India: Liberalism Vs. Nationalism

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Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability by Atul Kohli. Cambridge University Press, 1991. 420 pp.
The Politics of India Since Independence by Paul Brass. Cambridge University Press, 1990. 357 pp.

With the recent worldwide upsurge in nationalism, students of democracy must pay particular attention to the difficulties posed by religious and ethnic conflict. This is especially true with respect to India, where tensions between Hindus and Muslims caused the most agonizing event in twentieth-century Indian history: the partition of 1947, which displaced millions of people and killed tens of thousands of others. In the past decade, conflicting nationalisms have erupted anew with a fervor unmatched since 1947, challenging the integrity of India as a nation-state.

Conflicting nationalisms threaten political liberalism by creating what may be called a *liberal paradox*: Individuals and groups are free to organize in a liberal democracy, but can they be free to organize for something as radical as secession? If people in a secessionist part of the country are not allowed to secede in spite of their wishes, a fundamental tenet of liberalism is clearly violated—namely, that people have the right to choose their rulers. On the other hand, if secession is allowed, the principle that people are free to choose their government begins to undermine liberal democracy itself. At this point, liberalism and the right to self-determination raise deeply emotional questions: What takes precedence—a nation or a democracy? And what good is a liberal polity if it cannot even protect its own borders? Since human beings are not

only self-interested individuals (as liberal political theory assumes) but also people emotionally anchored in cultural or territorial communities, nationalism defines the limits of liberalism. In circumstances of rising nationalist ferment and conflict, liberalism has a limited capacity for dealing with emotions like loyalty, fear, and anxiety.

Liberal democracy has the best prospects when a relatively strong and stable nation-state has already been constructed or is beyond dispute. The stability of American democracy owes much to the Union victory over Southern secession in the Civil War of the 1860s. Sri Lanka, a shining example of Third World democracy through the 1960s, lost its luster when a confrontation between Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms tore the island apart in the 1980s. Democratic theorists have long been aware of the problem but have not discussed it fully. In his 1970 essay on "Transitions to Democracy," Dankwart Rustow described "national unity" as a prerequisite for democracy. "In order that rulers and policies may freely change," he wrote, "the boundaries must endure, the composition of the citizenry be continuous." In his latest work, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Dahl also recognizes the tension between liberalism and nationalism:

> Because subcultural conflicts threaten personal and group identities and ways of life, because such threats evoke deep and powerful emotions, and because the sacrifice of identities and ways of life cannot readily be settled by negotiation, disputes involving different subcultures often turn into violent, nonnegotiable conflicts. In a country where conflicts are persistently violent and nonnegotiable, polyarchy is unlikely to exist (p. 255).

With democracies and nationalism flourishing again, democratic theorists will have to analyze this paradox more fully in the future.

The effects of the liberal paradox are clearly demonstrated in India, which is both a democracy and a multiethnic, multireligious state. It now faces a religiously inspired secessionist movement in Punjab, an ethnic and religious insurrection in Jammu and Kashmir, and an ethnic rebellion in Assam, as well as a rising Hindu nationalism in the heartland that represents a backlash against these separatist movements. Compared to the Third World as a whole, the longevity of India's democracy despite all these problems is striking. Yet compared to the period under Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-64), the decline of India's democracy is equally remarkable. The first comparison is across countries, and is still a source of pride for Indians; the second comparison is across time, and it is a cause for concern.

Both Atul Kohli and Paul Brass address the decline of India's democracy. The "ungovernability" of India's democracy is the central question in Kohli's book. Brass seeks to provide an overview of Indian politics, but the deteriorating health of India's democracy is a key issue

for him as well because it is a systemic problem that affects virtually every other political matter of importance. The difficulties posed by conflicting nationalisms, however, have been underestimated by both. For Kohli, "the basic existence of India as a viable political unit does not appear to be threatened . . . as long as the armed forces are intact . . ." (p. 13). "Although the Indian political system shows signs of disintegration," says Brass, "it is unlikely that it will do so, at least not through secessionist movements. The center and the army remain strong enough to resist any such attempts" (p. 334). I would argue that the armed forces are necessary but not sufficient for keeping India together, and that the problem of governability may be turning into one of national viability. Restoring governability now will require improving not only the *institutional* health of the polity but also the *emotional* health of the country. Political leadership must heal ethnic and religious wounds and bind up a fractured country.

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Most political scientists agree that the fundamental cause of India's ungovernability is the organizational (but not electoral) decimation of the Congress party and the inability of other political parties to fill the resulting organizational vacuum. In the most systematic empirical investigation of the decline of the Congress to date, Kohli shows that it has ceased to perform its conflict-resolving role of the 1950s and 1960s, and has instead begun generating conflict. In *Party Building in a New Nation*, Myron Weiner demonstrated that in the 1960s the Congress was able to keep a vast, diverse, and conflict-ridden society under control by building up a nationwide party organization; by working through district and village "influentials" and adapting to local power structures; and by skillful use of patronage.

In the mid-1980s, Kohli returned to the districts surveyed by Weiner, and found that the breakdown of order resulted primarily from two developments: 1) the democratic process and its promise of political equality had to a great extent dismantled the local hierarchies of the traditional Hindu social structure; and 2) various parties (including factions within the Congress) were seeking to build winning electoral coalitions through competitive mobilization of social groups. Some parties concentrated on groups previously at the lower ends of the traditional hierarchy, while others mobilized the formerly dominant groups that resented the loss of their traditional power. If this political mobilization had been conducted within the institutional framework of the party system, it need not have resulted in ungovernability. But the example set

by Indira Gandhi—who relied on personal charisma rather than political organization—and followed by other regional parties and leaders led to the emaciation of political parties.

The decline of parties had three consequences. First, except for brief postelection lulls, the political system seemed to be in a state of perpetual mobilization. This, in turn, drew law-enforcement authorities deeper into the political process, eroding the integrity of the police and bureaucracy, and decreasing their ability to keep order. Second, elites could not keep the preelection promises that they had made in order to mobilize the masses, since legislation alone was insufficient without party organizations to carry it into practice. In Nehru's time the party machinery extended down to the lowest tier of the system, nurtured cadres of party workers, and provided a forum for deliberation and debate. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the Congress and other parties ceased functioning as organizations. The political elites saw parties as mechanisms for winning elections, not for keeping promises. Third, lacking organizations and unwilling or unable to build them, political elites filled their parties' leadership posts on the basis of personal loyalty rather than prior political and party work. Some of these "loyalists" were of dubious character or even criminals.

These three political consequences were intertwined with economic developments. Since the state was deeply involved in the economy, elections opened up enormous possibilities for private enrichment through state control over licenses, development funds, and government subsidies. In short, the organizational void left by the collapse of the party system was filled by the corrupt, by criminals, and by political dilettantes. In election after election, the voters threw out the incumbents, but the electorate's response could not provide sufficient incentive for change.

Such is the sad portrait of post-Nehru India drawn by Kohli and Brass—yet the misery is not unrelieved. In the 1980s, a left-of-center party restored order to strife-torn Bengal through disciplined organization, mildly redistributive land reform, and the creation of new elected institutions in the countryside that distributed power at the local level and provided local leaders with electoral legitimacy. The moral of the story, according to Kohli, is that a disciplined party which can also carry out income redistribution might redeem India. He rightly doubts, however, that a left-of-center party will come to power in many states or in Delhi. India's future remains centrist, but centrism cannot provide the organizational and ideological glue needed to bind a party together and prevent reckless behavior on the part of politicians.

Brass adds that the organizational void is deepened by the tensions between centralization and decentralization in Indian politics. Given India's ethnic and regional diversity, no centralizing leader can long succeed within a democratic framework. Yet increasing decentralization and regional assertiveness threaten the center by loosening its hold over

the states and the periphery. Visionary leaders like Nehru understood this dilemma, but of late India has not had enough men of vision.

Kohli and Brass shed much light on the problems of Indian democracy, but neither adequately discusses the emergence of conflicting nationalisms. Is India's problem of governability turning into a problem of national viability? Brass and Kohli do not think so. The country dealt with previous secession movements in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram through a successful combination of force and politicking. Why should one think that these may not be enough this time, and that the problem has become far more severe?

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First, the armed forces cannot continually use force against unarmed mobs without stirring a reaction over violations of human rights both in India and abroad. An authoritarian country can hide such behavior by censoring the press; a democracy cannot. Much, therefore, depends on how popular a given insurgency is. The state of Jammu and Kashmir stands paralyzed today, partly because the sentiment in favor of independence is so widespread.

Second, an insurgency today does not have to be mass-based to create massive disorder. The technologies of death used by today's insurgents make it very difficult to restore order through mere armed retaliation. Partisans with automatic rifles are clearly not the same as men using primitive guns. The easy availability of such powerful weapons makes ethnic or religious insurrection—and the response to it—violent and brutal in unprecedented ways. Ethnic and religious killings in India reached a new high in the 1980s. So long as a few dogged fighters can supply themselves with terrible weapons, their insurgency will be hard to put down without extended guerrilla warfare. Arms are flowing into Punjab and Kashmir from Pakistan, where the Afghanistan crisis of the 1980s has produced a virtual arms bazaar. Thus some of these insurrections are unlikely to be put down without an Indo-Pakistani agreement, making the restoration of order even more difficult. An internal military operation may not be enough.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, at no time since independence have secessionist sentiments so profoundly affected the mainstream of Indian politics. Rightly or wrongly, the small northeastern states of Nagaland and Mizoram do not—and did not—affect politics in India's heartland. This is not true of Punjab and Kashmir. Sikhs can be found not simply in Punjab but all over northern India. Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards led to killings of Sikhs all through the heartland. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir is potentially even more dangerous because of its relationship to the Muslim question on the

subcontinent—the issue that led to India's partition. While there are three million Muslims in the Kashmir valley, there are a hundred million Muslims outside the valley in India, and the insurgency in the state of Jammu and Kashmir broke out in the predominantly Muslim valley, not in the predominantly Hindu Jammu. Even if the armed forces manage to subdue the mostly Muslim insurgents of Kashmir in a war of attrition, Hindu-Muslim relations in the heartland have already been transformed by the rise of Hindu nationalism. The two most significant contributors to Hindu nationalism's rise have been the insurgency in Kashmir and the attempts by militant Hindus in the city of Ayodhya to reclaim a mosque allegedly built over the birthplace of Lord Rama, the most popular god in the Hindu pantheon and one who arguably transcends religion to become a civilizational figure. Both threaten to legitimate the principal argument of Hindu nationalists—that Muslims are disloyal to India. If Kashmir breaks away, it will be the second partition of the country over the Muslim question. Passions are running higher than they have since the late 1940s.

By rousing strong feelings of loyalty and fear and invoking the sacred, religious forms of nationalism (as well as other forms) can engulf entire communities in intense and even violent political battles. Group considerations always operate in politics; what makes nationalism distinctive is that all individuals are openly assigned to groups, even if they do not wish to be. Some of these groups are labeled disloyal and deserving of exclusion or of lesser citizenship, causing great damage to liberal democracy.

How did questions arousing such passion and extremism come to the political forefront? Kohli points out that as party organizations declined in the 1970s, political leaders started to look for symbols, slogans, and issues that would bind electoral coalitions. Religious and ethnic differences began figuring in campaign calculations. Thus India's increasing ungovernability and deinstitutionalization are connected to the rise of religion as a political issue. This may be right; however, once on the agenda, religious issues tend to change the nature of politics. Sikh extremism was utterly transformed by Mrs. Gandhi's decision in 1984 to order the army into the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs. Mrs. Gandhi paid for her decision with her life, but the country has yet to heal the wounds inflicted in the ensuing Hindu-Sikh conflict. Later Rajiv Gandhi, to appease the Muslims, gave constitutional protection to the *shari'a*. When a storm of Hindu protest followed, he had the disputed shrine in Ayodhya, which had been locked for 40 years, reopened for Hindu pilgrimage. Since 1947, religion has been a constant subtext in Indian electoral politics. The recent exploitation of religion for secular political ends, however, has led to new and dangerous levels of overt religious polarization.

Happily, the new Congress party government under P.V. Narasimha

Rao is taking two steps toward halting the deinstitutionalization of Indian politics: internal elections in the Congress party have been held for the first time in almost two decades, and the state has begun to withdraw from the economy. Measures to restore governability have thus been initiated—it remains to be seen how long they will be pursued. In the meantime, the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir continue to rage, and Hindu nationalists rule four of India's states.

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Yet even if the health of the Congress party is restored and the state's economic responsibilities are brought back into line with its capacities—developments that Brass, Kohli, and many others would welcome—challenges to India's democracy will remain. Will Delhi atone for desecrating the Golden Temple and punish those guilty of anti-Sikh pogroms after Mrs. Gandhi's death? How will the center respond to the widespread Kashmiri feeling that Delhi has overstepped its bounds and hurt Kashmiri pride? How will India's more than one hundred million Muslims be convinced that their places of worship are safe, and their lives not endangered by police? How will the government make millions of Hindus believe that it will not appease minorities at their expense? Will the government be able to do so without restoring the Hindu temple in Ayodhya or undoing the constitutional protection given to the *shari'a*?

Most of these questions do not lend themselves to compromise, and the usual answers lead to zero-sum outcomes. Granting Kashmir independence will provoke a backlash against Muslims in India. Undoing the *shari'a* and developing a common civil code will please the Hindus but will cripple Muslim confidence. Delhi's best strategy will be to remove these issues from the political agenda by replacing them with something else, such as successful economic reform. But Delhi alone no longer controls the process. Much will also depend on the behavior of various extremists—Sikh, Kashmiri, Muslim, and Hindu. India's democracy must pass a critical test in the 1990s, and the world will learn how well democracies can deal with conflicting nationalisms.

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