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# Understanding Contemporary India

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Sumit Ganguly

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# 1

## Introducing India

*Neil DeVotta*

**Every time India holds a general election, it turns out to** be the largest-ever exercise in democracy. Mind-boggling electoral statistics have been the norm in India, beginning with the country's very first general election of October 1951 to February 1952 (the logistical challenges involved in conducting general elections in India mandate that they be held in stages, with different regions going to the polls at different times, although elections today last around a month). That first general election saw 176 million Indians, of which 85 percent were illiterate, qualifying to vote at 224,000 polling booths presided over by 56,000 election offices, 280,000 assistants, and 224,000 policemen (Guha 2007b: 133–134).

When the country held its seventeenth general elections in April and May 2019, another record was shattered. This time nearly 900 million Indians qualified to vote, of which 15 million were first-time voters. The election required the services of around 12 million officials at over 1 million polling booths. As per Indian law, voters should not have to travel more than 2 kilometers (1.24 miles) to cast their vote. Election officials, therefore, had to visit the most remote parts of the country so citizens could exercise their franchise. In Ladakh, officials were equipped with oxygen tanks to get to twelve voters living at an altitude of over 14,000 feet, while others waded through crocodile-infested swamps in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to reach voters. A polling booth was even set up in the Gir Forest National Park so just one person, a Hindu priest, could cast his vote (Quraishi 2019). Ultimately, over 600 million people cast votes, with turnout exceeding 67 percent. High turnout is a

feature of elections held in South Asia, and India clearly contributes to this standard.

India's unique democracy upends arguments made by scholars about prerequisites for ensuring a successful democracy. For instance, it is generally true that the more educated and economically better-off people are, the more likely they are to vote. In India, however, the less educated and poor vote in greater numbers (often after standing in queues for hours) than those who are better educated and economically well-off. Furthermore, in Western countries especially, minorities tend to vote in lower numbers. In India, on the contrary, minorities vote in higher numbers. In the most recent election, not only did the poor, low castes, and minorities vote in large numbers, but they (with the exception of Muslims) also voted in higher numbers to reelect Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for a second consecutive term (Suri 2019; Chhibber and Verma 2019).

Figure 1.1 Political Map of South Asia



Democracies, more than any other form of government, are better at reforming and adapting. This process, however, is rarely neat, and India proves the point. Parties and politicians contest to win; so, absent strong rules, they will resort to electoral shenanigans to capture and stay in power. Thus, by one estimate, over 120 million Indians, mainly Muslims and women, were denied the chance to vote in the 2019 parliamentary elections because their names, for whatever reason, did not appear on voting lists (Shankar 2019). Ultimately, there are no perfect democracies in the world, and India needs to shed some troubling communal features in order to prevent democratic backsliding.

Thus far, however, India's democratic structure has remained sufficiently robust that various Indian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and citizens groups utilize the country's constitution and institutions (especially the courts) when trying to confront injustices committed against the most marginalized citizens—including the lower castes, women, and children. By some accounts these civil society organizations number over 500,000, and anyone spending sufficient time in rural and urban India can speak to their valiant efforts.

This triumph of democracy, however, represents a paradox, in that the deepening of democracy has been accompanied by political fragmentation and increased malgovernance (Sharma 2010: 68). Since Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in 2014, communalism rooted in Islamophobia and authoritarianism has contributed to this malgovernance (DeVotta 2019). But this is merely one paradox in a country that is in many ways a paradox. For India is both a young state and one of the world's oldest civilizations; it is a potential superpower, yet more than 300 million of its citizens live in abject poverty; it is the proud land of the peaceful Mohandas Gandhi, yet it brandishes nuclear weapons and hosts one of the world's largest militaries; its rivers are revered for embodying deities, yet are among the world's most polluted waterways; its infrastructure in many areas is abysmal, yet its information technology workers, engineers, scientists, and academics are in demand the world over; and it is a country led by powerful women at various ranks, yet its women are among the most marginalized in the world. The chapters in this volume confront such paradoxes in seeking to explain contemporary India.

## **Diverse India**

India's ability to combine relatively free and fair elections with diversity is what many find commendable. It is with good reason that Robert



Blackwill, upon completing his tenure as US ambassador to India in 2003, noted that “India is a pluralist society that creates magic with democracy, rule of law and individual freedom, community relations and diversity. . . . I wouldn’t mind being born ten times to rediscover India” (Phadnis 2003).

Indeed, one would need to be born at least ten times to discover India. This is why there are no “experts” on India. Notwithstanding the plethora of knowledgeable commentators on specific subjects pertaining to India, only those who are arrogant or ignorant dare claim to be an expert on this maddeningly diverse country comprising 325 functioning languages (including twenty-two official languages), hundreds of dialects, twenty-five scripts, six major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Jainism—4,500 caste groups, hundreds of tribal groups, and their resulting traditions and cultures encompassed in twenty-eight states and nine territories (see Table 1.1).

India’s diversity ranks among the country’s greatest strengths. What we now call Hinduism has played a huge role in fostering this diversity. The term *Hinduism* is of recent origin and was popularized by the British in the nineteenth century as they sought to understand the varied religious traditions among India’s Hindus (Hawley 1991). Given their Christian background, the British were nonplussed when confronted with the different “Hinduisms” in India that embraced numerous gods, rituals, and traditions, all of which had evolved over 4,000 years.

Unlike in the monotheistic (and most other) religions, Hindus do not have an official canon, a stated doctrine, an overarching leader, or an institution. In short, one could be a monotheist, a polytheist, or an atheist (who may merely devote her- or himself to the study of the Upanishads—ancient, abstruse philosophical texts—yet never visit a temple) and still be considered a good Hindu. Unlike the monotheistic texts that mandate fundamental beliefs, the Hindu texts promote varied beliefs and practices and come across as contradictory.

As US scholar Wendy Doniger (2009: 688) has noted, one could use these texts and argue for almost any position in contemporary India: that Hindus have been vegetarians, and that they have not; that Hindus and Muslims have gotten along well together, and that they have not; that Hindus have objected to suttee (or sati, whereby widows are burned on their husband’s funeral pyres), and that they have not; that Hindus have renounced the material world, and that they have embraced it; that Hindus have oppressed women and lower castes, and that they have fought for their equality. One can see why the British, who possessed a predilection for categorizing and cataloging the territories and peoples they conquered, got confused.

**Table 1.1 India's States and Territories**

| State                          | Year Created | Major Languages  |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--|
| Andhra Pradesh                 | 1956         | Telugu and Urdu  |
| Arunachal Pradesh              | 1987         | English, Miji, Honpa   |
| Assam                          | 1947         | Assamese and Bodo  |
| Bihar                          | 1950         | Hindi and Bhojpuri   |
| Chhattisgarh                   | 2000         | Hindi  |
| Goa                            | 1987         | Marathi and Konkani  |
| Gujarat                        | 1960         | Gujarati   |
| Haryana                        | 1966         | Hindi  |
| Himachal Pradesh               | 1971         | Hindi and Pahari   |
| Jharkhand                      | 2000         | Hindi  |
| Karnataka                      | 1956         | Kannada  |
| Kerala                         | 1956         | Malayalam  |
| Madhya Pradesh                 | 1956         | Hindi  |
| Maharashtra                    | 1960         | Marathi  |
| Manipur                        | 1972         | Meiteilon  |
| Meghalaya                      | 1972         | English, Garo, Khasi   |
| Mizoram                        | 1987         | English and Mizo   |
| Nagaland                       | 1963         | English  |
| Orissa                         | 1949         | Oriya  |
| Punjab                         | 1956         | Punjabi  |
| Rajasthan                      | 1956         | Hindi and Rajastani  |
| Sikkim                         | 1975         | Nepali, Bhutia, Limbu, Lepcha                                    |
| Tamil Nadu                     | 1956         | Tamil  |
| Telangana                      | 2014         | Telugu, Urdu   |
| Tripura                        | 1972         | Bengali, Kokborok, Manipuri                                      |
| Uttar Pradesh                  | 1947         | Hindi and Urdu   |
| Uttarakhand                    | 2000         | Hindi, Kumaoni, Garhwali   |
| West Bengal                    | 1960         | Bengali  |
| <b>Territories</b>             |              |  |
| Andaman and<br>Nicobar Islands | 2001         | Nicobarese, English, Bengali,<br>Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam |
| Chandigarh                     | 1953         | Hindi and Punjabi  |
| Dadra and Nagar Haveli         | 1961         | Marathi and Gujarati   |
| Daman and Diu                  | 1987         | Marathi and Gujarati   |
| Delhi                          | 1947         | Hindi, Urdu, English, Punjabi                                    |
| Lakshadweep                    | 1956         | Malayalam  |
| Pondicherry                    | 1963         | Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, French                                 |
| Jammu and Kashmir <sup>a</sup> | 2019         | Kashmiri, Urdu, Dogri, Pahari                                    |
| Ladakh                         | 2019         | Ladakhi  |

*Note:* a. Jammu and Kashmir, including Ladakh, operated as a state from 1947 to 2019, when it became two union territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

India's diversity partly stems from the country not being a single political entity until recently. For while one can speak of an Indian civilization, India's present territorial borders represent a historical accident. British India consisted of nearly 600 principalities, and it was British ambitions and malpractice that gave the country its current boundaries. Britain's biggest mistake may have been to clumsily partition the subcontinent in

August 1947, which led to hundreds of thousands being killed and an estimated 15 million people displaced, as it created Pakistan and, inadvertently, Bangladesh (Talbot and Singh 2009: 2). Postindependence India's challenge has been to try to get the variegated peoples who ended up within its borders to embrace and celebrate a common Indian identity even while nurturing their distinct cultures and traditions. This is a continuous challenge, and it is manifested in the periodic communal violence (especially between Hindus and Muslims) and secessionist violence the Indian state has experienced since independence.

Muslim elites like Mohammed Ali Jinnah had justified Partition by promoting a "two nation" theory claiming that Hindus and Muslims were different nations no matter how they were evaluated, and that the subcontinent's Muslims therefore qualified to have their own country. This was the basis for creating Pakistan. Indian elites like Jawaharlal Nehru were determined not to position their country as a Hindu entity in opposition to "Muslim Pakistan" and staunchly promoted India as a state in which all religious groups could live amicably. Notwithstanding the grotesque violence that accompanied Partition, Gandhi and Nehru encouraged Muslims to make the country their home; and Gandhi's campaigns on behalf of Muslims, his assassination in January 1948 at the hands of a Hindu extremist, and the reflection this promoted among both Hindus and Muslims influenced many among the latter to stay on in India (Husain 1965: 134).

Given especially the communal violence that led to Partition, it is understandable why some Hindus felt their religious community ought to dominate the state's affairs. But it was the pluralist and secular approach that Gandhi, Nehru, and others within the Congress Party championed that initially held sway.

The idea of secularism is influenced by Europe's Protestant Reformation. In the United States it led to the separation of church and state given the Founding Fathers' aversion to any established state religion. But throughout South Asia's history, princely rulers had functioned as patrons of religions; so defining secularism in the newly independent India became problematic. Nehru felt that the irrational influences of religion would vitiate as society developed; India should therefore not privilege religious identities but instead emphasize individual rights rooted in public law. Gandhi, on the other hand, felt all religions were true and valid and could be the basis for sustaining communities (Rudolph 1987: 747). Given the contradictions associated with secularism in an Indian context, the constitution, which took effect in January 1950, avoided branding the state as secular. That took place in 1976,

when a government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi introduced the forty-second amendment to the constitution. Yet the state modern India's founding fathers sought to create was undergirded by a secular ethos.

This was evidenced by how India sought to accommodate religious minorities and groups who were discriminated against for centuries based on caste and tribal identities. Thus Muslims and Christians were allowed to create and oversee educational institutions. Independent India also decided not to institute a uniform civil code, which meant that Muslims could utilize their own law when dealing with issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

### *The Reservation System*

The reservation (or quota) system put in place so Dalits (formerly called Untouchables), Tribals, and Other Backward Classes could overcome discrimination and secure employment represents a significant instance of accommodation on the part of the Indian state. Whatever reasons may have justified the creation of the caste system, it morphed over the ages into an institution that oppressed and denigrated millions of Indians. The periodic violence ranging from rape and murder associated with caste represents a major blemish on Indian society. Dalits continue to face the brunt of this oppression.

Forced into lives of servitude, drudgery, and humiliation, it is only in postindependence India that many Dalit communities have been able to assert themselves, and the main reason for their being able to do so is the right to vote. Chapter 7 describes the caste and reservation systems, but what bears repeating is that the rise of the Dalits and lower castes in India represents a social revolution. The reservation system put in place over the years now ensures that 22.5 percent of all central government jobs and university placements are set aside for Dalits and Tribals. Similarly, 27 percent of all government jobs are placements in government-run universities reserved for caste groups that fall under the Other Backward Classes category.

In January 2019, partly as a sop to its higher-caste base, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party engineered the 104th amendment to the Indian constitution and thereby ensured a 10 percent quota for so-called economically weaker sections (EWS) of society. As a result, those who are not from Dalit, Tribal, or Other Backward Classes families and making less than 800,000 rupees (around \$11,000) per year qualify to compete for jobs and educational placement through this EWS quota. The quota will likely weaken opposition among the upper castes toward the reservation system (as they too now benefit from it), but it also muddies the criteria

for reservation since quotas have hitherto been justified based on centuries-long caste oppression, not economic hardship. This new quota was established despite the Supreme Court having ruled that total reservations in India should not exceed 50 percent. Those who consider the 50 percent reservation cap to now be a basic structure of the constitution have brought cases against the new quota, although the apex court has refused to issue any stay orders. So the quota is being implemented in most central universities and other government establishments.

India also has quotas in place for Dalits and Tribals in parliament. Currently, out of the 543 seats in parliament's lower house, 84 are reserved for Dalits and 47 for Tribals. Dalits and Tribals also have seats reserved for them in the respective state legislatures. The Congress Party-led governments have even considered imposing job quotas on the private sector to increase Dalit and low-caste representation, but have been forced to back off.

Beginning in 1952, two representatives from the Anglo-Indian community (those of European and Indian ancestry) were nominated to serve in parliament (as the community is relatively small and too scattered to compete for any seats). But the 104th amendment to the Indian constitution, passed in January 2020, did away with this reservation at both the national and state legislature levels.

While the number of women winning elections to the Lok Sabha (lower house) of parliament has been inching up—45 women were elected in 2004, 58 were elected in 2009, 66 in 2014, and 78 in 2019—a movement to pass the Women's Reservation Bill, which would set aside 33 percent of seats in the lower house, state legislatures, and local governments for women, is yet to become a reality.

### *Women and Panchayati Raj*

Indian women, however, do enjoy reservation at the local government levels. Panchayats are the five-member local governing bodies in India's federal system. Comprising three levels (gram panchayats, block panchayats, and district panchayats), there are over 250,000 entities at the lowest (gram panchayat) level. Not only does the Indian constitution reserve positions for Dalits and Tribals (in line with their population within the panchayat), it also reserves one-third of the seats for women. Consequently, at present over a million women get elected to these councils every five years. In 2009 the Congress Party-led Union Cabinet recommended that reservation for women in panchayati institutions be increased to 50 percent. Some states had already taken the lead in this regard, and at present over half of India's states reserve 50 percent

of seats for women in panchayati institutions. The evidence of whether such decentralization has improved governance is mixed (Mullen 2013: 78), but the fact remains that there is no electoral exercise of this magnitude designed to empower women anywhere else in the world.

### *Dealing with Regions*

The political process in India typically unfolds amid great tumult, and students of India cannot be blamed for thinking that Indian elites are better at ruling than governing. One can rule by diktat, but governance requires compromise and tact. Nehru, who was instinctively drawn toward accommodation as opposed to confrontation, stands out with regard to the latter, and this is evident in how he dealt with regional leaders and their various demands. It is especially evident in his instructions to the Indian army regarding how to deal with the Naga tribes even after Naga rebels had ambushed homes, burnt houses, “looted shops . . . kidnapped teachers . . . raided railway stations and sniped trains” (Elwin 1961: 60).

You must remember that all the people of the area in which you are operating are fellow-Indians. They may have a different religion, they may pursue a different way of life, but they are Indians, and the very fact that they are different and yet part of India is a reflection of India’s greatness. Some of these people are misguided and have taken to arms against their own people, and are disrupting the peace of this area. You are to protect the mass of the people from these disruptive elements. You are not there to fight the people in the area, but to protect them. You are fighting only those who threaten the people and who are a danger to the lives and properties of the people. You must, therefore, do everything possible to win their confidence and respect and to help them feel that they belong to India. (Elwin 1961: 60)

This was the same tact that Nehru used with the leaders of south India when they demanded separate states and later threatened secession (in what was branded the Dravidian Movement) due to Hindi being made the official language. The demand to create states along linguistic lines first led to the creation of Andhra in 1953 (and renamed Andhra Pradesh in 1956). With Andhra’s Telugu speakers having won their state, other regions also began demanding statehood. This led to the States Reorganization Act of 1956, which created a number of states along ethnolinguistic lines. Nehru and the Indian elite were initially averse to creating such states, believing it could lead to India’s balkanization, but by giving into the popular will of the masses, these states “consolidated the unity of India” (Guha 2007b: 189, 199–200). Since then, new states have been periodically created along regional lines (but never on religious

grounds), with Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand being made states in 2000 and Telangana in 2014 (see Table 1.1). The state-creation process and their ethnic composition have played no small role in ensuring India's relative stability as a federal setup (Adeney 2007).

It is a testament to Indian democracy that it remains one of the few countries (another being Nigeria) that can continue to add to its list of states (Tillin 2012). Given extant demands, one should not be at all surprised if the India of the future included states called Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, Harit Pradesh, Bhojpur, Mahakaushal, Poorvanchal, Bodoland, Marathwada, Rayalaseema, Bundelkhand, Seemanchal, Avadh, and Kongu Nadu. One author has even suggested that India should be divided into fifty or sixty states (Kashyap 1998). While this may sound excessive, it is useful to consider that the United States, as currently constituted, with about 325 million people, has fifty states, while India, with four times as many people, has just twenty-eight states. For instance, Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, has nearly 205 million people (which is over 60 percent of the US population), and is bound to be reorganized in the future.

The manner in which Nehru and others dealt with Hindi becoming the national language also speaks to these early leaders' accommodative spirit. The Indian constitution, which was adopted in November 1949 and became operational in January 1950, said that Hindi would become the national language within fifteen years, until which time English could also be used for all official purposes. As the date approached to implement Hindi as the sole national language, southerners especially turned hostile. In 1963, India under Nehru passed the Official Languages Act, which said English may continue to be used for official communication even after 1965. When debates over verbiage led to the act not being implemented, violent protests erupted in Tamil Nadu, leading to rioting and self-immolation. Lal Bahadur Shastri, who became prime minister following Nehru's death in May 1964, soon thereafter declared that states will be allowed to maintain their regional languages and also continue to use English as an official language when communicating with each other and the central government.

This thus far continues to be the case in India, where the sense of being Indian is not associated with any particular language. Indeed, the popularity of Hindi and English has grown to the point where both languages now are spoken interchangeably, leading to a fusion called "Hinglish." Indian authors today are among the best writers in English, and their literary success has led some to claim that the "empire is striking back." At the same time, nearly 40 percent of Indians now speak



Hindi, and Bollywood no doubt has played a major role in facilitating this. Even regions that rebelled against Hindi being imposed are now gradually accepting it, and this would not have happened if the Indian government had refused to compromise on the language issue and sought to impose Hindi on the entire population. Like Nehru, who was averse to creating linguistic states but relented in order to ensure India's territorial integrity, Prime Minister Shastri was averse to continuing with English as an official language (Guha 2007b: 395). But he too gave in to the popular will of the south, and polyglot India is, consequently, a culturally richer country. And thanks to such accommodation, it is also one where "loyalty first and foremost to the regions is in steady decline" (Mitra and Pehl 2010: 53). The rise of Hindu nationalists, under Narendra Modi, who want to superimpose Hindi on the rest of India and institute policies that will empower the north over the south of the country will test these gains in the years ahead.

Nehru's predilection for accommodation as opposed to confrontation extended to the region as well, and this was especially so in his dealings with China—which arguably took advantage of Nehru's camaraderie and humiliated the prime minister—and smaller states like Sri Lanka, which had attracted a large number of Indian laborers whose plight Nehru took a deep interest in.



*Nehru and his sister Krishna Hutheesingh with A. Vittal Pai (agent to the government of India) and his wife, Tara Pai, Sri Lanka, July 1939. Photo courtesy of Sharada Nayak.*



### *Accommodating Separatists*

India has experienced dozens of separatist attempts since independence. While the northeastern area that comprises seven states has undergone the most numerous and longest-lasting secessionist attempts, the movement by extremist Sikhs in the Punjab and Kashmiri separatism have generated the most coverage. The quest to create a state of Khalistan for Sikhs ended violently when Indira Gandhi sent the Indian army into the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine, to force out insurgents hiding within its compound. Operation Blue Star culminated in her Sikh bodyguards assassinating her in October 1984, which in turn unleashed murderous riots against Sikhs (Tully and Satish 1985). There remain elements within Punjab who glorify pro-Khalistan leaders and clamor for a separate state for Sikhs, but Punjab, in the main, now operates as a solid unit of the Indian union.

Kashmiri secessionism, on the other hand, is complicated by the India-Pakistan rivalry and attendant communalism (Chowdhary 2016). When the Hindu ruler of Kashmir decided to join India, Nehru assured his predominantly Muslim population that they would be treated as equal citizens even as India and Pakistan battled over Kashmir. In an attempt to buy their loyalty, Kashmir was provided certain privileges that did not apply to other states (i.e., its own constitution and flag, and the provision that only Kashmiris could purchase land in Kashmir). This was in line with India's asymmetrical federalism, whereby some states are afforded certain rights so as to ensure their adoptability within the Indian union. Such accommodation did not prevent tensions between the state and center over numerous issues, but when (just as in the Punjab) Indira Gandhi, and thereafter her son Rajiv Gandhi, resorted to electoral meddling in the state in the 1980s, it contributed to the Kashmir insurgency (Ganguly 1997; Bose 2003). Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities and Indian troops' violence with impunity caused much carnage in Jammu and Kashmir (DeVotta 2012: 35; Tankel 2013). The Modi government's policies—splitting the state into two territories, enforcing a lengthy communications blockade that prevented Kashmiris from accessing the internet and using phones, and keeping Kashmiri politicians under house arrest while promoting Hindu nationalism—have further exacerbated tensions in the region.

Since the late 1960s, India has also experienced an insurgency movement that has sought to overthrow the state. This so-called Naxalite Movement (which gets its name from a 1967 revolt in the village of Naxalbari) is influenced by Maoism, although it is linked to long-standing communist party activism in India (Joshi and Josh 2011). In the past few years, nearly 200 of India's over 600 districts have dealt

with Naxalite violence. In most instances recently, the violence stems from attempts to uproot tribal people especially from their land (so states and private companies can extract various natural resources), the scarcity of government services and employment among rural youth, and the impunity with which police and paramilitary forces perpetrate violence against India's most marginalized populations (Guha 2007a; Miklian and Carney 2010; Sundar 2016). Naxalite violence is not separatist, because the Naxalites seek to take over the state.

Successive Indian governments have adopted a carrot-and-stick approach when dealing with forces threatening to undermine the Indian union. In the latter instance, the Indian state has resorted to brute violence to put down separatist forces, and its tactics have rightly generated condemnation both within and without India. But if India today functions as a stronger state with Indians taking pride in their nationality even as they celebrate their regional diversity, it is due to the mainly accommodative spirit that India's postindependence leaders promoted.

### **Democratic Vibrancy and Backsliding**

There were dozens of countries in Africa and Asia that gained independence in the two decades following World War II, yet India is among the few that successfully nurtured and maintained its democracy even though it was considered among the most likely to fail. Why is this so? Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2005) has argued that Indian civilization has long tolerated, encouraged, and celebrated an argumentative tradition that has been conducive to democracy and secularism.

Others suggest that there is nothing inherently democratic about India's past, and that the consolidation of democracy is mainly due to the conscious decisions made by Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru who championed the idea of representative government for all citizens (Khilnani 1997). There is no gainsaying how important Nehru especially was in ensuring India adopted a democratic trajectory. Not only did he serve three full terms as prime minister, but among his first responsibilities was helping to forge the Indian constitution, which one scholar thinks may represent "the greatest political venture since that originated in Philadelphia in 1787" (Austin 1999: 308). This is because the world's longest written constitution, which Nehru together with Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar and others engineered, has taught Indians how to operate within a democracy (Khosla 2020).

There was also a practical reason for democratic consolidation in India, and it concerns India's ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional

diversity: people strongly identify with their regional identities. In this context, authoritarian governance was bound to lead to secessionist pressures, while devolution of power to local regions as part of a federal political structure was more likely to maintain unity and territorial integrity. This meant granting everyone in the polity the right to vote (as opposed to countries like the United States and United Kingdom where the franchise was introduced gradually) even if the state lacked the capacity to accommodate people's basic needs (Ramanathan and Ramanathan 2017). If India has chugged along and defied the odds of disintegration that some believed likely (Harrison 1960), it is in no small measure due to this devolutionary culture.

Political scientists consider a democracy to be consolidated if all stakeholders therein are committed to changing governments through free and fair elections. From this standpoint, India is a consolidated democracy. Except for a two-year period between 1975 and 1977 when Indira Gandhi imposed emergency rule, the country has changed governments via the franchise. Indeed, elections in India are akin to carnivalesque celebrations, and the Indian word *tamasha* (which the *Oxford English Dictionary* now defines as “an entertainment, show, display, public function” and “a fuss, a commotion”) best captures the accompanying spirit and milieu of political campaigning. The closest comparable atmosphere in the United States is the tailgating revelry that takes place prior to football games. Depending on their wherewithal, candidates aspiring to political office campaign using aircrafts, helicopters, trains, tractors, automobiles, bullock carts, elephants, and camels.

But a country could be democratically consolidated yet operate in illiberal fashion. Being a liberal democracy requires a country to go beyond merely holding free and fair elections. It must also uphold civil liberties for all citizens irrespective of ethnicity and religion, ensure an independent judiciary that fearlessly enforces the rule of law, tolerate civil society, minimize corruption, and balance against executive overreach (Diamond 2019: 19). Becoming and maintaining a liberal democracy is a constant work in progress, and this is evidenced by how even established democracies like those in Western Europe and that of the United States have experienced backsliding due to recent right-wing populist movements. Indeed, the backsliding that has taken place in the United States is sufficiently severe that some scholars wonder if democracy as we know it is being threatened (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017).

The pro-Hindu politics of the BJP have long worried those who are committed to seeing India being a pluralist and secular country. The party, however, had governed relatively moderately when it headed the

government from 1998 to 2004. This was partly due to its then leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee but also due to it being part of a coalition. When the party won a clear majority in 2014 and Narendra Modi became prime minister, many felt that notwithstanding Modi's anti-Muslim history he too would be pushed to govern moderately. Ashutosh Varshney (2014), a leading scholar of India, noted that the need to develop India economically and appeal to moderate voters, constitutional constraints, and the country's first-past-the-post electoral system, among other issues, would nudge Modi and the BJP to tone down their Hindu nationalist agenda. Varshney had echoed others before Modi became prime minister, saying: "No political party [in India] can come to power without putting together multi-religious, multi-caste, multilingual coalitions. Barring entirely unpredictable shocks to the system, a rightwing takeover of Indian politics is inconceivable" (2013: 131). And just before Modi's reelection, another knowledgeable authority on India's political economy likewise pointed to the country's varied regional and local dynamics and caste politics and argued that the BJP's goal to create a state rooted in Hindu nationalism will "remain aspirational, as India's complex ecosystem of identities will continue to act as a powerful break on a descent into outright ethnonationalism" (Sharma 2019: 106). Yet following the anti-Muslim agenda that was instituted within six months of Modi's May 2019 reelection, it is clear the country is becoming increasingly illiberal (Ganguly 2020). Within the context of democratic consolidation, it is now an electorally vibrant polity that is mired in illiberal majoritarianism (Varshney 2019). Hindutva is the ideology undergirding this majoritarianism.

## Hindutva

India's success in defying the odds and staying democratic caused democracy scholar Robert Dahl to say that "democracy . . . is the national ideology of India" (1998: 162). But the ramping up of Islamophobia and majoritarian politics, especially since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, allows one to argue that it is Hindutva that is now the national ideology of India.

Hindutva refers to "Hindu-ness" and is the ideology associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Organization). Its principal originator, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, associated Hindutva with "Hindu blood," the Sanskrit language, and its attendant culture. While the term *Hindutva* can connote different meanings (Andersen and Damle 2018: 77), it generally holds that no

matter an Indian's religion, she or he should subscribe to a Hindu ethos (Hardgrave 2005).

Hindutvadis may claim their ideology seeks to protect and promote Hindu culture and is not hostile toward non-Hindus, but the Hindu domination they subscribe to threatens minority rights, and the Islamophobia they wallow in similarly threatens the country's nearly 200 million Muslims. This sense of majoritarianism stems from the notion that Hinduism is the subcontinent's oldest religion and India is its home; while all Indians may consider the country their *pitribhu* (fatherland), only Hindus—plus groups like Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs whose religions originated in India—possess it as a *punyabhū* (holy land) (Savarkar 2003: 115–116). Minorities must thus appreciate their subordinate position and not make undue demands on the majority, who are the authentic *bhumiputra* (sons of the soil).

The RSS was organized in 1925 with the goal of uniting and strengthening a divided Hindu community, although its rhetoric from the beginning was majoritarian and Islamophobic. The RSS incorporates nearly forty other pro-Hindu affiliates—with the BJP operating as its political wing—and seeks to create an India that is contrary to the secular country Gandhi and Nehru aspired toward. Indeed, it was a member of the RSS who killed Gandhi because he, like fellow Hindu extremists, believed the Mahatma appeased Muslims and the newly created Pakistan. Among Hindutva advocates, Gandhi's murderer is today hailed as a “patriot” (Kazmin 2019: 8). This is especially ironic given that the RSS played no oppositional role in India's quest for independence from the British.

While the RSS and its political affiliate the BJP have sometimes experienced tensions between them, the rise of Narendra Modi helped minimize differences. Modi was a *pracharak* (a full-time RSS volunteer) before being allowed to enter politics in the state of Gujarat. Postindependence India had experienced episodic Hindu-Muslim rioting (Berenschot 2011; Brass 2003), but soon after his election as Gujarat chief minister the state erupted in the worst anti-Muslim violence since Partition (Sarkar 2002). This caused Modi to be shunned by the international community (with the United States refusing to grant him a visa for a number of years), but his pro-Hindu credentials, coupled with Gujarat's relatively vibrant economy, made him all the more popular among Hindutva advocates.

The influence of the RSS now reaches to the far corners of India, and when Modi headed the BJP ticket in 2014, the organization's cadre campaigned on his behalf in ways they had not done for other BJP candidates. They did so again in 2019, even as the Indian diaspora and industrialists once more funneled vast amounts of money toward the BJP campaign and

most media provided uncritical coverage. The lackluster leadership of the Congress Party was a major reason for BJP dominance (Hasan 2018), but the so-called three Ms—money, machine, and media—made stymying Modi’s reelection prospects a formidable task (Jenkins 2019).

Modi’s election and reelection as prime minister emboldened Hindutvadis determined to create a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu polity) that stands in opposition to the secular ideals upon which India’s democracy has been built (Aiyar 2004; Bhargava 1998). They have long accused the Congress Party of mollicoddling minorities (especially Muslims) and have expressed their detestation for the party’s secular claims by routinely spelling the word as “sickular.” Congress Party leaders have occasionally pandered to pro-Hindu sentiments, a development some call “soft-Hindutva,” but the party has consistently stood in opposition to violence against Muslims. Such violence and marginalization of Muslims, however, is a major manifestation of Hindutvadis’ contempt for India’s secular republic.

Since Modi’s rise to national power, Muslims (and some Dalits too) have been assaulted and killed for eating beef even as they are accused of resorting to “love jihad” (a conspiracy to seduce Hindu girls and convert them to Islam) and “population jihad” (an attempt to overtake Hindus, who are nearly 80 percent of the population as per the 2011 census). This is despite evidence that fertility rates for both Hindus and Muslims are related to educational and economic circumstances (Jeffery and Jeffery 2006) and population growth is declining faster among Muslims (“Poison of Demographic Prejudice” 2015: 7). The anti-Muslim violence and agitprop coincide with attempts to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism (Gupta 2018) even as it appears to be part of a calibrated attempt to eventually disenfranchise Muslims by branding them noncitizens (discussed further in Chapter 11).

Following Partition, most prominent and accomplished Muslims migrated to Pakistan. Most among those who decided to stay in India were extremely poor, and according to the 2006 Rajindar Sachar Committee report, India’s Muslims lag behind other communities when it comes to government employment, access to health facilities and bank credit, education, and their overall economic condition (Prime Minister’s High Level Committee 2006). Demonizing an already downtrodden population is a sure way to radicalize them, and in a region where Islamic fundamentalism is in sway and Islamic terror groups are looking to attack India, it is akin to playing with fire.

Muslim incursion into South Asia starting in the eighth century, Muslim-Mughal influence that led to Hindus converting to Islam, and violence associated with Partition all combine to promote the Islamophobia

undergirding Hindutva ideology. The inability to reconcile with the subcontinent's Islamic legacy and the subsequent British presence is what causes Prime Minister Modi and other Hindutvadis to talk about 1,000 years of slavery.

This sense of humiliation has led to ridiculous claims designed to portray Hinduism as part of a civilization par excellence. For instance, Hindutvadis assert that the Taj Mahal is not a Mughal creation but was originally a Hindu temple built by a Hindu king in honor of Shiva and that prayers to Lord Shiva should therefore be allowed on its premises; and that cars, plastic surgery, in vitro fertilization, stem cells, and airplanes (traveling between planets around 7000 B.C.E.) were all invented in ancient India. Recently a BJP member of parliament claimed that "speaking in Sanskrit every day boosts the nervous system and keeps diabetics and cholesterol at bay" (quoted in "Ganesh Singh's Statement in Parliament" 2019: 11).

This attempt to reconstruct and rewrite history in ways that burnish everything related to Hinduism is a long-standing Hindutva goal that is now well under way. Consequently, new textbooks vilify non-Hindu elements throughout Indian history and disregard the labors of Jawaharlal Nehru and Congress Party leaders while magnifying the roles of Hindu heroes and nationalists (Traub 2018). Other Hindutva objectives include banning cow slaughter (which is illegal in a number of states) throughout India, banning Hindus from converting to other religions, and instituting a uniform civil code (which will end the special rights especially Muslims enjoy when it comes to marriage, divorce, and inheritance). Two other long-standing goals, repealing Article 370 of the constitution and building a temple for Lord Ram in Ayodhya (located within the state of Uttar Pradesh), have now come to fruition.

The temple dispute is based on a dubious claim that the mosque honoring the first Mughal emperor, Babur, was constructed on the spot where the Hindu god Lord Ram was born. While the god Ram is a celebrated and venerated figure, there is no evidence that he was born in Ayodhya or anywhere else. But the dispute led to a Hindu mob demolishing the early-sixteenth-century mosque in 1992 as part of a well-orchestrated RSS campaign (Kaw 2010: 56). In November 2019, in a victory for Hindu extremists, the Indian Supreme Court finally gifted the disputed site where the mosque stood to Hindu entities, and in August 2020 the prime minister ceremoniously laid the foundation stone to build a grand temple to Lord Ram. One can expect the temple to be completed before the next general elections, so that Modi and the BJP can benefit from it politically.

Article 370, on the other hand, took effect in 1949 and allowed the only majority-Muslim state, of Jammu and Kashmir, to design its own



laws except on issues pertaining to foreign affairs, defense, and finance. In the process, it granted the state the right to its own constitution and flag, which other Indian states are not entitled to. Together with a subsequent addition (Article 35A), the state legislature was empowered to determine who qualified to be a permanent resident and own property in the region. This prevented non-Kashmiris from owning land and obtaining state scholarships and government jobs. As noted earlier, the policies were designed to accommodate predominantly Muslim Kashmiris within the Indian union when Pakistan claimed all of Kashmir. But the residential restrictions have long galled Hindu extremists, who would like to settle Hindus in the region and thereby transform its demographics. In August 2019, Prime Minister Modi's government annulled the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir and created two union territories that are directly governed from New Delhi. This is another victory for Hindu supremacists, for they can now gradually transform the region's demographics by flooding the area with Hindu settlers. These recent developments question the extent to which India will function within a secular ethos.

In 2001, a decade after India began gradually opening up its economy, an influential US scholar wondered if "India is destined always to be 'emerging' but never actually arriving" (Cohen 2001: 2). Two decades later, with India being the fifth largest economy in the world and expanding military ties to the United States, one may argue that the country has indeed "arrived" and will play a leading role in the twenty-first century. But India's ability to be a consequential and even indispensable player on the global stage will depend on internal cohesion. That in turn mandates camaraderie, especially between its Hindus and Muslims, which is more likely to be achieved in a pluralist and secular, as opposed to majoritarian Hindu, India.

## **The Chapters Ahead**

The chapters that follow, by prominent scholars of India, seek to provide especially undergraduates an overarching understanding of the country. They provide context while emphasizing the most important aspects of the topic that is covered. Thus Chapter 2, by Douglas Hill, not only maps India's geographical features but also discusses how people's socioeconomic, political, and environmental lives are shaped by them. There are many Indias and Hill highlights how India's variegated geographies are linked to livelihoods, for "the outcome of economic, political, or social processes depends on where it occurs; whether it is in a town in the fertile Gangetic areas, a small village in the middle hills of the Himalayas, or a prosperous neighborhood of a bustling megacity."



Chapter 3, by Benjamin Cohen, provides an overview of India and South Asia's major historical periods, events, and some themes from the Indus Valley era (c. 2500 B.C.E.) to India's independence in 1947. Neither settled nor fixed, India's history is constantly being added to, challenged, and revised as new discoveries are made and new theoretical insights are applied to its lengthy past. The chapter divides India's past into a more nuanced scheme rather than the traditional tripartite ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Cohen brings to the fore the major dynasties and empires that have held sway over the subcontinent while alluding to some of the scholarly debates that have intervened in their narratives. Although far from comprehensive, this chapter provides a broad introduction and contextualization for modern India's history.

In Chapter 4, Eswaran Sridharan explains the resilience of democracy in India in the face of a low-income economy, widespread poverty, and immense religious and ethnic diversity; how the country's federal system is structured; and how political parties have evolved and their leaders have operated over the decades within the system. Sridharan discusses Arend Lijphart's notion of consociationalism (sharing power within democracy) to explain India's ability to function as a relatively stable polity. He also points to the country's sense of unity in diversity as another major reason for such stability. The latter, as noted earlier, is now being challenged due to Hindutva advocates feeling emboldened, and the dangers this poses for the country are discussed briefly in the final chapter.

Chapter 5, by Rahul Mukherji and Seyed Hossein Zarhani, discuss India's socialist economy and why and how the country embraced globalization and private entrepreneurship. In doing so, they point to a number of policies the Indian state has adopted in order to try to alleviate poverty. But they emphasize that, unlike in certain other states that developed in dramatic fashion, Indian leaders typically come to major decisions gradually. In short, extant policies get jettisoned only after alternative options tried incrementally prove more useful. When this happens amid a degree of institutional consensus, a tipping point is reached, upon which new policies become embedded. According to Mukherji and Zarhani, the successful transformative changes that take place economically in India are not based on the whim of a prime minister; they result after issues have been debated over time.

Chapter 6, by Sumit Ganguly, evaluates the key drivers that have influenced the country's external relations since it gained independence. Ganguly discusses specific events that conditioned India's foreign policy posture, the institutional sources that have influenced its foreign policy trajectories, and certain challenges it faces in the twenty-first

century. In doing so, he emphasizes how the Indian independence movement and beliefs and practices of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru impacted the country's postindependence foreign policy trajectory. China's rise and expanding tentacles in South Asia challenge India's influence in the Indo-Pacific. While the country participates in military exercise with the United States, Japan, and Australia to ensure its continued influence in the region, Ganguly suggests India may need to join the United States in a strategic partnership to balance meaningfully against a dominant China.

Chapter 7, by Christophe Jaffrelot, discusses the origins of the caste system and how both Dalits and the Other Backward Classes have used their numbers and the franchise to gradually organize, mobilize, and assert themselves in Indian politics. Jaffrelot discusses how Kanshi Ram gave rise to the Bahujan Samaj Party and the party's progress and impact on Indian politics (especially in Uttar Pradesh) over the past few elections. Caste was most salient when the *jajmani* system (which specified services across caste groups) operated and perpetuated hereditary caste-based employment. But that is less and less the case today. As Jaffrelot notes, caste still exists and is especially important when it comes to marriage, but the caste system is undergoing significant change, at least in urban areas.

Chapter 8, by Chad Bauman and Ainslie Embree, highlights how many religious systems have contributed to the complex mosaic of contemporary Indian life. Four of them—Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism—originated in South Asia and constitute over 80 percent of India's population. Three had their origins outside the subcontinent—Islam (by far the largest), Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Bauman and Embree offer brief surveys of the historical development of these religions in India and emphasize their interaction with each other and their contributions to the larger society. These interactions have unfortunately been characterized by hostility, especially before and after Partition in 1947 and by the development of political parties stressing the dominance of Hindu culture over the religious groups that had their origins outside the subcontinent.

In Chapter 9, Lisa Trivedi looks at Indian women and identifies some of the common pitfalls in our thinking about women in modern India even as she introduces the turning points in the emergence of women as historical subjects and actors. Beginning with a discussion of the common misconceptions and paradoxes of women's position in contemporary Indian society, Trivedi explains how colonialism, nationalism, and the family have contributed to the particular political, social, and economic

positions in which women live today. Her chapter also explores the roles of Indian women themselves in transforming society and their position within it over the course of more than a century. Finally, the chapter considers women's position in society in terms of education, politics, and work in the period following independence. New opportunities in the work force made possible by India's liberalized and growing economy are today challenging social roles and customs that have heretofore been the single most important influence on women's lives in India. Just how much women's social status will be changed by women themselves and how much it will change due to forces brought to bear upon society by the economy are questions for the century ahead.

Poverty, development, and urbanization have degraded India's air, land, and water to the point where it is today one of the most polluted countries. Indeed, fourteen of the world's fifteen most polluted cities are in India ("Dirty Work" 2018: 14). And this despite the country's constitution enjoining citizens to protect the environment. Chapter 10, on population, urbanization, and the environment, by Kelly Alley, discusses how ecological, hydrological, and planetary cycles impact Indian livelihoods and how India's National Green Tribunal and judiciary have dealt with challenges stemming from urbanization, environmental strains, and public health. Alley's chapter points to how citizen and judicial activism operate as a check on government even as certain authorities may seek to put development ahead of environmental well-being. The chapter also discusses how Indians at multiple levels are seeking to deal with environmental challenges in purposive and consequential ways.

Finally, Chapter 11 looks ahead to the challenges facing India. These challenges include the assault on democracy by Hindu nationalist forces. They certainly include Covid-19 and the way the coronavirus has exacerbated the difficulties facing the country economically.

At the end of World War II, no serious student of international affairs could afford to ignore the United States. Similarly, no serious student of international affairs today can afford to ignore India, for its actions too will increasingly affect the rest of the world for better or worse. The chapters that follow go a long way in helping students better comprehend the extraordinary and complex country that is India.