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**ARGUING DEMOCRACY: INTELLECTUALS AND
POLITICS IN MODERN INDIA**

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The idea of democracy, brought into being on an Athenian hillside some 2,500 years ago, has travelled far, and today attaches itself to a growing number of political projects. In everyday political talk, as well as in the specialised fields of the political and social sciences, terms like “spreading democracy,” “promoting democracy,” and, of course – “imposing democracy” – have become ubiquitous. Underlying such talk is a belief in democratic universalism; the idea that, as Larry Diamond, erstwhile advisor to Paul Bremer in Iraq, has put it: “Every country in the world can be democratic.” Yet, even as the ambition is asserted to spread democracy across the globe, our conceptions of what democracy *is* have narrowed: to a “checklist” model, a prescriptive blueprint, based almost entirely on Western experience.

We can perhaps sympathize with the impulse towards determinacy in defining democracy, in the face of the term’s wayward history; an impulse that wishes, rightly, to avoid a relativist dissipation of democracy’s meanings. However, the peripatetic life of the democratic idea suggests the increasing inadequacy of a history – and the prospective lessons drawn from such a history – that is written solely from within the terms of the West’s experience. Today, the idea of democracy has been drawn into quite other historical vortices, giving rise to political experiences that are transformative of the idea itself.

Democracy as a political idea draws its formidable appeal and power from its promise: from its resolute openness to the future, not from its ancestral pedigree.

There is no special normative or analytical privilege which historically prior forms of democracy can hope to command. Nor will the prior forms necessarily be more practically useful in the years ahead. Rather, in thinking about the possibilities of democracy across the world, the possibility that every country can become democratic, the political experience of countries like India will probably be a more valuable resource than the cases of, say, the United States, France, or Britain.

So, I'd like this evening to talk about India's democracy; the most expansive and arguably most significant experiment with democracy since the late eighteenth century. Habitually noted as a success of some sort, the Indian experiment is just as often absolved from serious interrogation. Following the political congratulations, intellectual condescension all too often settles in, in large part because the Indian case seems too exotic to understandings based on the Western experience. Indeed the emergence of India's democracy is a direct challenge to the axioms of classical theory—particularly those which stress social homogeneity and political unanimity.

In India, a country of countless dense allegiances and loyalties, democracy both as a form of government and as an idea, is – as the jargon has it – consolidated. Since independence in 1947, the country has held fifteen national elections and many more in its regional states, and dozens of peaceful alternations of government have occurred. In this respect, India's political system has succeeded in institutionalizing uncertainty. Democracy as a type of government, a political

regime of laws and institutions, has achieved a real – which is to say, inherently problematic and partial – existence. Equally significantly the *idea* of democracy has penetrated the Indian political imagination. Rising popular belief in democracy is manifest in several ways; surveys for instance. In 1971, 43 percent of Indians expressed their support for parties, assemblies, and elections; in 1996, almost 70 percent did so. At independence, India had a tiny political elite, numbering perhaps a few thousand; today around ten million Indians contest elections, at all levels of the political system; people with direct material interests in the preservation of democracy. The social backgrounds of India's political class are fast changing, as large numbers of Indians, especially those lower in the social order stream into the electoral arena are pushing up turnouts to consistent levels of 60 percent and more.

Consider also the scale. In the classic modern debates about the possibilities of democratic government in large societies, in late eighteenth century America and France, their respective populations were three and twenty-five million. In India's forthcoming national election next month, half a billion or more Indians – the great majority of them poor, many of them unable to write a sentence – will engage in a free act of collective choice. It is worth pausing over this bare figure. It represents, of course, the largest exercise of democratic election in human history; an index of what is in fact the largest reservoir of democratic experience within a single state, a resource for intellectual reflection that remains still underused.

But, beyond the logistics and machinery of democratic politics, it is important to recall the extent to which, everywhere, democracy starts from, emerges out of, local and practical problems, and from arguments over how to address these. In mapping democracy's global life, we need – apart from its empirical descriptions – also to explore the diverse political imaginations and arguments that sustain (or undermine) democratic politics. To explain why democracy has had such various fates in different parts of the world is a complicated task; but a necessary part of any such explanation must be a sense of the ways in which democratic argument were (or were not) made to speak to quite specific problems, as they were perceived in particular locations.

The subject of how India's democracy came to be is obviously too unwieldy for a single lecture. What I'd like to try to do is to suggest that it may be useful, at this point in India's own history – as well as in our own attempts to make sense of perhaps the most striking fact about modern western political ideas, that is to say, their global extension – to begin a systematic excavation of the ideas and arguments, the intellectual debates, which came together to make possible the Indian democratic experiment. Time, that is, to take the ideas and arguments themselves seriously – and not to read them off some other logic or logarithm – the logic of capital, or see them as the emanations of socio-economic processes. What I hope to do is reconstruct for you – partially and selectively – the responses of some of India's more reflective minds, to the political predicaments in which they found themselves in the first half of the twentieth century, and how some of these responses became part of the intellectual and political foundations

of modern India. Such work is I think part of what is in my view an imperative task of task of producing a global history of political thought.

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The central political dilemmas facing Indians under colonial rule early in the twentieth century were these: How to create a representative political order at all, how to represent the collective entity/fiction, “India?” and how to enable within such an order the articulation of internal differences among its many elements – how to represent “Indians,” who were also always something else as well – Tamil, Muslim, poor, Adivasi, Shakta, Brahmin? Indian intellectuals had thus to devise an order of political representation sufficiently singular and unified so that it could lay claim to self-rule while also sufficiently plural as to be able to articulate internal differences. It had to be able to claim to represent both a totality or collectivity, and simultaneously the disparate elements that formed this larger unity.

This problem of how to create an idea of “the people” or “nation” (a representation of unity) which also could enable difference is a central problem of any modern, large-scale democracy, that is, of any representative order more generally. From the French revolution and its long, troubled aftermath, to the many – mainly failed – attempts to establish representative democracy in post-colonial situations, it has be-deviled democratic efforts in the modern world.

The problem has usually or rather at best been posed in terms of sequence. First establish unity, by use of violent means if necessary: terror, civil war, ethnic purging, then think about how to represent difference, plurality: where in fact the latter is, invariably, deferred and ignored.

In the Indian case, this always already complex process, this act of self-creation, had to be accomplished in the face of the colonial assertion that India lacked anything like a representative order, and was fated to oscillate between despotism and anarchy, without colonial control. This incited various lines of response, in several phases. I'd like to explore in very general terms the contours of these responses: if in the nineteenth century a recognizably liberal argument could be heard in Indian intellectual and political circles (one that stressed rights, separation of powers, free press, and law: but which had difficulty developing a conception of collectivity which could persuade large numbers), by the early twentieth century this was displaced by arguments that invoked civilizational and cultural motifs, appealing to evolutionary and monist schemata, enabling Indian singularity to be portrayed as universalism (and which suspected any forms of internal difference). But there was a third phase and strand to these Indian arguments too which began to emerge out of the global political turbulence produced by the First World War. This line of thinking and practice – which encompassed figures such as Tagore via Gandhi to Nehru – was itself internally diverse in its preoccupations and with varying capacities to focus on the specifically political dimensions of the problem, came to a different view of how to try to align the demands of collectivity and individuality, representation and

democracy. It tried to treat this not as something to be addressed by sequence or in stages, but one where the imperatives of unity and difference required simultaneous articulation into a complex political form. There was always something unstable about this line of response, making it vulnerable to pressures: and early on it met with spectacular failure; the Partition of India. But on the whole, and over time, it has proved a pretty effective way of dealing with this core problem of modern democratic politics.

I shall divide my remarks into three parts: First, I start by outlining the initial predicament of Indian intellectuals under colonial rule; one defined by India's enormous diversity and social divisions, which denied the possibility of a common politics. Second, I turn briefly to how intellectuals in the line I am most interested in attempted to address this predicament, developing a sense of identity as provisional, layered, and subject to revision. Finally I shall suggest how some of these ideas – which are quite different from Western conceptions of national identity and democracy – fed into the political and institutional architecture of post-independence India, in the form of the Indian constitution. In short, I'd like to suggest that it pays to look at how ideas and intellectual arguments evolved to provide a conceptual vocabulary for the problem of how to give a representative form to India's diversity within democratic structures.

A couple of points at the outset: when I refer to Indian "intellectuals," I do not intend a sociological sense (as say, did the American sociologist Edward Shils in his 1950s study of intellectuals in India). I am simply using the term to mean

political actors who self-consciously reflect on their own actions, and who also reflect on their own reflections, and on each others' reflections. I am referring, that is, neither to mere academic theoreticians (who do not act, at least in not any immediately recognizable way), nor to politicians, who are not in the habit of sustained, self-conscious reflection. The second point concerns the forms of political thinking and argument in India. If one asks: "What sort of political self-knowledge can be found in India, what intellectual reflections on politics might be seen as sustaining Indian democracy?" one has to acknowledge that, in contrast to Western history of political theory and practice, there are no founding texts of Indian democratic thought, no rich textual field which is focused on a distinct object or field of study, politics, or on questions of the state or democracy. Consider modern France where, as I've tried to show elsewhere, revolutionary history and historiography, a preoccupation with particular, national idiosyncracies served as the form and terrain for political thinking and theory, for making universalist claims: unless one recognizes this distinct configuration, one cannot understand the peculiar shape and rhythms of French political thought, at once its breadth and ambition of vision and its myopia. In modern India, one would be hard pressed to find properly theoretical texts of politics; the exception being Gandhi's remarkable 1909 work *Hind Swaraj*, perhaps the most radical and original political text written by anyone, anywhere, in the twentieth century, but that would require a separate discussion. On the other hand, there is a great deal of political thinking, in a wide variety of genres. For instance, a striking feature of Indian discussions of politics in the twentieth century is their intimate, personal nature; letters and autobiography, for

instance, are two important forms in which political thinking is enacted, suggesting how Indians responded to the challenge of being rooted in a what their colonial master's described as a non-political world, by expanding the domain of the political, infiltrating it into the personal self.

I

The idea of devising a self-governing representative political order for India – one through which its people could live in freedom, collective and individual – was, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a possibility nearly inconceivable. For the space in which Indian intellectuals found themselves was defined by a denial of politics. This denial was an effect of two fierce and mutually reinforcing factors: British colonialism, and the nature of the Indian social order.

Colonial subjection rested on a double refusal to grant selfhood to Indians, in either collective or personal form: Indians did not constitute a nation, nor were they in any proper sense individuals. What defined them was in the first instance their racial difference from their British rulers, followed by their self-divisive communal identities: the many religions, languages, and still more castes of the subcontinent, attributes that resisted the demands at once of distinct nationhood and of a differentiated individuality. India, seen as a collection of mutually threatening communal identities, could not achieve any “national representation.” From the colonial administrator John Strachey's declaration in 1885 (the year of the foundation of the Indian National Congress) that “there is

not, and never was an India, nor even any country of India possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious; no nation, no 'people of India,'" to Churchill's remark some fifty years later that "India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator" (1931), the British consistently denied the possibility of a collective Indian self or nation-hood.

In the absence of the pacifying and stabilizing presence of the colonial order, India's collection of disparate communities, the British held, would entropically yield either despotism or anarchy. That colonial order professed liberal principles and claimed to bestow peace and the rule of law. Yet the rule of law, when exercised in despotic manner, was vulnerable to self-contradiction.

Over time, the British established a restricted arena of representative government, and setting with due circumspection the scale and terms of Indian participation in it. Although British imperial ideology held aloft a principle of the development of self-government, especially for the white settler colonies, it was an emaciated specimen of that principle was upheld in India. Narrow circles of "representative government" were created (beginning in the late nineteenth century at the municipal level, then gradually expanding to the government of the provinces), which soon came to be based on the view that electorates should be divided along community lines, in order to protect numerically smaller and socially weaker communities. Into this circle were admitted a small educated class of Indians. Expansion was promised, but at velocities controlled by the

British. The British thus retained control over the rhythms of Indian political life, in what has been termed the “waiting room” theory of history.

But the imperialists were not the only problem. Indeed, they were simply exploiting the indigenous social and religious divisions of India, divisions which themselves seemed equally to preclude the possibility of politics. The caste order systematically segmented groups, and linked them together in a codified, hierarchical division of labour. It was designed to resist the intervention of the state and state-made law, and treated politics as extraneous. Religious differences, especially between Hindus and Muslims, similarly impeded imagining an Indian politics. How could these religious divisions be united into a common political subject able to rule itself?

Thus, before Indians could even contemplate self-rule, they faced a prior task: to formulate *who* the subjects of such rule might be and to identify a subject capable of any politics at all. This in turn, required the creation of a representative form: of a collective idea or entity in whose name rights could be claimed, actions performed, and to which people could feel allegiance. This task, of the creation of a representative order, has proved one of the great obstacles to the emergence and consolidation of democracy in post-colonial territories elsewhere, from Nigeria, through Algeria to Indonesia. And for Indians, there were few usable resources to draw upon when considering large-scale collective identity. Limited potentialities existed, for example, in the traditional idioms of kingship, and it is striking how few Indians recurred to kingly idioms. Although Indian intellectuals

rummaged through the vocabularies of both traditional and modern politics for appropriate terms, the readiest term available – the “nation” – was, in the Indian context, as much beset by problems as it promised any solutions. For India seemed to lack all the ingredients required by Western definitions of the nation.

By the early twentieth century, an argument over nationhood had developed. Spurred by developments in Bengal (the Swadeshi movement), some upper caste Hindus accepted the diagnosis that India’s internal diversities and particularisms were disabling, and wished to efface these. Impressed by the prowess of European nationalisms, these thinkers saw homogeneity as the only possible basis for nationhood and hoped that a common cultural and religious identity would be the glue and would yield a distinctively Indian concept of the nation. As the contemporary inheritors of this broad and resonant current, the Hindu nationalist BJP party manifestos of the 1990s were to put it “one nation, one people, one culture.” The importance of Western ideas and examples in shaping this religious nationalism is important to underline. The ideologue of *Hindutva*, the ideology of today’s Hindu nationalists, V. D. Savakar, was a non-believing Brahmin from western India, an admirer and translator of Mazzini, who founded a secret society modeled on Young Italy (its members, planning to assassinate the Viceroy, learned bomb making from a Russian revolutionary in Paris). Aurobindo Ghose, educated in Classics at King’s College, Cambridge, returned to rediscover and propagate what he saw as his spiritual traditions, melding ideas picked up from European idealist philosophy with Vedantist ideas. Meanwhile, Swami Vivekananda, similarly steeped in European thought, urged upon his young

Indian followers the “three Bs”: beef, biceps, and the Bhagavad Gita. European history, as a repertoire of positive and negative examples, pervaded the thought of such men. In the late 1930s, Savakar, for instance, pointed to Europe’s failed nations, Poland and Czechoslovakia, “ever a stern warning against any such efforts to frame a heterogenous people into a hotch potch nation”; unlike such “Treaty Nations,” Hindu India was “an organic National Being,” he declared in Calcutta in 1939. These organicist conceptions of the Indian political form denied the necessity of any representation of internal difference, and were a conscious riposte both to colonial ideology and to the classical liberalism of the a constitutionalist Congress party.

Adherents of such exclusive definitions of the nation, tied to a neo-Hindu identity, rejected democracy in its institutional forms, a pale substitute for the more vigorous “homogeneity of sentiment” (Aurobindo) which they felt must sustain National solidarity. Yet they could not fail to notice the pragmatic and instrumental benefits of democracy: it would be a means to ensure the permanent dominance of a Hindu majority. To this end, some of them worked to indigenize notions of democracy.

The attempt to find ancient and local roots for democracy was not unique to early twentieth century neo-Hindu intellectuals. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, political actors and thinkers in France, Germany, and Britain all advanced claims that democracy was not an invention of the Enlightenment, but had its roots in their own ancient societies: in Frankish, Goth and Anglo-Saxon

customs and practices. In the Indian case, an eruption of new works (often drawing on nineteenth century English social thought) found democratic antecedents in Hindu (and also Buddhist village) communities with their own councils and deliberative assemblies (*panchayats*, as well as *sabhas*, *sanghas*) – an attempt at indigenization which continues to have its contemporary – perfectly secular, adepts.

The notion of a unified, homogenous Hindu community was project into an idealized village community. (There were also other efforts; it must of course be said, not so closely tied to Hindu nationalist ideas, which advocated the village – whether for ethical or socio-economic reasons – as the basis of Indian self-rule). Almost immediately, though, this pastoral vision was challenged from several directions, on the one hand, by lower caste movements; movements whose very existence testified to the internal divisions and conflicts among Hindus. The leaders of the lower caste movements shared none of the high castes' romanticism about village life. Instead they looked to central power, the colonial state, for protection from the upper castes, as well as advancement through quota policies and separate caste-based electorates, where the lower castes (and religious communities) could vote for their own candidates. To some lower caste intellectuals, such as B.R. Ambedkar, democracy, understood as universal suffrage in electorates that were not divided, in fact undermined their hopes for remedy against historical injustice, creating a spurious representative order. As Ambedkar put it, just “as a King has no Divine Right to rule, so also a Majority has no Divine Right to rule” (108).

Religious minorities also saw democracy as a direct threat. As early as the 1880s, Muslim intellectuals were concluding that it was impossible to devise a democratic representative order that incorporated both Hindus and Muslims. In a united India, with a central state, Muslims would be a permanent minority, subject to the perverse effects of what was called “numerical justice.” Men like the educationist Syed Ahmad Khan, and later the poet Mohammed Iqbal and the politician Mohammad Ali Jinnah, read Western liberals like John Stuart Mill closely. They were troubled by arguments such those advanced by Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government*. “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities,” Mill had written, “each fears more injury to itself from the other nationalities than from the common arbiter, the state. Their mutual antipathies are generally much stronger than jealousy of the government” (Chapter 16).

Both of these Indian lines of critical reflection – the lower caste, articulated by Ambedkar, the Muslim, advanced by Jinnah – denied the possibility of democracy functioning within an ethnically “mixed state.” They represented, in fact, the strongest version of the classical liberal position in Indian debates. Ambedkar, in his striking 1940 work, “Pakistan or The Partition of India,” appealed to the lesson of Europe’s long history, and to the more recent examples of Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria, and was already concluding: “that the transfer of minorities is the only lasting remedy for communal peace is beyond doubt.” It was such reasoning that would lead Ambedkar to advocate the creation of a

“Dalitstan” for India’s Scheduled Castes. Although Ambedkar would later modify his views, at least on this later point, in the twentieth century argument over how to protect the interest of minorities – whether by creating territorial homogenous in their human content or by means of constitutional legal safeguards operating within mixed populations – he clearly was strongly attracted by the idea of the homogenous state as the most reliable representative political order.

II

How then to constitute a collective subject in the face of such antipathies, and how to find appropriate forms of self-rule? These problems preoccupied in different ways the three figures I want now to turn to: Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru. I want to say a little bit about the responses each man came up with, and in all three cases I shall need to simplify from considerable complexity, and shall be uneven in my treatment of each.

Tagore was not in any obvious way engaged with the question of democracy. But his engagement with Western ideas of the self, freedom, and politics led him to devise a social philosophy that stands as an alternative to liberalism in its European definitions.

To Tagore, India’s apparent “backwardness in politics,” its absence of a clearly defined national essence and of a state, was in fact its strength. It had allowed India to avoid the instabilities of European politics; a politics based on constant

negotiation between rivals, and where numbers become the court of appeal. In such systems, Tagore argued, “government has to pass law after law to keep the warring, heterogenous elements somehow patched together,” as if unity could be achieved “by enacting a law that all shall be one” (*The Message of Indian History*, 1902). Instead of following the nationalist impulse to avoid danger by removing foreign elements, Indians needed to articulate into an alternative political principle their historical capacity to absorb and order. External elements could be “bound together by a basic idea,” the idea of India as a space of diverse self-descriptions. Tagore authored what would eventually become India’s de facto motto (now worn bare with over-use), “unity in/through diversity,” an idea that would later be articulated by Nehru in *The Discovery of India*, a book Nehru wrote just before he took charge of the Indian state.

In many ways Tagore’s view of India was a poetic fiction, an imaginative aspiration. It certainly was not an account of empirical, sociological reality. But his writings were read by the elite, his songs sung by the masses in many parts of India: and his fiction managed to carve a trace both in Indian public life and on the imagination of independent Indian state.

Mahatma Gandhi, the figure who towered over Indian intellectual and political life in the first half of the twentieth century, also engaged with liberal premises, and shared Tagore’s ambition to work out an alternative universalism. Unlike many other non-Western reactions to liberalism and its practices, Gandhi’s redefinition was not based on a culturalist or nativist rejection of liberalism’s

premises. Indeed, he shared liberalism's universalist ambition, as well as both its critical attitude to inherited authority and its commitment to experiment and revision when it came to the choice of political and ethical ends (he entitled his own autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*). But he rejected western liberal understandings of the nation as homogeneous, as well liberalism's disenchanted view of the sacred. Gandhi's ideas emerged out of the dual crisis of liberalism and religious belief, a crisis whose scope extended from Victorian England to the religious reform movements of India.

Gandhi's arguments are often viewed as primarily religious, and as anti-political. On the contrary: he had a radical idea of politics; one that extended well beyond the domain of state institutions and practices. He helped to politicize identities, by challenging Indians to conceive of themselves not – as held by the British, or by the orders of caste and religion – as fixed and immutable, but as containing a significant element of contingency, a potential space for self-reflection and self-transformation, and therefore for freedom, outside the imposed identities of state and society. Such a political conception of the self is a crucial precondition for representative democratic politics, though this was not, of course, the purpose for which Gandhi developed this conception.

For Gandhi, the State itself was anti-political since it was founded upon violence, and worked to impose order on what were seen as unruly identities of caste, tribe, region, religion. These, seen as rivals to the state, had to be subdued. So Indian self-rule did not involve capturing and using the instruments of the state, nor

even devising a representative political order. Instead, it involved a process of self-transformation as he traced out in his autobiography. Because self-rule was a personal, individual condition – a moral acquisition – not one manifest in the accountancy of numbers, democracy as practised in the West, with its majorities and minorities, held no lessons for India. “The essence of democracy,” Gandhi asserted, “did not lie in numerical strength, but in the spirit behind even one person. Every man could represent a whole democracy” (Collected Works, vol. 65; and Gandhi’s autobiography, *Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, chapter 43: “To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self-respect, and should insist upon choosing as their representatives only persons as are good and true”).

Yet Gandhi was now operating in new circumstances in India, which changed some of the terms of the debate about democracy. The years after the end of the First War saw the emergence of a new social force in Indian politics, the peasantry, and its political potentialities were unclear. New types of leaders were also emerging, religious men and populists; and new arenas of popular organization; religious pilgrim destinations like the Kumbh mela, proclaimed as sites of “spiritual democracy,” as Kama Maclean has argued. New political forms such as peasant assemblies and sabhas were becoming the object of intellectual interest, prompting a new materialist sociology of power, as Christopher Bayly has recently made clear. The emergence of mass politics could not but raise anxieties and ambivalence in the minds of intellectuals: anxieties about the undisciplined mob (Gandhi) as also the dangers of militarist nationalism and

fascist regimentation (Nehru). It lead Nehru – who is nowadays habitually portrayed as a happy rationalist – to become preoccupied with, to use the contemporary term, the “psychological,” non-rational impulses, above all fear, and how this related to democracy. (It’s worth just noting, as an aside, that few Indian intellectuals withdraw into conservative reaction in the face of the rise of the masses, as they did in Europe – as John Carey has shown – with the arguable exception, in certain respects of Rajagopalachari, or Bhagwan Das.)

Gandhi’s first mass political campaign – the 1920 Khilafat movement – demonstrated both the power and the limitation of his conception. Orchestrating Hindus and Muslims into a united movement, he insisted (as Faisal Devji has argued) that religious alliance was founded not on bargaining and on the conditionalities of contract – as in liberal theories of interest – but on non-instrumental bonds, on friendship and assistance between those who otherwise had cause to fear one another. However, this period of religious unity was short-lived, and Gandhi’s future efforts to recreate it were to founder.

Gandhi’s approach to the problem of caste inequality was also based on a non-instrumental conception of the relation between the powerful and those without power: on reform through persuasion and personal example. In his ashrams, he sought to create small communities of mixed religions and caste, built on notions of trust and personal friendship. Although his broader movements to abolish untouchability made an impression among upper caste Hindus, his efforts inspired scepticism among the lower castes themselves, as well as among India’s

Muslims. The more modernist and classical liberals – men like Ambedkar, and Jinnah both, as I've noted, broke with Gandhi – disbelieving in the possibility of representing difference and conflict with a common political order. They challenged Gandhi's – and Congress's – claim to represent all Indians, a claim based for Gandhi neither on numbers nor on social/cultural/religious likeness, but on moral firmness and sympathy.

Nor did Gandhi's anti-statist, small-scale and personal conception of politics, his suspicion of political parties have much purchase on the idea of a democratic Indian state, the conception that the Constitution set out to elaborate. But Gandhi's politicization of the self, his insistence that identity was not trapped by religious or caste allegiance, as well as his paternalist sense of the need to attend to the general welfare of all Indians: these were a crucial part of the intellectual inheritance of those whose extensive deliberations resulted in the 1950 Constitution.

III

Now, conceptions of the nation and of the state have become the favourite whipping boys of the recent trends that dominated history and several related fields (post-colonialism etc.). Seen as oppressive within the Enlightenment lands where first they were conceived, they are held to doubly more oppressive when exported beyond: usurping identities etc. Representation itself, in much of this drift, is seen as oppressive, a tool of sovereign power. There is something to be

learned from the best of such arguments; but there has also been relentlessness in the pursuit of this line of thought, which I think has done damage to the possibility of political judgement. (It is worth noting that, such views presume sub national and other forms of identity claims to somehow be more authentic, yet this is hardly a defensible position: all are in the relevant sense fictive, an invention.)

One reason its important to remind oneself of the political predicaments of facing Indian intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century is that it helps to see the importance of a representative order in the struggle – always partial and prone to defeat – to give space to difference. Any project of democracy, of political justice, needs a political form, under modern conditions, a representative order.

Nehru serves as the link between the ideas of Tagore and Gandhi and their effective if no doubt partial translation into the habits of the independent Indian state. Nehru was in command of the Indian state for the first seventeen years after independence, and faced most directly the dual task of devising within the structure of a modern state a representative form, which could give unity while also expressing difference and shaping it into a political form. Before his prime minister-ship however, he, like Gandhi, used autobiographical writing to develop his ideas of personal and national selfhood.

More conventional nationalist autobiographies (of which there are many Indian examples) trace the author's path towards an integrated, heroic self, ready to do battle against colonial rulers. But we find in neither Gandhi's nor Nehru's autobiographical writings a fully achieved personality. Instead, a fragile and provisional self is revealed; a self which for both men is the site of political struggle. Nehru particularly liked to portray himself as a product, not of cultural fusion, but of tension: for the various elements he identified within himself – Kashmiri, Brahmin, Persian/Mughal, English, scientific, emotional, Indian and internationalist, writerly, public man – conflicted more often than they agreed. As he put it, "I became a battleground, where forces struggled for mastery." Importantly, he did not see the idea of the nation, or of nationalism, as a means of reconciling once and for all these interior conflicts.

Nationalism, recent academic theorists insist, is the global diffusion of a standardized, modular form devised in the West- whether in the Gallic version of a community of common citizenship, or the *volkisch* idea of a shared ethnic or cultural origin. Some historians argue that Indian nationalism is a "derivative" form, a local instantiation of a universal model. In fact I think a quite different reading is possible, which would show that distinctive ideas of the individual and collective self are worked out by some Indian intellectuals. For instance, Nehru's understanding of the link between culture and power avoided the liberal presumption that individuals could transcend their cultural inheritance, and remake themselves however they – or their state – saw fit. Equally, though, he steered away from the perception of cultures as self-enclosed wholes, as hermetic

communities of language or belief, a view that itself sustains two different positions: on the one hand, the conservative idea of the state as an instrument at the community's disposal, and on the other the more benign view of the state as a curator of cultural exhibits, responsible for preserving communities.

Rather, cultures as he saw it were overlapping forms of activity that had commerce with one another, mutually altering and reshaping each other. Today, this is a view which we might feel quite familiar with, a view has received recent theoretical formulation by, for instance, philosophers like James Tully. But it was not an obvious way to think about the issue for a new nation state sixty years ago. It may well be that this is was always, and is, too hopeful a view, that once one commits ones fate into the hands of a state, it is a one-way street towards the loss of pluralism and diversity (though one might delay or slow the process). I don't know. But that really is the stake of the Indian project.

Nehru's reading of the relation between cultures was, he insisted, one of the most valuable insights to be gleaned from a study of India's history. India was a society neither of liberal individuals nor of exclusive communities or nationalities, but of interconnected and historically accreted differences, as he had put in his famous metaphor of India as being: "like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie have been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously."

As Indian independence approached, the pressure on Nehru and his counterparts to turn their ideas into a trustworthy representative order escalated. The challenge, articulated by Jinnah, of how to protect Muslim identities in the face of the majoritarian threat posed by universal suffrage in undivided electorates, would in the end defeat Congress and its conception of nationalism and representative order. For Jinnah, territory not law was a more secure protection for the rights of India's Muslims. It was against the background of Partition that Indians set about trying to re-formulate the terms of a representative political order that would be trustworthy to its diverse peoples. The 1950 Constitution is perhaps the most elaborate expression of India's democratic self-conception, articulated as a representative order. It is best seen not as a strong ideological statement of a logically consistent world-view, but rather as a force field that tries to stabilize a range of contradictory considerations.

The work of excavating the complex intellectual currents that came together to produce this political testament of the nation is still in its early stages. But one has to see the constitution as the product of collective deliberation stretched over three years – over 7,500 amendments were tabled, 2,500 were moved, and a document of almost four hundred articles emerged – one of the longest of its kind. The parties to this deliberation were no doubt drawn from a small circle. The Constitution had not been won by the masses in an act of collective self-creation: indeed, it bore little trace of the imaginative concerns of ordinary Indians. Rather, it was a gift of a small set of India's elites. Its drafters were chosen by indirect election on a narrow 14 percent franchise, from electorates set

by the British. Upper-caste and Brahminic elites of the Congress Party dominated, mostly lawyers; virtually all male. There was no organized Muslim presence. Still, the document – and the debates which produced it – manifests an extraordinary frankness in trying to address the difficulties of creating a democratic representative order amidst India's diversity, and it serves as something of a refutation of the genetic fallacy, which would seek to reduce ideas to ideology, to sociological origins.

The Constitution recognized as the primary form of political representation the vote. As individual citizens, Indians were accorded fundamental civil and political rights, including the franchise for all adults, creating a single, undivided electorate of around two hundred million people. But if universal suffrage recognized the first-order diversity of interests among individual Indians, there were, both in the Constitution and its early years of practical enactment, also several instruments designed to recognize their differences as defined by group allegiances. One might call these instruments a system of second-order diversity.

These political mechanisms were designed to organize India's uneven social diversity into a coherent representative form: to offer minorities protections from majoritarian will, to give the ex-Untouchables (who came to define themselves as Dalits) remedies against upper-caste oppression, and to recognize the presence and dynamism of a mass of cultural, linguistic and individual identities: instead of trying to build structural barriers and walls of separation, it chose provisional

and inherently political methods; flexible, but always open to contest and liable to be unstable.

Three second-order forms of representing diversity should be particularly noticed. The Constitution-makers – fearful of further partitions along ethnic or religious lines – had initially wanted to see the federal principle as simply an administrative tool to distribute powers between centre and region. They feared that aligning the claims of linguistic and cultural identities with territory would threaten further division of the country. But in fact when, in the 1950s, demands were made for such alignment – in the form of linguistic states – Nehru conceded them. And, contrary to initial fears, this served to stabilize and integrate the Union. The point is that regional identities were not seen as requiring absorption within an encompassing Indian one. And indeed the Constitution enabled the state to recognize new identities, to accede to claims of various cultural groups for their own regional states and governments.

More generally, on the issue of language – a subject that has vexed nationalisms everywhere – the Constitution and its subsequent managers achieved a sustaining compromise. Instead of adopting a “national language” – and there were strong pressures for Hindi to be so adopted – the decision was taken to defer any such choice, and to create a category of “official languages,” in which public business could be done. Alongside Hindi and English, India has a “schedule” or list of around another twenty-two nationally recognized languages, a list that has expanded over the past six decades at virtually no political cost. The

status of English and Hindi meanwhile, has been subject to parliamentary review every ten years, which has allowed their continued use and acceptance on pragmatic grounds without giving them a permanent and irrevocable status. The result has been remarkable diversion of the energies of linguistic nationalism by giving it representation in the political order.

Second, the Constitution rejected the divided electorates favoured by the British to protect religious groups. Now, in order reassure the minority religions, especially Muslims (who after Partition still formed some 12 percent of India's population), that elected majorities could not legislate in defiance of minority wishes, the Constitution gave religious minorities the option to be governed by their own customary civil laws; a situation of legal plurality was created. And while the document declared the ultimate ambition of a unified civil law code, fulfilling that ambition was indefinitely deferred, left to the vagaries of politics. Nehru, given his views about the mutable, transactional nature of cultures, had hoped and expected that these protections would change, and that individuals and their communities would in time opt for a common civil code. Here, his optimism proved misplaced. In later decades Hindu nationalists were able to use such special provisions as fodder for their attacks, while conservative Muslim clerics have found in them a means to control their flock.

Finally, and most crucially, the Constitution abolished the millennial caste order, de-legitimizing it with the stroke of a pen. Henceforth, the decennial national Census ceased to record any caste data, denying the caste system official

recognition. And yet, the social reality of caste was simultaneously acknowledged in order to help erase its effects. A legislative policy of “Reservations,” positive discrimination, was established for those lowest in the caste order, as well as for India’s large tribal populations. This policy assigned “reserved” seats in the legislatures, as well as quotas in state employment and education. Such measures too were seen as temporary expedients, to be periodically reviewed and ultimately dispensed with. This too was to prove over-hopeful.

But by such constitutional means, the fundamental markers of identity – language, caste, and religion – were granted a degree of fluidity and revisibility. This provisionalism rendered language, caste, region and religion into primarily political rather than cultural categories, a major shift in their character, and a vital one because it served to bring them into democratic debate. But – and one has always to notice the tensions running through the project of representative democracy in India – it would also become the case that the claims of identity would place enormous, even overwhelming pressures on the order of representation.

The techniques of compromise and deferral instanced the refusal to anchor Indian identity in any single trait or set of traits. The tactic of temporizing in response to calls for decisive definitions of a uniform Indian identity – for instance from advocates of Hindi as the national language, or Hindu reformers who wished to abolish multiple legal codes in favor of a common one – has been seen as a potential weakness both from the perspective of Western theories of

nationalism (theories that guided the thinking of Hindu nationalists), as well as from liberal theory. In fact, it was one of the more creative and enabling aspects of the nationalist imagination installed after 1947. It inscribed as a constitutional habit the practices that had made the Congress Party successful as a national movement, practices which were themselves informed by the ideas and arguments of the major intellectual figures of the movement.

IV

Let me come in conclusion to some failures and paradoxes of this struggle to create and sustain a representative democratic order. In important respects, India's ambitions to represent its social diversity within such an order have often fallen short. India has experienced episodes of violent regional secessionism (Punjab, the North East, Assam); incidents of caste violence (in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan); periods of savage religious killings and mayhem (Bombay, Gujarat); and always, of course the unending despair of Kashmir.

And yet, set this unhappy sequence against the other historical cases of large, agrarian *ancien regime* societies, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China. Beside these examples, the violence India has experienced over the past sixty years seems something of a historical discount. Much of the recent discussion of democratic transitions – the transition to a new figuration of power, embodied in a new representative democratic form – has focused on the shift from authoritarian regimes and dictatorships to democratic ones: that is, a shift from

one modern regime to *another* modern regime form. But India's transition to a democratic regime and its consolidation is different, and cannot be mapped by the terms of the existing "democratic transitions" literature. In fact, what we see in India is an *historical* or *epochal* shift, from an *ancien regime* to a modern political form. Such shifts are wrenching, often bloody affairs: think again of the violent histories (both internal and external) of America and France since the eighteenth century, as they struggled to make themselves democratic nation states.

Of course, India remains rich with potential for further failure. The ideology of Hindutva has imaginative persistence; the dream of dealing with the problem of difference by abolishing it. Its counterpart is a fragmenting identity politics, preoccupied with difference and how to thrust it into the political realm, which evades altogether the task of building any common political project. Yet, paradoxically, the very things that Strachey, Churchill and so many others had claimed precluded India from becoming a nation may in fact have proved fruitful material for this task for two reasons: Diversity has made it difficult to entrench majoritarian or dominant identities. And second, diversity has forced India's political elites to be inventive; they could not create a sense of nationhood simply by imitating existing models.

In a second paradox, it is precisely the workings of India's democracy that have nourished identities that threaten it, by leading to majoritarian excess and minoritarian obduracy. The identities of religion and caste that figure

increasingly in Indian politics are the creation of democratic politics, and not the intrusion of the primordial; and as such they will have to be contained and disarmed by the resources of democratic politics itself. Thus India today is a field where ideologues of Hindutva and the advocates of lower caste emancipation must confront one another – and others; a field where there is a regular, open competition to persuade people to see themselves in one way or other – as Hindu, low caste, poor, Bengali. In this sense, India has become a profoundly politicized society, perhaps the most so in the world. This has turned the Indian world upside down so that we see Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh helping to vote into power a Dalit woman as their Chief Minister.

Indian democracy has been in part an argument over the terms through which to represent diversity, an argument over what it is to be Indian. The intellectual debates and the tradition I have held up for your consideration here saw Indians as necessarily condemned to politics, not because they believed this was a medium through which to achieve utopian ends, but because this was the available means to find freedom. Freedom meant, in the first instance, being able to choose who they were, and how they wished to be seen. The invention of a representative order that enabled that sometimes dangerous liberty is not the least acquisition of the Indian democratic experience.

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