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## India: the next superpower?: democracy

### Report

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# > Democracy

Mukulika Banerjee

**As India is hailed as the next superpower, do its political credentials stand up to scrutiny? Is its record on governance and development up to the challenge of its newfound reputation? India has been a democracy for over six decades. In this time it has achieved some remarkable successes but also failed in significant ways. While economic growth has been rapid over recent decades, this has not translated into greater welfare for the majority of the Indian population. Despite being severely critical of its politicians, the electorate however remains enthusiastic in its political participation, especially at elections.**

In 1947, when India gained her independence from colonial rule, the choice of parliamentary democracy and a universal franchise for such a poor, vast and largely illiterate nation was considered foolhardy by many observers, at home and abroad. Nevertheless the first general election was held with great rigour, enthusiasm and success in 1952. In the meantime, a Constitution reflecting the political and ideological goals of the new nation had been adopted. It was authored by the Constituent Assembly made up of 299 members who represented the enormous class, religious and linguistic diversity of India's population and who after much debate and deliberation set out the framework for India's future as a republic and parliamentary democracy. Enshrined within it were the principles of the separation of powers, a universal Indian citizen with constitutional rights, equality before the law, the separation of civil and military powers, and the necessity for political competition. The press remains as free as any in the world and contributes to a lively and highly contested public sphere. So according to the democratic checklist of institutional arrangements, India's democratic system is in a reasonable shape.

## CIVIL SOCIETY

But what of India's record on democratic ideas more broadly: the participation of citizens, rule of law, and the responsibility of the state in ensuring basic freedoms, material security and education? It is evident that India's heterodox policy of a mixed economy of planned economic development and liberalization has put it at the high table of emergent powers in the world, but the positive effects of this are yet to reach the majority of Indians, in particular the poorest citizens. Many of those in power have severely abused their position, transgressing trust and probity, as scandals of corruption, bribes and kickbacks are revealed daily. While some of this corruption is widely regarded as inevitable transactional costs, the more serious consequences have been felt by what has been called an 'economy of influence', namely the nexus of corporations, politicians and the press who have colluded to bolster entrenched interests and weaken institutions. This has been acutely felt, for instance, in the state's policy on India's natural resources, which has consistently ignored the rights of indigenous populations whose lands contain these resources in deference to corporate interests who seek to exploit them commercially. This neglect, on the back of an abysmal human development record among the same populations, has led to violent insurgency movements in some districts, whose ideologues disavow the democratic state and its institutions. The state in turn has not held back in its violent suppression of these movements.

Elsewhere too, India's civil society remains vigorous as ecological, feminist, religious and justice-based social movements continually challenge the status quo. The national body politic has developed a vast repertoire of protest and persuasion, drawn on the techniques developed during the anti-colonial struggles and those from the twenty-first century, to bring pressure on governments to be responsive to popular demands. These movements at once utilize and challenge the freedoms and liberties afforded by democracy.

## **VOTER TURNOUT**

At the heart of India's democratic system have been the regular elections that now see the participation of over a hundred political parties and the largest electorate in the world (now c.715 million – larger than all the potential voters in North America, Europe and Australia combined). Recent voter turnout rates in India have been comparable to other major democracies (about 60 percent) but are still trending upwards, unlike in the older democracies where rates are generally falling amid growing voter apathy. Even more surprisingly, the most enthusiastic voters in Indian elections are not the well-educated urban middle classes but those who are the poorest, most discriminated against, and least educated, mainly living in villages and small towns. Turnout rates at elections in these areas can be well over 80 percent. Further, the more local the election, the higher the turnout, again bucking global trends. Contrary to what many predicted in 1947, poverty and illiteracy have not hampered the functioning of Indian democracy.

Why do large parts of the country's electorate cast their votes enthusiastically (and support a democratic mode of government over any other), despite the sustained failure of the Indian state to improve the living standards of its poorest citizens? Is it because the poor are ignorant and don't know what they are doing? Are they gullible and vulnerable to vote buying and empty campaign promises? Or to bullying and violence? These are important questions and recent ethnographic research carried out nationally can help us gain some understanding.

## **THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA**

One important factor in the faith that people have in elections is the performance of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Set up in 1950 to manage and conduct elections, unlike many of its counterparts in other democracies, the ECI is a genuinely autonomous and constitutional body, which through its sixty-year-old life has evolved into a responsive and efficient public body. Only the Supreme Court of India shares this level of popular respect. The voting process, the successful adoption of electronic voting machines, the maintenance of electoral registers, the security provided to voters and political actors, and the standards of probity among the two million election officials who conduct the elections have all emerged as enviably efficient features in a country where much else goes wrong. During elections, the Election Commission is given wide-ranging powers to create greater transparency and accountability, and politicians and governments are governed by the strict rules of a Model Code of Conduct imposed by the ECI. So, the Indian electorate trusts the Election Commission of India and the elections it runs. But when questioned about the politicians that those elections empower, the popular responses were a lot more critical.

## **POLITICIANS**

Indian politicians' behaviour and public standing have seen a long steady decline compared to the cohort of educated, idealistic and conscientious politicians who brokered national independence and authored the constitution. Political parties are increasingly dominated by kin and nepotistic networks and have blocked the rise of new talent, and in too many cases the sins of greed and avarice appear to have displaced any desire to serve the public good. The Indian National Congress continues to be dominated by members of the family of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The Communist Parties of India, which stand fragmented but are still important forces in several regions, have seen their leadership replaced by less ideological and more opportunistic leaders who are reluctant to admit the young or women into senior ranks. The large national party the BJP and its allies have had their own share of leadership crises, divided by varying generational styles and different degrees of right wing ideology.

## POLITICAL STYLES

However, in the last couple of decades the political landscape has been shaken up by the emergence of lower caste parties that have made their challenge to the long standing social and political hegemony of the upper caste parties the cornerstone of their political activity. While not yet fully national parties, they now dominate important regions (each of which is the size of a European country). At the same time, their national importance has grown due to the greater incidence of coalition governments in Delhi, where their support has been crucial. These newer parties have also brought a new style to democratic politics. Often commanding the loyalty of millions who place their faith in leaders who are 'one of them', the leaders of these parties have successfully challenged the patrician and insulated worlds of traditional politicians. Importantly, in at least three significant parties, these leaders are women and are currently the Chief Ministers of the populous states of Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Though their backgrounds differ, they are each single women who personally command the loyalty of millions. More generally, the leaders of the newly emergent parties are no longer ashamed of not being able to speak fluent English (which still remains the coveted hallmark of being elite and educated in India) as these mass politicians seek to represent their constituencies of lower caste, illiterate and poor voters in literal terms. Their dress, their language, their gestures and their agendas are distinctively more populist and in tune with their supporters. There has thus been a huge proliferation of political styles and personalities on the stage of Indian democracy of late.

## PARLIAMENT

These redefined political styles play out in the Indian Parliament, which has emerged as an arena for loud, gestural statements alongside debate and deliberation. In recent years, it has become routine for Parliamentary proceedings to be frequently disrupted by members aiming to capture the attention of a hungry media that relishes the transgression of parliamentary norms. In turn, the airtime gained by politicians has proved to be an invaluable tool to reach out to their mass followings.

The role of the Member of Parliament has become less that of legislator and more that of extractor of State resources for their constituencies, as a result of which personal corruption has seen unprecedented levels. But Parliament also remains a place where the great questions of unity and diversity, freedom and equality discussed at independence continue to be vigorously contested and updated by interest groups, determined variously by political ideology, religion and caste. As a result, 115 amendments of the Constitution have been passed by the national parliament to accommodate the changing realities of the political landscape. New states have been created (now 28 in total) and other changes made to improve the workings of democracy at the grass roots. Perhaps the most significant of these amendments was the 73<sup>rd</sup>, which made statutory provision for Panchayat Raj as a third level of elected administration in villages, below the national and state levels. As a result, representative democracy could now operate at the local level and help empower new actors to take on the responsibility of governance.

## CITIZENSHIP

Ordinary citizens on the other hand, who turnout in large numbers at elections, see the role that politicians play in Parliament and elsewhere as only one aspect of India's democracy. While they are clear eyed about the venality of politicians, they point to the importance of their *own* role in the success of the workings of the democratic system. They emphasize that it is their individual vote that adds to the final result and it is *their* choice of candidates that determines the nature of government.

'The vote is our weapon' is a statement that is often used to explain this sense of empowerment. A majority of the electorate believes in the efficacy of multi-party democracy and regularly held elections, because it is through these institutions that governments can be forced to respond to popular pressures and punished for a bad performance. The examples of incumbent governments losing power after one term (a frequent occurrence in India) or of governments being rewarded with re-election were proof of this. 'Without us, the system is nothing' was how voters put it to emphasize the role of the ordinary voter.

Indian democracy can thus be described as made up of two spheres of politics - the 'demonic' (politicians and high politics) and the 'demotic' (the electorate), with the electorate seeing its own politics as the purer in intention and action. Demotic politics is based on hope of a better future, the need for participatory citizenship and a sense of duty, and a celebration of universal franchise. And it is for these reasons that Indians across the country emphasize the importance of exercising this right assiduously, if only to remind those in power of their ultimate dependence on their votes.

Further, the right to vote is also seen as a foundational right of each citizen that makes possible the demand for other basic rights – to food, education and security. Thus Indian voters see their electoral participation as fundamental to their other engagements with the state, and their presence on the voting list a rare official acknowledgement of their existence. People thus frequently use the word 'duty' while describing the importance of voting and engaging with the system. A typical formulation states: 'it is my right to vote and it is my duty to exercise this right. If I don't discharge this duty, it is meaningless to have this right'. Further, there is a shared sense that it is important for each individual to exercise this right, rather than defer the responsibility to others.

But popular understandings of democracy also recognize that while elections are a necessary element of democracy, they are not a sufficient condition. To this end, the act of voting is seen to be the necessary first step in putting forward future demands and holding democratically elected governments to account. But political participation in non-electoral spaces is considered equally important, if more difficult to achieve. This understanding lies at the heart of a popular notion of participatory citizenship in the Indian electorate.

## **ELECTIONS**

Elections in India are a big festival and it is at this time that the two political domains of the demonic/demotic that remain largely separate for the most part are forced to collide and confront each other. It is during election campaigns that the politicians have to account for their neglect of their constituencies and beg a second chance. During long and exhausting election campaigns in large and diverse constituencies (the size of a parliamentary constituency in India is almost twenty times that of one in the UK) the laundered clothes of rich politicians are sullied by dusty road journeys, their arrogant heads have to be bent entering modest huts of the poor, and their hands have to be folded in a plea for votes. It is no wonder that elections in India have a carnival air as people delight in this leveling effect of campaigns, as the ordinary voter suddenly becomes the object of attention of the powerful.

But the voter also feels some pressure to play her own role in making the correct choice, which is always open to the influence of a caste group, kin or community. At the most fundamental level, there is tremendous pressure to not waste a vote. One of the ways in which this pressure is created is by a simple procedure carried out by the ECI. In any Indian election, each voter has their left index finger marked by a short vertical line in indelible black ink just before they approach the electronic voting machine. While this procedure is carried out to ward off repeat voting, it has also had the unintended consequence of making it impossible to lie about *whether* one had voted. It therefore generates tremendous peer pressure among people to go and take the trouble to vote, for not to do so causes the discomfort of constant questions and suspicions about one's motivations for abstaining. The importance of not losing face in front of others, whether they are kin or party workers, is thus an important motivation for voting and results in high turnout rates.

A further motivation for voting is the actual visceral experience of doing so. The culture of a polling station fosters an order, disciplined queues, respect for the ordinary person of whatever social background, efficiency of process and trust in the system – all of which can be a rare in Indian public life. In addition, at a polling station, the only relevant identity of a person is his Electoral Photo Identity Card that records

nothing apart from the most basic information. As people arrive to vote, they have to queue in the order in which they arrive and no preferences are made on the basis of wealth, status or any other social marker. For those who are routinely discriminated against on the basis of caste, colour, class and religion in everyday life, this extraordinary glimpse of egalitarianism is valued. Further, people often pointed out that the knowledge that each vote is of equal to any other heightens its importance even more. By turning up to vote, by queuing patiently at polling stations, by punishing arrogance and complacency in their choice of leader, they thereby consider themselves as participating in the most basic act of democracy that enshrines political equality and popular sovereignty.

## **CONCLUSION**

India's record on democracy can thus be fairly summarized as reasonably consistent. Her institutions have been mostly robust though they have also increasingly come under threat by personal greed and the collusion of powerful actors who seek to undermine the principles and robustness of these institutions. Yet, at the same time, in the wider society, ideas about democratic participation, the role of the electorate and the importance of a shared duty of citizenship are also vigorously articulated. In the end, it will be the challenges posed by this latter democratic politics of hope, mobilization, participation and justice that will need to overcome the demonic world of greed and power.

India's experiments of democracy have taught the world a number of lessons: the successful workings of coalition governments, the unpredictability of voter behavior, the importance of an autonomous and responsive electoral commission, and above all the possibility of political sophistication among the poorest people. It remains to be seen whether India can redistribute the fruits of its economic growth to the wider society and thereby serve as a unique model among the rising powers of combining economic democracy with a robust political one. ■