

Mark Twain

Delhi and democracy: a challenge for India

Elections can reveal India at its best but they also obscure deep-rooted problems



A busy junction in Delhi, India © Panos

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Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi, by Rana Dasgupta,
Canongate, RRP£25, 512 pages

Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy, by Ashutosh Varshney,
Penguin, RRP\$599 / RRP\$20, 432 pages

Remapping India: New States and their Political Origins, by Louise Tillin,
Hurst, RRP£20 / OUP USA RRP\$40, 288 pages

Mark Twain, who visited India in 1896, admired the country as the cradle of civilisation but did not think it could ever become a plausible nation – let alone a democracy. “If there had been but one India and one language – but there were eighty of them!” he marvelled. “Where there are eighty nations and several hundred governments, fighting and quarrelling must be the common business of life; unity of purpose and policy are impossible.” John Strachey, a British colonial official writing a decade earlier, was equally dismissive of the chances of uniting Punjabis, Bengalis, Tamils and others: “You might with as much reason and probability look forward to a time when a single nation will have taken the place of the various nations of Europe.”

Twain and Strachey are both quoted in Ashutosh Varshney’s *Battles Half Won*, a collection of essays published in time for the next scheduled event in the world’s largest democracy: the 2014 general election to be held by May, in which up to 800 million Indians will be eligible to vote. Varshney, a US-based political scientist, concedes that Indian democracy is a “baffling phenomenon”. This is not just a matter of the country’s size and diversity. India differs from western democracies in other ways, too, having adopted a universal franchise long before its industrial revolution was complete. For decades after the first general election in 1951-52, most voters were illiterate and desperately poor; many still are.

The explanation given by Varshney for India’s unexpected success as a democracy is persuasive. He points to the fact that multiple ethnic, linguistic, social and religious identities are dispersed around the country; without a large group of people of similar backgrounds and beliefs in one place, the tendency is to compromise rather than fight. Historical exceptions in the cases of Kashmiri Muslims and Punjabi Sikhs only prove the point. In India, writes Varshney, “No political party can come to power without putting together multi-religious, multi-caste, multilingual coalitions. Barring entirely unpredictable shocks to the system, a rightwing takeover of Indian politics is inconceivable.”

That last point is particularly important in 2014, when secular liberals and the left, not to mention Muslims, fear that Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party will oust the Congress party in the election and fulfil his ambition to become prime minister. Although Modi's reputation is tainted by the slaughter of hundreds of Muslims in the Gujarat riots of 2002 just after he became the state's chief minister, his economic record is now widely admired by Indians weary of the [corruption](#) and incompetence of Congress over the past decade. But the BJP will probably not win a straight majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament. Like other BJP and Congress leaders before him, Modi would, therefore, have to build a coalition with the help of regional parties unlikely to share his core beliefs.

The rise of Modi – the charismatic son of a chai-wallah challenging Rahul Gandhi and the secular, leftist legacy of the Nehru dynasty – is only the most obvious example of how Indian democracy constantly reinvents itself. Another is the [Aam Aadmi \(Common Man\) party](#) of Arvind Kejriwal, a former tax inspector whose strong anti-corruption rhetoric won enough votes in Delhi's state elections in December to allow him to form a shortlived government. Kejriwal's party could win urban seats elsewhere in India in the coming general election.

There has been structural change, too. As the political scientist Louise Tillin explains in her academic study *Remapping India*, new states in the union have been formed on several occasions since independence for political, cultural and economic reasons with surprisingly little long-term upheaval – even if the current carving out of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh to make India's 29th state has prompted scuffles and even the use of pepper spray in the national parliament by an angry Andhra politician.

Tillin's book is a reminder of how the lower and middle castes have increasingly shaped Indian politics, and of how important the states and state elections have become within the union – a trend illustrated by the current national government's decision in 2012 to give individual states the right to opt out when it reluctantly opened the door to foreign investment by big retailers such as Walmart, Carrefour and Tesco. So important are the states for the lower-caste politics in which the majority of Indians engage, writes Tillin, that since 1989 “national election results have been best read as the amalgamation of multiple state-level contests”.

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At election time, then, Indian democracy looks lively and robust. This year's [general election](#) will be the 16th, and the Election Commission is consistently rated as one of the most unbiased and efficient institutions in the country.

What happens between elections, by contrast, is a matter of growing anxiety for those who care about the future of India. The charge list is long. Governments are incompetent. Politicians, officials and police officers are corrupt. Big businessmen are corrupt. Small businessmen are corrupt. Murder, rape, theft, environmental destruction, drug abuse, hypocrisy and cruelty are rife. All this we can learn from *Capital*, Rana Dasgupta's first work of non-fiction, in which the horrors and delights of Delhi are described by a cast of mostly anonymous observers who do not mince their words about the city whose wealth and political importance has sucked them in from all corners of India and beyond.

"Now our city is about aggression, rage, inequality, corruption and personal gain. It's about consumerism and shopping malls," is the mournful conclusion of Sadia Dehlvi, one of the few people in the book whose real name is used, and whose Muslim family has lived in Delhi since Mughal times. "We have no beauty to leave to our children."

Dasgupta, known for his novels *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005) and *Solo* (2009), mostly lets his subjects speak for themselves. The authorial bits in between are uneven, ranging from achingly beautiful descriptive writing through laugh-out-loud observations of Delhi traffic to some rather ponderous economic analysis. But the interviews at the core of the book are a cleverly tangential way to investigate a city that is among the world's largest – about 22m people live in and around Delhi – and has been made a microcosm of India by the hundreds of thousands who arrive each year as migrants.

As we read of Delhi's frantic modernisation – from, among others, an outsourcing entrepreneur, a gay fashion designer, a property speculator, assorted tycoons and the victims of medical scams that extract cash from the relatives of the dying – we trace Dasgupta's personal journey from excited arrival in 2000 to disillusionment. At first he sees the tolerant side of a globalised metropolis: "This ability of the Third-World city to embrace utter unintelligibility within its own population, to say not, 'Let me understand you so I may live alongside you,' but 'I will live alongside you without condition, for I will never understand you'."

But then people start telling him things. They speak of “Punjabi culture”, once mystical, Sufi and detached and now, after decades of economic growth, a Delhi byword for vulgar materialism. Wealthy Delhi-ites want houses and cars that look like those of Russian oligarchs. The poor are not immune from criticism either. A psychologist counselling the parents of children murdered and mutilated by a psychopath on the outskirts of the city tells of their grotesque enthusiasm for government compensation. “A discussion began in the room about the 5-lakh [\$10,000] sums that had been rumoured. And parents said, ‘If we had known there would be 5 lakhs for a dead child, we would have sent two children.’”

Dasgupta is understandably disheartened by all this. “No longer was the city building a paradise to inspire the world; now it was trying to pull itself back from the brink of hell,” he writes. He even goes so far as to identify Delhi – with its packed slums for the poor and spacious, guarded mansions for the rich – as a mature example of a dystopian global capitalist future.

The villains, however, are not just the ordinary residents of Delhi, but the politicians they have elected and the government officials who are supposed to serve them. Implicit in some interviews, explicit in others is the notion that elected governments do not manage the city or the country for the benefit of all but simply behave as apex predators in a brutal world.

As Varshney and Tillin make clear in their more measured academic prose, the story of Indian politics since independence is the rise of the lower and middle castes to displace the once dominant Brahmins. But there is unfortunately scant evidence that this has done anything to improve governance. Dasgupta cites the examples of Mayawati, the self-aggrandising former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and of Madhu Koda, a farmer’s son turned fabulously wealthy Jharkhand politician, who is now out on bail on corruption charges and is said by the author’s interviewees in a Delhi bazaar to be the richest man in the city. This, writes Dasgupta, is “stunning evidence for the truth that politics, for India’s poor, is the quickest and most accessible route to wealth . . . If you have no money, status or connections and you want to get rich in your own lifetime, politics is the absolutely rational career choice. Corrupt politics, in this sense, is a corrective to the brutal inertia of the rest of society.”

This is a worrying conclusion for the future of India, particularly when the institutions that should underpin a robust electoral democracy – parliament, the justice system, the police, the media – are themselves being visibly undermined by corruption and dysfunction. Kapil Sibal, the Congress law minister, even took the unusual step this year of complaining publicly about the lack of transparency and accountability in the judiciary, which meant that few judges were being brought to book for corruption.

Indian democracy, says Varshney, would qualify as a great success if it were judged only by electoral competitiveness and people's participation. "What happens between two elections, however, can be very different," he says. "Political power is used at the time of elections to please citizens. Between elections, it is often used to treat citizens in an unfeeling manner. Empowered at the time of elections, the citizen often feels powerless until the next elections arrive."

The next elections are coming soon. For a few weeks, Indians of all languages, castes and religions will relish the quarrelling deplored by Mark Twain and boast again of their status as the world's biggest democratic nation. The democracy itself, however, is badly in need of repair.

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