
INDIAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY SINCE INDEPENDENCE

EVENTS, PROCESSES AND IDEOLOGY



Bidyut Chakrabarty

Indian Politics and Society since Independence

This book focuses on politics and society in India. It explores new areas enmeshed in the complex social, economic and political processes in the country. Linking structural characteristics with broader sociological context, the book emphasizes the strong influence of sociological issues on politics, such as the shaping of the social milieu and the articulation of the political in day-to-day events. Political events are connected with the ever-changing social, economic and political processes in order to provide an analytical framework to explain 'peculiarities' of Indian politics. The main argument of the book is that three major ideological influences have provided the foundational values of Indian politics: colonialism, nationalism and democracy. The colonial, nationalist and democratic articulation of the political have shaped Indian politics in a complex way. Structured thematically, with a multitude of pedagogical features, this work is a useful text for students of political science, sociology and South Asian Studies.

Bidyut Chakrabarty is Professor of the Department of Political Science at the University of Delhi. His main research areas are public administration and modern Indian political thought. He has published extensively on the subjects, and is the author of *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932–47* (Routledge, 2004), *Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi, 1933–1943* (Routledge, 2006), *Forging Power: Coalition Politics in India* (Oxford University Press, 2006), *Re-inventing Public Administration: The Indian Experience* (Orient Longman, 2007) and *Mahatma Gandhi: A Historical Biography* (Roli Books, 2007).

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**Dedicated to Tutun, Barbie, Pablo and my friend-
philosopher-guide, Dipakda.**

Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Map</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1 Setting the scene: partition and after	17
<i>Partition of the subcontinent</i>	18
<i>Political economy of India as a nation-state</i>	19
<i>Planning for development: a panacea or failure?</i>	21
<i>Changing economic horizon</i>	24
<i>Public administration in India</i>	26
<i>Governance and the Fifth Pay Commission, 1997</i>	30
<i>Public administration in a network society</i>	32
<i>Concluding observations</i>	34
2 Shaping Indian politics: the language of identity	36
<i>Conceptualizing identity</i>	37
<i>The perspective</i>	39
<i>Communal identity and the historical context</i>	43
<i>Consolidating an identity</i>	47
<i>Other considerations for identity</i>	49
<i>Concluding observations</i>	51
3 Indian democracy: liberalism in its reinvented form	54
<i>Democracy and its articulation</i>	55
<i>Electoral dynamics</i>	57
<i>Rajiv Gandhi's entry into politics: old pattern survived</i>	60

	<i>Plebiscitary democracy: political outcome</i>	61
	<i>The Mandal recommendations</i>	64
	<i>Mandal II: reservation for social justice or appropriation by the creamy layer?</i>	67
	<i>The Mandal II arguments</i>	68
	<i>Assessment</i>	70
	<i>The changing political parties</i>	72
	<i>Ethnification of party</i>	74
	<i>Hindutva as an electoral agenda</i>	78
	<i>Decline of the majoritarian ideology</i>	81
	<i>Concluding observations</i>	82
4	Parliamentary federalism: redefining the Westminster model	84
	<i>Demystifying the Indian polity</i>	85
	<i>Some theoretical inputs</i>	86
	<i>Nature of the Indian Union: the constitutional inputs</i>	88
	<i>Parliament in India</i>	90
	<i>The role of Rajya Sabha: a think tank or the states' voice?</i>	93
	<i>Federalism in India</i>	95
	<i>The federal arrangement: its evolution</i>	97
	<i>The Congress system</i>	99
	<i>Parliamentary federalism and the basic structure of the Constitution</i>	102
	<i>Concluding observations</i>	105
5	The chaotic 1960s: decade of experiments and turmoil	110
	<i>The Congress decline and crystallization of a new wave</i>	113
	<i>Coalition in West Bengal</i>	113
	<i>Coalition in Uttar Pradesh</i>	116
	<i>Coalition in Madhya Pradesh</i>	120
	<i>The Haryana experiment</i>	121
	<i>Coalition experiment in Kerala</i>	123
	<i>The possible outcomes</i>	127
	<i>Concluding observations</i>	130
6	The Left Front and the 2006 assembly elections in West Bengal: Marxism reinvented	132
	<i>Conceptual points</i>	133
	<i>The context of the poll</i>	135
	<i>The poll outcome</i>	137
	<i>The possible explanation</i>	138
	<i>The Brand Buddha in rural Bengal</i>	138

<i>The Brand Buddha in urban Bengal</i>	141
<i>The election machinery</i>	143
<i>The fragmented opposition</i>	144
<i>Concluding observations</i>	149
7 Coalition politics in India: cultural synergy or political expediency?	153
<i>Historical roots</i>	153
<i>Institutional roots of coalition politics in India</i>	155
<i>Coming together syndrome in Indian politics</i>	158
<i>Stable pan-Indian coalitions: trends and patterns</i>	159
<i>Concluding observations</i>	167
Conclusion	170
<i>Growing democratization</i>	171
<i>Secularism</i>	172
<i>Gender as a critical component</i>	174
<i>Growing importance of political institutions</i>	176
<i>Adulthood of Indian states or decline of umbrella parties?</i>	179
<i>Glossary</i>	182
<i>Annotated bibliography</i>	185
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	236

Tables

2.1	The reservation scheme provided in the Communal Government Order of 1927	38
3.1	Poll outcome of the UP assembly elections in 2007 and 2002	75
5.1	Election results in Uttar Pradesh	117
5.2	Representation of the various constituents in the Charan Singh ministry and their ratio in the SVD (%)	118
5.3	Election results in Kerala, 1982–2001	126
6.1	Seats and percentage share of votes in West Bengal assembly elections, 1996–2006	137
6.2	The 2006 West Bengal assembly election results (in contrast with the 2001 outcome)	138
6.3	Share of the Left Front votes in the panchayats and zila parishads	139
6.4	Left Front candidates elected unopposed	139
6.5	Election committee for assembly segment	144
6.6	2006 assembly election in West Bengal; index of opposition unity	146
6.7	Electoral performance of Trinamul Congress, 2006	148
7.1	Lok Sabha elections, 1989–2004: poll results for six national elections	166

Preface

This book is an outcome of my sustained interaction, over the years, with colleagues, analysts and friends who are equally keen to unravel the dynamics of Indian politics. The idea of writing a book on Indian politics dawned in our regular evening meetings at the Beavers' Retreat of the London School of Economics. I fondly remember Professor W. H. Morris Jones, Professor Tom Nossiter, Professor Meghnad Desai and Dr David Taylor for having kindled and also sustained my interest in the subject. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, which are very useful for revising the manuscript in the form of the present book. As this book is intended for general readers I have tried, as far as possible, to leave nothing unexplained.

Portions of this book were presented in various seminars and workshops around the globe. I am thankful to the participants who made perceptive comments that helped to sharpen some of the major arguments in the book. The book has developed over the course of several years and some of my earlier essays foreshadowed some of the points that I pursued in it. I owe a great deal to Mr Dipak Bhattacharya, who always remained a constant source of inspiration. It would not have been possible for me to concentrate on my academic pursuits without the support that Mr Bhattacharya extended whenever I asked for it. I also put on record my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Mohit Bhattacharya, who helped me understand the intricate processes that are at work in Indian politics. By being very supportive in a very chilly winter in Hamburg, Professor Tatiana Oranskaia, Dr Ramprasad Bhatt and Dr Barbara Schuler never allowed me to feel homesick. My colleagues in the Asien–Afrika Institut of the University of Hamburg provided all facilities, including a well-equipped office that was a very useful aid to my academic pursuits. I am thankful to Mr Sunil Sharma for his critical inputs in comprehending the changing nature of 'grassroots politics' in the context of the rise of the socio-economically peripheral sections of Indian society. I appreciate Mr Gopinath of Routledge India for his help. I shall be failing in my duties if I do not mention the contribution of the editors of Routledge London in publishing my three books in a row. I am indebted to my graduate students for their critical role in making this work seem worthwhile.

Without the support of my family, my wife and two most inquisitive children,

Pablo and Barbie, it would not have been possible to write on such a complex theme as Indian politics. By dedicating this book to them, I have just put on record my endorsement of their contribution, which, I know, can never be gauged. Despite her severe illness, my mother always encouraged me to venture out into the 'unknown', which both inspired and gave me confidence to undertake projects on a variety of themes. Tinku and Mini sustain my zeal for creativity by being supportive and their daughters, Mitul and Rimpi, always make my visits to Calcutta worthwhile. I also fondly remember my students around the globe who contributed to my academic sharpness by being perhaps the staunchest critics of whatever I had presented before them. Without their inputs, the book would not have been the same.

Bidyut Chakrabarty
Hamburg, Germany
January 2008

Abbreviations

ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad
AGP	Assom Gana Parishad
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham
AICC	All India Congress Committee
ARC	Administrative Reforms Commission
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh
BLD	Bharatiya Lok Dal
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
<i>CAD</i>	<i>Constituent Assembly Debates</i>
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist and Leninist)
CWC	Congress Working Committee
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazagham
FDI	foreign direct investment
FERA	Foreign Exchange Regulation Act
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries
FPTP	first past the post
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	gross domestic product
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
ICS	Indian civil service
INC	Indian National Congress
IPR	Industrial Policy Resolution
IPS	Indian Police Service
JD(U)	Janata Dal (United)
JP	Jayaprakash Narayan
KHAM	acronym for a combination involving Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims
LF	Left Front
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazagham

xiv *Abbreviations*

MISA	Maintenance of Internal Security Act
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MNC	Multinational corporations
MP	Member of Parliament
MRTTP Act	Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practices Act
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NDC	National Development Council
NF	National Front
NRI	non-resident Indian
OBC	other backward classes/other backward castes
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PMK	Pattali Makkal Katchi
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
POTA	Prevention of Terrorist Act
POTO	Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance
PR	proportional representation
PSUs	public sector units
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal
RLD	Rashtriya Lok Dal
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SAD	Shiromani Akali Dal
SC	scheduled castes
SJM	Swadeshi Jagaran Manch
SJP	Samajwadi Janata Party
SP	Samajwadi Party
ST	scheduled tribe
TADA	Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act
TDP	Telegu Desam Party
TMC	Tamil Manila Congress
TMC	Trinamul Congress
TNC	Tamil National Congress
UF	United Front
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
WBIDC	West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation
WEBEL	West Bengal Electronic Corporation
WTO	World Trade Organization



Introduction

I

India's freedom struggle culminated in the transfer of power in 1947. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 ratified the change. A new era dawned and Jawaharlal Nehru captured that historic moment in his famous 'tryst with destiny' speech which runs as follows:

Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes out rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.

The future [of India] is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we might fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest man of our generation [Mahatma Gandhi] has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us but as long as there are tears and suffering, our work will not be over.¹

India became a free nation in 1947 through what is known as 'the transfer of power'. Yet a great deal of what we see in independent India can be attributed to 'legacies' of one kind or another. Was independent India a break with the past or in continuity? Did India, as Nehru claimed, 'step out of the old to the new'? These are the questions that baffle historians given the clear continuities in terms of not only institutions of governance, but also the values that inform these institutions. Was the change that India saw following decolonization merely cosmetic then? There is also the argument that the influences of almost 200 years of colonialism seem to have been entrenched in India's society, economy and polity simply because of its long duration. Hence it was almost impossible for those who presided over India's destiny at the early phases of her nationhood to completely do away with

2 Introduction

the prevalent system of governance, so critical for the British Raj. Besides the system of governance, political liberalism of the British variety remained a significant ideological force even after the withdrawal of colonial administration on 15 August 1947. Although 'a new age', as Nehru enthusiastically characterized it, had arrived when 'the soul of a nation . . . finds utterance', the language had hardly changed simply because of its articulation in the classical liberal mould. Those who remained outside the Congress fold did not approve of continuing the colonial system of governance, but Nehru and his colleagues had perhaps no alternative but to accept the colonial administration, which successfully dealt with the communal violence that broke out in Bengal and Punjab following the declaration of independence by the British. It was perhaps the only option available to the nationalists, at a critical juncture of India's history when the administration that the British left was useful for the new ruling authority in India. So it was an ideological choice that the nationalists exercised perhaps on account of the exigencies of the circumstances, which more or less ruled out the search for alternatives. The year of 1947 cannot therefore be seen as 'marking a total disjuncture between the colonial and post-colonial'. What governed the nationalist choice for instruments of colonial administration were perhaps the unique circumstances of communal riots in which these instruments of power became useful to Indian rulers who had hardly any experience of managing the state.² Given the well-entrenched administrative legacy of the British Raj, the post-colonial state in India is hardly a break with its immediate past.

Three major ideological influences seem to have been critical in Indian politics: colonialism, nationalism and democracy. The colonial, nationalist and democratic articulation of 'the political' remains therefore crucial in comprehending Indian politics even after decolonization. Two points need to be kept in mind. First, although colonialism and nationalism are surely antagonistic to each other there is no doubt that the former provoked circumstances in which nationalism emerged as a powerful ideology to articulate the voices of the colonized. Second, colonialism also led to a slow process of democratization by gradually involving people who were favourably disposed towards the alien administration. The colonial state had permitted some measures of representation to carefully selected Indian interests. But it had also ensured that 'the state had always operated at a level removed from the society which it governed'. Appropriating 'the executive privilege' for itself, the colonial state appeared to 'stand outside the realm of and therefore free to be arbiter over, social conflict and political competition [and its relationship with the subject] continued to be conducted in the language of supplication and concession, grants and demands, charters and petition, grievances and repression'.³ The British were admittedly influenced by their own 'theories of liberalism and self-government'. Through a mixture of motives that included 'self interests and ideological commitments', the colonial government introduced principles of representation, appropriate for its rule, into the colonial legislature.⁴ The British imperial attitudes in India seem to be 'highly ambiguous' resulting from their efforts to negotiate their liberal regard for self rule as the best form of government and their vested interests in being imperial masters.⁵

Modelled on the British North America Act, 1867, which established the Canadian federation, the 1935 Government of India Act is certainly a powerful constitutional intervention that the colonial rulers seriously made to accommodate the nationalist zeal within, of course, the colonial administrative format. This is also illustrative of efforts at legitimizing the growing democratic aspirations of the ruled in India through a constitutional intervention. Interestingly, the 1935 Act remained the strongest influence during the making of the 1950 Constitution for free India. Some 250 clauses of the present Constitution were, in fact, lifted from the Government of India Act. Although the political system of independent India draws its sustenance from universal adult franchise and political sovereignty, the governing rules are undoubtedly derived from its colonial past. The most striking provisions that the Constitution of India derived from its 1935 counterpart are the 'emergency provisions' that enable the President to suspend democratically elected governments and fundamental rights of the citizens. Furthermore, colonial provisions for 'preventive detention' of the so-called 'politically subversive individuals' remain in force in independent India in different forms. The infamous 1972 Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) of the early 1980s and Prevention of Terrorist Act (POTA) in recent times are some of the examples that draw on the colonial and authoritarian legislation of the colonial past. Nonetheless, the 1935 Government of India Act is undoubtedly a very significant concession that the colonial government was forced to make to the rising tide of nationalism and democratization.

There is no doubt that the post-colonial state in India inherited its habits of governance from colonial practices. And its *weltanschauung* (world view) is based on 'the mixed legacies of colonial rule' that also upheld rule of law, bureaucracy, citizenship, parasitic landlords, modern political institutions and 'two-track tradition' of protest and participation.⁶ What accounts for relative stability for colonialism in India was certainly its ability to adapt to the changed socio-political circumstances and also gradual but steady 'internalization' of domination by the subjects of colonial rule, which led Ashis Nandy to characterize colonialism as 'an intimate enemy' because the dominated saw 'the virtues of being dominated' for their own betterment.⁷ Colonialism was not seen as an absolute evil. For the subjects, as Nandy argues,

it was a product of one's own emasculation and defeat in legitimate power politics. For the rulers, colonial exploitation was an incidental and regrettable by-product of a philosophy of life that was in harmony with superior forms of political and economic organization. This was the consensus that rulers of India sought, consciously or unconsciously . . . [while] the subjects collaborated on a long-term basis [because] they seemed to have accepted the ideology of the system, either as players or as counter-players. This is the only way they could preserve a minimum of self-esteem in a situation of unavoidable injustice.⁸

4 Introduction

Colonialism drew on such a cultural consensus, which was further strengthened by evolving mechanisms to defuse threats and also nationalist ire as and when it required. For instance, when the British model of unitary governance proved relatively ineffective for a diverse country like India, the colonial rulers began introducing by degrees doses of ‘decentralization’ and ‘federalism’, from the 1920s, in which the 1935 Government of India Act was the most significant institutional step.⁹ Although the colonial state was hardly federal in its classical sense, the federal arrangement that the Act stipulated seemed to have provided critical inputs to the founding fathers when they deliberated on federalism in the Constituent Assembly.

These selective examples are illustrative of the argument underlining the critical importance of the three ideological forces of colonialism, nationalism and democratization in charting out a distinctive path for India. The argument that this book seeks to make draws on the dialectical interaction between colonialism, nationalism and democratization over a historical time leading to India’s independence and its aftermath. Hence, it is intended neither to suggest that political freedom from colonial rule wrought no changes to Indian polity nor to argue that post-colonial India is just a continuation of her colonial past. Major political institutions, despite their clear colonial roots, have undergone dramatic metamorphoses in independent India. A careful look at the evolution of institutions in India clearly shows that they evolved creatively to adjust to the changing circumstances. The Westminster model of parliamentary democracy that India adopted was not a clone, for instance, but was responsive to the situation-specific ethos and the existent socio-cultural milieu. Similarly, there is no more persuasive example of ‘deepening of democracy’ than the 1977 and 2004 national polls, which were announced by the incumbent ruling authority, allegedly not favourably disposed towards ‘democratic values and procedures’. In other words, the holding of the 1977 elections – called by Indira Gandhi, who had proven dictatorial tendencies – and of the 2004 elections – called by the BJP, who did not exactly appreciate democratic procedures – were both testimony to ‘the deep roots that democracy had struck in the soil of India’.¹⁰ Furthermore, the changing socio-economic profile of the legislative assemblies and national parliament is also indicative of a trend toward a genuinely inclusive democracy. Given the growing politicization of the peripheral sections of society, the elite-centric governance is fading away with the consolidation of people-centric governance. The change of political authority at regular intervals through elections is an eloquent testimony to the depth of the democratic processes, which are not merely articulated in periodic elections.¹¹ The introduction of adult suffrage transformed India’s politics beyond recognition. Democracy is, therefore, no longer confined to electoral participation of the voters; it is also articulated in the ‘everyday struggle’ in which people are involved while exercising their rights as citizens.

There is however a note of caution. Colonialism contributed to nationalism, but not to a nation-state in India, for a variety of reasons connected with India’s socio-cultural diversity. Post-colonial India was therefore hardly a nation-state, but rather a state-nation, simply because the institutions of governance, very much part of

British legacy, were already in place when the 1947 transfer of power took place. The nationalist leaders, except M. A. Jinnah, deliberately avoided the nationalist language that could be devastating in view of the absence of cultural and moral unity in India that characterized the rise of nations in the west. The nation, as a conscious political articulation, hardly figured in the political discourse of the day. Indian nationalism was not based on a shared language, religion or ethnic identity. Perhaps the presence of a common enemy, namely, British colonialism, 'united men and women from different parts of the subcontinent in a common and shared endeavour'.¹² A nation was consolidated, but followed a completely different path that was not at all derivative of the European sources. The nation that India is does not privilege a single language or a religious faith. Although the majority of its citizens are Hindus, India is not a 'Hindu Pakistan'. Its constitution does not discriminate between people on the basis of faith, nor did the nationalist movement that resulted in decolonization. Although the joy of freedom was marred by partition on the basis of religious chasm between Hindus and Muslims, the failure to avoid the division made Gandhi's political successors determined to construct independent India as a secular republic.

India can thus never be a nation in its catholic sense, though the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition is illustrative of attempts to unite Hindus on the basis of a nationalist criterion, namely religion. The fact that the political forces that spearheaded the campaign for Hindu consolidation remain peripheral in contemporary India is also suggestive of the weaknesses of a clear nationalist ideology. The relative decline of the nationalist ideology is perhaps matched by the rise of the 'regionalists', who seemed to have gained enormously with the growing involvement of the people in the political processes. Bringing people from India's periphery in terms of religion, elite caste status, or geographic distance from the centre, the regionalists have, in the context of coalition politics, redefined not only the contour of Indian politics, but also its vocabulary. In consequence, the terms of political discourse in contemporary India no longer resonate the values of the erstwhile Congress era, but are the outcome of the processes of 'deepening' of democracy. Articulating the voice of the regions, the regionalists seem to have erected a platform for an effective dialogue between the centre and periphery. It is thanks to these regionalists that the emerging multi-party democracy of India 'is not merely an anomic battle for power and short-term gain, but releasing a pent-up creativity and visions that provide a fertile and a cohesive backdrop to the realignment of social forces'.¹³ The history of independent India is thus testimony to a creative articulation of democracy that is neither ethno-centric nor exactly imitative of the western experiences, but *sui generis*.

II

The making of free India's constitution by the Constituent Assembly over a period of little more than three years is reflective of the efforts that the founding fathers undertook to translate the nationalist and democratic aspirations of an independent polity following decolonization. Furthermore, although the Constitution is a

6 Introduction

continuity at least in structural and procedural terms, it was also a clear break with the past, since the 1950 Constitution drew on an ideology that sought to establish a liberal democratic polity following the withdrawal of colonialism. There can be no greater evidence of the commitment to constitutionalism and rule of law on the part of the founding fathers than the Constitution that they framed despite serious difficulties due to partition. The commitment to liberal democratic values, as the Constituent Assembly proceedings suggest, remained paramount in the making of the Constitution. For instance, though the constitution-makers valorized the idea of popular sovereignty, they redefined it and adopted the liberal representative principle to create 'a Nehruvian statist political order'. Popular sovereignty was thus defined in the Habermasian proceduralized sense, in which 'popular opinion and will formation in informal and voluntary public spheres could seek to influence the channels of legitimate law-making'.¹⁴

Set up as a result of negotiations between the nationalist leaders and the members of the Cabinet Mission over the possible constitutional arrangement in post-war India, the Constituent Assembly began its deliberations on 9 December 1946 and concluded with the passage of the Constitution on 24 January 1950. This period, slightly over three years, was one in which the joy of freedom was severely marred by national trauma, associated with the partition and violence, that resulted in the killing of Mahatma, besides the butchering of innocent people in the wake of the transfer of population in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of freedom. The Indian Constitution was born, argues Paul Brass, 'more in fear and trepidation than in hope and inspiration'.¹⁵ There is hardly a strong argument to dispute this proposition because of the context in which the Constituent Assembly began and concluded its proceedings. The Constitution was thus a pragmatic response to the reality that the Assembly confronted while drawing the roadmap for free India. The founding fathers practised, as has been appropriately suggested, 'the art of the possible and never allowed [their ideological cause] to blind them to reality'.¹⁶

Although they appreciated India's pluralistic social texture, there was a near unanimity among the Assembly members for a strong state.¹⁷ Even those who were critical of the emergency provisions also defended a centralized state to contain tendencies threatening the integrity of the country. Emergency provisions in the Constitution were justified because 'disorder' or 'mis-governance' endangers India's existence as 'a territorial state'. Such concerns could only have reflected, argues Paul Brass, 'another kind of continuity' between the new governing elite and the former British rulers, namely 'an attitude of distrust' of the ordinary politicians of the country and 'a lack of faith' in the ability of the newly enfranchised population to check 'the misdeeds' of their elected rulers.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the fear of 'disorder' was probably the most critical factor in favour of the arguments for a centralized state despite its clear incompatibility with the cherished ideal of the nationalist leaders for a federal state. B. R. Ambedkar's contradictory stances on federalism, for instance, thus may appear whimsical independent of the circumstances. In 1939, Ambedkar was clearly in favour of a federal form of government for its political viability in socio-culturally diverse India.¹⁹ By 1946,

he provided a radically different view by saying that ‘I like a strong united Centre, much stronger than the Centre we had created under the Government of India Act of 1935’.²⁰ While presenting the final report of the Union Powers Committee, Jawaharlal Nehru also argued in favour of a strong state by stating that:

[w]e are unanimously of the view that it would be injurious to the interest of the country to provide for a weak central authority which would be incapable of ensuring peace, of coordinating vital matters of common concern and of speaking effectively for the whole country in the international sphere.²¹

As is evident, federalism did not appear to be an appropriate structural form of governance in the light of the perceived threats to the existence of the young Indian nation. Hence the constitution-makers recommended a strong centre because the constitutional design of a country is meant to serve ‘the normative-functional requirements of governance’. The constitution was to reflect ‘an ideology of governance’ regardless of whether it articulated the highly cherished ideals of the freedom struggle that a majority of the Assembly members had nurtured while participating in the struggle. As G. L. Mehta believed, ‘we have to build up the system on the conditions of our country [and] not on any abstract theories’.²² Along the same lines, Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar argued that ‘our constitutional design is relative to the peculiar conditions obtaining here, according to the peculiar exigencies of our country [and] not according to a prior or theoretical considerations’.²³ In the making of the constitution for governance, they were guided more by their views on statecraft, which would surely have been different without the traumatic experience preceding the inauguration of the Constitution in 1950. Hence one can safely suggest that ‘hard-headed pragmatism and not abstract governmental theories’ was what guided ‘the architects of our Constitution’.²⁴

Yet it was not the entire Assembly that wrote the document. It was clearly the hard work ‘of the government wing of the Congress, and not the mass party’ and the brunt of the task fell upon ‘the Canning Lane Group’, so named because ‘they lived while attending Assembly sessions on Canning Lane’.²⁵ There is another dimension of the functioning of the Assembly that is also instructive. According to Granville Austin, Indian’s constitutional structure is perhaps ‘a good example’ of decision-making by consensus and accommodation, which he defends by examining the debates on various provisions of the Constitution.²⁶ Scholars, however, differ because, given the Congress hegemony in the Assembly, views held by the non-Congress members were usually bulldozed. As S. K. Chaube argued, at least on two major issues – political minorities and language – both these principles were conveniently sacrificed. As regards political minority, there was no consensus and the solution to the language problem was, as Austin himself admits, ‘a half-hearted compromise’.²⁷ By dubbing the Assembly ‘a packed house’, the diminished Muslim League expressed the feeling of being alienated from the house. Even Ambedkar underlined the reduced importance of the Assembly since on a number of occasions, as he admitted, ‘they had to go to another place to obtain a decision and come to the Assembly’.²⁸

Decision by consensus may not be an apt description of the processes of deliberation. But, as the proceedings show, there was near unanimity on most occasions and divisions of opinion among the Congress Party members, who constituted a majority, were sorted out politically. As Ambedkar admits, '[t]he possibility of chaos was reduced to nil by the existence of the Congress Party inside the Assembly which brought into its proceedings a sense of order and discipline. . . . The Party is therefore entitled to all the credit for the smooth sailing of the Draft Constitution in the Assembly'.²⁹ As Shiva Rao informs us, on a number of controversial issues, efforts were made to eliminate or at least to minimize differences through informal meetings of the Congress Party's representatives in the Constituent Assembly.³⁰ If the informal discussion failed to resolve the differences, 'the Assembly leadership . . . exercised its authority formally by the Party Whip'.³¹ It is evident that in the Constituent Assembly no attempt was made to force a decision, the accent being on unanimity presumably because 'the leaders were alive to the fact that the constitution adopted on the principle of majority vote would not last long'.³² It was not therefore surprising that Rajendra Prasad, the president of the Constituent Assembly, preferred to postpone debate and allow them to work out agreed solutions rather than take a vote that might, as he apprehended, result 'in something not wanted by anybody'.³³

Two important points emerge out of the preceding discussions. First, the making of the Indian Constitution was a difficult exercise not only because of the historical context but also on account of the peculiar social texture of the Indian reality that had to be translated in the Constitution. The collective mind in the Assembly was defensive as a consequence of the rising tide of violence taking innocent lives immediately after partition. Second, the founding fathers seem to have been obsessed with their own notion of integrated national life. The aim of the Constitution was to provide 'an appropriate ordering framework' for India. As Rajendra Prasad equivocally declared on the floor of the Assembly, '[p]ersonally I do not attach any importance to the label which may be attached to it – whether you call it a Federal Constitution or a Unitary Constitution or by any other name. It makes no difference so long as the Constitution serves our purpose'.³⁴ On the whole, a unitary mind produced 'an essentially unitary constitution doused with a sprinkling of permissive power for a highly supervised level of constituent units'.³⁵

III

The national polls in 1999 and 2004 are a watershed in India's recent political history for at least two reasons. First, these elections have ushered in an era of coalition in India that can hardly be reversed because of radical socio-economic changes at the grassroots due to 'deepening' of democracy. There is hardly a stable vote bank for any party involved in elections. Parties win or lose not because of the ideology they represent but because of their electoral strategy to muster support at the time of elections. Second, the 2004 election was also a new era for a voter's calculations of his/her pay-off by deciding strategically at a time when

mobilization based on caste or ethnic identities did not seem to be as critical as it was before. The three Ms of the 1990s – Mandal, Mandir and Market – hardly remained effective in garnering votes. Hindutva, for or against, had lost its appeal and the incumbent ruling party, BJP, had to draw on the ‘India shining’ campaign, which failed to sway the voters. Political parties thus tell ‘a story of gradual withdrawal from linkages of one’s performance and capabilities’.³⁶ Local issues – be it electricity, roads or water – became critical in deciding the poll outcomes in a large number of constituencies. This also suggests that ‘the issue of governance’ – primarily performance – is what mattered most in voter’s calculations.

The 2004 national election seems to be a continuation of the pattern that the 1999 election confirmed, namely coalitions of parties as the only option for government formation on account of the fractured poll verdict. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to suggest that the coalition era had begun in 1999 because the experiment, though ephemeral in duration, was conducted earlier in India. Although in 1967 coalition governments were formed in as many as nine Indian states – Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala – the first national experiment of coalition government was articulated in 1977 when the Janata Party captured power at the Union level. The Janata experiment of 1977–79 is a class by itself for at least two fundamental reasons. First, this was the first attempt at forming a coalition government at the national level.³⁷ The non-Congress catch-all coalition governments that came into being in 1967 were merely state-level experiments with no obvious impact on the union government. In a way, regionalization of Indian politics was inevitable when the politically pervasive Congress system appeared to have lost its all-India appeal. Second, although at a different level, the Janata government was a continuation in the sense that not only did it draw upon anti-Congress sentiments, but it also brought within its fold parties with diverse ideological beliefs on the basis of certain common socio-economic and political goals. The importance of the 1975–77 Emergency cannot be glossed over in uniting parties and political forces against the Indira Gandhi-led Congress (I) immediately in the aftermath of the 1977 election. With the Janata coalition at the centre, the state-level parties rub shoulders with national issues as members of the union government and national-level parties get the feel of the polity of the state and still lower levels.

The Emergency was an assault not only on the Constitution but also on the liberal democratic practices that had evolved with the Constitution since independence. Seeking to gag the democratic processes, the authoritarian state created an opportunity for the opposition parties to unite irrespective of ideology against the party in power. The 1975–77 Emergency was thus a watershed in India’s post-colonial history not only because it led to circumstances for the emergence and consolidation of coalition politics but also because it strengthened the processes of democratization by provoking spontaneous movements challenging the authoritarian rule. It was easier for various political groups to mobilize massive support for their cause because of the participation of the people, mainly in urban centres, in movements against the suspension of fundamental rights and privileges to which a citizen in a democratic polity had access.