be sure, micro-level collusion of the politically powerful with the dominant economic interests but there were very few overt, macro or structural economic limits to politics. Thus the smooth transfer of power in 1947 brought into existence something which might appear as an astonishing accomplishment in retrospect. Without much fuss it signalled the beginning of an era of the centrality of politics in the public sphere. It is amazing to see the extraordinary power modern political agencies have come to occupy in a society which was characterised by an absence of a political centre, where politics was a limited and self-limiting activity. A future historian might remember these fifty years not for the more noticeable political events but for the creation of the space on which these events took place.

Behind these appearances, however, the content had already begun to change. If one takes cognisance of what the actors thought they were doing, rather than go by an external descriptions of their behaviour, it is clear that a new and unfamiliar life was being infused in the formal structures of liberal democracy. The few field studies of local politics and the fictional accounts available through contemporary literature in the Indian languages shows sufficient proof that patron-client network and systems of reward distribution were already in place in the first decade after independence. And what is worse, most of these were based on criterion other than those liberal democracy could approve of. Competitive politics had already formed linkages with the pre-existing social divisions. Caste acquired a new salience in political mobilisation. This development, initially condemned as casteism in politics but later theorised as politicisation of caste, was to have enduring effects both on democracy and the institution of caste.

The fact that the basic building blocs of competitive politics in India are not individuals or groups based on ideas and interests but communities based on birth has been something of a scandal in the eyes of commentators, analysts and some elite practitioners of Indian politics, irrespective of their ideological preferences. It has been interpreted as the Indian corruption of the ideal of liberal democracy. This sense of shame informs the dominant story of Indian politics. It may not be out of place here to remember that this gap between the self-image and the reality of liberal democracyis not specific to India alone. A comparison, for example, with

the history of democracy in the United States in the nineteenth century bears out that this gap lies at the very heart of the practice of liberal democracy. The problem is not that the real life has failed to live up to the theoretical ideals, but that theory has failed to take into account the nuances of real life. A more sensitive theory would have noticed that this gap may have helped the growth of democracy, for its articulation through the pre-existing social divisions helped competitive politics take firm roots in the society and become something of an organic growth. A closer look at the interaction between caste and politics would have shown that the basic building bloc were never really the product of 'primordial loyalties'. Before becoming the basis of politics, units like caste or community underwent a secular process of packaging in which interest and to some extent ideology mattered as much as they did anywhere else.

The working of the famous "Congress system" in the first phase should be viewed in this context. The one party dominance system, in which both the governmental and the effective oppositional roles were performed by the differnt factions of the Congress, served as a nursury of the multi-party system. There was very little ideological polarisation, except on the very extremes of the political spectrum, as the Congress occupied a wide range of middle positions through which different interests could be articulated. At the macro level the catch-all character of the Congress ensured that its support was evenly spread across different sections of society, a feature mirrored by its major opponents. The composition of the political elite was heavily biased in favour of the upper caste, upper class and the English educated.

Occasionally the game threatened to break down, for the popular beliefs refused to be tamed on at least some questions. The questions of the 'linguistic states' proved to be one such question. The British divisions of the country into administrative sub-units did not respect the natural cultural divisions. At the time of independence the Indian rulers kept those divisions more or less intact, despite the fact that more than two decades ago, Gandhi's had already reorganised the Congress party on the principle of linguistic state. The resultant resentment formed the basis of the first organised political movement in a large number of states for redrawing the federal units on the basis of language. After initial reluctance based on the typical secular suspicion of such 'primordial' sentiments, Nehru conceded the demand by setting up a States Reorganisation Commission and accepting its recommendations in most cases. A skilful political handling routinised and thus rendered harmless the legitimate political expression of regional diversity. As already observed, popular self-identities in terms of local communities were also granted a back-door entry by all the parties through a process of politicisation of castes.

A combination of good designing, skilful execution and fortune thus ensured that the new democracy did not create alienation or face deep-seated hostility from those sections of population whose beliefs did not find much play in the system. It is true that these sections were not very active in the first phase of electoral politics. Consequently, the first two or in some cases the first three elections witnessed a relatively low level of popular participation and competitiveness. But it actually helped the structure of competitive politics to take roots and thus contributed to early institutionalisation. Electoral system, party organisations, legislatures, judiciary and the bureaucracy got a grace period where their capacities were not subjected to the strenuous test of popular democracy.

The Nehruvian phase of Indian democracy is widely seen, and rightly so, as a period of consolidation. The achievements of this phase and of Nehru in giving a long-term institutional base to democracy in a fragile moment must not be undervalued. But it must be remembered that these were made possible by a big discursive chasm between the elite and the masses. Such a reminder is necessary, for a loudly proclaimed nostalgia for Nehruvian democracy is a common refrain in Indian politics. Many a times this desire to recreate Nehru's India reflects a longing for an infinite extension of the times when politics was not spoilt by the entry of the commoners. It barely conceals a desire to save democracy from the people.

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The second phase of Indian democracy can be said to have began with the fourth general election held in the year1967. In this election the monopoly of the Congress power was broken for the first time. In an election marked by higher turnout and intense participation of the backward communities, the Congress was voted out in many state, though it managed to retain a thin majority at the centre. Congress stalwarts like Kamraj and S. K. Patil lost elections. The Congress party was not finished – its reincarnation was to win an unprecedented majority in the next election -- but the Congress system came to an end. It was also the culmination of a series of political developments – the Kamraj plan to shift some of the Congress heavyweights to organisational work, the rise of the 'syndicate' of regional bosses and the beginnings of backward class politics in the South –which brought about a qualitative change in the chemistry of power.

A weaker candidate for the beginning of the second phase is 1969, the year in which the Congress faced its first major split. The legislative wing under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi broke from the organisational wing led by many regional stalwarts. It was also the year of the beginning of the Naxalite movement, the extreme left-wing protest which was to attract a new generation of radical youth and address itself to the question of inequality of land. Alernatively, the break could be located in the year 1971 when Indira Gandhi scored a decisive electoral victory on the plank of poverty removal. It was the first of the four 'wave' elections – where one party swept through the poll with the help of massive swing of votes cutting across various states -- which changed the electoral geography of India. But none of this created the kind of world-turned-upside-down feeling that was generated by the results of the 1967 elections.

Whatever the exact cut-off point, it is clear that after about two decades of the intial phase of installation and incubation, the nature and the character of Indian democracy changed significantly. This second phase of Indian democracy is recalled in all the stories as signalling the failure of the system, as the beginning of its regrettable decline. It is at least equally plausible to read this phase as the natural outcome of the first phase of successful installation and consolidation. It marked the coming of age of Indian democracy. The infant was now taken out of the incubator and placed in the more natural if also more risky environment. Far from being a result of the failure of the system, it was a direct consequence of the extra-ordinary success of democratic politics in drawing out some new sections of the people into the political arena.

As more and more participants came to see this game as their own, they brought to bear on it their expectations, demands and beliefs. At least some of the sections hitherto excluded from centres of power thought it was about time they had a say in framing the rules of the game.The most notable group among these were the peasant-proprieters belonging to the middle castes, well below the 'twice born' castes but distinctly above the ex-untouchables. Traditionally involved in agriculture and handicrafts etc., this group of castes had lagged behind the upper castes in education and the modern public sphere. But they were the first ones to take advantage of the opening offered by democratic politics. Taking advantage of their relatively secure economic background, these castes staked their claim to political power. This phenomenon took the form of new political parties like the Bharatiya Kranti Dal [BKD] in Uttar Pradesh, Dravida Munetra Kazhagam [DMK] in Tamil Nadu and the Vishal Haryana Party in Haryana. But in most of the cases their rise was facilitated by the major parties. The Congress itself acted as the agent of mobility of the backward castes in southern states like Karnataka and Kerala, while the reluctance of the Congress in the north to play the role meant that the Socialist Parties, especially the Samyukata Socialist Party [SSP] led the entry of the backwards into mainstream politics.

This phase was marked by the beginning of an interaction between elite ideologies and popular belief systems. As political competition grew more intense, political actors were forced to pay attention to the tastes and preferences of the ordinary voters. Charan Singh blew a hole in the ideology of industrialised development by exposing the neglect of the agrarian sector in particular and rural India in general. The Socialists in the north and parties like the DMK in the south made the empowerment of backward caste their leading plank in their critique of the Congress. The Naxalites and then the youth movements in Gujarat and Bihar gave expression to the frustration of the new generation. The grace period was over and generalised pleas for hope in an incomprehensible ideological language were simply insufficient.

The first casualty of the new compulsions of the political market was the edifice of borrowed high ideologies, both of the government and the opposition. These had to be quietly and quickly replaced by home spun, or rather home made patchwork, ideologies. Mrs. Gandhi replaced the Nehruvian socialism by a more attractive if vaccuous slogan of 'Garibi hatao'. Highly visible policy initiatives like the nationalisation of all the major private banks as well as the coal industry and the abolition of the 'privy purse' of the ex-princely families accompanied the new rhetoric.The Socialist parties translated their ideology in terms of social justice to the lower castes. The Janasangh, the parent party of the present day BJP, moved towards the middle position and formally adopted 'Gandhian socialism' as its ideological self-description by the time of its reincarnation in 1980. The Communists stuck to the pure ideology but paid the price for it in terms of their political containment. The Swatantra Party, the party of the political right in the pure sense, also failed to innovate and simply disappeared.

The overall impact on the ideological map was admittedly shabby. Stitched in a haste by tailors of varying skills, the new clothes did not quite fit the customer. English speaking analysts and pure ideologues interpreted this development as the decline or demise of ideology in politics. Yet a paradigmatic change had taken place. Everyone save the diehard

ideological purists came to recognise that the clothes must fit the customer, and not the other way round. To be sure, much of the political innovation was taking place through the backdoor, in response to the 'regrettable compulsions of practical politics'. None of the innovators had the audacity to call it an innovation; usually the tendency was to dissimulate, to deny that these changes were at all significant.

The immediate result of this paradigmatic shift was the rise of populism as the dominant political ideology. The label needs to be understood carefully, for it has become a word of abuse in the commentaries on Indian politics. Populism is equated with political irresposibility, with shortsighted measures meant to appease the people without really helping them. As such it has come to be seen as pure evil and a sign of ideological corruption. Such a reading fails to understand the role of these non-standard ideological packages in the process of democratisation. Populist ideologies bridged the gap between popular aspirations and the language of high ideology without formally displacing the latter from its hegemonic position. Mrs. Gandhi's ideology of Garibi Hatao, Janata Party's redistributive policies, Charan Singh's demand for remunerative prices for agricultural products, N T Ramarao's policy of supplying cheap rice and sarees to the poor and Devi Lal's decision to waive the farmers' outstanding loans illustrate various versions of populism. Not many of these schemes proved successful and indeed the motives behind these were far from noble. Yet these 'corrupt' versions made the language of democracy accessible to the newly enfranchised and reduced the yawning gap between the theory and the practice of politics. At the same time, populist ideology did not necessarily reflect popular beliefs, let alone rework high ideology in the light of the popular aspirations and needs. At this stage it was not easy for ideas to travel bottom upwards.

Indian version of populism involved a selective appropriation of the language of socialism, which had been incorporated in the political mainstream following the official adoption in 1956 by the Congress of the "socialist pattern of society" as its goal. Socialist symbols and rhetoric served to package substantive policies which had little to do with either the pure socialist doctrine or an egalitarian agenda. If anything, mainstream politics grew less sensitive to the real needs of the people, at least those which did not lend themselves to easy aggregation. Yet, insofar as rhetoric tends to bind down the actors, the language of socialism set limits to what could be defended and legitimately argued in the political arena. First used to reap electoral harvest in 1971, populism continued to be the reigning ideology of Indian politics till the end of 1980s. Different political brands were worked out by recombining familiar elements under the socialist label.

Elections were about whose claim to offer the same menu was found more credible by a nation-wide electorate. That changed the character of elections. In the first phase, elections were about electing a representative. The sum total of these localised verdicts constituted the national verdict. Beginning with 1971, elections became something of a plebiscite. The entire country was addressed as one single audience and asked to give its verdict on one single issue. And they responded in the same spirit by voting for their MPs (Members of Parliament) as if they were directly electing the PM (Prime Minister). A regionally fragmented electorate gave way to a national electorate, whose swinging moods could cause a more or less uniform swing of votes across the country (or at least across the Hindi heartland) resulting into massive electoral waves from 1971 to 1984. It was not impossible to defeat the

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Congress, yet it continued to be the pole around which party competition was structured.

The picture at the state level looked somewhat different. The Congress was displaced from the ruling position in 1967 in most of the north Indian states. The party or, as in most cases, the coalition of parties that replaced it varied in their social base and ideological persuasion as also the duration for which they could replace the Congress. In most of the states the Congress came back to power by 1972 and its local fortunes fluctuated with the national fate of the Congress. But in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Congress was been reduced to a third force in the 1970s itself. In Bihar,the second most populous Hindi speaking state , the Congress did come back to power but never gained back the social base it lost in the late 1960s. In West Bengal it lost power to the Communist parties in 1977 and is yet to get it back. The defeat of the Congress in the 1983 state assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, its two remaining bastion in the south completed the circle. By then there was no major state of the Indian union with the sole exception of Maharashtra where the Congress had not been ousted from power at least once. The rise of regional political parties like the Assam Gana Parishad and the Telagu Desham foreshadowed the political developments of the 1990s.

If the party system in the first phase was called 'the Congress system', the second phase should be described as the Congress-Opposition system. Congress was still the only political party with a truly all-India spread. Yet it could not take electoral victories for granted. Ranged against it were a number of political parties with different ideologies and varying level of poltical support: the ever splitting and re-uniting versions of Janata family of parties mainly in the north; the right wing BJP, the reincarnation of the Jansangh, moving from its traditional base in the north to the west; the two Communist parties which were effectively contained by then to the three states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura; besides there were the regional parties.   Political competition was organised on Congress versus non-Congress lines. Occasionally all the non-Congress parties -- routinely referred to as 'the opposition' even when in power -- would come together to defeat the Congress as in 1977 asnd 1989. The system of one party dominance in the first phase had by then given way to a system of one party salience.

The Congress itself had been reinvented by Mrs Gandhi following its split. The coalition of social forces which formed its support base was also reconstituted. It retained its capacity for cross-sectional mobilisation but its support was not randomly scattered across all social groups: its core was now constituted by a rainbow coalition. It was a rainbow with thick edges: groups on the margins of society tended to vote for Congress much more than anyone else. These included *dalits*, the 15- 16 per cent ex-untouchables at the bottom of Hindu social hierarchy, the *adivasis*, the 8 per cent tribals who lived outside the pale of Hindu social order and the minorities, mainly the 12 per cent Muslims. The reinvention of the Congress and the occasional electoral success of the opposition resulted in a rapid turnover of the elite and some enduring changes in the social composition of the political elite. Leaders from non-upper caste background had their first taste of power, especially in the South and the West. Their entry in the centres of political power accelerated the process of cultural encounter set in motion by the introduction of universal adult franchise.

This first encounter of Indian democracy with popular beliefs left it at once deeper and

weaker. It helped Indian democracy take roots. Greater participation and more intense politicisation showed that the process of democratisation was still on and that the system of representative democracy had greater acceptance among the people than was imagined at the beginning of India's democratic career. Repeated, almost ritual, alteration of governments gave the people a sense of control and contributed to their sense of political efficacy. The social constituency of politics was considerably widened in the south as political power passed from the hands of the twice born to the peasant proprieters. The rise of the dominant Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the south had some impact in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and the western state of Gujarat. Tough the tide was yet to turn in these states, an inexorable process of downward percolation of power had been set in motion.

This period also showed the weakness of political institutions exemplified in the Emergency. In some ways it was a part of the larger crisis of polititcal institutions. In this phase the logic of imported liberal democratic institutions came into clash with the cultural codes embedded in the everyday practice of Indian public life. Consequently there began a process of erosion of political institutions, especially those which required functional autonomy. The emergency was by no means the necessary outcome of this erosion, but it was surely one of the possible outcomes.

June 1975 was politically the most insecure moment for an inherently insecure person like Mrs. Gandhi, the then prime minister. She used the internal emergency provisions of the Indian constitution to turn her personal crisis into a national emergency and suspended basic human and political rights of the citizens. The following nineteen months showed how fragile the institutional edifice was. Political opposition was silencenced more easily than Mrs. Gandhi may have thought. There were unmistakable elements of fascism as Mrs. Gandhi's son became an unconstitutional centre of power, leading illegal demolitions of poor localities and campaigns of forced sterlization. Civil services and the judiciary caved in even more willingly as there was considerable talk of the 'committed' bureaucracy and judiciary. The record of the press and the intelligenstia was far from heroic, notwithstanding later reconstructions. There were of course honorable exceptions in each of these categories. Yet what brought India out of that phase was not the heroism but something that must be described as the spirit of democracy. Something of that spirit continued to give Mrs. Gandhi a bad conscience and ultimately forced her to call general elections in 1977. It was the same spirit that translated into the loss of popular legitimacy of her regime at least in the north, the epicentre of authortarian excesses.

The results of the Lok Sabha elections of March 1977 were astonishing, ever for those who had hoped and worked for Mrs. Gandhi's defeat. Her party was defeated in all but 2 seats out of the 226 parliamentry seats in the north Indian 'Hindi heartland'. The first non-Congress government came to power at the centre led by the Janata Party, a hastily put together combination of all the major non-Congress parties. In a limited respect the Emergency demonstrated that Indian democracy had developed self-corrective mechanisms and could invent new anchors for itself in times of crisis.

Two decades of plebescitary politics considerably weakened the local character of democracy, giving rise to the need to articulate issues which did not and could not find expression in mainstream politics. Since the fate of the representative did not depend on what

he did or did not do, there was very little incentive to raise local demands at the centre.Besides, the organisational capacity of political parties shrunk as leaders like Mrs. Gandhi established a direct relationship with the people, sometimes consciously with a view to undermining their own party. Governance became more remote than ever. Although the governments came to power with hitherto unprecedented majorities, they soon lost popular confidence. The failure of the socialist rhetoric to deliver the goods also contributed to a deep-felt popular frustration. The gap between the people and the centres of power was filled by protest movements such as the Marxist-Leninist Naxalbari movement and the students' agitation in Gujarat and Bihar for clean public life. A large number of non party political formations and some parties with a movement character like the Janata Party in 1977 or V. P. Singh's Janata Dal in 1989 filled a crucial gap in influencing the political agenda of the mainstream at a time when it was growing insensitive to popular demands.

If this phase led to the creation of a national political community, its catch-all character also squeezed out some of the claims to power based on regional and ethnic diversity.
The insensitive handling of two such claims in the states of Assam and the Punjab led to prolonged political crises. In Assam a students movement protested against the massive illegal migration into the state which threatened their culture and livelihood. In the Punjab, a movement for part regional, part-religious charter of demands turned into nearly a civil war in response to Operation Bluestar, an attack by the armed forces on the Golden Temple, the highest religious shrine of the Sikhs in 1983. This was followed by the large-scale massacre of the minority Sikh population in 1984 in which the culprits were believed to be shielded by the central government. The rise of regional parties restored something of the voice of diversity as also the faith in the self-correcting mechanisms of democracy.

By mid 'eighties the stage was set for another political transition. However, Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and the following general election blocked the natural flow of political events and postponed the arrival of the next phase by five years. For all its problems and weaknesses, this phase established that the people could not be kept out of the democratic process.

VI

The third and the ongoing phase of democratic politics began somewhere around the turn of the decade with the almost simultaneous arrival of the three Ms on the domestic horizon and the collapse of the USSR which silently but very effectively signalled the demise of the hegemony of the language of socialism in Indian politics. The three Ms stood for Mandal, Mandir and Market. Mandal, the chairman of a governmental commission constituted in 1980 that recommended reservation of government job for the OBCs to improve their social and educational conditions, came to refer to the entire phenomenon of the assertion of the OBCs and their quest for empowerment, when the recommendations of the Commission for were suddenly implemented by the Janata Dal governmnt in 1990. Mandir, or the temple, refers to the Hindu fundamentalist movement supported by the BJP in favour of the claim that the Babari mosque situated in the holy city of Ayodhya was actually a temple of Lord Rama. The movement culminated in the demolition of the Babari mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992. The third M, Market, stands for the policy of economic liberalisation and integration into the global economic regime now controlled by the World Trade Organisation,

that was sprung on the unsuspecting Indians in 1991 by Dr Manmohan Singh, the then finance minister of a minority Congress government. After four decades of following a 'socialist' path, admittedly with rapidly diminishing enthusiasm and almost no conviction, the policy makers decided to take a U-turn without even forewarning the electors, let alone seek popular mendate on this question.

It can be argued that all these changes were not as sudden as they appear. The first two years of Rajiv Gandhi's premiership did signal some of these changes. The first two budgets – presented, ironically, by V. P. Singh – gave out the first signals of the economic 'reforms' of the 'nineties. It is also true that the strands of the three Ms were present since the first phase itself. The assertion of the OBCs began in the southern states in the 'sixties; the Hindu fundamentalist campaign agaist cow-slaughter took place in 1966; and, in 1974 the government had to reverse the decision to nationalise the wholesale trade in wheat. Yet it was only in the 'nineties that these tendencies became an all-India presence and came to dominate the political agenda.

What followed was a fundamental change in the terms of political discourse. Some of the changes in the ideology of the Communist parties, undoubtedly the purist practitioners of high ideology, illustrate the extent to which the terms of discourse had changed. Following the Mandal agitation, after decades of holding on to a doctinaire belief in class, the CPI accepted the reality of caste as a marker of social inequality in the Indian society. Both the communist parties thought it necessary to turn to progressive elements within Hindu religion to counter the BJP's position on the Mandir issue. Like all other state governments irespective of their stated ideology, the Left Front government in West Bengal also actively pursued the policy of attracting foreign investment to promote industrial growth in the state. Other parties also made quick, if silent, amends to their ideological postures. Notwithstanding its loud proclaimations about nationalist economic policy, the BJP has in practice stuck faithfully to the economic agenda of the Congress. Despite fanning agitations agaisnt it, the BJP also officially accepted the Mandal report and has since made all possible efforts to accommodate the OBC upsurge within its organisation. Belatedly, the Congress also accepted Mandal; even the all-mighty Sonia Gandhi was forced to concede to the demand of its OBC MPs on the Women's Reservation Bill. The silence and the inaction of the Congress government following the demolition of the Babari mosque also illustrated the attempt by the party to shuffle its feet from the established secular position. Within less than a decade the norms of what is an acceptable behaviour in the public arena have undergone a basic change.

These dramatic changes do not, however, rupture our story of the encounter of the language of democracy with popular imagination. The third phase takes the encounter a step further. The sudden ideological unsettling has created a context in which for the first time ideas from the lower order can leave their impress on high ideology. The removal of the token supremacy of the idea of socialism had both a liberating and a debilitating effect on democratic contestation of meanings. Some of the new set of beliefs which come into play in this phase are from the lower orders of society and articulate interests which could not be articulated under the previous ideological hegemony. This development liberated a Kanshi Ram, the supremo of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party mainly of the dalits, or a Laloo Yadav, a charismatic and controversial OBC leader from Bihar, from having to pack their sectional demands in the language of high ideology which weighed against it. It also made

possible a reconfiguration of the 'third force' to allow for a coalition of regional parties with the left, something their fundamental ideological differences would not have allowed in the past.

This does not apply to all the dimension of the ideological terrain. The New Economic Policy and its ideology of privatisation and free-trade is by no means an ideological influence from below. The price paid for the influence of the lower orders on the political discourse was the shrinking of the agenda itself. Economic policy no longer figured on the menu of political choices. Major economic decisions are now in the technical domain for the experts to settle. Something of the extraordinary autonomy that politics enjoyed since independence has alredy been eroded in the current phase .

If the second phase had turned the ordinary voter into a customer whose tastes had to be taken into account by political entrepreneurs, the third phase turns them into demanding and often discerning customers. In that sense there is, for the first time, a two-way traffic in ideas. It is not surprising that this also happens to be the period when a democratic upsurge is taking place among the hitherto disempowered sections. In this context, some of the findings of the two wide-ranging and representative national surveys of the Indian electorate conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) during the 1996 and 1998 general elections are worth noting. The surveys report a dramatic upsurge in all forms of political participation from voting to membership of political parties among *dalits*. There is a beginning of change among *adivasis* too, for their turnout recorded a sudden jump in the 1996 election, though a similar change is not evident in other activities. For women, the increase in participation has affected all the levels except voting turnout which recorded a marginal improvement in 1998. These are not meaning-less statistics. Nor is the fact that India is perhaps the only major democracy in the world where the turnout and political activism is higher among the very poor than among the upper middle class. These are nothing if not instances of participatory upsurge associated with the journey of the idea of democracy .

This radicalisation of the encounter of ideas does not by itself produce a radical agenda of politics. The erosion of the established language of high ideology and the inability to replace it with a home spun alternative has deprived political formations of the lower order of any aggregating or screening ideological devise. The beliefs brought to the centre of politics by the rise of the lower orders (especially dalits and the OBCs) are often fragmentary in character, concerned only with one section and with a single issue. Samajvadi Party [SP] and the Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD], the two political expressions of the OBC upsurge, have not been able to evolve an agenda or an identity which speaks for all the OBCs; more often than not these are seen as parties that look after the interests only of the Yadavs. No wonder the Samajvadi Party reserves its fury not for the Congress or any other party of the upper caste but for the BSP, the party of the dalits.

The BSP's slogan "*Vote hamara raj tumhara nahin chalega*" (Our vote and your rule: No More) captures the evocative power and the narrow vision of these ideologies. On the one hand it holds out the promise of liberation by asserting the democratic right to self-rule. At the same time the 'our' and 'your' in this equation are defined in strictly sectional terms. My rule in this context means no more than the rule of those born in my community. Thinly

wrapped in a language of liberal democracy, these sectional claims do not even attempt the task of ideological mediation of competing sectional claims, let alone provide an integrated vision for the polity. Although the BSP seeks to establish the rule of the *bahujan*, the majority, it has never even attempted to reconcile the claims of the dalits with other victims of the caste system, the OBCs or with other oppressed like the adivasis. What was achieved in the previous phases through mediation and accommodation within various parties is now attempted through political coalition among different parties by stapling together different ideological fragments that each brings to the process. Thus the mediation of the dalit and OBC claims takes place through the temporary and inherently fragile alliance between the BSP and the SP.

Politics in this phase represents the fuller working out of the logic of universal adult franchise. Electoral politics has now become the central arena of democratisation. It is marked by higher participation, specially in the state-level and local level elections, of the lower orders of society and their greater politicisation. The urban, upper middle classes have obviously not shared the participatory enthusiasm. While the political system continues to enjoy fairly high legitimacy, the legitimacy of the political agencies and actors has suffered a decline. If the second phase was accompanied by the first democratic upsurge, what we have seen in the last few years is best described as the second democratic upsurge.

The most noticed political development in this period is the dramatic rise of the BJP to power. Facing the first general election after its rebirth, the party had managed to send only 2 MPs to the Lok Sabha in 1984. The number had risen to 80 in the next election in 1989 as the BJP rode piggy back on the success of the newly formed Janata Dal [JD]. The break-up with JD only helped it further as the figure rose to 121 in 1991 in the wake of Mandal and Mandir. In the next election in 1996 the BJP emerged the single largest party with 160 MPs in a fractured parliament. It accepted teh presidental invitation to form the government but could not sustain the experiment beyond 13 days; the United Front [UF] formed the government which lasted 18 months with outside support from the Congress. The BJP's long wait came to an end in the 1998 mid-term poll when it raised its strength to 180 and crossed 250 with all its regional allies.

Though the BJP has come to power, it is yet to win a popular mandate. At 25 per cent of the popular votes, it is technically the second largest party, a fraction behind the Congress in this respect in the 1998 election. More importantly, it is yet to fully overcome the three barriers which have historically blocked the BJP's bid for power. It is beginning to overcome the geographical barrier, its inability to go beyond the north and the west, but much of the newly acquired vote in the south and the east is on loan from its allies like the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Biju Janata Dal [BJD] in Orissa and the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal. The ideological barrier, its isolation from the mainstream, has also been partially overcome, thanks to its allies like Samata Party and the fact that the middle position itself has shifted towards it in the last decade. The most important barrier which it still needs to cross is the social barrier, its inability to change its profile as a party of the socially privileged. The findings of the National Election Study, 1998 show that although the BJP's support has become broader than before, it is far from acquiring the kind of widespread support the Congress enjoyed in the past. The BJP continues to be the darling of the upper caste Hindus and the urban 'middle classes', though it has also succeeded in getting a substantial vote from

the OBCs. It still lags behind among the Dalits and the adivasis. Despite marginal improvement in this respect, it has not even begun to win the confidence of the Muslims.

While the BJP has made a difference to the character of Indian politics, no less significant is the effect Indian politics has had on the BJP. The competition for power between the forward and the backward castes is as intense in the BJP as in any other party. While it did succeed in carrying out its hawkish line on the nuclear test, it should be remembered that its ideological support on this question came from a position endorsed by every major political party in the last two decades. The Bomb should not draw our attention away from the fact that in framing the National Agenda for Governance, the BJP had to give up on various items of its aggressive agenda of cultural homogenisation in deference to the wishes of its regional allies. It had to give up its demand for the construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, withdrawl of the special status to Kashmir and the introduction of a Uniform Civil Code.

The BJP's rise should be viewed as a part of the larger reconfiguration of the party political space. Though it may not be correct to speak of a realigning election in the Indian context, for there was no stable alignment to begin with, the changes brought about by elections from 1989 to 1998 show many similar features. Step by step these elections have brought to an end the one-party salience. At the national level India seems to be moving towards a muli-party system. The Congress has been losing popular votes in every elecrtion since 1984 and is now just one amongst many parties. The decline of the Congress, or the move towards a post-Congress polity, is accompanied by a fresh drawing of the relationship between social cleavages and political loyalties. If the Congress dominance in the first two phases was characterised by a rainbow coalition of social communities, its decline has meant that the various slices of the rainbow are coming apart. While the Congress has held on to a shrinking but more or less evenly spread rainbow, all its major competitors are rather skewed in their social support. It is as if everyone is running away with a slice of the old rainbow. Even the Congress does not have the same social profile in all the regions of the country. Wherever it faces the BJP, the Congress is a party of the lower sections of the society. But in states like West Bengal and Kerala where it is pitted against the Communists, it is a party of the privileged. For the first time since Independence, political parties are developing macro-level identification with communities. This is accompanied by a widening of the social basis of political elites. The much-delayed transfer of political power to the OBCs has started taking place in North India.

This national picture does not tell us very much about perhaps the most salient aspect of the emerging political reality of the 1990s, namely the bifurcation of the national political arena from the arena of state politics. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the arena of state politics was often no more than a reflection of the developments at the national level. The citizens voted in the state assembly elections as if they were electing their Prime Minister. Now the logic has almost reversed. Not only is the state arena largely free of the influence of the national developments, in fact now people vote in the national election as if they are electing their Chief Minister. The emergence of state or region as the effective level of political decision making has changed the party system. While the national picture appears as if there is a multi-party system, a look at the level of state shows the effective emergence of two-party system. The emerging party system is best described as a system of multiple bi-polarities. Practically every state is moving towards a bipolar political competition, but the

pairs differ from state to state, thus creating the impression of a multi-party system.

It will take some more time before the mist surrounding the emerging picture of this latest phase of democratic politics clears up. It may take yet another election or perhaps elections for the picture to become clearer. If the current coalition woes of the BJP continue unabated, it may be forced to go for the next election very soon. But one of the trends is already fairly significant and might appear in retrospect as the defining characteristic of this phase. Compulsions of economic globalisation and sharpening of ethnic cleavages has definitely eroded the autonomy of politics. This process is most evident in the case of economic liberalisation. It is now seven years since the economic policy was given a U-turn, without any mention of such a change in the election manifesto or the campaign or any evidence of popular support for it either before or after its introduction. Since then India has seen two general elections and three new Prime Ministers. But there has been no serious political debate about these new policies. The same set of bureaucrats, all trained with the World Bank, continue to take all the important economic decisions with only cosmetic changes or occasional intervention by the political rulers. In the long run this is bound to affect the quality of democracy. As the second democratic upsurge brings the hitherto disempowered into positions of state power, they might discover that history has cheated them once again, that there is very little they can do with state power. This is perhaps the deepest irony in the story of the journey of the idea of democracy.

VII

Let me now leave this story and turn to an audit of the working of democratic politics in the last fifty years. Here one needs to distinguish between two different questions: Has India succeeded in establishing a democracy ? And, has the Indian democracy succeeded in achieving its goals ? While the first is a question about what democracy is, the second is about what democracy does, or can be expected to do.

The first question allows a more cheerful answer, if only because of the sad record of most other post-colonial polities which this question reminds us of. If one goes by the base-line definitions of procedural democracy, India is and is likely to remain in the foreseeable future a democracy. In order words, democracy has come to be the 'only game in the town'. And that, as the students of comparative democratization never forget to remind us, is no mean achievement. This is recognised across the political spectrum in India, including by the harshest critics of the system. A few years ago, when the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) came overground after years of underground violent anti-system politics and decided to contest elections, they were unwittingly paying a big compliment to Indian democracy.

To say that India is a democracy is not merely to make a statement about the formal constitutional structures of democratic governance that India has retained, and not just in name. More importantly, it is a statement about the presence of the language of democracy in India. India has, to use Shiv Vishwanathan's memorable phrase, "by-hearted" democracy: this characteristically Indian English expression captures so well how Indians have creolised the idea of democracy. They have accepted the western idea of democracy as their own and then

proceeded to take liberties with it as one does with one's own things. As a result the idea of democracy has been localised and routinised. Note, for example, the frequency with which the virtually unlimited franchise election is used in settings that do not require it: from academic council of the universities to managing committees of colleges to the chairmanship of the cooperative banks to sports selection committee. Election has come to be the principal mode of settling competing claims to power in the entire public arena. Or witness the ubiquity of protest culture, from matters significant to trivial: collective public protest is an ever present reminder of the belief in democratic rights. In its Indian version the idea has come to shape ordinary Indians' beliefs about citizenship, their political rights and virtues of political participation. It has, above all, come to supply the only valid criterion for claims to legitimate rule and correspondingly the moral basis of political obligation.

The idea is embodied in the political processes which have on balance retained a certain dynamism upto this point. The fundamental trend towards greater participation and more intense politicisation has continued to spread the idea of democracy both vertically and horizontally (except the state of Jammu & Kashmir and some parts of the North East). Competitive politics has retained its dynamic capacity to draw hitherto non-political segments, articulate cleavages and build bridges. Thanks to its capacity to connect itself to the pre-existing social cleavages and to transform them, democracy has taken roots in Indian society.

The idea of democracy also has by now powerful and reliable carriers. India has a wider catchment area for recruitment of political elite than most of the post-colonial polities. A rough estimate suggests that the number of elected political representatives at one or the other level, from national to the village level, is no less than 3 million. Consequently, there is a large contingent of political actors (at least 10 million including representatives, rivals, hopefuls and also-rans) whose instinct of self-preservation can be relied upon in defence of democracy. The logic of competitive politics has ensured that these active participants do not come only from within the traditional social elite, though they continue to enjoy a larger than proportionate share. There are a large number of parties (the number of registered political parites that contested the 1998 general election was 166), though their dynamic capacity and legitimacy has sapped somewhat over the last two decades. Party is no longer a western import; it has merged into the landscape of every village and found its way into practically every Indian language. Last but not the least, there are the movement groups, non-party political formations and various other organisations of the civil society including many NGOs that have done a lot to deepen the idea of democracy in India. They have taken up causes which do not lend themselves to easy aggregation, demands of groups which are electorally non-viable and issues which are yet to make their mark on the national political agenda. They have kept the spirit of democracy alive as and when the machinery of competitive politics has failed to nourish it.

Lest this description makes democracy look more secure a possession than it actually is, let me also recall the aspects which cause concern for the future of democracy in the procedural sense, even if there is no immediate or imminent danger of its collapse. The formal institutional apparatus of Indian democracy has never been quite strong; the institutions of liberal democracy did not quite undergo the kind of by-hearting the idea of democracy did. It is true that these are still stronger than their counterparts in other post-colonial polities; but

they are not the strongest links in the democratic chain, and the very process of democratisation is weakening these further. Claims which cannot be processed in the electoral arena have not found anything like adequate attention. The judicial apparatus never appeared like taking on the load of litigation thrust upon it. Over the years its effectiveness has gone down sharply, especially at the lower rungs where it matters to the people, notwithstanding the recent activism of the upper levels of judiciary. The civil service was always politicised, right from the colonial times. Democratisation has made it more politicised without the corresponding benefits of accountability, for the bureaucracy has still to outgrow its colonial legacy. The combined effect of both these maladies is the denial of an effective rule of law to ordinary citizens.

Intermediary political institutions which were to act as the link between the people and the centres of power have declined considerably. The near collapse of democratic procedures within political parties has left a major void which of late has been filled by managerial style politics and criminalisation. The very autonomy of the political process, which lies at the heart of India's path to democratisation, faces encroachment as a result of the instrumental linkage of political power with the dominant economic interests as also the structural limits created by the recent globalisation of Indian economy. To be sure, all these are not signs of the impending demise of democracy, as many radical democrats would have us believe. But if these trends continue to grow without adequate counter from within the political process, we could be moving slowly towards a "low intensity democracy".

VIII

As we proceed from a procedural to a more substantive definition of democracy, from a definition focused on a set of institutional inputs to one that demands a desired set of outcomes, the distinction between the two questions suggested above, between what democracy is and what democracy does, disappears. At this level it also becomes difficult to sustain a universal check list definition: democracy cannot be defined without reference to the historically specific dreams and ideals which got articulated through this label. This brings us back to the four goals implicit in the Indian model with reference to which the achievements and failures of democratic polity can be discussed.

Achievement and sustenance of procedural democracy itself partly realises the first goal of political democracy. A democracy provides disgnity and liberty by simply being there. Given the Indian model, democracy was also the key instrument, the necessary condition, for the realisation of all other goals. In that sense, taking into account the growing limitations mentioned above, Indian polity has achieved something worth defending. It has also met, at least until now in most parts of the territories which fall within its boundaries, the minimal substantive expectation from any regime, democratic or otherwise: protecting its own form and protecting its citizen from complete anarchy. The fact that India has kept at bay even a remote possibility of a military takeover, has successfully defended (at times through brutal and undemocratic means in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram in the north east) the territorial borders it inherited and that most of its citizen do not ordinarily experience complete anarchy is unlikely to enthuse a radical democrat. But it is useful to remember that democratic regimes usually collapse not because they fail to realise the higher ideals

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associated with democracy but because they cannot be relied upon to meet the bare minimum expectations.

The achievements of democracy as a set of institutions or as a regime does not, of course, satisfy the deeper ethical impulse associated with the idea of democracy. As a political ideal, democracy gives rise to the promise of a community of equals, where the ordinary citizens enjoy true liberty and are governed by none except themselves. The nationalist movement in India had translated this ideal as the goal of *swaraj*, of self-rule in a deeper sense.It would indeed make impossible demands on one's credulity to suggest that Indian democracy has come anywhere close to meeting this ideal. Perhaps no democracy has, but this constitutes a poor consolation to those who accepted the ideal for its ethical appeal. Ever since the famous 'tryst with destiny' speech on the midnight of the 14-15 August 1998, the promise of a community of equals has been a false promise. What has come about as a result of the working of democracy is neither a community nor equality. The political community, or rather politicised social communities, it brings into existence are no communities, for their shared life is shallow, if not perverse. The liberty it offers, at least formally, is distributed in extremely unequal measure. The power it brings to the People as an abstraction is rarely, if at all, exercised by the real people. And there are still many people -- full citizens of the republic of India -- who feel as powerless under this democracy as they did under the British rule.

The performance of Indian democracy in achieving national integration has left a lot to be desired, but as the examples from India's neighbours show, we could have done worse. There are areas (Kashmir and hill states in the North-East) and periods(Mrs Gandhi's second regime, for example) which constitute an exception, but on balance the Indian elite has stuck to the "salad bowl" rather than the "melting pot" model of integration of diversities. That is to say, various communities and aspiring nationalities have not been forced to give up their identity as a pre-condition of joining the Indian entreprise. They have been accepted as distinct and different ingredient in the Indian mix of multi-culturalism. And, again on balance, it has worked: legitimate political articulation of social and regional diversities and the mediation of competing claims through mechanisms of political accommodation has achieved what consociational arrangements for power sharing among different social groups do in other societies. There have been more than one instances of majoritarian excess (the anti-Sikh riots in 1984 and the Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, to take two instances from recent history), but democratic politics seems to have evolved mechanisms of self-correction in this respect (the 1997 elections in Punjab and the politics of UP since 1992 could illustrate that). In retrospect, effective political accommodation of visible diversities might look like one of the outstanding achievements of Indian democracy in the last fifty years.

But by its very nature, it is an inherently fragile achievement, ever contingent on the skills of the political actors in working out the power sharing arrangements or in allowing the mechanisms of self-correction to work themselves out. This is a lesson well worth remembering as India confronts the most organised challenge to the politics of diversities in the form of the BJP government at the centre. The most serious challenge to the survival of diversities comes from forces which are less organised, less visible and may not even be considered political in the ordinary sense: forces of cultural homogenisation, the monoculture

of modernity and the ideology of nation-state. While there is something to be said for the capacity of democratic politics to deal with the more obvious and political challenges to diversity, it has proved a very weak ally in the struggle against these deeper threats from within.

The promise of social revolution which the democratic invitation always contained has been realised only in parts and in fragments. It is not that democratic politics left the society unaffected. In fact, these fifty years may be recorded in the history of Indian society as years of fundamental transformation triggered above all by the mechanism of competitive politics. At least in one respect it did bring about something of a revolution: the role of ritual Hindu hierarchy as a predictor of secular power diminished dramatically over the last fifty years. While it is a fundamental change, it does not in itself guarantee equality. On balance, unsurprisingly, the functioning of democratic politics has contributed more to a vigorous circulation of elite and to expanding the circle itself than to the establishment of social equality. Its contribution to social equality is mainly by way of politicisation of castes and communities, which then struggle in the secular domain for equality of self-respect.

Since gender divide does not lend itself to easy aggregation on party political lines, competitive politics has failed to bring about the kind of change in this aspect that it has on caste inequality. The representation of women in the parliament and the state assemblies has stagnated at abysmally low level of 8 and 4 per cent respectively over the last fifty years. The national movement may not have had a greater proportion of women's participation but it did ensure that women had a stronger voice in public life. If women's question gets talked about much more in the political arena than their presence in legislatures or voice in political parties would warrant, the principle reason is the politics of ideas to which the growing women's movement has contributed a great deal. Consequently, India has had fairly 'progressive' legislation on gender justice including the provision for reservation of one-third seats in the election of local democratic bodies. A resolute opposition to a similar bill for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies shows the lack of political will that underlines the symbolic progressivism on the women's question.

The single biggest failure of democratic politics lies in the non-fulfilment of the promise of material well being. Far from ensuring a life of equal and reasonable comfort for everyone, it has not succeeded even in providing the minimum needs of the people, or in removing the worst indignities or the ugliest disparities in the material conditions of life enjoyed by its citizens. It is true that the conditions of life for most of the people have not deteriorated substantially, that India did achieve some reduction in the proportion of the poor in its population, that the Indian economy is not caught in the impossible spiral of inflation or in a debt-trap. That is perhaps an achievement, at least in comparative perspective. It is also true that a majority of the population feels that its economic condition has improved in the recent past and an overwhelming majority thinks that their children have better opportunities in life than they did. But there is a significant minority – mainly artisan communities and scheduled tribes – that disagrees and has experienced an overall deterioration in the quality of their life. For others too, there has been a visible decline in some of the crucial resources like the availability of public health and the quality of public education.

Democratic politics only provided a formal mechanism for conversion of the potential

majority of poor into a political majority which then take charge of the state power to redistribute the material resources and to augment them in such a way as to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged. The functioning of democracy by itself does nothing to ensure that the mechanism is actually used to this end. The other conditions, that of the availability of political agency which can transform the potential majority into political majority (class in itself to class for itself) by winning their political trust has proved to be highly contingent. The Indian model expected politics to provide three crucial elements to what was then called economic development: politics was to provide the blueprint for economic development; it was to give the political will to implement the design in the face of structures of economic interests and it was to create a popular support for egalitarian politics. In practice, it succeeded in providing only the third component and that too partially. The most recent phase of globalisation and liberalisation marks a decisive retreat from whatever remained of politics of egalitarianism. Not only is there no effective political will to do something, but there is very little by way of a coherent intellectual design as to what needs to be done in the first place. This combination of political amnesia and cognitive paralysis poses the most important challenge to the ethical impulse underlying the Indian enterprise today.

IX

Let me round off this story by asking a general question implicit in it: what happens when the idea of democracy travels downwards? Fifty years ago no one felt it necessary to ask this question. Fifty years ago the decision to establish democracy in a poor, unequal, post-colonial society did not look as courageous as it does now in retrospect. The spirit of the time helped everyone overlook the fact that no other society had successfully taken this path before. Nor has anyone done so since then. India failed to remove poverty or inequality or shake off the cultural burden of colonialism, yet it succeeded in remaining a democracy. Fifty years ago hardly anyone had thought about this possibility, of democracy being the lone survivor in the family of ideals we set out with. Neither the historians nor the political theorists of democracy had prepared us for this possibility, nor have they done so ever since.

There was another reason for not thinking about this question. The founding fathers of our democracy, the original hosts to this game, entertained the illusion that the democratic idea will remain intact as it travels downwards. Indian model assumed a pure diffusion of ideas; it was assumed that the grafted institutions and ideas of western democracy would percolate down in their pure form to the masses. The model was unspoilt by the suspicion that the recipients of these ideas were themselves thinking minds, that they could transform the received ideas just as the elite had done to the doctrines of liberalism. What this model did not have, to use the recent vocabulary of social science, was a theory of reception. This was a crucial lacunae, for the success of democracy depended in large measure on recreating the democratic dream in popular imagination, in anchoring the universal ideal in the specifically Indian context. Some of the founding fathers may have entertained a different kind of illusion: that the idea of democracy will be automatically transformed by the people when it travels downwards. In this romantic version the people make democracy speak their language and devise the system best suited to their needs.

The experience of the last five decades confirms neither of these versions. The journey of the idea of democracy in India not only changed the lives of the millions it touched, it also

changed the idea of democracy itself in ways more than one. Call it creolisation or vernacularisation of democracy, this transformation is at the heart of whatever success democracy has achieved in India. Serious attempt to marry the democratic idea to the popular beliefs, to develop shared protocols with the pre-existing language of the people, is what has distinguished India from other countries where the democratic enterprise never took off. And that is also what can continue to maintain this distinction in future.

Creolisation by itself is no magic remedy. Indigenisation of democracy is a necessary condition of the working out of this idea, but is not a sufficient condition. A large historical process like this one follows no one's script. It does not therefore produce neat outcomes. It leaves gaps, it produces contradictions. And there is no hidden hand at work here which might straighten every wrinkle. There is, in other words, no short cut to creating and sustaining the language of radical democracy except weaving every strand and tying every thread.