

India: After Nehru

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See also from Perry Anderson and this issue of the London Review of Books:

[Gandhi Centre Stage](#) (ESSF article 26028), and

[India 1947: Why Partition?](#) (ESSF article 26033).

To hallow the solemn occasion, Nehru and his colleagues sat cross-legged around a sacred fire in Delhi while Hindu priests – arrived posthaste from Tanjore for the ritual – chanted hymns and sprinkled holy water over them, and women imprinted their foreheads with vermillion. Three hours later, on the stroke of midnight, 14 August 1947, a date and time stipulated by Hindu astrologers, Nehru – in defiance of any earthly notion of time, announcing that the rest of the world was asleep: London and New York were wide awake – assured his broadcast listeners that their ‘tryst with destiny’ was consummated, and had given birth to the Indian Republic.

After the ceremonies came practical arrangements. Within a fortnight, a Constituent Assembly had appointed a committee to draft a constitution, chaired by the leader of the Untouchables, Ambedkar. After the committee had laboured for more than two years, a charter of 395 articles was adopted, the longest of its kind in the world, which came into force on 26 January 1950. The document drew on British, American and White Dominion precedents for an original synthesis, combining a strong central executive with a symbolic presidency, a bicameral legislature with reserved seats for minorities, a Supreme Court with robust provincial governments, in a semi-federal structure denominated a union. Widely admired at the time and since, and not only at home, the constitution has become a touchstone of what for many are the signature values of India: a multitudinous democracy, a kaleidoscopic unity, an ecumenical secularity.

There is always some gap between the ideals of a nation and the practices that seek or claim to embody them. Its width, of course, varies. In the case of India, the central claim is sound. Since independence, the country has famously been a democracy. Its governments are freely elected by its citizens at regular intervals, in polls that are not twisted by fraud. Although often thought to be, this is not in itself a unique achievement in what was once called the Third World. Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Jamaica and Mauritius can match regular elections as independent states. What sets Indian democracy apart from these is its demographic and social setting. In sheer scale, it is unlike any other democracy in the world. From the beginning, its electorate was more than twice the size of the next largest, in the United States. Today, at some 700 million, it is more than five times larger. At the far top of the range in numbers, India is close to the bottom in literacy and poverty. At independence, only 12 per cent of the population could read or write. Comparable figures for Jamaica were 72 per cent, Sri Lanka 63 per cent, Malaya 40 per cent. As for poverty, per capita income in India today is still only about a sixth of that of Malaysia, a third of that of Jamaica, and not much more than half that of Sri Lanka. It is these magnitudes that make Indian democracy so

remarkable a phenomenon, and the pride of its citizens in it legitimate.

To be impressive, however, is not to be miraculous, as Indians and others still regularly describe the political system that crystallised after independence. There was never anything supernatural about it: terrestrial explanations suffice. The stability of Indian democracy came in the first instance from the conditions of the country's independence. There was no overthrow of the Raj, but a transfer of power by it to Congress as its successor. The colonial bureaucracy and army were left intact, minus the colonisers. In the mid-1930s Nehru, denouncing the Indian civil service as 'neither Indian nor civil nor a service', declared it 'essential that the ICS and similar services disappear completely'. By 1947 pledges like these had faded away as completely as his promises that India would never become a dominion. The steel frame of the ICS remained in place, untouched. In the last years of the Raj, its upper ranks had been Indianised, and there was no other corps of native administrators available. But if this was true of the bureaucracy, it was not of the army. Indigenous officers and soldiers had fought bravely, arms in hand, against the Raj in the ranks of the Indian National Army. What was to be done with them, once the British left? Their record a potential reproach to Congress, they were refused integration in the armed forces of the former colonial power, composed of veterans of domestic repression and overseas aggression fresh from imperial service in Saigon and Surabaya who now became the military apparatus of the new order. Nor was there any purge of the police that had beaten, jailed and shot so many in the struggle for independence: they too were kept intact. For the Congress high command, the priority was stability. These were the sinews of a strong state.

The legacy of the Raj was not confined to its bureaucracy, army and police. Alongside its machinery of administration and coercion, Congress inherited its traditions of representation. The Constituent Assembly that gave India its constitution was a British-created body dating from 1946, for which only one out of seven of the subjects of the Raj had been allowed to vote. Once independence was granted, Congress could have called for new elections, with universal adult suffrage. Fearing the outcome might be less convenient than the conclave to hand, in which since partition it controlled 95 per cent of the seats, it took care not to do so. No election on an expanded franchise was held till 1951. The body that created Indian democracy was thus itself not an expression of it, but of the colonial restrictions that preceded it. The constitution to which it gave birth, moreover, owed the majority of its provisions to Westminster: some 250 out of its 395 articles were taken word for word from the Government of India Act passed by the Baldwin cabinet in 1935. But the most important segment of the umbilical cord attaching the Congress regime of the post-independence years to the arrangements of the Raj was the least conspicuous. A mere six articles out of nearly four hundred dealt with elections, but these laid down that the victors would be those first past the post in any constituency.

Though the Raj had imported this British system to the subcontinent, confronted with intractable local problems it had on occasion contemplated alternatives, the existence of which could not altogether be excluded from the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. Over the protests of the handful of Muslim members left in it, any idea of proportional representation was given short shrift, and an undiluted Westminster model adopted for the Lok Sabha. The Anglophone provincialism of the Congress elite played its part in this. When the functionary responsible for detailed drafting of the constitution, the legal bureaucrat Benegal Rau, a recent locum for Delhi in Kashmir, was dispatched on a fact-finding tour abroad, he visited just four countries: Britain, Ireland, Canada and the United States, all reassuringly first past the post save Ireland. There, however, De Valera told him that 'he would do away with proportional representation in any shape or form. He preferred the British system as it made for strong government'. Efforts by Fianna Fail to strengthen its grip on the island would mercifully be frustrated, but their logic was readily understood by Congress. The last thing it wished was to weaken its monopoly of power in India. First past the post had delivered what

it wanted in the past. Why forego it in the future?

The consequences were central to the nature of the Indian democracy that emerged once elections were held. For twenty years, across five polls between 1951 and 1971, Congress never once won a majority of votes. In this period, at the peak of its popularity as an organisation, its average share of the electorate was 45 per cent. This yielded it crushing majorities in the Lok Sabha, amounting to just under 70 per cent of the seats in Parliament. In effect, the distortions of the electoral system meant that at national level it faced no political opposition. At state or district level, this did not hold. But there, the centre had powers that could deal swiftly with any local trouble. These too were heirlooms of the Raj, eagerly appropriated by Congress. Preventive detention dated back to a Bengal State Prisoners Regulation of 1818, and had been a standard weapon of colonial rule. At Rau's instigation, approved by Nehru and Patel, the constitution retained it, eliminating due process. Intervention by the viceroy to over-ride or overturn elected governments in the provinces had been authorised by the hated Section 93 of the Government of India Act of 1935. At the last minute, the same powers now reappeared in Article 356 of the constitution, transferred to the president of the republic, in practice a placeholder for the prime minister. Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel had wasted no time in showing the uses of the first, sweeping communist leaders and militants into jail across the country within a few months of independence. Resort to the second came within months of the adoption of the constitution, when Nehru demanded and obtained the head of the chief minister in Punjab, a Congressman he regarded as insubordinate, over the opposition of the newly installed president himself. In Kerala, where communist governments were intermittently elected, president's rule was imposed five times, from 1959 onwards. By 1987 there had been no fewer than 75 of these takeovers by the centre, affecting virtually every state in India. The representative institutions of Indian democracy were thus from the start anchored in a system of electoral distortion, and armoured with an ample repertoire of legal repression.

Still, limits to liberty such as these have never been peculiar to India. In one degree or another, they are familiar elsewhere. All liberal democracies are significantly less liberal, and considerably less democratic, than they fancy themselves to be. That does not cancel them as a category. There is no reason to judge India by a higher standard than is complacently accepted in older and richer versions. The explanation of democratic stability in a society that is so much poorer and more populous is only to a secondary extent to be found in institutional restrictions common enough in the species. It lies in a far larger enabling condition. To see what this might be, a truly distinguishing feature of Indian democracy – one that sets it apart from any other society in the world – needs be considered. In India alone, the poor form not just the overwhelming majority of the electorate, but vote in larger numbers than the better-off. Everywhere else, without exception, the ratio of electoral participation is the reverse – nowhere more so, of course, than in the Land of the Free. Even in Brazil, the other large tropical democracy, where – unlike in India – voting is technically compulsory, the index of ballots cast falls as income and literacy decline.

Why then has the sheer pressure of the famished masses, who apparently hold an electoral whip-hand, not exploded in demands for social reparation incompatible with the capitalist framework of this – as of every other – liberal democracy? Certainly not because Congress ever made much effort to meet even quite modest requirements of social equality or justice. The record of Nehru's regime, whose priorities were industrial development and military spending, was barren of any such impulse. No land reform worthy of mention was attempted. No income tax was introduced until 1961. Primary education was grossly neglected. As a party, Congress was controlled by a coalition of rich farmers, traders and urban professionals, in which the weight of the agrarian bosses was greatest, and its policies reflected the interests of these groups, unconcerned with the fate of the poor. But they suffered no electoral retribution for this. Why not?

The answer lies, and has always lain, in what also sets India apart from any other country in the

world, the historic peculiarities of its system of social stratification. Structurally, by reason of their smaller numbers and greater resources, virtually all ruling classes enjoy an advantage over the ruled in their capacity for collective action. Their internal lines of communication are more compact; their wealth offers an all-purpose medium of power, convertible into any number of forms of domination; their intelligence systems scan the political landscape from a greater height. More numerous and more dispersed, less equipped materially, less armed culturally, subordinate classes always tend, in the sociologist Michael Mann's phrase, to be 'organisationally outflanked' by those above them. Nowhere has this condition been more extreme than in India. There the country is divided into some thirty major linguistic groups, under the cornice of the colonial language – the only one in which rulings on the constitution are accessible – of which, at most, a tenth of the population has any command. These would be obstacles in themselves daunting enough to any national co-ordination of the poor.

But the truly deep impediments to collective action, even within language communities, let alone across them, lay in the impassable trenches of the caste system. Hereditary, hierarchical, occupational, striated through and through with phobias and taboos, Hindu social organisation fissured the population into some five thousand *jatis*, few with any uniform status or definition across the country. No other system of inequality, dividing not simply, as in most cases, noble from commoner, rich from poor, trader from farmer, learned from unlettered, but the clean from the unclean, the seeable from the unseeable, the wretched from the abject, the abject from the subhuman, has ever been so extreme, and so hard-wired with religious force into human expectation. The role of caste in the political system would change, from the years after independence to the present. What would not change was its structural significance as the ultimate secret of Indian democracy. Gandhi declared that caste alone had preserved Hinduism from disintegration. His judgment can be given a more contemporary application. Caste is what preserved Hindu democracy from disintegration. Fixing in hierarchical position and dividing from one another every disadvantaged group, legitimating every misery in this life as a penalty for moral transgression in a previous incarnation, as it became the habitual framework of the nation it struck away any possibility of broad collective action to redress earthly injustice that might otherwise have threatened the stability of the parliamentary order over which Congress serenely presided for two decades after independence. Winding up the debate in the Constituent Assembly that approved the constitution, of which he was a leading architect, Ambedkar remarked: 'We are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality ... We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly has so laboriously constructed.' He underestimated the system of inequality against which he had fought for so long. It was not a contradiction of the democracy to come. It was the condition of it. India would have a caste-iron democracy.

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What of the second great claim for which the constitution could legitimately be held to lay the basis, the resilient unity achieved in a country of such immense diversity? Its drafters studiously avoided the word 'federal'. The Upper House in Delhi would be not even the weak shadow of a senate. The new state would be an Indian Union, with powers conferred on the centre to manipulate or overthrow elected authorities in its constituent units unthinkable in the United States, Canada, Australia or other models consulted for its construction. But though less than federal in intention, in outcome the union became something like a creatively flexible federation, in which state governments came to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, so long as they did not offer opportunities for intervention by internal disputes or cross too boldly the political will of the centre. The test of this undeclared federalism came with the emergence of movements for the linguistic

redivision of territorial units inherited from the Raj. The Congress high command was instinctively hostile to these, Nehru particularly dismissive. But popular pressures in the Telugu zone of the Madras Presidency eventually forced Delhi to accept the creation of Andhra in 1953. Top-down reorganisation brought Karnataka, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh into being three years later, and after considerable violence the Bombay Presidency had to be split into Maharashtra and Gujarat in 1960.

Thereafter the principle that new states could emerge on a linguistic or other basis, if there was strong regional demand for them, was effectively conceded. At independence there were 14 states in the union; today they number 28, and still counting, with proposals to split Uttar Pradesh into four states now on the agenda. In no case have voters as such ever been consulted in these redivisions: the centre has broken up states, reactively or pre-emptively, according to its own judgment of what exigencies required. Yet the institutional evolution that has permitted this multiplicity of regional governments to take shape must be accounted the most distinctive achievement of the Indian constitution. That so many linguistic divisions could co-exist in a single huge polity without generating insuperable disputes or deadlocks has certainly also been due to the luck of the cultural draw. Had one language group constituted a clear majority of the nation, or none enjoyed any particular preponderance over any other, the potential for conflict or scission would have been much greater. Hindi, whose native-speakers comprise some 40 per cent of the population, had just the right weight to act as a ballast in the political system, without risk of too provocatively lording over it. Still, that the contours of a mobile federalism could develop so constructively is owed to the good sense of those who redrew the map of India, originally against the wishes of Congress.

This real achievement has, in what by now could be termed the Indian Ideology, been surcharged with claims to a largely imaginary status: the notion that the preservation by the Indian state of the unity of the country is a feat so exceptional as to be little short of a miracle, in the standard phrase. There is no basis for this particular vanity. A glance at the map of the post-colonial world is enough to show that, no matter how heterogeneous or artificial the boundaries of any given European colony may have been, they continue to exist today. Of the 52 countries in Africa, the vast majority arbitrary fabrications of rival imperialist powers, just one – Sudan – has failed to persist within the same frontiers as an independent state. In Asia, the same pattern has held, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia after two years of cohabitation not even a break with the colonial past, of Bangladesh from Pakistan enabled by external invasion. Such few sports of history aside, the motto of independence has invariably been: what empire has joined, let no man put asunder. In this general landscape, India represents not an exception, but the rule.

That rule has, in one state after another, been enforced with violence. In Africa, wars in Nigeria, Mali, the Western Sahara, Ethiopia, Congo, Angola; in South-East Asia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Sri Lanka. Typically, military force deployed to preserve postcolonial unity has meant military government in one guise or another in society at large: state of emergency in the periphery, dictatorship at the centre. India has escaped the latter. But it has exhibited the former, with a vengeance. It is now 65 years since Congress seized the larger part of Kashmir, without title from the colonial power, though with vice-regal connivance, in the name of a forged document of accession from its feudal ruler, the assent of its leading politician and the pledge of a plebiscite to confirm the will of its people. Having secured the region, Nehru – the prime mover – made short work of all three. The maharajah was soon deposed, the promise of a referendum ditched. What of the politician, on whom now rested what claims of legitimacy for Indian possession remained?

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Abdullah, the Lion of Kashmir as he enjoyed being styled, was a Muslim leader who, like Badshah Khan in the North-West Frontier Province, had been an ally of Congress in the years of struggle

against the Raj, and become the most prominent opponent of the maharajah in the Valley of Kashmir. There his party, the National Conference, had adopted a secular platform in which local communists played some role, seeking independence for Kashmir as the 'Switzerland of Asia'. But when partition came, Abdullah made no case of this demand. For some years he had bonded emotionally with Nehru, and when fighting broke out in Kashmir in the autumn of 1947, he was flown out from Srinagar to Delhi by military aircraft and lodged in Nehru's house, where he took part in planning the Indian takeover, to which he was essential. Two days later, the maharajah - now safely repaired to Jammu - announced in a backdated letter to Mountbatten, drafted by his Indian minders, that he would install Abdullah as his prime minister.

For the next five years, Abdullah ruled the Valley of Kashmir and Jammu under the shield of the Indian army, with no authority other than his reluctant appointment by a feudatory he despised and Delhi soon discarded. At the outset, Nehru believed his friend's popularity capable of carrying all before it. When subsequent intelligence indicated otherwise, talk of a plebiscite to ratify it ceased. Abdullah enjoyed genuine support in his domain, but how wide it was, or how deep, was not something Congress was prepared to bank on. Nor, it soon became clear, was Abdullah himself willing to put it to the test. No doubt acutely aware that Badshah Khan, with a much stronger popular base, had lost just such a referendum in the North-West Frontier Province, he rejected any idea of one. No elections were held until 1951, when voters were finally summoned to the polls for a Constituent Assembly. Less than 5 per cent of the nominal electorate cast a ballot, but otherwise the results could not have been improved in Paraguay or Bulgaria. The National Conference and its clients won all 75 seats - 73 of them without a contest. A year later Abdullah announced the end of the Dogra dynasty and an agreement with Nehru that reserved special rights for Kashmir and Jammu, limiting the powers of the centre, within the Indian Union. But no constitution emerged, and not even the maharajah's son, regent since 1949, was removed, instead simply becoming head of state.

By now, however, Delhi was becoming uneasy about the regime it had set up in Srinagar. In power, Abdullah's main achievement had been an agrarian reform putting to shame Congress's record of inaction on the land. But its political condition of possibility was confessional: the expropriated landlords were Hindu, the peasants who benefited Muslim. The National Conference could proclaim itself secular, but its policies on the land and in government employment catered to the interests of its base, which had always been in Muslim-majority areas, above all the Valley of Kashmir. Jammu, which after ethnic cleansing by Dogra forces in 1947 now had a Hindu majority, was on the receiving end of Abdullah's system, subjected to an unfamiliar repression. Enraged by this reversal, the newly founded Jana Sangh in India joined forces with the local Hindu party, the Praja Parishad, in a violent campaign against Abdullah, who was charged with heading not only a communal Muslim but a communist regime in Srinagar. In the summer of 1953, the Indian leader of this agitation, S.P. Mookerjee, was arrested crossing the border into Jammu, and promptly expired in a Kashmiri jail.

This was too much for Delhi. Mookerjee had, after all, been Nehru's confederate in not dissimilar Hindu agitation to lock down the partition of Bengal, and was rewarded with a cabinet post. Although since then he had been an opponent of the Congress regime, he was still a member in reasonably good standing of the Indian political establishment. Abdullah, moreover, was now suspected of recidivist hankering for an independent Kashmir. The Intelligence Bureau had little difficulty convincing Nehru that he had become a liability, and overnight he was dismissed by the stripling heir to the Dogra throne he had so complacently made head of state, and thrown into an Indian jail on charges of sedition. His one-time friend behind bars, Nehru installed the next notable down in the National Conference, Bakshi Gulam Mohammed, in his place. Brutal and corrupt, Bakshi's regime - widely known as BBC: the Bakshi Brothers Corporation - depended entirely on the Indian security apparatus. After ten years, in which his main achievement was to do away with any

pretence that Kashmir was other than 'an integral part of the Union of India', Bakshi's reputation had become a liability to Delhi, and he was summarily ousted in turn, to be replaced after a short interval by another National Conference puppet, this time a renegade communist, G.M. Sadiq, whose no less repressive regime proceeded to wind up the party altogether, dissolving it into Congress.

Abdullah, meanwhile, sat in an Indian prison for 12 years, eventually on charges of treason, with two brief intermissions in 1958 and 1964. During the second of these, he held talks with Nehru in Delhi and Ayub Khan in Rawalpindi, just before Nehru died, but was then rearrested for having had the temerity to meet Zhou Enlai in Algiers. A troubled Nehru had supposedly been willing to contemplate some loosening of the Indian grip on the Valley; much sentimentality has been expended on this lost opportunity for a better settlement in Kashmir, tragically frustrated by Nehru's death. But the reality is that Nehru, having seized Kashmir by force in 1947, had rapidly discovered that Abdullah and his party were neither as popular nor as secular as he had imagined, and that he could hold his prey only by an indefinite military occupation with a façade of collaborators, each less satisfactory than the last. The ease with which the National Conference was manipulated to Indian ends, as Abdullah was discarded for Bakshi, and Bakshi for Sadiq, made it clear how relatively shallow an organisation it had, despite appearances, always been. By the end of his life, Nehru would have liked a more presentable fig-leaf for Indian rule, but that he had any intention of allowing free expression of the popular will in Kashmir can be excluded: he could never afford to do so. He had shown no compunction in incarcerating on trumped-up charges the ostensible embodiment of the ultimate legitimacy of Indian conquest of the region, and no hesitation in presiding over subcontracted tyrannies of whose nature he was well aware. When an anguished admirer from Jammu pleaded with him not to do so, he replied that the national interest was more important than democracy: 'We have gambled on the international stage on Kashmir, and we cannot afford to lose. At the moment we are there at the point of a bayonet. Till things improve, democracy and morality can wait.' Sixty years later the bayonets are still there, democracy nowhere in sight.

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On the symmetrical wing of the union to the east, matters were no better. There the British had conquered an area larger than UP, most of it composed of the far end of what James Scott has described as the Appalachia of South-East Asia: densely forested mountainous uplands inhabited by tribal peoples of Tibeto-Mongoloid origin untouched by Hinduism, with no historical connection to any subcontinental polity. In the valleys, three Hindu kingdoms had long existed, the oldest in Manipur, the largest in Assam. The region had lain outside the Maurya and Gupta Empires, and had resisted Mughal annexation. But by the early 19th century Assam had fallen to Burmese expansion, and when the British seized it from Burma they did not reinstate its dynasty, while leaving princely rule in the much smaller states of Manipur and Tripura in place. The spread of tea plantations and logging made Assam a valuable province of the Raj, but the colonial authorities took care to separate the tribal uplands from the valleys, demarcating large zones throughout the region with an 'Inner Line' and classifying them as 'Excluded and Unadministered Areas', which they made little effort to penetrate. So remote were these from anything to do with India, even as constituted by the Victorian Empire, that when Burma was detached from the Raj in 1935, officials came close to allocating them to Rangoon rather than Delhi.

The arrival of independence would, in its own way, make the links of the North-East to the rest of India even more tenuous. For after partition, only a thin corridor, at its narrowest some 12 miles wide, connected it to the body of the union. Just 2 per cent of its borders were now contiguous with India - 98 per cent with Burma, China, Nepal and Bhutan. Manipur had no direct road connection to India at all. Confronted with difficulties like these, the Congress leaders did not stand on ceremony. The ruler of Manipur had not been rounded up along with his fellow princes by V.P. Menon in 1947, and by 1949 was resisting full integration. Briefed on the problem, Patel had just one short question:

'Isn't there a brigadier in Shillong?' Within days, the maharajah was kidnapped in Shillong, cut off from the outside world and made at gunpoint to sign his kingdom into oblivion. With it went the elected assembly of the state, which for the next decade was ruled – like Tripura, brigaded into the union at the same time – with no pretence at popular consultation by a commissioner from Delhi.

Dispersed tribes in the uplands did not permit of this kind of coup de main, and there trouble started even before the departure of the British. In Assam, about half the Naga population of 1.5 million – some 15 major tribes, speaking thirty languages – had been converted to Christianity by Baptist missionaries, and acquired an educated leadership in the shape of a Naga National Council, which made clear it did not want to be impressed into any future Indian state. A month before independence, a delegation called on Gandhi in Delhi. 'You can be independent,' he told them, characteristically adding: 'You are safe as far as India is concerned. India has shed her blood for freedom. Is she going to deprive others of their freedom? Personally, I believe you all belong to me, to India. But if you say you don't, no one can force you.' Congress was less emollient. Nehru dismissed the emergent Naga leader, Phizo, as a crank, and the idea of Naga independence as absurd.

Undeterred, the Naga leaders declared independence a day before Britain transferred power to India. Congress paid no attention. Phizo continued to tramp villages, increasing support among the tribes. In March 1952, he met Nehru in Delhi. Beside himself at Phizo's positions, Nehru – 'hammering the table with clenched fists' – exclaimed: 'Whether heavens fall or India goes into pieces and blood runs red in the country, whether I am here or anyone else, Nagas will not be allowed to be independent.' A year later, accompanied by his daughter, he arrived on an official visit as prime minister at Kohima, in the centre of Naga country, in the company of the Burmese Premier U Nu. Petitioners were brushed aside. Whereupon, when he strode into the local stadium to address a public meeting, the audience got up and walked out, smacking their bottoms at him in a gesture of Naga contempt. This was an indignity worse even than he had suffered among the Pathans. The Naga National Council was de-recognised, police raids multiplied. An underground Naga army assembled in the hills.

By late 1955 a Naga Federal Government had been proclaimed, and a full-scale war for independence had broken out. Under its commander-in-chief, two divisions of the Indian Army and 35 battalions of the paramilitary Assam Rifles, a largely Gurkha force notorious for its cruelties, were dispatched to crush the uprising. As in Malaya and Vietnam, villagers were forcibly relocated to strategic hamlets to cut off support for 'hostiles' – Indian officialese banning even use of the term 'rebels'. In 1958, Nehru's regime enacted perhaps the most sanguinary single piece of repressive legislation in the annals of liberal democracy, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which authorised the killing out of hand of anyone observed in a group of five persons or more, if such were forbidden, and forbade any legal action at all against 'any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers of this regulation', unless the central government so consented. With this licence to murder, Indian troops and paramilitaries were guaranteed impunity for atrocities, and made ample use of it. The brutality of Delhi's occupation of Nagaland far exceeded that in Kashmir. But as in Srinagar, so in Kohima pacification required the suborning of local notables to construct a compliant façade of voluntary integration, work that in Naga territory was entrusted to the Intelligence Bureau. Once assured of this, Nagaland was promoted to statehood within the union in 1963. Half a century later, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act is still required to hold the region down.

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In the mid-1930s Nehru had published a book, *The Unity of India*. As a ruler, his career began and ended with bids to enforce his conception of it. Kashmir, whose seizure was the first major act of his

tenure after independence, came to occupy more Indian diplomatic time and energy than any other issue, under a prime minister who prized above all his role on the international stage. His undoing came with another territorial dispute, where he could not exercise his will so easily. 'Not a yard of India is going to go out of India,' he declared in Shillong in December 1957. By then, China had already completed a seven hundred mile road from Sinkiang to Tibet, passing through the uninhabited Aksai Chin plateau, claimed as part of India, without anyone in Delhi being aware of it. No part of the borderlands between India and China had ever been demarcated. In the east, India took lands as its own that the Raj had claimed by virtue of a convention never accepted by the fledgling Chinese Republic in 1913, but agreed at Simla in 1914 by the Tibetan authorities, over whom Britain acknowledged China to be suzerain, and with and from whom Britain had undertaken by earlier agreements neither to negotiate directly nor to annex territory.

Even by the standards of the Raj, the degree of chicanery involved in this transaction was unusual. In the words of the American jurist Alfred Rubin: 'The documents reveal the responsible officials of British India to have acted to the injury of China in conscious violation of their instructions; deliberately misinforming their superiors in London of their actions; altering documents whose publication had been ordered by Parliament; lying at an international conference table; and deliberately breaking a treaty between the United Kingdom and Russia.' The result, called after its architect, was the McMahon Line. But the line remained so notional, the territory it claimed so little penetrated, that it was not until 1935 that another British functionary in Delhi noticed that the agreement wrested from the Tibetans was not included in the British lexicon of international treaties, and official maps of India still showed the border as traditionally claimed by China; whereupon all copies of the lexicon were recalled for destruction, and a backdated one was produced by the Foreign Office with a forged year of publication. Such was the position on the eastern wing of the Raj: on its north-western salient, juridical visibility was still less. There, in 1897, the director of Military Intelligence in London had urged Britain to take the whole of Aksai Chin as a buffer against Russia. Deprecating this idea, two years later the viceroy proposed its division in a note to China ignored by the Qing court. In 1913, at Simla itself, the British maps marked all of it as belonging to China. By 1927, however, without any other supervening change, British maps showed it as part of India. Down to the end of the Raj, the British made no attempt to occupy the region.

In 1956, Zhou Enlai, pointing out to Nehru that borders between their two countries had never been agreed by any treaty in the past, and needed to be determined, told him that notwithstanding its imperialist origins, China was willing to take a 'more or less realistic position' on the McMahon Line. To this Nehru replied that the northern frontiers of the British Empire, as bequeathed to India, were unnegotiable. On discovering two years later that China had built a road through Aksai Chin, he demanded it withdraw. On getting a reply that Aksai Chin was part of China, Delhi initially conceded that the area was 'a matter in dispute', then hastily reversed itself. There could be no question of a dispute, and no question of negotiations: the Chinese must get out. The following year, revolt broke out in Tibet, and the Dalai Lama fled to India, where the CIA had for some time been helping Tibetan rebels with Indian connivance. The Dalai Lama's arrival was of no comfort to India on the border dispute - complaining about Indian recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, he pointed out that 'if you deny sovereign status to Tibet, you deny the validity of the Simla Convention and therefore the validity of the McMahon Line' - but it increased tensions between Beijing and Delhi. Nevertheless, in 1960 Zhou Enlai arrived from Rangoon, fresh from a boundary agreement accepting the McMahon Line where it abutted on Burma, and proposed a similar agreement with India, in exchange for its assent that Aksai Chin belonged to China. Once again, he was told there could be no negotiations over Indian claims in their plenitude.

Legally, these rested simply on the expansionist chicaneries of the Raj in the east, and on still less - mere cartographic fancies - in the west. Politically, however, the reality was that on either side of

the mountain chains separating the subcontinent from the plateaux to the north, both Qing and Victorian regimes were systems of imperial conquest over subject peoples. The Qing was an older presence in the region, and by what passed for the diplomatic proprieties of the time, its weak successor had been defrauded of territory by the British. The corpse of one predator had been robbed by another, with otherwise little to choose between them. Half a century later, China was a revolutionary state actuated not by legal injury but strategic utility. Aksai Chin was of use to it, whereas it was of almost no significance to India. Territory south of the McMahon Line was of little use to China, and India could keep it. Had Nehru shown a grain of historical common sense, or political realism, he would have settled on that basis. Indian public opinion, it is often said, debarred this, and certainly he feared, as he told his officials, that 'If I give them that I shall no longer be prime minister of India - I will not do it.' But, of course, no one was more responsible for the fantasies of a sempiternal India, stretching back millennia across every yard of land claimed by the Raj, than Nehru himself. This was the dream-world of the 'unity' and 'discovery' of India in which he had soaked himself since the 1930s, and was now inspiring the surreal claim that the McMahon Line coincided with the borders of India as they had been for nearly three thousand years, in which 'the striving of the Indian spirit was directed towards these Himalayan fastnesses', as testified by the Upanishads.

In the grip of delusions such as these, all contact with reality was lost. Troops were ordered to take up forward positions, challenging outposts of the PLA in Aksai Chin, and in the North East. Nehru's chief of staff declared that 'a few rounds fired at the Chinese would cause them to run away.' His home minister - and later successor - Lal Bahadur Shastri announced that if China did not vacate the disputed areas, India would eject it from them as summarily as it had Portugal from Goa. In September 1962 - Nehru himself, attending another meaningless Commonwealth conference in London, was not even in Delhi - the decision was made to do so, without the slightest idea of what might ensue. Burning villages in Nagaland and shooting demonstrators in Srinagar in the name of national unity was one thing: that the Indian army could do. Taking on the PLA in the same cause was another matter. In a first round of fighting, lasting a fortnight in October, Indian troops attempting to advance in the North-East were thrashed, while garrisons fell in the West. The shock in Delhi was great, but did not sober Nehru, who in characteristic style thanked China during the succeeding lull for an action that has 'suddenly lifted a veil from the face of India' - in full rhetorical flight, images from the boudoir were rarely far from his mind - affording 'a glimpse of the serene face of India, strong and yet calm and determined, an ancient face which is ever young and vibrant'.

US, British and Israeli weapons were hastily summoned to bulk up the national arsenal. On Nehru's birthday, 14 November, his troops launched a counter-attack in the North-East. In less than a week, they were ignominiously routed, disintegrating completely as a military force. Had China wished, the PLA could have marched without opposition to Calcutta. In panic, Nehru pleaded for American bombers to attack it. But the Chinese leadership had already achieved all that it intended, and its control of Aksai Chin now beyond challenge, withdrew back across the McMahon Line in a move of Olympian closure virtually as humiliating to Nehru as his crushing defeat in the field. The Caporetto of Thagla Ridge effectively finished him. Psychologically broken and physically diminished, he lingered in office for another 18 months before his death in the spring of 1964.

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In retrospect, Nehru's stock has risen among Indian intellectuals of liberal or left persuasion as that of the political class that came after him has fallen. That is understandable: he belonged to a generation that had resisted the British in the name of an ideal, with no certainty of success in their lifetime, and paid for it, as those who came to power thereafter by birth or intrigue did not. The image of a ruler-sage was always misplaced. As those who knew and admired him at close range were well aware, his was - in the words of Savarpalli Gopal, the loyal assistant who became his

principal biographer – a ‘commonplace mind’ that was ‘not capable of deep or original thought’. The shallowness of his intellectual equipment was connected to the side of his personality that so easily drifted away from realities resistant to his hopes or fancies. It is striking how similar was the way two such opposite contemporaries as Patel and Jinnah could see him – the former speaking on occasion of his ‘childlike innocence’, the latter comparing him to Peter Pan. Gopal’s image is more telling still: early on, Nehru ‘made a cradle of emotional nationalism and rocked himself in it’, as if a child cocooning himself to sleep away from the outside world. He had, of course, many more adult qualities: hard work, ambition, charm, some ruthlessness. With these went others that were developmentally ambiguous: petulance, violent outbursts of temper, vanity. Occupational hazards of high office, no doubt. Yet however self-satisfied, few politicians could write, as Nehru did before his death, that no one had ever been loved so much by millions of his compatriots. Abstemious in many other ways, and little attracted to the supernatural, his opiate – as another admirer, the Australian ambassador to India Walter Crocker, would remark – was the adoration of the people.

The disabling effects of this addiction lacked an antidote among his colleagues. Patel, who could have counterbalanced it, was soon dead. Nehru took care to appoint no deputy premier to succeed him. Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, who had been president, went in Nehru’s view ‘off the rails’, resigning from Congress. Ambedkar, whom Nehru feared, and whose funeral he pointedly failed to attend, had been rapidly edged out. Subhas Chandra Bose, the only leader Congress ever produced who united Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in a common secular struggle, and would have most threatened him, lay buried in Taiwan: the political landscape of postwar India would not have been the same had he survived. Surrounded by mediocrities, Nehru accumulated more posts than he could handle – permanent foreign minister as well as prime minister, not to speak of defence minister, head of the planning commission, president of Congress, at various times. He was not a good administrator, finding it difficult to delegate, but even had he been, this was a pluralism too far. In Gopal’s view, government became ‘a one-man show’. That was not entirely just, since Nehru could not attend to everything, so a notional cabinet also meant that ministers could often do what they liked in their departments as well.

The most damaging feature of the regime was less this centrifugal aspect than the development of a court of sycophants at extra-ministerial level. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru was a poor judge of character, and his choice of confidants consistently disastrous. Promoting to chief of staff over the heads of senior officers his henchman in overthrowing Abdullah, B.N. Kaul, a poltroon from Kashmir with no battlefield experience who fled the field at the first opportunity, Nehru was directly responsible for the debacle of 1962. For his personal secretary, he installed a repellent familiar from Kerala, M.O. Mathai, who acquired inordinate power, taking Nehru’s daughter to bed and passing his paperwork to the CIA, until his reputation became so noxious that Nehru was reluctantly forced to part with him. For political operations in Kashmir, the North-East or closer to home, he relied on a dim police thug, Bhola Nath Mullik, formerly of British employ, head of the Intelligence Bureau. The only actual colleague he trusted was Krishna Menon, an incompetent windbag who ended in disgrace along with Kaul.

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Still, it can be argued that such failings were trifling set beside one commanding achievement. Nehru’s greatness, it is generally felt, was to rule as a democrat in a non-Western world teeming with dictators. Preceptor to his nation, he set an example from which those who came after him could not long depart. Tutored by him, Indian democracy found its feet, and has lasted ever since. That by conviction Nehru was a liberal democrat is clear. Nor was this a merely theoretical attachment to principles of parliamentary government. As prime minister, he took his duties in the Lok Sabha with a conscientious punctilio that put many Western rulers to shame, regularly speaking and debating in the chamber, and never resorted to rigging national elections or suppressing a wide

range of opinion. So much is incontestable. But liberalism is a metal that rarely comes unalloyed. Nehru was first and foremost an Indian nationalist, and where the popular will failed to coincide with the nation as he imagined it, he suppressed it without remorse. There, the instruments of government were not ballots but, as he himself blurted, bayonets.

Nor, within the zone where the nation was not contested, could democracy simply be left to its own devices. No figure was more powerful in Nehru's court than B.N. Mullik, picked for the job by Patel, who ingratiated himself with Nehru by supplying surveillance of all opposition parties from a network of informers inside them. Like other elected rulers – Nixon comes to mind – Nehru was fascinated by such clandestine information, and would rely on Mullik in handling Kashmir, where he became the minder of successive puppet regimes, and in pressing forward on the Sino-Indian border, his counsel disastrous in both areas. But it was closer to home that his services were most critical. As Mullik's memoirs show, when a communist government was elected in Kerala – 'always a matter of special interest to the IB' – and the local Congress establishment connived at religious agitation to overthrow it, the Intelligence Bureau was central to the operation that finally brought it down, when Nehru gave the order to eliminate a democratic obstacle to the will of the centre.

Such episodes have generally been portrayed as inconsistencies on Nehru's part, of a secondary kind it would not be difficult to find in the career of many well-regarded liberal statesmen. There is reason to that. The larger truth, however, is that Nehru could be the democratic ruler he was because once in office he faced so little opposition. Throughout his years as prime minister, Congress enjoyed enormous majorities in parliament, and controlled virtually every provincial government, in a caste-divided society. All non-Congress governments were handed their cards. Given the ease of that monopoly of power – political scientists would dub it a 'one-party democracy' – there was no occasion to resort to the conventional forms of authoritarian rule. Subjectively, any prospect of a dictatorship was alien to Nehru. But objectively, it was also quite unnecessary, so little temptation ever arose. By and large, democracy across most of the union was costless. That he handed it on as well as he did remains, nevertheless, his positive legacy.

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What of the other side of the ledger? 'As Calais was written on Queen Mary's heart,' Nehru told a British general in a revealing comparison, 'so Kashmir is written on mine.' The consequences, down the decades, would be bloodier even than her reign. The inheritance he left in the North-East was much the same. In 1961, he made it a crime to question the territorial integrity of India in writing or in speech, in sign or image, punishable by three years' imprisonment. The Nagas, whom he started to bomb in 1963, were unbeaten when he died. Three years later, in March 1966, a full-scale rebellion broke out among the neighbouring Mizo. By the end of the following decade, Manipur, Tripura and Assam were all in flames. The criminality – murder, torture, rape – covered by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act multiplied. Repression, co-option and exhaustion have yet to bring any real peace to the region, where India still has so much to hide that outsiders need special permission to enter, and can only visit parts of it under strict controls. Tibet is generally easier of access to foreigners.

For the rest of the union, the lasting affliction of Nehru's rule has been the dynastic system he left it. He claimed to reject any dynastic principle, and his capacity for self-deception was perhaps great enough for him to believe he was doing so. But his refusal to indicate any colleague as a successor, and complaisance in the elevation of his daughter – with no qualifications other than her birth for the post – to the presidency of Congress, where Gandhi had once placed him for his own trampoline to power, speak for themselves. From the outset, she was more authoritarian than her father – within weeks, she called for the ouster of the government of Kerala. Once in command of the state and not just of the party, she would declare an emergency, arresting the leaders of every opposition

party and jailing 140,000 citizens without charge. To many, it seemed that India was on the brink of dictatorship.

In fact what had happened was an exercise, on a much larger scale than ever before, of a traditional instrument of British rule, dubbed by one of its officials with the oxymoron 'civil martial law': mass arrests, suspension of ordinary legal procedures, followed – when danger of refractory opposition was thought past – by release of prisoners and reversion to ordinary legal and electoral procedures. This was the technique the Raj had applied to civil disobedience in 1932 and again in 1940, and that was used to bring Kerala to heel in 1959. Thereafter, in the shape of impositions of presidential rule, it became the centre's regular method for disposing of state governments unsatisfactory to it, by 1977 employed no fewer than forty times, with only five states not having been subjected to it. But it could also be deployed less formally on a national scale, as when Delhi interned and deported thousands of Indian citizens of Chinese origin as enemy aliens, and arrested all communist leaders out of hand – including even those who had rallied to the patriotic banner – during the Sino-Indian War. The difference between resort to civil martial law by father and daughter was one of degree rather than kind. After twenty months, Indira Gandhi lifted the Emergency and held elections, as the guidebook of the Raj laid down.

The Emergency was nevertheless a watershed in Indian politics, since popular reaction against it broke for the first time the monopoly of government in Delhi enjoyed by Congress since independence. The heteroclit coalition that replaced it in the elections of 1977 did not last long, and the dynasty – daughter, succeeded by grandson – was soon back at the helm. But out of the magma of post-Emergency opposition eventually emerged a party of comparable electoral strength, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which two decades later was capable of forming governments as stable or unstable as those of Congress. With the arrival in power of the BJP, formally committed to the idea of Hindutva, it was less democracy which looked under threat – at least immediately; if ultimately it too, in the eyes of many – than the third value of the Indian state, its secularity.

In the struggle for independence, the legitimating ideology of Congress had always been a secular nationalism. It was in the name of this ideal that it claimed to speak for the whole subcontinent, regardless of faith. Partition had divided the Raj, the Muslim League creating a state founded on Islam in Pakistan. In the run-up to partition, British officials regularly referred to the larger area where Congress would rule as Hindustan, a term in private not always shunned by Congress leaders themselves. But when an independent state came into being, it was proudly just India, repudiating any official religious identity, proclaiming the unity of a nation that had been artificially divided. The constitution it adopted did not, however, describe India as a secular state, a term that was avoided. Nor did it institute equality before the law, a principle also eschewed. There would be no uniform civil code: Hindus and Muslims would continue to be subject to the respective customs of their faith governing family life. Nor would there be interference with religious hierarchies in daily life: Untouchability was banned, but caste itself left as it was. Protection of cows and prohibition of alcohol were enjoined, and seats reserved in Parliament for two minorities, Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) and Tribes – Dalits and Adivasis in today's terminology – but not Muslims.

Ambedkar, responsible for much of the constitution, was not satisfied with the upshot, and as minister for law introduced in 1951 a Hindu Code Bill striking down the grosser forms of marital inequality it had sanctioned. Faced with uproar from the benches of Congress (he had the temerity to tell its MPs that the cherished legend of Krishna and Radha was an emblem of Hindu degradation of women), he was unceremoniously abandoned by Nehru and the bill neutered. With his exit went the only outspoken adversary of Hindu ascendancy ever to serve in an Indian cabinet. In 1947, he had been inducted à contrecœur into it by Patel and Nehru, because they feared the alliance between his party, the Scheduled Castes' Federation, and Jinnah's, which had actually elected him from Bengal to the Constituent Assembly – the combination of Untouchables and Muslims that

Gandhi had dreaded in the 1930s. In his resignation speech, Ambedkar made it clear he had been isolated from the outset by Nehru, who had refused to give him any post of substance in the cabinet, and that he regarded not only the ditching of the Hindu Code Bill as a betrayal – he called it ‘mental torture’ – but the grabbing of Kashmir and the ensuing allocation of more than half the budget to the army as unacceptable.

Nor did he feel the position of his own people had altered much meanwhile: ‘the same old tyranny, the same old oppression, the same old discrimination which existed before, exists now, and perhaps in a worse form.’ He had reason to say that, since he had been forced to scrap even the minimal safeguards for their political autonomy conceded in the 1930s, consigning the fate of the Untouchables to Uncle Toms like the notoriously venal Jagjivan Ram, union minister and pillar of Congress in UP, who made no secret of the fact that ‘since one had to depend on the non-Scheduled Caste vote, one went along with the fortunes of the party.’ Nor was Ambedkar consoled by sanctimonious plaudits for his role in drafting the constitution. He knew he had been used by Congress, and said two years later: ‘People always keep on saying to me: oh sir, you are the maker of the constitution. My answer is I was a hack. What I was asked to do I did much against my will.’ When his *Riddles of Hinduism* was published thirty years later, long after his death, not a Congressional whisper was heard in defence of him, amid the bigoted outcry.

Congress had failed to avert partition because it could never bring itself honestly to confront its composition as an overwhelmingly Hindu party, dropping the fiction that it represented the entire nation, and accept the need for generous arrangements with the Muslim party that had emerged opposite it. After independence, it presided over a state which could not but bear the marks of that denial. Compared with the fate of Pakistan after the death of Jinnah, India was fortunate. If the state was not truly secular – within a couple of years it was rebuilding with much pomp the famous Hindu temple in Somnath, ravaged by Muslim invaders, and authorising the installation of Hindu idols in the mosque at Ayodhya – it wasn’t overtly confessional either. Muslims or Christians could practise their religion with greater freedom, and live with greater safety, than Muslims could in Pakistan, if they were not Sunni. Structurally, the secularism of Congress had been a matter not of hypocrisy, but of bad faith, which is not the same: in its way a lesser vice, paying somewhat more tribute to virtue.

Around it, however, there inevitably developed a discourse to narrow the gap between official creed and unofficial practice, which has come to form a department of its own within the Indian ideology. Secularism in India, it is explained, does not mean anything so unsophisticated as the separation of state and religion. Rather – so one version goes – the Indian state is secular because, while it may well finance or sponsor this or that religious institution or activity, in doing so it maintains an ‘equidistance’ from the variegated faiths before it. According to another version, this is too limitative. The state should, and does, keep a ‘principled distance’ from the different religions of India, but the principle is one of ‘group-sensitive’ flexibility, allowing both for direct involvement in religious matters, supporting or restraining, and for non-involvement where that is the better course, without any necessary commitment to symmetry of action towards sensitive groups in either case. The outcome is a richer and more rewarding texture of relations between public authorities and devout communities, more in keeping with the highest ideals of a multicultural age than any *laïcité* to be found in the West or Far East.

A leading test of these professions is the condition of the community that Congress always claimed also to represent, and the Indian state to acquit of any shadow of confessionalism. How have Muslims fared under such secularism, equidistant or group-sensitive? In 2006, the government-appointed Sachar Commission found that of the 138 million Muslims in India, numbering some 13.4 per cent of the population, fewer than three out of five were literate, and a third were to be found in the most destitute layers of Indian society. A quarter of their children between the ages of six and 14

were not in school. In the top fifty colleges of the land, two out of a hundred postgraduates were Muslim; in the elite institutes of technology, four out of a hundred. In the cities, Muslims had fewer chances of any regular job than Dalits or Adivasis, and higher rates of unemployment. The Indian state itself, presiding over this scene? In central government, the report confessed, 'Muslims' share in employment in various departments is abysmally low at all levels' – not more than 5 per cent at even the humblest rung. In state governments, the situation was still worse, nowhere more so than in communist-run West Bengal, which with a Muslim population of 25 per cent, nearly double the official average for the nation, many confined in ghettos of appalling misery, posted a figure of just 3.25 per cent of Muslims in its service. It is possible, moreover, that the official number of Muslims in India is an underestimate. In a confidential cable to Washington released by WikiLeaks, the US Embassy reported that the real figure was somewhere between 160 and 180 million. Were that so, Sachar's percentages would need to be reduced.

At partition, most middle-class Muslims in Hindu-majority areas had emigrated to Pakistan, leaving a decapitated community of poorer co-religionaries behind. The great mass of those who remained in India thus started out in a very disadvantaged position. But what is transparent is that the Indian state which now claimed to cast an impartial mantle over them did no such thing. Discrimination began with the constitution itself, which accorded rights of representation to minorities that were denied to Muslims. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were granted special constituencies and seats in the Lok Sabha, subsequently also reservations in public employment, and in due course further Hindu groups – 'Other Backward Castes' – acquired the latter privilege too. But Muslims were refused both, on the grounds that conceding them would violate the precepts of secularism by introducing religion into matters of state. They were thereby denied any possibility of acting collectively to better their lot. If a Muslim party had possessed any proportionate share of national representation, its interests could never have been ignored in the coalition politics that have been the norm since Congress lost its monopoly of power. To add insult to injury, even where they were locally concentrated in sufficient numbers to make an electoral difference, these constituencies were not infrequently reserved for castes supposedly worse off than they, but actually better off. In mechanics such as these, Indian secularism is Hindu confessionality by another name.

If matters are like this in the Indian state's machinery of representation, it may be imagined how they stand in its now immense apparatus of repression. All told, the 'security agencies' of the Indian Union, as the *Sachar Report* politely calls them, employ close to two million. How many Muslims do they contain? The answer is too sensitive to divulge: as the report notes, no data on their composition are available for three-quarters of these. Put simply, Muslims are not wanted in their ranks. In 1999, a former defence minister let slip that they numbered just 1 per cent of 1,100,000 regulars. In the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Intelligence Bureau (IB) – the CIA and FBI of the Indian state – it is an 'unwritten code' that there should be not a single Muslim; so too in the National Security Guards and Special Protection Group, its Secret Service corps. The Indian armed forces are a Hindu preserve, garnished with Sikhs, and bolstered still – a unique arrangement in the postcolonial world – by Gurkhas from Nepal, as under the Raj. Mercenaries they may be, but their battle-cry could not be more impeccably Hindu: yells of 'O Goddess Kali' as they unsheath their kukri.

As with other oppressed minorities in societies keen to advertise their pluralism, a sprinkling of celebrities – a batsman or film star here, a scientist or symbolic office-holder there – adorns, but doesn't materially alter, the position of the overwhelming majority of Muslims in India. Unlike blacks in the US, who comprise a roughly similar proportion of the population, they suffer from no racial stigma, and are overlaid with a thin elite layer of upper-class origin, the small residue of those who did not leave for Pakistan in 1947, bearers in some degree of a historical memory of Muslim rule, without any counterpart in the descendants of slavery in America. But otherwise most Muslims in

India are much worse off, because they benefit from no affirmative action, and in a caste society are perforce more endogamous. They are second-class citizens.

Their fate throws into sharp relief unspoken realities of the Indian polity that emerged after partition, which take still more ominous form where it is contested. What the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act effectively does in such zones, the young Indian historian Ananya Vajpeyi has written, is 'to create an entirely separate space within India, a sort of second and shadow nation, that functions as a military state rather than an electoral democracy, and only remains hidden because it is not, at least so far, officially ruled by a general or a dictator'. This space should 'not be thought of as a zone of exception, but as a contradiction so extreme that it undoes the totality in which it is embedded', which breaks down into 'two distinct and mutually opposed regimes' that form 'two nations: India and non-India'. The description is powerful, but it looks away from the connection between them. For what is perfectly obvious, but never seen or spoken, is that the hand of AFSPA has fallen where the reach of Hinduism stops. The three great insurgencies against the Indian state have come in Kashmir, Nagaland-Mizoram and Punjab – regions respectively Muslim, Christian and Sikh. There it met popular feeling with tank and truncheon, pogrom and death squad. Today, the same configuration threatens to be repeated in the area the current prime minister calls 'the greatest danger to Indian democracy', the Naxalite corridor that runs from Jharkand to Andhra Pradesh: pre-Aryan tribal populations with their own forest cults, whose homelands are subject to ever more ruthless despoliation. Vajpeyi's formulation is better reversed. The 'shadow nation' is not where democracy is denied, but where it is practised. What is hidden within India is Hindustan. It is that which tacitly shapes the state and determines the frontiers between freedom and repression, what is allowed and what is forbidden.

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Official secularism is not meaningless. If India is a confessional state, it is by default, not prescription. There is no need to be a Hindu in any sense other than by birth to be successful in bureaucratic career terms. Descent, not piety, is the criterion. Much of the state apparatus, especially its upper echelons, may be composed of individuals largely or entirely secular in outlook, practising or devout Hindus perhaps only a minority. Compared with the state, society is less secular. To that extent, the ideology of Indian secularism is grounded in a real difference, and makes a difference. An ideology it nevertheless remains. For what the character of the Indian state essentially reproduces is that of Congress as a nationalist party. It is not overtly confessional, on the contrary making much of its secular ideals, but in both composition and practice is based squarely on the Hindu community, and just as Congress made no serious effort to register or come to terms politically with the Muslim League, so the state over which the party has presided has never made any serious effort to improve the social or political position of its Muslim minority. Had the party or state been truly secular, in each case this would have been a priority, but that was the last thing it had in mind. There cannot be a genuinely secular party or state unless it is willing to confront religious superstition and bigotry, rather than truckle to them. Neither party nor state has ever contemplated doing that, because both have rested, sociologically speaking, on Hindu caste society. The continued dominance of upper castes in public institutions – administration, police, courts, universities, media – belongs to the same matrix.

In the history of 20th-century nationalism, there is a distinct sub-group in which religion played a central organising role from the start, providing so to speak the genetic code of the movement. The most significant cases are those which eventually founded stable parliamentary democracies. The three leading states of this type in the world today are Ireland, Israel and India. In all three, the nationalist party that came to power after independence – Fine Gael, Mapai, Congress – distanced itself from the confessional undertow of the struggle without ever being able to tackle its legacy head-on. In each case, as the ruling party gradually lost its lustre, it was outflanked by a more

extreme rival that had fewer inhibitions about appealing directly to the theological passions aroused by the original struggle: Fianna Fail, Likud, BJP. The success of these parties was due not just to the faltering of the first wave of office-holders, but to their ability to articulate openly what had always been latent in the national movement, but neither candidly acknowledged nor consistently repudiated. They could claim, with a certain justice, to be legitimate heirs of the original cause. In each case, the setting was a parliamentary system, in which they operated constitutionally, if in each case with certain prewar sympathies for European fascism. Jabotinsky, founder of the line leading to Likud, was an admirer of Mussolini; the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the organisation underpinning the BJP, looked to National Socialism.

Neither the institutional Catholicism of De Valera's Ireland nor the constitutional Judaism of the Zionist state set up by Ben-Gurion was repeated in India, where the state has never professed any such explicit religious allegiance. Historically, no Congress leader had been capable of openly and vigorously combating Gandhian pietism, all persuaded that its emotional appeal offered a shortcut to independence with an emotional awakening against the British. After Independence, Gandhi's doctrines were consigned to the museum, but his saturation of politics with Hindu pathos lived on. For two generations, as in Israel, the compromised origins of the state could be masked by the charisma of a ruler who cared little for superstition of any kind, but a good deal about state-led economic development. After he went – full Hindu funeral rites on the Ganges – there was a rapid degeneration. Arguably, Nehru left a worse legacy in this respect than Ben-Gurion, since he injected a further irrationalist element into the political system, blood rather than faith, with the creation of a hereditary dynasty that has been an additional curse, lingering without end. The daughter, characteristically, made more of a show of secularism, writing a belated commitment to it for the first time into the constitution, while in practice toying instrumentally with confessional appeals. By the time the grandson was in charge, the global turn to neoliberalism was in full swing, and the Indian middle class eager for its pickings. In these conditions, the ground was prepared for the BJP to enter, Likud-style, into its inheritance. In all three countries, the political system would come to rest on a more or less regular alternation between two large kindred forces, each bidding for alliance with an array of opportunist smaller parties to form majorities difficult for them to achieve by themselves – the pattern shared in the Dail, the Knesset and the Lok Sabha. In all three, the marginalisation of the left has been a structural effect of the dominance of the hegemonic religion in the national identity.

The temporalities and outcomes of the process differed. The Irish reversion came within a decade of independence – its carrier was the genuinely more popular and radical wing of the national movement, with the greatest anti-colonial legitimacy – and enjoyed the longest ascendancy, only finally collapsing last year. It took thirty years for the Israeli variant to gain the upper hand, which it still enjoys. The Indian was slower still: half a century passed before the BJP gained office. A mutation of the Hindu Mahasabha, with which Gandhi had been on good terms, it had played a very modest role in the independence struggle, coming to the fore only during partition, when it led the campaign to divide Bengal along religious lines, pulling Congress in along with it. In the RSS, the party had a disciplined mass organisation behind it, but no fighting credentials comparable to the IRA or the Irgun. It took successive stages in the decay of Congress – the Emergency; the manipulation and repression of Sikh insurgency in Punjab; its retribution in the death of Indira Gandhi; the ensuing pogrom in Delhi, applauded by her son; the ballooning corruption around Rajiv Gandhi, and its generalisation with the neoliberal turn under Narasimha Rao – for the BJP finally to achieve take-off as a credible alternative to the ruling party. But by the 1990s, the conditions for its ascent had crystallised. The social promises of Congress had faded, markets and money filled the airwaves, customary expectations and inhibitions were eroded. In such conditions, anomic modernisation unleashed a classic reaction of religious compensation. The time for Hindutva, the vision of Vinayak Savarkar, a revolutionary fighter incarcerated by the Raj on the Andamans before

Gandhi ever set political foot in India, had come.

The rise of the BJP was greeted with intense alarm by most of the country's intellectuals, many of whom saw the party and its mentor the RSS as akin to an Indian version of fascism. This was a category mistake – there was no working-class threat, no economic slump, no revanchist drive, to produce any subcontinental equivalent of the interwar scene in Europe – and overlooked not only the distinct social matrix of Hindutva, but the ideological setting in which it could flourish. Indian secularism of the post-independence period had never sharply separated state and religion, let alone developed any systematic critique of Hinduism. But by the 1980s, it had come under fire from neo-nativist thinkers as an alienated elitism, insufficiently attuned to popular sensibilities and practices of devotion that Gandhi had intuitively understood, and Subaltern Studies would later defend and illustrate. Still, the vocal anti-secularism of Ashis Nandy, T.N. Madan and others remained a minority trend within intellectual opinion, if one that enjoyed high visibility and real influence.

Much more widespread was – and is – another discourse, embellishing Hinduism as pre-eminently a faith of tolerant pluralism and peaceable harmony, its teeming multiplicity of different deities, beliefs and rituals a veritable template for a modern multiculturalism. For Amartya Sen and others, indeed, no other religion has so capaciously included even atheism in its repertoire, along with monotheism, polytheism, pantheism and any other sort of theism. In this version, secularism cannot be at odds with a Hinduism whose values are so close to its own. Of course, just because Hinduism is so ecumenical a religion, intolerant or aggressive strains may also find accommodation within its embrace. But with a sufficiently open mind, these can be transformed into their opposite. Sen tells us that ‘no matter what the “message” of the Bhagavad-Gita is meant to be’, Arjuna’s arguments against killing are ‘not really vanquished’ by Krishna, inviting us to believe it irrelevant that Arjuna ends by agreeing with Krishna and kills as enjoined. Since Sen’s grandfather ‘identified an overarching liberality as part and parcel of the basic Hindu approach’, why trouble ourselves with what can only be less basic to it? ‘It is not particularly worthwhile,’ Sen explains, ‘to enter into a debate over whether the liberal, tolerant and receptive traditions within Hinduism may in any sense be taken to be more authentic than the narrower and more combative interpretations that have been forcefully championed by present-day Hindu politics.’

A secularism as spavined as this presents little obstacle to Hindutva. Long before Sen, its originator Savarkar cast the generous mantle of Hinduism over atheists, and his successors have had no difficulty turning the tropes of Indo-tolerant pluralism into maxims of their own. The BJP does not oppose, but upholds secularism, for ‘India is secular because it is Hindu.’ Its theorists have little reason to fear a debate others decline. ‘About 25 words in an inscription of Asoka,’ Nirad Chaudhuri once observed, ‘have succeeded in almost wholly suppressing the thousands in the rest of the epigraphy and the whole of Sanskrit literature which bear testimony to the incorrigible militarism of the Hindus’ – or, more accurately, their rulers and bards – among whom, between the stele of Ashoka and the conversion of Gandhi, ‘there is not one word of non-violence in the theory and practice of statecraft.’ Generalisation for generalisation, who could doubt which Bengali judgment is the more historical?

Overt encapsulation of the nation by religion has come later in India than it did in Ireland or Israel, but the prior ‘accommodations’ – in the technical Jesuit sense – of Hinduism by a world of lay officials and intellectuals were one of its enabling conditions. ‘Myths have a way of running away with their proponents,’ G. Balachandran, an Indian critic of this outlook, of whom there have not been that many, has remarked: ‘Belief in the essentially secular character of the modern Indian state and society can often be little more than an exercise in self-congratulation which overlooks or rationalises the sectarian religious outlook pervading large areas of contemporary social and political practice.’ The result is a blurring of ideological boundaries to a point where the BJP appropriates ‘the language of secularism’, Congress makes a ‘studied espousal of so-called soft

Hindutva' and the communist parties 'proffer and publicise versions of a "purer" and "truer" Hinduism closer to popular religion as they understand it'.

In such a process of competitive desecularisation, as another analyst has termed it, the initial advantage could only lie with the BJP. Its breakthrough came in 1992 with a national campaign to demolish the mosque at Ayodhya, desecrating the supposed birthplace of Rama, the only mass political mobilisation – something of which Congress had long ceased to be capable – India has seen for decades. Culminating in the triumphant destruction of the mosque, as the Congress government stood by, the operation gave the BJP the momentum that put it into office in Delhi by the end of the decade. But its arrival at the turn of the century as a ruling party was not a straightforward jump from the springboard of Ayodhya, nor a progress that left it structurally unaltered. Its strongholds had always lain in the Hindi-speaking belt of North India, a narrower regional base than that of Congress, and one incapable of delivering a parliamentary majority on its own. That was one obvious barrier to replacing Congress as India's dominant party. Another and more important obstacle came from a different direction.

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In the time of Nehru and for twenty years after him, Congress had ruled a segmented society, divided vertically and horizontally by caste, which rarely coincided across regions. At the summit of this hierarchy, and at the controls of the state machine, were Brahmins. Beneath them, in that epoch, were the least privileged castes comprising the majority of the population, pinioned in their hereditary stations, the passive foundations of a huge democracy run by an elite without inconveniences from below. The Emergency imposed by Nehru's daughter not only released into being the BJP, it also cracked the carapace of the Congress system of caste subordination, wealthy farmers breaking away from it to lead the rebellion that brought the first non-Congress coalition to power in 1977. Fifteen years later, synchronised this time with the take-off of the BJP, caste erupted onto the political scene. The mandated reservations in public employment for 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes' had been fixed initially at 12.5 and 5 per cent, later increased to 15 and 7.5 per cent. There matters stood when the Janata coalition that briefly followed the Emergency produced a report from a commission headed by B.P. Mandal, a wealthy Shudra from Bihar, recommending that 'Other Backward Classes', amounting (it claimed) to more than half the population, should be accorded 27 per cent of public sector jobs. On returning to power a year later, Congress would have none of this, and it was not until another Janata-style coalition was, again briefly, in office in 1992 that the Mandal quota became law, over furious upper-caste opposition in North India.

The upshot was to galvanise an entire spectrum of hitherto apathetic, resigned or intimidated lower castes into active political life, transforming the landscape of Indian democracy. A coalition of two parties, one mobilising Dalits and the other OBCs (Other Backward Classes), captured UP – much the largest state in the country – a year later, and within another two years, Lucknow had the first Dalit chief minister in history, the redoubtable Kumari Mayawati, who has ruled the roost, alternating with her OBC rivals, for much of the time since. Congress has never recovered in what was once Nehru's electoral fief, his great-grandson crashing to humiliation there a few months ago. The upheaval in UP was the most spectacular expression of a new political scene, but caste parties and factions sprouted across the land, disrupting traditional arrangements and drawing suppressed forces into play. What this development, unquestionably, has wrought is an impressive social deepening of Indian parliamentarism, whose roots now reach much further down into popular soil. For some, like the French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot, it represents a rise of the lower classes amounting to a 'silent revolution', if one yet to be fully realised.

But castes are not classes. Constructed by religion and divided by occupation, they are denizens of a

universe of symbolism governed by customary rituals and taboos. State and market have loosened the frontiers between them, but when it came, political activism would all but inevitably acquire a distortingly symbolic twist. Job reservations are material benefits. The jobs, overwhelmingly in the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy, typically go to the highest layers within each caste, all of which are internally stratified. But since public employment accounts for a mere 4 to 5 per cent of the labour force, these jobs amount to little more than a drop in the ocean of destitution and unemployment; if the more precious and bitterly fought over for that. Since regional reservations can be much higher than the national ceiling of 49.5 per cent set by the Supreme Court, elections at state level readily become 'job auctions' in which castes, often conglomerates of jatis cobbled together for the occasion, compete ferociously with one another for the spoils of office, in disregard of any logic of wider, let alone national solidarities. 'Castes have no permanent friends when it comes to politics,' according to Dipankar Gupta: electoral alliances of Brahmins and Kshatriyas with Untouchables against OBCs can be sealed in one part of the country, while higher-caste armies wage vicious rural war on Dalits in another.

In driving this Hobbesian free-for-all, recognition – the quest for dignity – trumps redistribution, leaders gratifying followers with symbols of esteem rather than the substance of emancipation. Mayawati's erection of 150,000 statues of Ambedkar, not to speak of two hundred effigies of her party's elephant symbol and of herself (the largest 24 feet high, and like the rest covered in pink polythene as the state went to the polls in March, on the orders of the Election Commission, so as not to beguile or distract voters), at the cost of more schools and healthcare, offers an extreme case of this identity politics, which does not seek to abolish caste, as Ambedkar had wanted, but to affirm it. Awakening as voters, the poor and not so poor activate hereditary enclosures as political communities, rather than dissolving them. Within these enclosures, internally far more hierarchical than equal, the identities are ascribed and conformity to them enforced. Historically, the political philosopher Javeed Alam has pointed out, caste was a form of collective unfreedom from which it was more difficult for individuals to escape than slavery or serfdom. The traces of that remain.

Economic and educational development, however uneven, have weakened caste barriers. But crossing them is still taboo for the vast majority of the population, three-quarters of whom reject intercaste marriage, as do well over half of those with higher education. Nor has the actual lot of Dalits, exposed to violence and misery across India, changed in pace with either the formal ideology of citizenship or their electoral clout at the polls. Castes continue to be, as they have always been, and Ambedkar saw, one of the purest negations of any notion of liberty and equality, let alone fraternity, imaginable. That the Indian state has never lifted a juridical finger to do away with them, but in seeking only to ameliorate has if anything legally entrenched them, says more about its secularism than the omission of any reference to it in the constitution, or the belated passage of an amendment rectifying the omission to embellish the Emergency. But as they have become increasingly powerful lobbies, with the peculiar dynamism of hybrid voluntary-hereditary associations, castes are more than ever the pediments of Indian democracy. No longer passive but vigilant, in yet more radically segmenting its vast electorate they are what most fundamentally stabilises it.

The BJP, as a party aiming to unify the nation under its true Hindu banners, thus found, just as its momentum was increasing, that caste was blocking its path. At the time, its onslaught at Ayodhya was often read as a counterblow to the arrival of Mandal, mobilising the rage of upper-caste youth against impending loss of privileges. There may have been some truth in this, but if so, a course correction soon followed. Realising that it could not hope to win national power without attracting middle and lower castes, it set about broadening its appeal, and by the time of its first major electoral success in 1998, won 42 per cent of the OBC vote in North India. But regional parties composed of heteroclite caste blocs by now commanded too much of the landscape for it to have any

chance of taking the place of Congress of old, itself now reduced to a remnant of its former self. In the last three national elections, the two parties combined have never won so much as half the total vote. Coalition with an array of regional parties has become a requirement of rule at the centre.

With it has come a large measure of convergence between Congress and the BJP in government, each pursuing at home a neoliberal economic agenda, as far as their allies will allow them, and abroad a strategic rapprochement with the United States. Culturally, they now bathe in a common atmosphere in which religious insignia, symbols, idols and anthems are taken for granted in commercial and official spaces alike. Organisationally, they are not so similar, since the BJP possesses real cadres and members, Congress little more than a memory of them. Ideologically, too, their appeals are distinct, as are their social bases. Congress may tack towards confessionism, but it can still rely on Muslim and Adivasi vote-banks by pointing to the BJP as a greater sectarian danger, and invoke a vague social paternalism to garner votes among the poor. The BJP may tack towards secularism, but it can rely on the fervour of the devout and the attractiveness of a more muscular nationalism to an upwardly mobile middle class. Practically, the differences are fewer. Where communalism suits them, there is little to choose between the two. More died in the pogrom of 1984 in Delhi covered by Congress, than of 2002 in Gujarat covered by the BJP, although the latter's active political complicity was greater. Neither compares with the massacres in Hyderabad under Nehru and Patel. Well-wishers abroad occasionally express hopes for a grand coalition uniting the two major parties in the service of modernising reforms to bring the country up to scratch, as understood in Washington and Brussels, but the *raison d'être* of each resists this.

With the morphing under pressure from below of the political system into one resembling the Irish or Israeli, levels of parliamentary personnel and conduct have plummeted. Pervasive corruption dates back to the third generation of Nehru family rule, mired in a massive arms procurement scandal in the 1980s, and the subsequent regime of Narasimha Rao in the 1990s, the first to purchase a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha with millions in cash for defections to the government. Under the current incumbent, Manmohan Singh, it has reached an all-time high, with the defalcation from the public purse of some \$40 billion in crooked telecom contracts alone, while the prime minister – everywhere lauded as the image of probity – looked the other way. As the costs of securing a seat in Parliament have risen, so it has increasingly become a club of the super-rich: one out of five MPs is a dollar millionaire, and the total assets of its 543 members can be reckoned at \$2 billion, in a society where more than half the population lives on less than \$2 dollars a day. Indiscriminate criminality is the concomitant phenomenon. In the present Lok Sabha, some 150 MPs – over a quarter of the house – have a total of more than four hundred criminal charges against them. At state level, the statistics are more extreme. In 2010, Bihar held elections that were widely hailed as a triumph for the clean government of Nitesh Kumar, a well-respected ally of the BJP. Of the newly refreshed Legislative Assembly, nearly half – 110 out of 243 members – had criminal charges against them, including murder, kidnapping and extortion.

With a political class of this calibre, it is no surprise that the Lok Sabha now debates the nation's affairs for just a third of the time it used to spend on them. Or that nepotism has reached a point where more than a third of all Congress MPs inherit their seats by family connection (twice the figure for the BJP), and every single one of them under the age of 35. In India democracy never extended very far from government to the parties contending for it, which were always run from the top down. Today, however, many have become something other than the oligarchic organisations into which the political scientists Ostrogorsky and Michels thought all parties must sooner or later turn. With the exception of the communists and the BJP, they have become family firms competing for market shares of the electorate and so access to public office. The first of the major regional dynasties, setting the pattern for so many others, dates from the capture of the DMK in Tamil Nadu by the Karunanidhi patriarch at the turn of the 1970s. But the *fons et origo* of the transmission of

power by bloodline came, of course, at national level, with Nehru's complaisance at the installation of his daughter in pole position to take over after him. This was the authoritative example, set at the apex of the union, that legitimised the feudalism of hereditary succession on the lower rungs; nowhere more pitifully than in Kashmir, where once restored to office and obedience in the 1970s, Abdullah – a leader ultimately as disastrous for his people as any Abbas – passed a franchise for compliant enrichment to his offspring Farooq Abdullah, who handed it on to his offspring Omar Abdullah, now a crony of Nehru's great-grandson. Of the ensuing scenery, André Bételle, the doyen of sociologists of India, has written that the 'abject surrender' of Congress to a single family, corrupting all other parties, has done irreparable harm to Indian democracy, poisoning the wells of public life.

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Among so many degenerative symptoms in the executive and legislatures alike, one antibody in the constitution has stood out. The Supreme Court, which had not played a particularly distinguished role under Nehru, disgraced itself by rubber-stamping the Emergency. Thereafter, spurred by the reaction against it and no doubt ashamed of its past servility, the court has moved in the opposite direction, becoming the principal breakwater in India against threats to liberty, abuses of power and theft of public goods. In two landmark changes, the court has made it more difficult for the centre to overturn elected governments in the regions by imposing presidential rule, and has started to accept 'public interest litigation', allowing ordinary citizens and associations in civil society to bring suits before it against public authorities.

Today, the court is so proactive that it can not only annul laws passed in the Indian Parliament if it decides they are unconstitutional (the normal prerogative of a supreme court), but also demand that Parliament pass laws it determines are urgently needed – a juridical innovation without precedent in any other country. The current bench has harried Congress and its prime minister on the telecoms scandal, in which licenses were doled out to companies at billions of dollars below their value, and shows no sign of being willing to sponge away its implications. The court, now self-recruiting, is the most powerful judiciary on earth. It has acquired such an abnormal degree of authority because of the decay of the representative institutions around it. Even admirers are aware of the risks. In the graphic phrase of Upendra Baxi, India's leading legal scholar and one of the first to bring a public interest suit before the court, it is 'chemotherapy for a carcinogenic body politic'. So long as the malady persists, few Indians would think the country better off without it.

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The tidal wave of corruption in Indian public life has, of course, been in part a by-product of the neoliberal turn of the state since the 1990s, and the faster growth it has unleashed. The country now occupies a prominent place in every prospectus of the Bric powers, its economy the second largest in size, though in many ways strange in shape. Manufacturing is not its pile-driver. Services account for over half of GDP, agriculture for less than a fifth in a society where it accounts for more than half the labour force. Over 90 per cent of total employment is in the informal sector, a mere 6 to 8 per cent in the formal sector, of which two-thirds are government jobs of one kind or another. In India cultivable land is 40 per cent more abundant than in China, but on average agricultural yields are 50 per cent lower. The population is younger and growing faster than in China, but the demographic dividend is not being cashed: for ten million new entrants to the labour force each year, just five million jobs are being created. The greatest economic success of the past twenty years has been achieved in IT, where firms of global impact have emerged. But its employment effect is nugatory: less than 2 per of the labour force. Even in high-technology industries, average labour productivity appears to be little more than a third of Chinese levels.

Nonetheless, growth averaged 7.7 per cent in the first decade of this century, with savings rising to 36 per cent of GDP – double the respective rates of Brazil. But if the comparator is China, with now roughly the same size of population and a similar starting-point in the 1950s, India scarcely shines, as Pranab Bardhan has shown in his masterly analytic survey of the two countries, *Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay*. Per capita income in India is about a quarter of that in China, and inequality is significantly higher even than in the notoriously polarised PRC. India may have fewer billionaires than China, but they are also richer, and their share of national wealth is far greater: just 66 resident billionaires control assets worth more than a fifth of the country's GDP. Capital at large is three times more concentrated than in the United States. At the other end of the social scale, poverty has declined since the 1990s, though not more rapidly than in the 1970s and 1980s, and if measured by the World Bank line of a miserable \$1.25 a day, still stood at more than two-fifths of the population in 2005. Infant mortality is three times as high as in China. Undernourishment is much more prevalent even than in sub-Saharan Africa, afflicting more than half of all Indian children under the age of five. In 11 Indian states, four-fifths of the population are afflicted with anaemia. For the most part, the corrective role of the state is minimal. Two-thirds of all government subsidies – for food, fuel, electricity – go to the relatively well-off, mainly rich farmers. Over 80 per cent of expenditure on healthcare is private. One out of every five children never goes to school. Military expenditure virtually equals spending on all anti-poverty programmes combined.

Yet the Indian state is still, for big business and foreign investors alike, a far from satisfactory steward of the country's interests. Neoliberal the direction of every government since the 1990s may have been, but the pace has often been halting and the road strewn with obstacles. The dirigiste instincts of an unregenerate bureaucracy and the populist demagoguery of too many politicians have, in this view, hampered normal progress to freer markets. Banking remains largely controlled by the state. There has been little privatisation, even of such important industries as coal. Barriers to trade persist, with tariffs still twice as high as in China. Quotas limiting international stakeholders have not been abolished. Why be surprised, then, that foreign direct investment runs so low, that the two-million-strong Indian expatriates – the richest of all immigrant communities in the United States – fail to invest in the homeland as gladly as overseas Chinese have done, or that Mumbai conglomerates put so much money into buying up auto or steel in Britain, where Tata is now the largest private employer in the UK?

What such frustrations express is the intractable brake that Indian democracy has so far placed on the fullest expansion of Indian capital. The poor outvote the rich, the villages the cities, the slums the suburbs. At once activated and segregated by caste, the deprived have never been able to achieve any real redistribution of national income, their drive for recognition typically contenting itself with symbolic representation in the political firmament, with little reaction at its lack of practical consequence. Comparing India and China from another angle, one of the most lucid political minds of the subcontinent, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, has observed that in the People's Republic, where there is no democracy, communist rule is based on output legitimacy: it is accepted by the masses for the material benefits it takes great care to deliver them, however unequally. Whereas in India, democracy allows just the opposite – an input legitimacy from the holding of free elections, that thereby excuses the political class from distributing more than confetti to the masses who have elected them.

Commentators now complain as regularly of legislative deadlock in Delhi as they do in Washington. But the underlying reasons are quite different. What the Indian impasse reflects is the political contradiction at the core of the system between, as Zoya Hasan has crisply put it, 'the frustration of the majority of citizens with governments they vote in but do not control, and the smug indifference of elites and middle classes towards governments they do not vote in, but control'. Neoliberal precepts have the favour of the latter. Yet the former still continue, negatively, to inhibit too

provocative a dismantling of the arrangements of an earlier, more paternalist system of rule. Worse, from the standpoint of the stock market and the technocrats seeking further liberalisation to empower it, legislation cannot be wholly insulated from the pressure of a vast destitute electorate. In 2005, when Congress still depended on communist votes for a majority in Parliament, a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed, assuring any household in the countryside a hundred days' labour a year on public works at the legal minimum wage, with at least a third of these jobs reserved for women. It is work for pay, rather than a direct cash transfer scheme as in Brazil, to minimise the danger of money going to those who are not actually the poor, and so ensure it reaches only those willing to do the work. Denounced by all right-thinking opinion as debilitating charity behind a façade of make-work, it was greeted by the middle class like 'a wet dog at a glamorous party', in the words of one of its architects, the Belgian-Indian economist Jean Drèze. Unlike the Bolsa Família in Brazil, the application of NREGA was left to state governments, so its impact has been very uneven and incomplete, with wages often less than the legal minimum, and for many fewer than a hundred days. Works performed are not always productive, and as with all other social programmes in India, funds are liable to local malversation.

But NREGA now represents the largest entitlement programme in the world, reaching some forty million rural households, a quarter of the total in the country. More than half of these are Dalit or Adivasi, and 48 per cent of the scheme's beneficiaries are women – double their share of casual labour in the private sector. Such is the demand for employment by NREGA in the countryside that it far outruns supply. A National Survey Sample for 2009-10 has revealed that 45 per cent of all rural households wanted the work it offers, of whom only 56 per cent got it. What NREGA has thus started to do, in the formulation Drèze has taken from Ambedkar, is break the dictatorship of the private employer in the countryside, helping by its example to raise the wages even of non-recipients. Since inception, its annual cost has risen from \$2.5 billion to more than \$8 billion, a token of its popularity. This remains less than 1 per cent of GDP, and the great majority of rural labourers in the private sector are still not paid the minimum wage due them.

Conceived outside the party system, and accepted by Congress only when it had little expectation of winning the elections of 2004, NREGA eventually had such popular support that the Lok Sabha adopted it nem con. Three years later, with typical dishonesty, the Manmohan regime renamed it as 'Gandhian' to fool the masses into believing that Congress was responsible for it. The contrast in origin and scope with the Bolsa Família underlines the major difference between the two great tropical democracies. NREGA is being applied in structurally far less favourable conditions. Brazil had a Workers' Party born from militant labour struggles, and a leader committed to and capable of coherent social reform. In India, the communist tradition has long splintered in three directions, and trade unions muster no more than a tiny 3 per cent of the labour force. Caste, not class, and alas, least of all the working class, is what counts most in popular life, at once sustaining Indian democracy and draining it of reconstructive energy.

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If the poor remain divided against themselves, and workers are scattered and ill-organised, what of other sources of opposition within the political system? The new middle class has turned against mega-corruption, but is scarcely foreign to the bribe and the wink, let alone favours to kin, at its own level of advantage. Besotted with a culture of celebrity and consumption, on spectacularly vapid display in much of the media, and to all appearances hardening in collective egoism, it is no leaven in the social order. The intelligentsia is another matter. There, India possesses a range and quality of minds that perhaps no other developing society in the world, and not that many developed ones, can match. Whether working inside or outside the union, it forms an interconnected community of impressive acuity and distinction. In what kind of relationship does it stand to the country? Intellectuals are often held, quite wrongly, to be critical by definition. But in some societies, the

mistake has become internalised as a self-conception or expectation, and so it probably is for most Indian intellectuals. How far do they live up to it?

Generalisations here are bound to be fallible. But an approximate assessment is perhaps possible all the same. What is clear is that attitudes differ according to issues, along a gradient that has a logic of its own. So far as Indian society at large is concerned, it is safe to say that an overwhelming consensus is highly critical. It would be difficult to identify the social disorder or iniquity that has not been subjected to unsparing scrutiny. Hunger, misery, illiteracy; inequality of every kind, sexual discrimination, economic exploitation; corruption, commercialisation, fanaticism; spreading slums, looting of the environment – a detailed scholarship of anger or disgust covers virtually all. The passionate indictments of a great deal of this landscape in recent essays by Ramachandra Guha, the eminent critical liberal who is India's leading contemporary historian (they extend also to his country's pretensions to great power status), are eloquent of a widely shared sensibility.

Society is one thing; politics, although never disconnected from it, another. What of the claims of the 'idea of India', or what can equally well be called the Indian Ideology – the triune values of democracy, secularity and unity? Here the ether alters noticeably. But the response to the three is not the same: with each, the critical quotient is distinct. Indian democracy, although so often ritually loaded like a local idol with garlands as if it were a miracle, is on the whole treated with far less superstition than the rites might suggest. Indeed, it might be thought few countries enjoy such a copious and sophisticated body of political science, bearing on so many aspects of its electoral and constitutional life. The six hundred folio pages of the recent *Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, edited by Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, are impressive testimony enough to that. Empirical and theoretical approaches combine, in a spirit that is typically both analytical and critical. From Mehta's own sharp *Burden of Democracy* to Guha's judgment at the end of *India after Gandhi* that the country is at best a '50 per cent democracy', few intellectuals have lost sight of the flaws and limitations in the Indian version of representative government.

Yet compared with social criticism, political critique is typically less comprehensive and less searching. For no political system, however democratic, consists just of its institutions of representation. They are always flanked and buttressed by its apparatuses of repression. Symptomatically, these are a conspicuous absence in the *Oxford Companion*, as elsewhere, where civil rights scarcely figure. Neither the long-standing barrage of liberticide laws in India – starting with the Preventive Detention Act rammed through by Nehru and Patel as early as February 1950, less than a month after the promulgation of the new constitution, and stretching through the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958), Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1967), Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act (1971), Maintenance of Internal Security Act (1971), National Security Act (1980), Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act (1985), Prevention of Terrorist Activities Act (2002) and the Unlawful Activities Amendment Act (2004) – nor the role and character of the army, the Central Reserve Police Force, Border Security Force, Central Industrial Security Force, Home Guards, let alone the clandestine powers and activities of the Intelligence Bureau (a vast military, paramilitary and surveillance complex, totalling upwards of two million operatives), receive even passing mention in most of the literature on the world's largest democracy.

There are honourable exceptions. 'A staggering number of laws that sanction the use of coercive powers have been enacted in India,' Arvind Verma writes. Noting that 53,000 people were arrested under the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act, of whom just 434 could be convicted seven years later, he underlines some daily realities of Indian democracy: 'Torture is routinely practised in most police stations and death in police custody is a frequent phenomenon,' while – nominally outside the jails themselves – 'the police practice of getting rid of suspects through staged encounters is unfortunately all too common. Suspects against whom the police are unable to bring substantial evidence or those who are perceived to be dangerous are simply murdered.' Nor, while the police

are at work, have the military been idle. In the 1960s, the army was deployed 'in aid of the civil power' some 476 times, and in 1979-80 alone, 64 times; often 'openly stationed so as to provide a perpetual reminder, and on occasion an actual expression, of the fact that the existing social and political order in India is only to be challenged by its critics at their peril'.

These are not matters on which the literature of miraculism cares to dwell. It is not only in breadth of scope, however, that even more level-headed accounts of the political system so often fall short, but depth of penetration too. There is no lack of ledgers registering assorted strengths and weaknesses of representative democracy in India, and arriving at different estimates of the balance between them. But Ambedkar's inaugural error has yet to be corrected. Virtually all conventional analysis posits, as he did, a contradiction between society and polity, and explains imperfections in the latter that he did not foresee, as effects of distortions in the former of which he was bitterly aware. But the relationship between the two has always been more paradoxical than this. A rigid social hierarchy was the basis of original democratic stability, and its mutation into a compartmentalised identity politics has simultaneously deepened parliamentary democracy and debauched it. Throughout, caste is the cage that has held Indian democracy together, and it has yet to escape.

At secularity, taboos become stronger and the front of criticism narrows. In part, the reason lies in the political, and to some extent intellectual, chequerboard of recent decades, where to question official secularism as a doctrine, for a wide mainstream, risks opening the gates not only to nativist snipers but the troops of Hindutva. Yet the reflex of Belloc's 'Children! Always cling to nurse, for fear of finding something worse,' though real enough, is not the principal reason for a reluctance to tackle the sophisms and evasions of Indian secularism that makes the courage of its few true critics, pre-eminently the independent Marxist scholar Achin Vanaik, stand out all the more starkly. The larger explanation lies in the tense relationship of so many Indian intellectuals to the traditional faith surrounding them. Even for non-believers in the ranks of Congress, once religion had fused with nation in the independence struggle, to demystify one was to damage the other. In the 1920s the great Tamil iconoclast E.V. Ramasamy could declare: 'He who invented God is a fool. He who propagates God is a scoundrel. He who worships God is a barbarian.' He is still admired in his homeland. But an enemy of caste and of sexual inequality as fearless as this had no place in the construction of the Indian Union, which he resisted, and once it was consolidated, a stance like his became unthinkable for any politician with national ambitions. Intellectuals were under less constraint, but few cared to be too outspoken. On the whole, only Dalit writers have broken ranks. For how could the stature of Gandhi as father of the nation not suffer if Hinduism was to be handled so brusquely?

To this political inhibition was added a cultural difficulty. Sociologically, Hinduism was not a realm of belief or practice separate from the rest of existence, but permeated it as the ubiquitous texture of popular life. How could even secular progressives affront it, without loss of sympathy with the vast majority of their fellow citizens, and the symbols and ceremonies lending colour and meaning to their lives? Not only that. Like every other major religion, Hinduism also gave rise to a major reservoir of high culture – metaphysics, poetry and mathematics in particular. To dismiss or undervalue such riches of the subcontinental past would be as philistine a self-mutilation as a breezy ignorance of Christian art or thought would be in the West or the classical corpus in China. Outstanding among them, too, were the great epics of Hindu legend, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which unlike the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*, are still in such absolute command of popular imagination that their dramatisation on television could not only mesmerise hundreds of millions of viewers, but occasion many a literal act of worship before the small screen. If Gandhi could in all seriousness advise Congress in 1947 that partition was no more definitive than Ravana's abduction of Sita to Ceylon, where Rama would reclaim her; or the law minister of a communist-supported

government in Delhi, assuring the Supreme Court of his faith in the divinity of Rama, defer as potential sacrilege the dredging of the Pamban channel across which Hanuman's monkey army built a bridge to rescue Sita - who should be impious enough to gainsay them? Accommodation of fervours like these, inspired by so popular a literary masterpiece, might be held common prudence on the part of a state equi or flexi-distant from all religions. Indian secularism can encompass them all. Few are inclined to ask how many clothes it ever possessed, or what has become of them.

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At the last of the Trimurti values, dissent comes close to vanishing altogether. Democracy may be imperfect, secularity ambiguous, but unity - of the nation and the land belonging to it - has become virtually untouchable. Here the heritage of the past has had its own weight. Hindu culture, exceptionally rich in epics and metaphysics, was exceptionally poor in history, a branch of knowledge radically devalued by the doctrines of *karma*, for which any given temporal existence on earth was no more than a fleeting episode in the moral cycle of the soul. No major chronicles appear till the 12th century, over a millennium later than *Herodotus* or *Sima Qian*, and no *histoire raisonnée* as a cumulative body of writing ever emerged. Gandhi's dictum dismissing the worth of any memory of the past - 'history is an interruption of nature' - is a famous modern expression of this outlook. In such a historiographic vacuum, when the nationalist movement arose, legend encountered no barrier. 'In an overwhelmingly religious society,' one subcontinental scholar has written, 'even the most clear-sighted leaders have found it impossible to distinguish romanticism from history and the latter from mythology.' It follows that 'if the idea of India is suffused with religious and mythical meanings, so is the territory it covers,' Nehru explaining to Zhou Enlai that the *Mahabharata* entitled him to the McMahon Line. Today the cult of Indian unity has typically worked itself free from such mystical origins, territory as such becoming the bond unifying the nation, regardless of any religious - let alone ethnic or cultural - trappings. Meghnad Desai's *The Rediscovery of India* is recent example, in many ways an unusually free-spirited work that dismantles not a few nationalist myths, only to end with the purest hypostatisation of another, for which the 'one element central to the narrative of nationhood' becomes simply 'territorial integrity', under whose idyllic shelter 'all Indians, as individuals, are willing to co-exist under the same legal and constitutional system,' 'all regions have agreed to be part of the union,' and 'all take part in the vibrant democratic process.'

The reality is otherwise. In these pages, there should be little need for any reminder of the fate of Kashmir, under the longest military occupation in the world. At its height, in the sixty years since it was taken by India, some 400,000 troops have been deployed to hold down a Valley population of five million - a far higher ratio of repression than in Palestine or Tibet. Demonstrations, strikes, riots, guerrillas, risings urban and rural, have all been beaten down with armed force. In this 'valley of scorpions', declared Jagmohan - proconsul for Nehru's daughter in Kashmir - 'the bullet is the only solution.' The death toll, at a low reckoning, would be equivalent to the killing of four million people, were it India - more than double that, if higher estimates are accurate. Held fast by Nehru to prove that India was a secular state, Kashmir has demonstrated the exact opposite: a confessional expansionism. Today, the bureaucracy that rules it under military command contains scarcely a Muslim, and jobs in it can be openly advertised for Hindus only. In what was supposed to be the showcase of India's tolerant multiculturalism, ethnic cleansing has reduced Muslims, once a majority, to a third of the population of Jammu, and Hindu Pandits to a mere handful in the Valley.

How is this landscape received by the Indian intelligentsia? In late 2010, readers of the Indian press could find a headline 'Nobel Laureate takes India to task for tolerating tyranny.' Where would that be? Below, Amartya Sen uttered a plangent cry. 'As a loyal Indian citizen,' he exclaimed, 'it breaks my heart to see the prime minister of my democratic country - and one of the most humane and sympathetic political leaders in the world - engaged in welcoming the butchers of Myanmar and photographed in a state of cordial proximity.' Moral indignation is too precious an export to be

wasted at home. That the democracy of his country and the humanity of his leader preside over an indurated tyranny, replete with torture and murder, within what they claim as their national borders, need not ruffle a loyal Indian citizen. If we turn to Sen's book *The Argumentative Indian*, we find, in a footnote: 'The Kashmir issue certainly demands political attention on its own (I am not taking up that thorny question here).' Nor, we might infer from that delicate parenthesis, anywhere else either. Nobel prizes are rarely badges of political courage – some of infamy – so there is little reason for surprise at a silence that, in one form or another, is so common among Indian intellectuals.

Brazen celebration of India's goodwill in Kashmir, its peace troubled only by terrorists infiltrated from Pakistan, is a staple of the media more than the academy. There, discreet allusion to 'human rights abuses' that have marred the centre's performance are quite acceptable, excesses that any decent person must deplore. But any talk of self-determination is another matter, garlic to the vampire. More than ordinary intellectual conformism is at work here. To break ranks on India's claim to Kashmir is to risk not only popular hysteria but legal repression, as Arundhati Roy – brave enough to speak of freedom for Kashmir – bears witness: to question the territorial integrity of the union is a crime punishable at law. The same degree of pressure does not obtain outside the country, but Indian intellectuals abroad have not made notably better use of their greater freedom of expression. There the leading production comes from Sumantra Bose. *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* does not embellish the record of Indian rule, and covers in some detail the insurgencies which broke out against it in the 1990s, the extent of the assistance they received from Pakistan, and the way they were put down.

Descriptively, there is little it avoids. Prescriptively, however, it simply underwrites the status quo, on the grounds that the confessional and ethnic pattern in the region is now too complicated for self-determination to be applicable, and anyway India is not going to permit any such thing, so why not settle for the existing Line of Control, naturally assorted with appropriate placebos and human rights? Thus, on the one hand, 'the myth of freely and voluntarily given consent to Indian sovereignty is exploded by the appalling record of New Delhi-instigated subversion of democratic procedures and institutions and abuse of democratic rights in IJK over fifty years.' But, on the other hand – immediately following, on the same page – 'that India's dismissal of the plebiscite [promised to the UN in 1947] is fundamentally opportunistic does not detract from the reality that after more than fifty years of conflict [note the way the description of the fifty years has changed in the space of two sentences], the plebiscite is indeed an obsolete idea.' Why so? 'Self-determination is untenable given realpolitik, the entrenched interests of states, and the internal social and political diversity of IJK and of J&K as a whole.' Even an independent Kashmir, let alone one that opted for Pakistan, 'would be seen as an intolerable loss of territorial integrity and sovereignty by Indian state elites and the vast majority of the Indian public'. Upshot? 'Erasing or redrawing the Line of Control in Kashmir is neither feasible nor desirable.' We hold what we have: 'The de facto Indian and Pakistani sovereignties over their respective areas of Kashmir cannot, should not and need not be changed.'

No Indian general could put it better. Bose, who worked as an understrapper for Strobe Talbott (second in command at the US State Department in the era when Clinton was congratulating Russia on the 'liberation' of Grozny, and 'intimately involved in diplomacy on the South Asian subcontinent'), situates his solution for Kashmir in a constructive wider vision, in which 'India's maturity and confidence as the world's largest and most diverse democracy' and 'well-founded aspiration to be an economic and political player of global stature' should be able to find the right partner across the border in a future 'relatively moderate Pakistan which happens to be strongly influenced by its relationship with the United States'. If only there were a Sadat or Mubarak in Islamabad, Kashmir could enjoy the blessings of another Oslo, and Delhi the good conscience of Tel Aviv.

Looking north-east, attitudes are much the same, if typically rationales for them are adjusted to local conditions. There, the standard justification for military repression is that the various insurgent communities have always been far too small and isolated to be able to form independent states, and can only benefit from inclusion in the much more advanced Indian Union. The argument, like so much else in the national apologetics, is risible. Bhutan, in the same zone, is equally landlocked, and has a smaller population than Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram or even Meghalaya. Yet it is a perfectly viable independent state, with a seat at the United Nations like any other, and short of going the way of Sikkim, annexed by India in 1975, will continue to be so. What is true is that no break away from the union is conceivable in this area, not because of any economic impossibility, but because Delhi can unleash overwhelming military force, as it has done for a half a century, to crush any attempt at secession, and can count on exhaustion eventually wearing out all resistance, as it cannot in Kashmir, where the alternatives of independence or inclusion in Pakistan have not left the Valley, and any free vote would prefer either to the Indian yoke.

The toll of the two occupations forms no part of the triune liturgy. But the cold truth is that the British massacre at Amritsar which ignited the first great mass movement of the independence struggle was a bagatelle compared with the accumulated slaughter by the Indian army and paramilitary forces of their fellow citizens, or those deemed such, since independence. The same could, of course, be said of many states that were once colonies, not least the US itself, where the price in human life of territorial integrity was far higher. Still, at the altar of Trimurti, costs are discounted inversely to gains. Unity, whose moral and political deadweight is heavier, is safer from reproach than democracy or secularity.

An ideology, to be effective, must always in some measure answer to reality. The 'Idea of India' is not a mere tissue of myths. The co-existence of so many languages, the durability of parliamentary forms of government, the liveliness of cultural life, vigour of much intellectual exchange and elegance of social manners at their best, are all rightly matters of pride, out of which it has been fashioned. But the realities of the union are more complex, many of them much darker. The 'Idea' is a late mutant of Indian nationalism. Once any independent state has emerged from an anti-colonial struggle, what was once a discourse of awakening can easily become one of intoxication. In India that danger is great, because of the size of the nation, and the particular character and outcome of the way it came into being. Across its borders lie the accusing facts of the states that did not become part of India, whose existence cannot be squared with much of the story it continues to tell itself, and still could bring that story to a fatal end. Consoling themselves for domestic shortcomings, Indian intellectuals will often contrast the happier condition of their country with that of Pakistan. But given their respective starting-points, not to speak of the responsibility of the stronger in doing its best to sabotage the weaker from the outset, the comparison risks pharisaism. In any case, it is not always to Indian advantage. Though the military looms larger, today the media are more outspoken in Pakistan; though it is yet poorer, there is less undernourishment and better healthcare in Bangladesh. A more generous, more curious and more self-critical sense of their neighbours would become Indian attitudes better.

Needed above all is detachment from the totems of a romanticised past, and its relics in the present. The dynasty that still rules the country, its name as fake as the knock-off of a prestige brand, is the negation of any self-respecting republic. The party over which it presides has lost any *raison d'être* beyond clinging to its bloodline - now desperately pinning its hopes, after the flop of Nehru's weakling great-grandson, on his hardbitten sister, Priyanka Vadra, if only she would hurry up and divorce her too obviously shady tycoon-husband. Congress had its place in the national liberation struggle. Gandhi, who had made it the mass force it became, called at independence for its dissolution. He was right. Since then the party has been a steadily increasing calamity for the country. Its exit from the scene would be the best single gift Indian democracy could give itself. The

BJP is, of course, a more dangerous force. But it is a real party, with cadres, a programme and a social base. It cannot be wished out of existence, because it represents a substantial political phenomenon, not the decaying fossil of one, and has to be fought as such. So long as Congress lingers on paralytically, that will not occur. If Congress offers ultimate protection against Hindutva, why do more than just go on voting for it? Why think of any radical reconstruction of the state over which it has so long presided?

The political ills that all well-meaning patriots now deplore are not sudden or recent maladies of a once healthy system. They descend from its original composition, through the ruling family and its affiliates, and the venerations and half-truths surrounding these and the organisation enclosing them. Today, the largest statue in the world is being erected in Gujarat. The government commissioning it is BJP. But the giant it honours is a Congress leader, who wanted the RSS to join his party. Vallabhbhai Patel will tower six hundred feet high, twice the height of the Statue of Liberty. Appropriately, his will be the Statue of Unity. Long preceding it are monumentalisations, no less immane, in words not stone, of his companions. It is time to put away these effigies, and all they represent.

Perry Anderson

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P.S.

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