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THE STORY OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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http://www.fpri.org/education/1103china_india/

If you examine the panoply of former British colonies, the case of India is exceptional for its liberal and democratic institutions. The vast majority of British colonies either did not emerge as democratic states or quickly succumbed to the temptations of authoritarian rule. Consider states such as Kenya in East Africa, Malaysia, or even Sri Lanka, which remains nominally a democratic state but, in reality, has become an ethnocracy, privileging the majority community. India's twin, Pakistan, has undergone long periods of military rule and has not seen democratic consolidation even when brief democratic openings have appeared.

Even today, the military in Pakistan remains *primus inter pares*, or first among equals. When President Asif Ali Zardari visits Washington, D.C., directly behind him is General Ashfaq Kiyani, the chief of staff of the army. This is something that would never happen in India. When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visits, he does not bring a military entourage with him, because he does not need the military's consent to govern. The differences between Pakistan and India could not be more striking, and, yet, both of these countries emerged from the same colonial experience.

My principal focus here is on how liberal and democratic institutions emerged, specifically, in India. In the mid-nineteenth century, under the growing influence of British colonialism, the British government formally took charge of India. This government displaced the British East India Company, which had steadily expanded its influence and its ability to govern between 1757 and 1857. But in 1857, there was a significant uprising against British rule. British colonial historians have referred to this as the Great Indian Mutiny, and Indian Nationalist historians refer to this as the First War of Independence. I prefer to call this an insurrection or an uprising in a purely descriptive form, without necessarily taking a position on either side. In any case, this uprising was brutally suppressed with, for example, the principal leaders' bodies being shot out through cannon barrels—an effective way of killing someone—and also *pour decourager les autres*, to discourage the others. Once you see someone being shot out of a cannon barrel with a significant amount of gunpowder behind him or her, that tends to have a salutary effect on others thinking about an uprising. Contrary to popular accounts, which suggest that the uprising occurred with the introduction of the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle, which required soldiers to tear off the end of a cartridge before ramming it down the bore, (the cartridge in question, greased with the entrails either of pigs or cows and so equally repugnant to both Hindu and Muslim soldiers) that rifle was not the root cause of the Mutiny even if it might have been the catalyst for it. The underlying structural reason for the uprising against British rule was the penetration of India by British mores, customs, beliefs, and cultural practices, which were all seen as an assault on Indian cultural life. This was part of the transformation that had been taking place in India for well over 100 years. It was a social revolt more than anything else. It had been simmering for some time, and all that was needed was a catalyst. As McGeorge Bundy once said about Vietnam, when a major American base was attacked at a place called Pleiku, he said “Pleikus are like streetcars.” There's another one coming. In a markedly similar fashion, the Enfield cartridge was like a streetcar. If it wasn't the cartridge, something else would have

triggered that revolutionary upsurge against British—the rule of the East India Company—because of the collective grievances that had built up over a century, because of the high-handedness of the company, and the social and cultural transformation that had taken place.

In the wake of 1857, the British formally took over the rule of India. Queen Victoria promised not to tamper with local customs, practices and religious beliefs and generally to be a good steward of her Indian subjects. Despite this, by the late nineteenth century, the historical record shows the emergence of Indian nationalism. Undoubtedly the ideas which infused this insipient Indian nationalism were quintessentially drawn from the Western World. There was some Nationalist claptrap that perpetuated the myth of an ancestral village level democracy in India, and these ideas ultimately came to the fore. However, there is little evidence for that. There might have been this ancestral notion of consensus in a village and the like, but that is not where the origins of *modern* Indian democracy lie. Rather these origins, contrary to the claims of Indian Nationalists, lie in the traditions of British liberalism.

These liberal ideas were quintessentially British and European. However, it is the genius of the Indian Nationalists that they seized upon these ideas and then *implanted* them in the Indian soil. This was not something that the British bequeathed on India. This nineteenth century emergence of Indian nationalism was very different from that which ultimately brought India independence in 1947. The Indian nationalism of the late nineteenth century, which was given a voice when the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, was elitist, upper middle class, anglicized, and sought only incremental changes. The idea that India would be independent of British rule was simply beyond the pale. All they wanted was some notion of representative government. These demands were incremental, evolutionary and limited—reflecting the class, and the much anglicized character of the early Nationalist movement.

WILSON'S CALL FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

In the early twentieth century, in part because of Woodrow Wilson's call for the self-determination of peoples, the Indians received the mistaken impression that Wilson was referring to the subcontinent instead of Central Europe. Indian Nationalists got a considerable boost from this, only to be terribly disappointed by the very incremental, conservative changes that the British made in 1919. Slight forms of representation were allowed, but only very propertied males were allowed to have representation in the various parts of British India. (Even though after 1857 the British basically extended their sway over all of India, some monarchs were allowed to remain as titular heads of their states. They didn't wield any effective power, and could be dismissed with a wave if the British resident so chose. But there were these 562 monarchs, and some of them ruled over areas slightly larger than a postage stamp. They were allowed to do essentially what they wanted, except that the British controlled three critical areas—defense, foreign affairs and communications. They also recognized the British as what was called the paramount power in India, through the Doctrine of Paramountcy. As it happened, these nominally independent kingdoms would pose an interesting challenge at the time of national independence and partition in 1947.)

In the 1920s and early 1930s, under the Congress party, the Indian National Congress, which had been formed in 1885, came under the tutelage of one of the most remarkable men of the twentieth century: Mohandas K. Gandhi. Most people think of Gandhi as a saintly individual. They also think of his personal quirks. What is relevant, however, is Gandhi's genius in transforming this elitist, anglicized, upper middle class organization into a mass-based political party. Gandhi recognized that the only way to oust the British was to mobilize all of India's population. In this, he drew upon Henry David Thoreau and his idea of civil disobedience. Gandhi recognized that if he used civil disobedience, he could paralyze the British, because the British were interested in social control, not in genocide. They did not want to wipe out the Indians, but rather to keep the Indians in their place.

Gandhi's contribution to civil disobedience, which came back, ironically, to the United States in Dr. Martin Luther King's actions, is that it must be done in a non-violent fashion and with a willingness to suffer the consequences. In this way, Gandhi became an exemplar of the importance of the *rule of law*. That is, if you break the law, you must suffer the consequences, however unjust you might deem that law to be. He decided in 1931 to break a simple law, the so-called "Salt Law." Most people know about the breaking of the Salt Law, but this act contained a deeper significance. Salt is something you have to use; it doesn't matter if you're a peasant or a plutocrat. The Salt Law fell disproportionately on the backs of the poor Indian peasants, and thereby Gandhi managed to mobilize the peasantry, to give them an understanding that this was an unjust law and must be broken. But he was also prepared, along with his carefully chosen followers, to face police batons and go to prison. In this fashion, Gandhi helped the peasantry understand the power of civil disobedience; how to stand up against an unjust law, and the necessity to do so. This in part explains India's political culture after independence. The agitational politics that one sees in India—the strikes, the demonstrations, the public unrest, that so characterizes Indian life, in many ways has a direct lineage back to Gandhi. This is the idea that you have a right to go out into the public sphere and protest, even though the police unfortunately remain very colonial in their mentality, and still beat people to a pulp with batons. Nevertheless, people brave this routinely in India, and none more than the Indian poor.

CONGRESS PARTY TRANSFORMS

The larger point is that in the 1930s, the Congress party underwent a fundamental transformation, and for 1/16th of a rupee, the unit of currency—it was not a decimalized currency at that time—one could join the Congress party. People joined Congress in droves, thereby transforming the very character of the party. By the 1940s, the Congress had become a fascinating organization. It was a microcosm of India. There were staunch socialists in Congress at one end, and diehard free marketers at the other. There were those within Congress who firmly believed that India should be a federal polity, and others, like Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's chosen successor, who feared that an overly federated polity might serve as the basis for incipient secessionism, and thereby preferred a much stronger center. Some in Congress were passionately committed to the Stalinist model of economic development—the forced-draft industrialization—and others who absolutely opposed any notion of planning.

One of the great advantages of this diverse Congress was that its members were forced to negotiate, to debate, to argue and above all to learn the art of compromise. Consequently, when independence came, when Parliamentary institutions were created under the Constitution of 1950, they were more than well-versed in the art of debate and compromise. It became deeply imbedded in Indian political culture that you would live to fight another day, because that's the nature of democracy. You may lose this election; you gird your loins again, and come back and enter the arena.

The great failure of the Congress, which led to the partition and creation of the state of Pakistan, was that while the Congress did succeed in convincing significant portions of the Muslim population (about 20 percent of the population prior to independence) that their rights would be guaranteed in an independent future India, it could not convince all Muslims. Congress had to make important compromises, because it depended on local wielders of power to deliver the vote. Thus, despite its professed commitment to a secular political order, it nodded and winked when electoral needs proved to be compelling. This is what the Muslim League, the party that brought Pakistan into being, focused upon. The League said, in effect, "Look! Even when the British are here, they're making compromises at the local levels. Imagine how much worse things will be when the British leave, when this neutral power is removed." Of course, the British were anything but neutral, but that's how Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, characterized the British—that a neutral, moderating power would be gone, and Indian Muslims would be left to the tender mercies of Hindu Nationalists.

Congress emerged after independence as virtually a mini-parliament, with habits of debate, argument and negotiation. India managed to forge a democratic constitution by 1950, and it drew heavily from the American Constitution, the Irish Constitution, and, of course, from British Common Law. If there is a supreme irony in the drafting of this Constitution, it is that the principal drafter, Bhimrao Ambedkar, was an untouchable. He held a doctorate in law from Columbia University and proved well-suited for the task. The Constitution created a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, a federated state with significant powers located at the National Center. And in 1952, you have the spectacle of the world's largest election. While many things haven't worked out in India, the national election held every five years works well. It is the world's largest exercise of democracy.

Unfortunately, over the last couple of decades, the Indian Election Commission had become the bane of every Indian politician. It was a somnolent body, but one individual managed to revive this institution, and chose to implement existing laws. As a consequence, the election commission, far from being a poodle, has become a doberman. And politicians live in abject dread of it. In addition, the election commission now is armed with all manner of technology. Electronic ballot boxes, which are uniform across the nation, even if they have to be delivered by donkey to some parts of Rajasthan in the Western desert, or by elephant to extreme parts of Northeastern India, where even a jeep cannot go. This latter area is home to a hermit who refuses to come out of a forest. So a polling officer has to be sent to him so he can cast his ballot. This is not an apocryphal story. It has been written up in the *Journal of Democracy*, published by the National Endowment for Democracy. Because of this exercise of adult franchise, at municipal, local and national levels, we are witnessing what a friend, Christophe Jaffrelot, who is one of France's leading political scientists working on contemporary India, calls "India's silent revolution." We are witnessing a revolution through the ballot box, where the poor and the dispossessed have come to understand the power of the ballot.

THE POWER OF THE VOTE

Steven Weisman, former Washington Post's bureau chief in New Delhi in the late 1970s, tells the following story. Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister from 1966-1977 and 1980-1984, often declared a state of emergency to save her political career. She then called elections because her sycophants told her that "Madame, everybody loves you." The poor turned out in droves, however, and essentially put her out on her ear. Weisman covered this election. He traveled about 50-60 miles outside of New Delhi to a dusty little village in Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most benighted states, with 120 million people now (larger than France and Britain combined). There he met a wizened old man, who was barely literate. This man said to Weisman, "I want you to write this down. The lady told me to shut up. I've told her who has to shut up."

This story epitomizes the power of the ballot—that the poor in India may have little else. They are maltreated by the police.

Often they cannot approach the bench because they lack resources. Class privileges lead people to treat them as subhuman. But when they step into that booth, they recognize that they wield the power to throw out rascals and bring in new leadership. This is why Indian elections are so powerfully contested now, because you can no longer predict how the poor are going to vote.

Indeed, in the last couple of elections, highly sophisticated pollsters engaged in what is called the “fallacy of composition.” They polled people in urban areas, and said, “Oh, there’s going to be a landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party.” However, nobody polled the rural poor. When they did, the poor who dread anybody coming from the urban areas routinely dissemble. They tell the pollsters what they want to hear, and consequently draw a completely invalid picture. Only in the post-election polls do we understand how people actually voted.

An organization in New Delhi called the “Center for the Study of Developing Societies,” now gives us a kind of an electoral map. This map shows that, unlike in the United States, where the middle class vote is disproportionately high, in India it’s exactly the opposite. It is the poor who are voting in droves. The middle class says, “Life is pretty good. Why bother voting? What difference does it make?” Whereas for the poor; it does make a difference. It makes a difference whether you’re going to get a strip of road built or whether a schoolhouse will be constructed. Consequently, they use the power of the ballot to punish incumbent governments.

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