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Introduction

THE THREE AGES OF INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEMOCRACIES has long since determined that this type of regime warrants qualification.[1] While liberal democracy remains an ideal form, many "hybrids" that blend this archetype with other political genres have long existed, giving rise to such notions as "people's democracies," "guided democracies," "illiberal democracies," or even "authoritarian democracies."[2] India, even though it claims to be "the world's largest democracy" due to the number of voters it regularly calls to the polls, is not immune to this trend and has always been a "democracy with adjectives." However, the adjectives have changed over the years, with the country going from a "conservative democracy" to experiencing a "democratization of democracy" and today inventing a variant of "ethnic democracy."

The form of democracy framed by the Constitution of 1950 in the 1950s and 1960s, and even the 1970s, can be described as conservative, despite the socialist rhetoric of its leaders, both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Nehru, who governed from independence in 1947 to his death in 1964, never managed to emancipate his party, the Indian National Congress (also known simply as "Congress"), from notables who were attached to their privileges and traditions. While he no doubt drew inspiration from ideologies he deemed "progressive" (an adjective his heirs still use today) to set up the Planning Commission and launch a

program of nationalization (however moderate) that asserted the state's role in the economy, when it came time to contest elections, the prime minister resigned himself to relying on local leaders and regional heavyweights, the only ones capable of handing him a victory owing to their patronage networks. These were based not only on classic economic motives (landholdings for large landowners, financial clout for the business community) but also on status, as all of these notables belonged to upper castes. This strategy of clientelism enabled Congress to win the elections in 1952, 1957, and 1962, but it forced the party in power to endorse conservative notables who in no way shared Nehru's socialist ideology, preventing him from carrying out the land reform that was one of the pillars of his election campaigns.[3]

Under Nehru, positive discrimination remained limited. To be sure, the Scheduled Castes (SCs)—a euphemism to which the ex-untouchables prefer the term *Dalits* (the oppressed)—continued to benefit from quotas introduced by the British in the public sector, universities, and elected assemblies. However, when non-Dalit lower castes—mostly known as Shudra in the traditional caste system—asked to benefit from positive discrimination as well, they hit a brick wall, despite the fact that their offspring often had no other prospect than going to work in the fields. In 1953, when the government appointed a commission to examine the condition of a social category that had been laid down in the Constitution as Other Backward Classes (OBCs), it concluded that this category in fact corresponded to the bulk of the Shudras and that caste, in their case, was the most decisive factor of social backwardness. To combat this backwardness, the commission recommended instituting quotas modeled after those in place for the Scheduled Castes. But, arguing that caste should not be institutionalized, the Nehru government rejected the report. The aim was to prevent further quotas from contributing to the rise of castes much more likely than Dalits to oust from power the upper castes who dominated the Congress Party.[4]

The fate of Indira Gandhi's progressive discourse was to some extent similar to her father's. After winning the 1971 elections on a populist platform of highly ambitious social promises—hadn't she sworn to

eradicate poverty?—Indira admitted that in light of the clientelist structure of Congress, she could not win elections without the support of local notables who were as reluctant as ever toward any reform that went against their interests. Backed into a corner by the opposition and the judiciary, she suspended democracy between 1975 and 1977, declaring the Emergency—during which, no longer needing local notable support since elections had been postponed sine die, she took the liberty of redistributing a little more land. But the Emergency was almost as socially conservative as it was politically authoritarian.[5] The opposition, which came together to bring down Mrs. Gandhi's government, was more keen on helping the OBCs and appointed the Second Backward Classes Commission to this end. But the ruling coalition proved to be extremely disparate, and early elections, held in 1980, restored Indira Gandhi to office. She then refrained from pursuing a true social agenda, instead promoting a growth strategy with the backing of the private sector, a policy that her son Rajiv would pursue on succeeding her in 1984.

The democratization of Indian democracy did not come about until the late 1980s when Rajiv Gandhi was beaten by a coalition of opposition parties in many respects similar to the one that had triumphed over his mother in 1977. These two assemblages of heterogeneous forces had one essential characteristic in common: they were determined to do away with the hegemony exercised by the upper castes, those who stood to gain the most from the conservative democracy. The expression "upper castes" here refers not only to the three highest castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas) but also the dominant castes. These castes, which belong technically to the Shudras, were very powerful in demographic terms and in economic terms, as they included many farmers who, especially since the Green Revolution in the 1960s, were in a position to sell off a surplus.

While Congress was ruled by representatives of these upper castes, the Janata Party, in power from 1977 to 1980, and the Janata Dal, which ruled from 1989 and 1991, were more representative of the lower castes, especially the OBCs. In 1978, the Janata government had, as mentioned above, appointed another Backward Classes Commission, named after

its chairman, B. P. Mandal. This commission was tasked with looking into the living conditions of OBCs and recommending avenues and means by which to improve them. The Mandal Commission concluded that the situation of the OBCs was dire enough—due to their poor access to landownership as tenant farmers or landless peasants and their poor education—that a program of positive discrimination needed to be designed for them. The commission recommended a 27 percent reservation for them in the civil service, in addition to the 15 percent and 7 percent in favor of the SCs and the Scheduled Tribes (STs), respectively. The project was shelved as soon as Congress was voted back in office in 1980, but the Janata Dal tabled it again, and Prime Minister V. P. Singh implemented it in 1990.[6] The upper castes instantly mobilized and even took to the streets to prevent a reform that would curb their public-sector job opportunities—which remained the most valuable ones before the 1991 economic liberalization. Their resistance aroused indignation among the lower castes, which formed a common front to challenge the old clientelist rationale. Now many OBCs stopped voting for upper-caste notables and instead sent representatives from their own social milieu to parliament. Thus, long kept on the margins of power, the uneducated, usually rural masses became a force to be reckoned with in the political arena. In the Lok Sabha (People's Assembly), the lower house of parliament, the proportion of OBC members of parliament (MPs) from the Hindi belt[7]—the most important battlefield, representing 45 percent of the Lok Sabha seats—doubled, reaching more than 20 percent, thanks to the Janata Dal and its regional offshoots. The Janata Dal fell apart in the early 1990s, but that did not affect the dynamics of democratization that it had set in motion. First, all parties, including Congress, now resigned themselves to fielding a number of OBC candidates, being unable to rely on former clientelist mechanisms: as OBCs made up over half of the population, the new "OBC vote" could not be ignored. Second, new public policies designed to defend the interests of lower castes were implemented not only by the parties representing them but also by Congress, which, when it returned to power in 2004, set a quota of 27 percent for OBCs in public universities—again provoking the ire of the upper castes.

This phase in the democratization of Indian democracy to the detriment of the former elites, which I have described as a "silent revolution,"[8] first resulted in a relative retreat of upper-caste, middle-class voters from the democratic arena—as evident from the low turnout of this category in the late 1990s through the early 2000s.[9] It then brought on a counterrevolution—a sequence of action/reaction that has been observed elsewhere in recent decades, as Michael Walzer has shown.[10] The Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP—Indian People's Party), became the vanguard of this revenge of the elite—an Indian-style conservative revolution. This backlash took the path of an ideology dating back to the 1920s, Hindutva, the history of which will be overviewed in the first chapter and which at the turn of the twenty-first century had the advantage of transcending caste identities in the name of Hindu unity and its defense against Islam, increasingly perceived as a threat. But the backlash was not yet strong enough to do more than conquer a few states (in the 1990s) or win more than a relative majority and thus to form coalition governments (as in the years 1998–2004). The BJP was not truly in a position to govern on its own until 2014, when it interlaced Hindutva with populism, an alchemy achieved by Narendra Modi, a man his supporters viewed as providential, whose ascension in his home state of Gujarat in the first decade of the 2000s and then to head of state in 2014 will be traced in chapter 2.

The BJP victory in 2014 (chapter 3) ushered in a new era for India. This third age of Indian democracy marked the rise of populist politics, as promises made to the poor during election campaigns did not translate into policies (chapter 4). This stage also meets the criteria for two other "democracies with adjectives": "ethnic democracy" and "electoral democracy." The second part of this book will focus on the former aspect. The Indian variant of ethnic democracy—a notion that came to the social sciences out of the Israeli melting pot of the "Jewish state," as will be seen—is both informed by the promotion of a Hindu definition of the nation in opposition to the secularism enshrined in the 1950 Constitution and defended by its "progressive" champions (intellectuals, NGOs, etc.) (chapter 5) and by its opposition to the Christian and (more especially) Muslim minorities, the main victims of the rise of

vigilante-group violence (chapter 6). These groups have played a key role in the making of a de facto majoritarian Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). The third part of the book argues that the Modi government has promoted a new form of authoritarianism: the government has weakened the institutions of the state (chapter 8), distorted the electoral process (chapter 9), and targeted minorities in a more official and direct way than the vigilante groups (chapter 10), making Muslims second-class citizens (chapter 11). India is, therefore, transitioning from a de facto Hindu Rashtra to an authoritarian Hindu Raj (Hindu nation-state).

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