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Mind the liberal gaps

India's democracy shines electorally. But increasing attacks on freedoms in between polls must worry us all.



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Written by **Ashutosh Varshney** | Updated: May 25, 2016 12:33 am



Sealing the Electronic Voting Machines in Coimbatore after the voting.

India has just witnessed another democratic spectacle: elections in five states, in which three incumbents lost power. Elections were freely contested, and no noticeable obstacles impeded the expression of popular will. This is perhaps the

time, but the paradox is particularly pronounced at this time.

Since 1952, India has had 16 national elections and 357 state elections. Power has changed hands eight times in Delhi and tens of times at the state level. In 1952, 81 million votes were cast; in 2014, nearly 555 million votes. Until 1989, following democratic theory, the richer and more educated citizens used to vote more than the poorer and the less educated. Since 1989, defying democratic theory, the poorer and the less educated have voted as much as, if not more than, their more fortunate co-citizens.

Contemporary democratic theory argues that democracies can be established at low levels of income, but they survive mostly at high levels of income. In the West, universal franchise was introduced in the early 20th century — after societies had become rich. The 19th century Western democracies gave vote only to the educated and privileged. India was desperately poor in 1950 when it opted for universal franchise. That, of course, is consistent with theory, but the fact that elections have continued for over six decades is not. India is the longest surviving low-income, universal-franchise democracy in history.

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In Democracy and Development, Adam Przeworski and his co-authors have presented the most exhaustive empirical examination of democracies since the World War II. They cover 141 countries and find that income is the best predictor of democratic survival. No other predictor — religion, colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, international political environment — comes close. The most surprising case, they say, is India. “The odds against democracy in India were extremely high.”

Though undoubtedly gigantic, India’s electoral record is not without blemish. Election finance, extremely murky and much of it illegal, is the single biggest

are poorer win elections.

Let us now turn to the non-electoral performance of India's democracy. It is well known that democracy is not only about holding free and fair elections. It is also about ensuring the basic liberal freedoms between elections: freedom of expression, freedom of religious practice, freedom of association etc. This is the famous distinction between the electoral and liberal aspects of democracy.

India is at its freest at the time of elections. But once an elected government takes over, it often places restrictions on basic liberal freedoms. Intellectuals, writers, artists, students and non-governmental organisations can face harassment on grounds that they hurt the sentiments of certain groups, or undermine national interest.

In a multi-religious society, which has had a deeply hierarchical system, some group or the other can always claim to be hurt. When a group claims injury, the government does not protect the writer, the artist, the speaker. Thus, Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses was banned because the Muslim right felt injured; M.F. Husain, a leading painter, had to leave India because his paintings offended the Hindu right.

These problems are common to all kinds of governments. The Rushdie and Husain episodes took place when the [Congress](#) party was in power. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, too, Sheikh Abdullah remained incarcerated without trial for long and the Calcutta Chinese were interned during the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

But these liberal gaps become especially wide when Hindu nationalists come to power. They add two qualitatively different elements to India's structural liberal weaknesses: a Hindu-centric view of the nation, and a narrow and muscular nationalism, as opposed to a capacious one, which India's freedom movement promoted. Both of these tendencies attack liberal principles. They also begin to privilege vigilante forces that the state does not punish.

communities, not only or primarily to the Hindus. A Hindu-centric view of the nation automatically begins to target religious minorities.

Thus, a ghar wapsi (homecoming) campaign, with the explicit or implicit protection of the state, can be launched, as was done in December 2014, aiming at forcible reconversion of Muslims and Christians. And Muslims can be lynched on the suspicion of beef eating, as happened in Dadri in October 2015, just because many Hindus say beef eating is a religious affront. People certainly have a right not to eat beef, if beef eating offends their sensibilities, religious or cultural, but no modern-day liberal democracy forcibly prevents people from eating what they want, or allows them to be lynched for what they eat.

Hindu nationalists also infuse everyday political practice with a hard-edge nationalism, which begins to generate vigilante action and threatens even legitimate dissenters. Thus a Bharat Mata (Mother India) mobilisation can be launched, but the mother that is presented as a custodian of the nation is vindictive, punitive and unkind. She lets people be thrown out of assemblies, or mobs to be unleashed, if her victory anthem is not sung. She touches off vigilante violence in her defence.

This mother is very different from how the leaders of the freedom movement defined Bharat Mata. In *Discovery of India*, Nehru writes that while interacting with millions of farm workers, who chanted Bharat Mata ki Jai (victory to Mother India), he would suggest that Bharat Mata was all of us together and upon hearing that, their faces would light up with joy and instinctive approval.

Nehru's Bharat Mata was an inclusive, kind and compassionate mother, who cared for all of her children. So long as we think of India as a mother, should we not debate whether we want a mother who loves and looks after all her children, or a mother who discriminates, reserves her compassion for one set of children, and hurts the others?

To conclude, India's democracy is going through an especially troubling period of its fundamentally paradoxical character. It continues to shine electorally, but its

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