

# Celebrating Indian Democracy

Satyabrata Pal

The books under review are two additions to the long and distinguished line of books that have puzzled over the improbable success of democracy in India. Sumantra Bose starts off by recalling Seymour Martin Lipset's view that 'the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy'. Ashutosh Varshney invokes the work of Przeworski and others, who established that income was the best predictor of democracy. Both stress that India has remained democratic against the odds. But perhaps it should not be surprising if India does not fit an academic mould or conform to political theory, simply because, on so many counts, including its size and heterogeneity, it is *sui generis*. Theories developed from the experience of smaller nations may not fit a subcontinent.

For the same reason, examining the ways in which India kept the democratic flame alive serves a limited practical purpose, because what worked here might fail in states much smaller or less complex, where simple totalitarian solutions are both more tempting and more viable. The celebration of the fact that India is a

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## TRANSFORMING INDIA: CHALLENGES TO THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEMOCRACY

By Sumantra Bose

Picador India, 2013, pp. 337, price not stated.

## BATTLES HALF WON: INDIA'S IMPROBABLE DEMOCRACY

By Ashutosh Varshney

Penguin, Delhi, 2013, pp. 415, ₹599.00

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democracy serves two purposes: reminding readers that what is now taken for granted was not a given, as Bose does, while refuting, as Varshney does, those, like Ayesha Jalal and others, who claim that in essence India is not a democracy.

Bose's book is a succinct recapitulation of political developments from Independence, told with some sharp insights. The chapter on 'The Transformation Since 1990' is a masterly summary of the process through which the monolithic permanence in power of the Congress Party, and the dominance of the Centre over the rest of the circle, was replaced with the ferment and flux of coalitions, made inevitable by the emergence of regionalism as the driving force of national politics. Bose argues that this is an irreversible process, which is true up to a point. Politics will become increasingly local, but it is surely not a given, as Bose seems to argue, that this spells the demise of Congress and other national parties. (Varshney notes, with greater nuance, that 'we cannot be sure that the decline of the Congress Party will continue to be irreversible'.)

Indira Gandhi and her descendants refused to let powerful regional satraps rise, who would be independent of them, choosing instead pliable non-entities who were no match for local politicians who emerged from the people. Since, as Bose also points out, the Congress retains a significant percentage of the vote even in the States where they have not won elections recently, there is no reason why it should not regain power there if it returns to the Nehruvian practice of permitting local leaders to rise. The interests of the party clash with those of its ruling family.

Bose's chapter on 'Democracy in West Bengal' describes in cogent detail the tactics used by the CPM to capture and hold on to



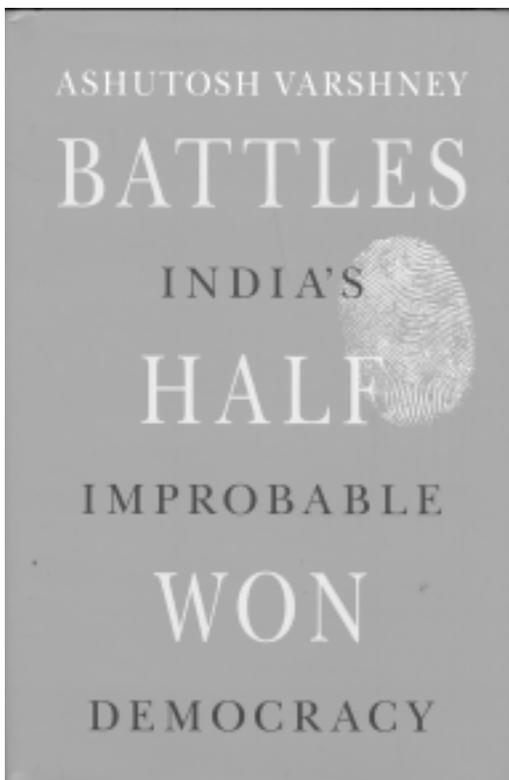
power. It is less convincing in the reasons it gives for the CPM's fall and the rise of Mamata Banerjee. From the late 1990s, CPM Ministers, travelling abroad to woo foreign investors, would freely confess that they had a problem with their younger generation, which argued that the Party had given land to their parents but done nothing for them. The CPM knew it had to offer jobs, but hamstrung by its past, clumsily forced through land acquisitions for the major industrial projects that it realized were essential.

In the chapter on 'The Maoist Challenge', Bose argues that an absence of governance and of government support for remote and impoverished communities led to the rebirth of the Maoists after the implosion of the original Naxal movement in West Bengal. This is a valid point, made forcefully in the 2007 report of the Expert Group to the Planning Commission. Bose argues that the Maoists win over the locals because they offer these services, but field visits, including by the National Human Rights Commission, show that the Maoists are also indifferent to local needs; the locals feel they are hostages to the men with the guns, police or Maoists.

Neither does Bose examine the complexity of the challenge that the Maoist insurgency poses to Indian democracy. For instance, in parts of Chhattisgarh, where no government schools function in the areas controlled by the Maoists, the state has opened residential schools in district headquarters to which tribal children are brought. This is clever, because it removes from Maoist control those who would otherwise form the next generation of its cadres. It is therefore being resisted by the Maoists, presumably with their usual violence. Those children who either escape or are evacuated by the state come to schools with superb facilities. These children have no interest in returning to their villages. Adivasi children are, therefore, either indoctrinated by the Maoists or assimilated into mainstream Indian society; in either case, they are lost to their families, and they lose their tribal identity.

The tribal belt, as Bose observes, also holds the bulk of India's reserves of ores. If democracy means the greatest good of the greatest number, these have to be exploited for development. For the adivasis, however, these hills and forests are not just habitat, they are gods, and their destruction is for them a desecration of the divine, carrying with it a loss of their own identity. If India cannot balance the demands of the majority with the existential needs of the most vulnerable section of its population, it will not evolve into an inclusive democracy.

Bose's last chapter, 'The Future of India's Democracy', lists factors which, in his view, will determine India's capacity to cope with its main challenges. He ignores several that are likely to have an even greater say on India's future, and pose the gravest challenges. Among these are the emergence of variable geometry, with the South, West and North West developing much faster than the Centre, East and North East, pulling India in different directions; the neglect of the North East; the acute insecurity of the Scheduled Tribes, now even



more vulnerable than the Scheduled Castes; and the continued slide into deprivation of the Muslims.

While Bose's book therefore leaves readers a bit dissatisfied, many of the questions it raises or omits are answered in Ashutosh Varshney's book, which complements and acts as a counterpoint to it. This is a dense, many-layered book, which repays repeated reading. It is, firstly, a passionately argued rejection of the proposition that, because India is still so unequal, it is undemocratic.

Whereas Bose highlights the cynical aspects of Nehru's policies, particularly in J&K, in the chapter, 'Why Democracy Survives', Varshney demonstrates how essential he was to the establishment of constitutional democracy in India. Varshney recalls that 'Subhas Chandra Bose and Vallabhai Patel were both serious competitors to Nehru', 'given to the use of force', and comments that he 'shudders to think what kind of political system India would have evolved into if they had dominated the 1940s and 1950s.'

Bose pillories Patel as 'a dour, conservative Congress leader from Gujarat', which is a travesty, but his assessment is not very different from Varshney's. However, while Varshney dismisses Subhas Bose as a closet Fascist, for Sumantra Bose his grand-uncle was 'a left-wing nationalist... with progressive ideas about the social emancipation of women and the poor and a staunchly secular vision'. Both authors capture facets of the man; which would have prevailed if he had supplanted Nehru is a question that can be debated forever.

In a fascinating chapter, 'How has Indian Federation Done?' Varshney uses the concept of a state-nation to define India. Drawing on the work of others, he points out that in this respect, India is not unique; Belgium, Canada and Spain are also state-nations, rather than nation-states. He argues that 'Indian identities tend to cross-cut, instead of cumulating', and 'the same factors that help democracy also aid federalism'. Religion, caste and language cut across each other within and across the States of India, and he makes the perceptive point that only those States, like the Punjab and J&K, 'where identities are cumulated, instead of cross-cutting, have produced the most serious Centre-state clashes, including secessionary movements.'

Varshney does not make this point, but that would apply as well to the disturbed States of the North East, including Nagaland and Mizoram, and to a lesser extent, Assam, in all of which tribe, rather than caste, has coincided with religion and language. It is a mercy that the Maoists build class consciousness in the tribal areas where they are active, rather than reinforcing tribal identities, which here too overlap with religion and language.

In the concluding section of this chapter, in which Varshney examines challenges to India, including from 'cross-border terrorism', which he describes as a 'new problem for federalism', he points out that, because public order is a State subject, central agencies

cannot act swiftly or without the permission and cooperation of State governments when a crisis breaks, as in Mumbai in November 2008. He argues that the 'laws concerning India's Centre-state relations ... are obstructing the evolution of a solid organizational structure to deal with cross-border terrorism.'

Several state governments oppose a National Counter-terrorism Centre, as they do the Communal Violence Bill, because these would confer on the Union Government powers that the Constitution gives exclusively to them. This is well known, and it is disappointing that Varshney, who rarely limits himself to the obvious, ignored the existence of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, used in the North East from 1958, and later in J&K, to suppress insurgencies supported from across India's borders. The Act was amended in 1972 to permit the Central government to declare an area disturbed, and send the Armed Forces in aid of local authority, even if the State government did not ask for help. Though the Supreme Court has held that this law is constitutional, the amendment was based on the assumption that, faced with cross-border threats to the nation which could only be met by the Armed Forces, some States would refuse to let them in. That the elected governments of some States in a federal democracy are not to be trusted is an appalling and frightening indictment, the implications of which Varshney, like the rest of the country, disregards.

In the chapter 'Is India Becoming More Democratic?' Varshney argues that 'much of the political space vacated by the Congress has so far been filled' by Hindu nationalism and regionalism (both documented in Bose) and by a third force, much less closely analysed, the parties that represent the 'lower castes'. He makes the telling point that 'lower castes do not give up their caste identities'; instead they now use their numbers to political advantage, and, as Varshney notes, it is 'the upper castes... which typically wish caste did not exist when a lower caste challenge appears from below.'

Varshney rightly considers this phenomenon, which he calls 'plebeian politics', a positive development, while arguing that the OBCs, the largest of these groups, have been weakened by internal divisions, as an example of which he cites the rise and fall, respectively, of Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar. These are valid points, but a deeper examination would have shown that plebeian politics has a very dark side. Since every group is finite, politicians spend time and effort dividing those from which their rivals draw power; Nitish Kumar has done this most skillfully, splitting dalits from mahadalits, the backward from the ati-backward, to weaken his opponents and consolidate his hold on power. The upshot is that the electorate, in Bihar and elsewhere, is being fractured into antagonistic groups, aligned on narrow identities, seeking power to get the largest share of a limited pie.

Africa's experience has shown that democracy as a zero-sum game ends in conflict. Already, the *Human Security Project*, which monitors conflicts world-wide, has noted in 2010 that 'India experienced more intrastate conflicts from 1946 to 2008 than any other country', these being conflicts between 'the government of a state and one or more non-state armed groups'. The other countries in the top ten are the USSR/Russia, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Indonesia, the DRC, Iran, Nigeria and Yemen. India is the only country in this group that is a democracy. On the one hand, it might be remarkable that it has stayed the course as a federal democracy despite these challenges, but it could also be argued that there would not have been so many violent uprisings in an inclusive democracy. Varshney's assessment of the success of India's democracy may be a trifle generous.

In the chapter 'Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society', Varshney argues that communal riots are primarily an urban phenomenon, pointing out that between 1950 and 1995, only 3.6% of deaths in com-

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munal violence were in villages, where most of India lived. Matching roughly comparable cities, he then argues that riots did not take place in those where formal 'inter-communal networks of civic engagement' were in place. Intra-communal networks helped defend their own, and picked up the pieces after a riot, but did not prevent violence. (In some instances, they have fomented it). While these are valid points, supported with data collected from the contrasting experience of Ahmedabad and Surat, and Aligarh and Calicut, Varshney perhaps needs to revisit these propositions in the light of current experience.

Firstly, it is sadly no longer true that the villages of India are largely immune from communal violence. The three largest and most savage outbreaks in recent years, in Kandhamal in Odisha, Kokrajhar in Assam and Muzaffarnagar-Shamli in UP, were all in rural areas, where, as Varshney acknowledges, the formal associations, like the Chambers of Commerce and trade unions that acted as a buffer in Calicut after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, do not exist. Secondly, though these associations held in Calicut in 1992, there is some evidence that thereafter ties between the communities there have come under strain, each retreating into its shell. Will this network take the strain if another crisis were to arise?

Some of the other essays that make up Varshney's book put up and test interesting hypotheses, some of which are not entirely tenable. The chapters on caste and entrepreneurship in India are the most ambitious, but also the weakest in the book. The chapter in which he attributes the breakdown of the caste system to the emergence of entrepreneurship in the South, drawing on the emergence of the Nadar community as an example, is brilliantly argued, but perhaps overstates the case. It ignores the effects of education and of political mobilization, which sometimes produced and sometimes were synchronous with the emancipation of castes previously depressed.

What must also be noted, simply to put matters in perspective, is that while there has certainly been an improvement in the condition of the dalits in the South, compared to their counterparts in Northern and Central India, many of the fundamental problems remain. An NHRC hearing in Chennai on the problems faced by Scheduled Castes threw up almost exactly the same complaints that it heard from dalits in Nagpur, in Puri, or in Jaipur. Therefore, in some respects, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

However, because Varshney grapples with these challenges, highlights some success stories not sufficiently known or understood, and draws attention to others ignored or neglected, his is an important and compelling book. The academic will find it useful for the wealth of data it carries; for the lay reader, many of its pages will be eye-openers.

**Satyabrata Pal**, a former High Commissioner to Pakistan, is presently a member of the National Human Rights Commission.

## Linking Epochal Events

Amit Dey

The Partition of British India in 1947 into the new nations of India and Pakistan, and the transformation of East Pakistan into the Republic of Bangladesh, in 1971, were events characterized by violence, displacement, and multiple alienations.

In her new book, Ananya Jahanara Kabir analyses their impact, three generations later, in contemporary cultural producers representing Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Cartography, literary texts, photographs, archaeological digs, and other memorabilia are woven together to project an intriguing reconsideration of Partition which is an integral part of the subcontinent's decolonization phase.

Kabir argues for 1947 and 1971 as linked epochal events by excavating the intrinsic interweavements of violence, memory, melancholia and modernity and also by bringing considerations of family, intergenerational dialogue, and subjectivity to a new memory studies of the subcontinent. In this sense, Kabir's account distinguishes itself from existing Partition scholarship.

The name of the author: Ananya Jahanara Kabir (with an emphasis on Kabir) is very suggestive. It is not exclusively an Islamic name. This is not accidental because her family represented and still represents the composite culture of the Indian subcontinent which was seriously challenged by the 'Two Nation Theory' culminating in the vivisection of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in

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### 1947, 1971 AND MODERN SOUTH ASIA: PARTITION'S POST AMNESIAS

By Ananya Jahanara Kabir

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1947. Islam as the principal ideological driving force behind Pakistan was losing its credibility with the emergence of the Bengali language movement in East Pakistan during the 1950s. Islamic legitimization of Pakistan received a final jolt in 1971 with the metamorphosis of East Pakistan into the nascent state of Bangladesh where Bengali identity triumphed over Islamic identity. In a way such developments in South Asia were anticipated by the great scholar politician and first Education Minister of Independent India, Abul Kalam Azad. A devout Muslim (unlike Jinnah) and a secular Congress leader Azad was a staunch critic of the 'Two Nation Theory'. Interestingly, the author's famous ancestor Humayun Kabir (the author has retained the family name Kabir) who was a philosopher cum Congress activist also acted as an aide to eclectic Azad in post-Independence India. Both Azad and Humayun Kabir are regarded as leading protagonists of the subcontinent's composite culture. A.J. Kabir's book should be read against this background. Kabir Bhavan, the original family home of the author situated in the East Bengal (later East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) district of Faridpur, is a bastion of this religio-cultural pluralism. Intriguingly, some members of the family who selected the southern fringes of Calcutta as their habitat during the post-Partition phase also built a Kabir Bhavan. Rural surroundings there echo the rustic charm of Faridpur which is now distanced by Partition.

Post-Partition developments in India and Pakistan followed two different trajectories. While the nascent Indian state with its capital in the historic city of Delhi aspired to project itself as a custodian of multiculturalism, the metamorphosis of the Pakistani city of Karachi from a polyglot identity to imposed homogeneity based on Perso-