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India and the Two Faces of Political Mobilization

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The reflections in this book on trends, tendencies and various features of the Indian political landscape do not lend themselves easily to delivering a coherent rating of Indian democracy. The contributions provide differing illustrations, examples and specimens of what Indian democracy stands for, what it has achieved and what it still has to live up to. What is common to all the contributions is that the phenomena that are analysed affect Indian democracy in one way or the other. In this chapter, therefore, I wish to hold up a kind of mirror to India’s democracy. What challenges do we see if we discuss the influence of Indian democracy on itself?

A question that is often asked is whether India has the ‘right’ qualities for a democratic regime to function effectively. After brief reflection on the way the question is posed, one detects an unexpressed suspicion that India ought not to survive at all, either as a nation or as a democracy. Against the background of some of the challenges described in this book, the following questions are reasonable: Is Indian democracy sustainable? Does the country have enough middle class, literate, female and low-caste people in politics, a high enough average income and so on, to give liberal values buoyancy? Sometimes researchers and debaters turn the question around and wonder whether India’s democracy creates the ‘right’ conditions in the country for long-term development. When can India create some kind of basic welfare for all its citizens? Can democracy bring justice, economic growth and political stability at the same time? In discussing these questions, the issue automatically arises: Is Indian democracy itself creating the

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preconditions for its own long-term survival?

On the one hand, India is a country that has disproved many common conceptions of what constitutes good conditions for a democratic form of government. Despite innumerable administrative failings, low literacy and poverty, the country has succeeded unusually well in mobilizing its voters. There is in India today a strong popular adherence to the view that the citizens have the right to choose their own leaders. One manifestation of this is the high electoral turnout of around 60 per cent since the 1960s. Only for a period of twenty-one months in the 1970s did a political elite succeed in totally blocking the democratic process at the national level (discussed in greater detail later). From this point of view, democracy has succeeded extremely well, if India is compared to other countries that were colonized and have long been burdened by poverty.

On the other hand, a high electoral turnout, implying a high degree of political mobilization, in a country still struggling with widespread poverty and a weak or corrupt bureaucracy, is far from unproblematic. Therefore, the aim here is to note some of the specific challenges facing the country, given that we, from a normative standpoint, favour democracy as a form of government. For even if the most pessimistic predictions have not yet been fulfilled, it is impossible to disregard the problems that arise, as Atul Kohli pointed out so well twenty-five years ago, when the masses are mobilized while at the same time the institutions of government are weak. If one considers that many of those who have become more politically active during the last two decades are motivated by issues relating to ethnicity and religious belonging, it becomes even more urgent to re-examine the problems. There is a risk of erosion and disappearance of political tolerance in strongly polarized societies. Issues relating to tolerance have been intensely debated in 2015, but here we will have a slightly more narrow approach to this topic. By political tolerance is meant here the will and inclination to put up with groups and opinions that we ourselves do not like.

By political elite, in this chapter and in this context, I mainly refer to leaders of political parties that win elections, bureaucrats and military officers positioned at high levels of authority within their own organizations, and representatives of large commercial interests and businesses. For an intriguing discussion on the theoretical aspects of the concept, see Alan Zuckerman, “The Concept “Political Elite” – Lessons from Mosca and Pareto” The Journal of Politics 39, no. 2 (1977).


that this aspect is essential to a functioning democracy then we can see the danger manifested in the political climate of India today.

The question to be asked is under what circumstances the mobilization of Indian electorates will have a negative effect on democracy. But as mobilization alone can hardly be said to constitute a problem, we have to see the phenomenon in relation to other factors.

**UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA**

The relationship between democracy and desirable societal development is one of the most intensely discussed issues in the social sciences. When India crops up in this discussion, it is often because examples are found here that turn common perceptions upside down. For example, the school of modernization may be mentioned, which is based largely on the idea that economic growth is a necessary prerequisite for democracy. Barrington Moore developed this view and was quick to make a pessimistic forecast of India’s prospects after Independence. It is true that from Independence onwards until the 1980s, the Indian economy did not do well. Economists spoke in deprecating terms of what they called the ‘Hindu rate of growth’. As long as economic growth was only two or three per cent, the broad-based middle class that social scientists asserted was a necessary prerequisite for a democracy was unable to emerge. A weak economy and low literacy levels and the extremely uneven distribution of the few resources that existed, handicapped Indian democracy.

Experts have also argued a reverse chain of causality. How has India’s democratic form of government been able to promote a kind of development that is desirable in other ways? On the plus side, it is most frequently mentioned that it is democracy which has given the country stability and ethnic peace. The reform of the 1950s, involving the reorganization of the states of India to coincide to a considerable extent with linguistic divisions, was particularly conducive to the relatively good outcome. When the size of the population and the degree of poverty are borne in mind, it is possible to claim that India has experienced relatively few ethnic conflicts. To understand how India has managed to stay united,

Paul Brass has contradicted the assumption we often make, that heterogeneous societies have more conflict than homogeneous ones. He does not regard the threat to India as arising from the heterogeneous nature of the country. On the contrary, he says, this is one of the country’s stabilizing factors.\(^9\) When a country contains so many ethnic groups, languages, religions, social groupings, etc., it is in theory impossible for one group to entirely dominate another. But even if the observation deserves consideration, one wonders whether it really can be so simple. Is it a misreading to assume that contradictions in India will solve themselves since no one group, in the long term, can dominate the country alone? We will return to this idea at the end of this chapter and compare it with other conclusions about the patterns of mobilization in India. For there are many factors here that confuse the picture.

It is necessary to raise the question of why during certain periods there has been widespread violence in India where factions have formed on ethnic lines. Atul Kohli in *Democracy and Discontent*, for example, has convincingly shown how the demand for government services in India tends to outstrip the supply.\(^10\) When the gap between supply and demand becomes too wide, there is no longer any room for political tolerance, and the result is often politically motivated violence, insurrection and sometimes pure ethnic persecution. Soon after Kohli published his book, the occurrence of serious conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the country increased. To some extent, the conflict was fuelled largely by the Hindutva movement. But it also arose from the fact that the state apparatus was weak, politicized and corrupt, entirely in accordance with Kohli’s analysis.

Three factors that can explain this effect on democracy need to be highlighted in this context. The first is that the supply of government services is not always something measurable in such coarse terms as levels of expenditure. If we want to understand the role of the government and of different institutions in how conflicts arise or can be avoided, we have to take note of the way in which services are provided.\(^11\) Are government services and provisions fair, clientelistic, efficient, complicated, etc.? A weak state apparatus increases the risk of conflict. The important role that the character of the government plays in development was stressed by Gunnar Myrdal in *Asian Drama* and subsequently, by a number of experts in development and admin-

\(^10\) Kohli, op. cit.
\(^11\) For support of this argument see Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).
Here, dysfunctional apparatuses of the state in the developing world are designated ‘soft’ when weighed down by corruption and clientelism. Going further back in time, the idea that institutions play a role in how a society is shaped, in general, and in determining the degree of political tolerance between the citizens, in particular, was first clearly expressed by the writers of the American Constitution – especially James Madison, who played a key role in formulating the American Declaration of Rights and who made sure that the US Constitution incorporated the principles of ‘checks and balances’.

The second factor is the role of the political leadership, who play an important part in determining whether people are mobilized under populistic and intolerant banners. Political leaders are not only ‘structural dopes’ – actors whose actions are determined solely by socioeconomic and cultural conditions, institutions, norms and rules – but also actors who can function autonomously. They can choose to mobilize for short-term economic gain and employ confrontational strategies. Or they may choose to plan for economic development that is sustainable in the long term and bank on political strategies that pour oil on the troubled waters of pluralistic and infected societies.

The third factor is the people themselves. They may be educated, prosperous, well-travelled and well-informed about political processes. Such citizens will probably have a greater chance of acting more tolerantly towards members of society who act differently, and express differing views in comparison with poorly educated and impoverished individuals who have never had direct contact with other political groupings or cultures.

The three factors stated above are important to understand why political mobilization of the population sometimes favours democracy and why it can also turn against democracy. This article is not meant to whip up fear of what in the past –

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even during the democracy debate of Mill’s time in the mid-nineteenth century – was called mob rule. It aims to discuss the real problems that arise when political actors mobilize the masses with a message of intolerance, and democratic institutions cannot protect the rights of the individual.

The subject of mass mobilization has been dealt with in many critical studies and it is worthwhile here to recollect some of them. John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were concerned about the unbridled mobilization of the citizenry – what they called ‘political mass participation’. To prevent it from getting out of hand – from mobilization of the masses to the mob, so to speak, it was necessary for the people’s level of education to be raised, and for them to be socialized in the democratic rules of the game by participating in politics. James Madison averred that the constitution and government institutions should be so designed as to avoid the tyranny of the majority. By enshrining rights in the Constitution and dividing power between different institutions – the parliament, the executive and the courts – it was possible to safeguard the rights of the weak and also channel interests so that they could not easily gang up against just one group in society. Nevertheless, the possibility remains of a political elite exploiting groups in society that may have found themselves outside the establishment. They can be utilized in populist movements and be moulded into the core of an entirely authoritarian movement. It is the masses that Hannah Arendt describes as particularly difficult to handle or even dangerous to the life of a democracy.

About the masses and those who were mobilized in the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe, Arendt writes:

It was characteristic of the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany and of the Communist movement in Europe after 1930 that they recruited their members from this mass of apparently indifferent people whom all other parties had given up as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention. The result was that the majority of their membership consisted of people who never before had appeared on the political scene. This permitted the introduction of entirely new methods into political propaganda, and indifference to the argument of political opponents; these movements not only placed themselves outside and against the party system as a whole, they found a membership that had never before been reached, never been ‘spoiled’ by the party system. Therefore they

did not need to refute opposing arguments and consistently preferred methods which ended in death rather than persuasion, which spelled terror rather than conviction. They presented disagreements as invariably originating in deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual and therefore beyond the power of reason. This would have been a shortcoming only if they had sincerely entered into competition with other parties; it was not if they were sure of dealing with people who had reason to be equally hostile to all parties.\footnote{H. Arendt, \textit{Totalitarianism} (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), pp. 9–10 (my italics).}

Notwithstanding Arendt’s well-formulated ideas on who represented the driving force in the tyrannical Nazi and Communist regimes, \textit{the masses} have almost disappeared as an analytical category in recent times. William Kornhauser tried to develop the concept into a theory, but in the 1970s, the term began to be regarded as basically unusable or politically incorrect.\footnote{W. Kornhauser, \textit{The Politics of Mass Society} (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).} It was felt to express disdain for the common people. But is this criticism fair to Arendt? Is it of use to us ourselves if we care about the democratic form of government? Let us see whether there are nevertheless, characteristics that Arendt describes in the amorphous political entity of \textit{the masses} that are pertinent to our analysis. Latter day events in Europe bear witness to the continued relevance of her viewpoint. In Ian Buruma’s \textit{Murder in Amsterdam}, Theo van Gogh’s murderer Mohammed Bouyeri is described as a ‘radical loser’. The term is borrowed from an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and refers to individuals in modern society who have found themselves outside the labour market and normal social networks, and who have finally found support in intolerant radical ideologies.\footnote{Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘The Terrorist Mindset – the Radical Loser,’ \textit{Spiegel Online}, 20 December, 2006.} The profile described can fit Bouyeri as well as those who are today attracted to the xenophobic ultra nationalist Sweden Democrats, Jobbik in Hungary, or Golden Dawn in Greece. And from here perhaps we can draw a parallel to Arendt and then onwards to those actors who take part in conflicts in India. The sum total of this is that radical losers crop up in all sorts of places and that they are always easy prey for populist leaders. They can in certain circumstances have a big effect on politics by being brought together under a populist message and acting in a manner contrary to all that the deliberative democratic model stands for.
To sum up, in the very brief exposition of political mobilization in India that follows we shall bear in mind the following actors, which together seem to be having a decisive effect on the outcome for democracy when the population is mobilized.\(^{19}\)

![Diagram of political actors](image)

Figure 9.1: Players interacting for and against democracy

The division of actors and structures is accepted in many analyses of political processes, but here it is particularly relevant because a consistent theme is the degree of tolerance in society. In *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, Sullivan et al. observe that different ideologies have had differing views about which actors contribute to intolerant movements, and how actors can help to counter intolerance.\(^{20}\) Conservative democratic theoreticians pin their hopes on the enlightened elites in society. Liberal democratic theoreticians also rely on the enlightened elites but they add that well-educated citizens are also key to a tolerant society, where equal democratic rights are respected. Mill and de Tocqueville were par-

\(^{19}\) One does not have to be a Marxist to ask where capital and the companies are placed in this model. Obviously, economic development plays a big part in the development of tolerance or conflict. But in this model, it is implicitly present as an underlying factor that influences and directs individuals, political elites, and the actions of the state, even if they can act autonomously. Other such underlying factors are historical context, cultural values, position in the greater international political context, etc.

\(^{20}\) Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*. 
particularly concerned about ‘mass political involvement’. But education and socialization by participation would bring order to this. Federalist democratic theoreticians, such as James Madison, rely neither on elites nor on citizens. It is the state and its institutions and how they channel interests that determine whether a society is tolerant or not. Just as these actors may represent solutions, so also can they be the cause of problems that arise with political mobilization. A brief account of India’s complex history with regard to different kinds of political mobilization, focusing on the roles played by the political elites, the state and its institutions, and the citizenry, is useful to highlight some of the major challenges faced by Indian democracy. The idea is to provide a few examples to illustrate the different and dynamic aspects of the mobilization processes that lead to diverging outcomes, where the factor or factors mentioned have played a central role. Such an account can also point out some of today’s greatest challenges to Indian democracy.

MOBILIZATION FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY

The obvious objections to the assumptions underlying the design of this chapter would perhaps be: how can anyone not approve of mass mobilization in India? Mass mobilization has surely been the basis for India’s liberation and has, after all, formed the basis for the many popular movements that have questioned the authoritarian tendencies of the state. Let us consider this perspective first.

MOBILIZATION FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Indian soldiers, both Hindu and Muslim, took part in a revolt against the British East India Company, which came to be known as the Sepoy Uprising. The incident resulted in the British Crown taking over the administration of the British Empire in India. The revolt, which was enormous in extent, included not only the soldiers recruited by the East India Company but also the civilian population. It is not surprising that the revolt is regarded in India as ‘India’s first war of liberation’ against the British. And this mass mobilization paved the way for continued resistance to outside oppression.

Early in the twentieth century there followed one of the most spectacular displays of mass mobilization that the world had ever seen when India once again

rose up against the British Empire. Obviously, some nationalist leaders, such as Subhash Chandra Bose from Bengal, advocated militant opposition to the colonial rulers. But it was a movement based on non-violence and civil disobedience that made the great breakthrough. This movement was led by the Congress Party, with Jawaharlal Nehru as its political leader, but most of the spiritual and ideological inspiration came from Mohandas Karamchand, or ‘Mahatma’ (great soul) Gandhi. He recommended ‘Satyagraha’ – a kind of passive resistance that proved hugely effective in winning both a strategic and moral advantage over the British. It began with boycotts of British goods and British education and a refusal to pay tax. The latter acquired enormous symbolic significance when the Indians were urged to produce their own salt to avoid taxation by the British. In 1930, Gandhi walked four hundred kilometres, from Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi, joined by thousands of Indians protesting the British rule by making their own salt from seawater. The protesters soon included millions of Indians from all strata of society and eventually Independence became a reality.

However, the tradition of large-scale protests and mass mobilization did not disappear with liberation. Indira Gandhi gave an impressive demonstration of mass mobilization forty years after the salt march. As Indira Gandhi had lost a significant part of her institutional capital after the Indian National Congress had split in the end of the 1960s, she was obliged to adopt a new political strategy. She decided to mobilize the masses by appealing to them directly. Before the election of 1971, she promised that poverty would be eradicated. ‘Garibi hatao’ became a slogan that had enormous impact, particularly on the poorer voters. The underlying strategy came to involve an important change for the Congress Party. Previously the party had been a ‘catch-all’ party – an organization that picked up support from virtually all groups in society, or as Rajni Kothari has described it, a kind of microcosm of the whole of India. But now, Indira Gandhi was compelled to bypass both the old caste elites in the countryside and the middle class in the cities. Within ten years, the Congress Party lost its ‘catch-all’ character. But to win the 1971 election it proved to be the right move. Indira Gandhi’s Congress won 44 per cent of the votes, while the Congress (O) gained 10 per cent before receding into

the background. The electoral victory was a political and cultural upset without parallel. Partly because Indira, a woman, succeeded in beating the old elites at their own game and also because ‘garibi hatao’ came to stand as a symbolic victory of the poorest, who previously had difficulty in making their voices heard.

We can find a final example of meaningful democratic mass mobilization in India in recent times in the protests against the building of dams in India. Since the 1980s, the Sardar Sarovar dam was the focus of protest, since it may have displaced between three hundred thousand and a million people from their homes.26 The large scale protests against the dams helmed by the organization, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada) was a significant movement in many respects. Regardless of the consequences of the dam project, the protests show that Indian democracy is far from being a space that engages only the elites. Tribal peoples, the largest demography affected by dams in India, are among the most economically and politically disadvantaged groups in Indian society. Even if the dam projects continue, the size of the protests still shows that Indian democracy lives in the hearts of a population who despite severe socio-economic disadvantages assert their rights against political elites and outstandingly strong economic forces.

From these examples, it is apparent that the mobilization of citizens on a large scale, or ‘mass mobilization’ is central to Indian democracy. Such mobilization can, undoubtedly, encompass the most economically disadvantaged and can be of a populist nature. The ‘garibi hatao’ campaign is an example of this. Given these circumstances, it is not entirely obvious how one can convincingly argue that mass mobilization can also pose a threat to democracy. But unfortunately one can. As is shown by history and by what Arendt witnessed before and during the Second World War, mass mobilization is not inevitably beneficial to democratic development. It can also work in an anti-democratic direction if those who are mobilized have no intention of letting their political opponents be heard, and if violence is the means of achieving their goals. India, like so many other states around the world, also offers many experiences of the kind.

MASS MOBILIZATION AND TRAGEDY IN INDIA

India’s Independence in 1947 also came with the displacement of millions of Hindus and Muslims from their homes. More than seven million Muslims fled to

26. The Narmada project is actually a number of projects that include dams to be built along the River Narmada in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. More about popular protests in India can be found in Katrin Uba, ‘Do Protests Make a Difference? – the Impact of Anti-Privatisation Mobilisation in India and Peru’ (Uppsala University, 2007).
Pakistan and equally many Hindus and Sikhs made their way to India. This gigantic process of migration gave rise to conflicts that led to the deaths of around a million people. ‘Liberation’, therefore, is remembered alongside ‘Partition’ and forms one of the most painful moments in the history of southern Asia. India and Pakistan have still not recovered from it, and the events around 1947 remain a volatile ground of conflict between Pakistan and India and have also fuelled intolerance between, in particular, Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus.\(^{27}\) In these conflicts, mass mobilization is an important component, where the state and the political elites exercised a crucial effect on the outcome. The following four examples illustrate this point.

The *garibi hatao* campaign had a downside, even if the purpose was a good one. When Indira Gandhi broke with the old elites in the Congress Party, she was obliged, as described previously, to pursue her political struggle without a strong organization. She appealed directly to the people. This enabled her to circumvent elite groupings in the states and rule by direct means. For example, it quickly became customary to use and indeed abuse, the protective mechanisms in the Indian Constitution that were intended to create order in the states when there were disturbances. Vaguely expressed passages in the Constitution were often used to depose regimes at the state level that were not to her liking. Generally, power was centralized in New Delhi in a very tangible and authoritarian manner. With strong electoral results behind her and a closely integrated political elite surrounding her, there was for a long time nobody to whom she was answerable. In 1975 Indira Gandhi, locked in a very tight political corner, introduced a state of emergency that radically circumscribed the freedom of the press and civil rights. Politicians who expressed dissatisfaction with the regime were thrown into prison. Even less did anyone dare to criticize her right-hand man, her son Sanjay Gandhi, who became increasingly known for implementing Indira’s will, and his own, with a growing brutality. Here mention may be made of compulsory sterilizations in the seventies and Sanjay’s order to clear the slums of the poor in New Delhi using ruthless methods; these are but two instances.\(^{28}\) It looked for a while as if India was going to suffer the same fate as Pakistan. Nonetheless, after 21 months, Indira Gandhi suspended the state of emergency. She and the Congress (I) lost the following election. However, the opposition was fragmented and weak, and after another election in 1980, Congress (I) and Gandhi managed to regain power.

\(^{27}\) Admittedly, it would be possible and relevant in this context also to discuss caste conflict and intolerance based on gender.

Before the election, Gandhi and her party entered into alliances and collaborations with other political forces who were prepared to resort to harsh methods against opponents of Congress (I).

One example is Sanjay Gandhi’s support over a period for the religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in Punjab. Bhindranwale’s career was rising as a Sikh missionary preaching strict abstinence to young, disillusioned and often unemployed men of rural Punjab. Collaboration with the Congress (I) did not work out well, since it was soon realized that Bhindranwale had a political agenda in the direction towards separatism. Soon Bhindranwale led a widespread populist movement that targeted the Indian government and Congress (I). They demanded that Punjab be allowed to form its own state, Khalistan. Soon Bhindranwale and his supporters achieved wide support in Punjab. He mobilized a kind of mass movement and many of the displaced farmers and poor young men who joined it were not very different from some of those described by Arendt. Those who opposed him and his political movement became targets of the death patrols sent out from the movement’s headquarters, which were in the sacred Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar. The conflict escalated and Indira Gandhi’s attempt to ‘solve’ it was Operation Blue Star, which involved surrounding the temple with a full military force and then attacking it. The siege ended in great bloodshed. Bhindranwale was killed, and his supporters avenged his death less than six months later by assassinating Indira Gandhi. Congress Party supporters then took immediate revenge on the Sikhs as a group, especially in New Delhi. For three or four days there was a frenzied hunt for Sikhs and more than three, possibly four, thousand Sikhs were killed in organized pogroms. The conflict in Punjab continued throughout the 1980s, where democratic institutions were damaged or stopped functioning entirely. In due course it subsided, only to give way to a growing conflict in Kashmir, which, too, contained elements of mass mobilization.

Kashmir was disputed at Partition and before the 1980s, India and Pakistan had already fought three wars specifically about, or strongly affecting, the area. Kashmir, or ‘Jammu & Kashmir’, as the Indian-controlled part was called, is special in a number of ways, including the fact that it is a state with a Muslim majority. Over the years, Pakistan has often supported separatists in Kashmir in the hope of gaining control of the Indian-controlled part. But in the late seventies and early eighties there was hardly any local support for separatism in Kashmir. Democratic institutions were functioning relatively well and integration of the area with the rest of India was proceeding along the right lines from an Indian perspective. Dur-

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ing the 1980s, however, corruption in Kashmir increased, politicians tried to manipulate elections and control the judicial system for their own purposes. When the population lost faith in democratic institutions, protests increased, as did support for separatists in the region. The Indian central government chose to meet the discontent with more restrictions of rights and by imprisoning dissenting political leaders. Towards the end of the 1980s, mass protests were very common and the response was sterner military reaction. Before long, almost all the democratic institutions in Kashmir collapsed and this was followed by a conflict that has not yet come to an end. It is important to note that by the end of the 1980s, the young men who had been mobilized in the conflict were completely disillusioned about democracy and opportunities for rational and constructive discussion. Years of corruption and electoral fraud shaped, quite naturally, their view that it was only with violence that a political struggle could be continued. What else could they lose? They had, in a sense, been transformed into radical losers, to revert to the terminology of Enzensberger. In this case, we can clearly see how the masses were mobilized and took up rational positions on account of the actions of the political elites and of weak, politicized and corrupt institutions.

As the conflict in Kashmir escalated, the Hindu nationalists in India found more support. It is true that their movement had begun to grow appreciably during the 1980s, but in the 1990s, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the largest party espousing the Hindutva movement, came to enjoy almost as much support from the electorate as Congress (I). In its political rhetoric, Muslims were portrayed as disloyal to India – Kashmir was just one example – and its most radical representatives were not opposed to the idea of suspending Muslims’ Indian citizenship. The BJP was remarkably skilful in mobilizing the masses. One way of doing this was by marches through the country, for example the BJP’s *Ekta Yatra* in 1992. This was led by BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi, and ended in Kashmir with Joshi hoisting the Indian tricolour in Srinagar to show that Kashmir was a part of India and would never be relinquished. Given the conditions in Kashmir at that time, it is understandable that a symbolic deed of this kind merely exacerbated the conflict at the local level. Another type of mass mobilization that turned out well for the BJP was its actions in what is known as the Ayodhya question. The background to this conflict is described in Chapter Seven. There, too, we observe a well-organized mobilization of the masses. Many of these joined the movement as *kar sevaks*, or voluntary assistants, who in 1992 demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

31. Ibid.
The Ayodhya conflict continues today and still has repercussions on the political climate of India. This leads us on to the last example of mass mobilization associated with conflict. In 2002, a train stopped at a station in the state of Gujarat. The train contained many Hindu passengers, including several Hindu nationalist activists returning from Ayodhya after demonstrating for the building of a temple on the remains of the Ayodhya mosque. One of the carriages in the train caught fire. The first media reports stated that the carriage was set on fire by angry Muslims. Later enquiries suggested that it caught fire after an accident. Fifty-eight Hindus died and the event set off an extensive pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat, not unlike the pogrom against Sikhs in New Delhi in 1984. Within the span of a few days, around one thousand Muslims were killed in the state, although the exact numbers remain inconclusive. The violence was extremely brutal and often sexual. According to many reports, it was led by Hindu nationalists and sanctioned by political elites in the state, including the Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In the subsequent election in the state, Modi and the BJP won a decisive victory.32
Later, in 2014, Modi became the Prime Minister of India.

DEMOCRATIC AND ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MOBILIZATION IN INDIA

From these examples, it is easy to confirm that the kinds of contexts in which mobilization with democratic or anti-democratic overtones has arisen are specific to India. However, this does not mean that the dynamics and the patterns we can observe are unique or of an unusual kind. Let us return to the discussion at the start of this chapter and take a closer look at the population, the political leadership and the institutions to examine the role they play in the varied outcomes.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

Political leaders around the world are seldom averse to taking personal credit when their own political campaigns are successful from a democratic perspective. This view is reflected in the depiction of political leaders as the founders of the nation in portraits and statues, and in the writing of biographies of the ‘great leaders’. When things go wrong, the responsibility of the individual leaders seldom receives the same proclamation – at least not from themselves. Suddenly it

becomes necessary to understand ‘structures’ – such as the laws, the constitution, the economic situation, etc.

It is obvious that institutions, conventions, unwritten and written systems of rules and so on, can lead, and even force, political leaders to adopt positions and strategies that polarize groups in an anti-democratic direction. It is difficult to blame a party which resorts to arms after being harassed and suffering drastic restrictions of freedom over a long period. We can see elements of this process in Kashmir and Punjab. At the same time, it is wrong to exonerate political leaders in every situation that leads to conflict. Perhaps the leaders could have acted differently. Perhaps they could have implemented conciliatory strategies in critical situations. As well as cases that are difficult to assess from a perspective of responsibility, there are many examples of conflict stirred up by politicians whose main concern has been to maximize their personal power and influence. Conflict may then arise as an unforeseen consequence. Sometimes polarization is an expression of a desire for revenge, or of an intention to drive out or wipe out another group in the community. The Kashmir conflict, as it developed in the 1980s and the early 1990s, is an example of a conflict that was not created deliberately. The Congress Party, and also the strong local party, the National Conference under the leadership of Farooq Abdullah, pursued a policy focused solely on maximizing their own influence. This then led to the politicizing and/or dismantling of democratic institutions, which resulted in greater polarization and conflict.

So even if armed conflict was never intended, the major parties and their leaders were to blame. In the wake of the Ayodhya conflict, we find examples of direct provocation of Muslims led by a Hindu nationalist elite. The most blatant example is Gujarat’s Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is alleged to have sanctioned the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. The fact that instead of resigning as Chief Minister, he used the attacks as a platform for re-election, bears witness to dominant views of Muslims as well as his and the political elite’s cynical exploitation of opportunities – which continues to constitute a problem for Indian democracy.

It is clear that the political elites have a definite influence on the patterns of mobilization that may arise among the population. As mentioned earlier, Paul

Brass has pointed out that pluralism in India strengthens its democracy. This is true to some extent. If society contains many different politicians and groupings who are all making political demands of different kinds all the time, a pattern of countervailing pressures arises that prevents any groups from taking over completely. In cases like the Sepoy Uprising and the Dandi March we saw how large-scale protests mobilized several groups at the same time against a tyrannical regime. The explicit joint objective here lay in a democratic direction. But it is equally possible for political elites to mobilize a larger group, or several groups together, against one single group.

A kind of tyranny of the majority can then arise. This may mean that, for example, different caste groupings, which have previously had differing interests, unite against another group in society, such as the Muslims. This creates a new identity, a new ‘us and them’ dimension, and when a minority group finds itself at such a disadvantage, the consequences may be serious. Government institutions and the State in general are supposed to resist such a course of events. But sometimes government institutions fail to act in accordance with the democratic principles of the state to treat and protect all its citizens equally. On the contrary, the institutions may often be a powerful causal factor in the polarizing process.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN THE MOBILIZATION OF CITIZENS AND INTERESTS

The pioneering work of Sullivan et al. on political tolerance draws attention to James Madison’s perceptive observation that a state contains a large number of political groups and differing interests. As long as the structure of the state incorporates well-developed principles of separation of powers and a decentralized administrative structure, interests are divided between different levels and are always to some extent opposed by other interests. This means that no group can easily achieve total political dominance, and no group ends up entirely outside the system as a loser. Nor does the federalist model anticipate that any political group or leader will, to any great degree, stand up heroically to defend another political group that is subjected to threats, violence or other activities that curtail its freedom. This function is the task of the executive power, the legislative assembly and the judicial system as prescribed in the Constitution and in its declaration of rights.

These observations are particularly interesting in an Indian context, because the Indian Constitution envisages a kind of federation based on rights that finds parallels in the American Constitution and elsewhere. There are many cases where the Indian Constitution and the institutions of the Indian state have worked together in unifying the nation and upholding democracy. The Indian state has never been as soft-centred as many have imagined after reading Gunnar Myrdal’s *Asian Drama*. The language question that we mentioned initially is an example. It was solved by amending the Constitution and by the court’s upholding of government directives. What might have become a prolonged conflict on borders and the status of the different languages was turned, instead in the 1950s, into one of the strongest foundations currently supporting the Indian nation. Furthermore, it was the Constitutional reforms in the early 1990s along with administrative reforms, such as the *panchayati raj* reforms, that led to India becoming more decentralized and gaining a better-functioning democracy with a considerably higher number of women in politics.36

My own research on the panchayat system in India shows how the democratic deficit – citizens’ experience of lack of effective democratic processes – was reduced by decentralizing reforms.37 The study was carried out in Madhya Pradesh and Kerala during the period 2000–2004. It contains in-depth interviews and questionnaires addressed to political elites and citizens chosen at random. The study clearly shows that people believe that democracy functions better since the decentralizing reforms were carried out. In this respect, the aforementioned federalist democracy theory receives support. Further support from the theory emerges from the fact that the study shows the different effects of the degree of decentralization on the level of political tolerance among citizens.38

There is no doubt that we can see good results for democracy when government institutions function as intended. Conversely, there is also considerable criticism of Indian government institutions, which are often deemed weak and corrupt. It is very easy to show that many cases of conflict have arisen because of, or have been inflamed by, India’s dysfunctional institutions. In Kashmir, Gujarat and Punjab, as we mentioned earlier, corruption in the police force, the judicial system and the electoral commission, and among politicians, can be the most important factor

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37. *Decentralisation, Corruption and Social Capital – from India to the West*.

38. Also see Sullivan et al., op. cit., p. 22, for discussion of decentralization and tolerance.
contributing to the flare-up and escalation of conflict. The political elites who wish to exercise total political domination cannot do this by military force alone. They have to draw up a hegemony – to use (Gramsci, 2007). They have to exercise an appreciable influence on cultural values and norms in society, and ensure that their own value system is accepted by the rest of society. This can be done if the elite or elites can control government institutions for their own interests. There is still far too much scope for this in India. In democracies where the state is ‘soft’, there is potential for a dictatorship of the majority. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest challenges facing democracy in India is to build a more just and functioning state apparatus and to avoid a dictatorship of the majority.

TOLERANCE OF THE CITIZENS AND THE RADICAL LOSERS

Finally, it is necessary to put in perspective the role of the citizens in the mobilization processes. As we have seen, elites and institutions have a big influence on the direction of democracy. They can influence citizens and structure their preferences, their feeling of solidarity, their interpretation of reality, etc. However, first, not all citizens are affected in the same way by the same information or incentive structures. Second, the reverse order of causation is relevant – elites and institutions are often shaped by the pressure from beneath in the form of the will and methods of expression of the people. When these take an anti-democratic course, terms such as ‘mob’ and ‘rabble’ are heard. When they take a democratic or other more sympathetic course, they are usually called grassroots movements. But even if the citizens are motivated by widely differing aims, it is possible to ask whether the underlying dynamics in political processes are not basically similar. This question is well beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is worthwhile to provide some illustrations of how the characteristics of individuals shape political movements and what may constitute differences that are very important to democratic development.

There is no shortage of studies supporting the liberal democracy theory we mentioned at the beginning – stating that not only enlightened elites but also educated and socially oriented citizens are necessary for a functioning democracy. A generally high level of education and high levels of social capital among the population are seen as either essential or at least conducive to a functioning democracy. Tolerance research, in particular, has focused on the importance of educa-


tion in the development of democratic norms. Ideas on the importance of social capital made, in their early form, their breakthrough with the modernization theory of the 1950s, which also stressed the great significance of education; they have more recently been revived in the work of Robert Putnam in the field.

Modern theories in this area of research have proved particularly relevant to India. We know from these that economic activity that involves individuals across ethnic lines creates trust across boundaries and reduces the risk of conflict. We also know that literacy breaks down old social hierarchies and creates new social entrepreneurs in a more equal and therefore, more democratic social structure. These observations are particularly interesting, because enthusiasm is often expressed for social capital between groups in today’s discussion of democratic theory. In such cases, the mafia, the Ku Klux Klan and criminal motorcycle gangs are cited as examples of what can happen when groups only nurture trust, networks and norms within their own group.

At the same time, mobilization within groups need not necessarily be a bad thing. Trust within groups and internal solidarity are preconditions for the mobilization of resistance to forces of oppression. This has been observed in the villages of Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, and in my opinion, it is also demonstrated in work done by the Narmada Bachao Andolan. They depend on trust within the group, and it is probable that they have no great faith in their political opponents. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is undoubtedly important to democracy. Democracies have developed on the same lines in the West. High levels of social capital within groups have been the key to the mobilization of workers, blacks and women. For instance, extensive research on intolerance in South Africa shows that strong identities based on ethnic divisions need not have a negative effect on democratic values. The conclusion we can draw from this is that social capital is an important precondition for the occurrence of political mobilization in what-

41. At least from the time of Stouffer onwards. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties – A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind*.
42. S. M. Lipset, op. cit..
ever form. But social capital itself does not determine the course that a democracy will take. This is decided by interaction with factors we have already mentioned, such as the institutions and the elites. However, that does not mean there are no differences between citizens who want to mobilize within a democratic framework and those who resort to non-parliamentary methods to achieve political influence. I conclude this section by making a few observations concerning those individuals who seem to have ended up ‘outside’ the democratic system.

Hannah Arendt’s initial description of intolerant citizens who are mobilized in populist movements is of special interest. She says that those who were mobilized by the Nazis and the communists were individuals whom other parties regarded as too crazy or apathetic to be interesting. They were individuals who had not been mobilized before and who, more importantly, were indifferent to the arguments of political opponents. Differences of opinion were regarded by these citizens as a result of divisions that were so deep, and also ‘natural’, that it was quite simply not possible to enter into a rational dialogue. For this reason, these individuals were more inclined to turn to violence to attain political success. They were people who had been placed, or had placed themselves, outside the existing political system. So the question then becomes how this picture fits in with our picture of, for example, radical Hindu extremists or extreme Islamists in India.

Epithets such as extremists with a religious prefix lead to thoughts of individuals who practice their religion very ardently, and the idea that it is the religious belief itself that gives inspiration, force and motivation to their intolerant or violent behaviour. But the order of cause and effect is often quite different. It is rather the case that the most intolerant individuals are people who first find themselves outside society in some way and that they are then picked up by a politically radical movement.

In studies that I have been involved in after the above mentioned research project on decentralization, deeper insights about the causes behind tolerance have been revealed in India – or more specifically in the context of Madhya Pradesh. Gender, education, party affiliation and age seem to have no relationship to political tolerance. The politicized curriculum seems to block the positive effects of education on political tolerance, which is commonly observed elsewhere. Those who do engage in party activities, or membership in NGO-activities and unions, are however significantly more tolerant than those who do not.48 Perhaps this is

expected but what was surprising was that those showing strong trust in their own
group were no more intolerant than those showing trust across group bounda-
ries. It is quite common in the discourse on social capital to emphasize the pos-
itive effects that trust extends across group identities. Trust mainly within groups
is often regarded as detrimental to democracy. Also it is assumed that trust and
political tolerance is almost the same thing. People are assumed to be politically
tolerant towards those they trust. But the study on decentralization shows that trust
and tolerance are evidently different qualities.

It was perhaps even more surprising to find in the studies mentioned here that
the degree of tolerance, or intolerance, was not correlated with the inclination to
visit temples or, if the person went to the temple regularly, the frequency of the
visits. If various statistical methods were applied to the survey data it was possible
to detect that in some cases the extremely intolerant respondents went to the tem-
ple more seldom than those who showed themselves to be tolerant. Apparently,
intolerance and religious activism cannot be automatically equated. What appears,
on the other hand, is the picture of men who are not doing particularly well in life
and who are outside the more established social contexts. They are bitter for var-
ious reasons and do not think ‘other people’, especially those they regard as dif-
ferent from themselves, should have the same rights as they believe they them-
selves should have. They are very close to the personality type described by
Arendt, and this is not, in other words, unique to the Europe of the 1930s and
1940s. Nor to India today.

This kind of outsider has been described by Ian Buruma in his portrait of
Mohammed Bouyeri: a young man who ended up entirely outside the usual
social groupings and systems of norms in one of the world’s most developed wel-
fare systems. The only recognition and the only moral rehabilitation that Bouyeri
seemed able to find was from radical Islamist ideologues whom he met primarily
on the Internet and in Amsterdam. He easily fell into the role described by Hans
Magnus Enzensberger as a ‘radical loser’ – an individual who has found himself
outside ‘the collective’ and has nothing to lose, however, extreme the actions he
or she takes. On the contrary, radical, non-democratic action may be all that can
afford the individual some redress and self-esteem. Here Arendt, Buruma and
Enzensberger take the same line, and it becomes relevant in the South Asian con-
text as well. We find radical losers among the kar sevaks who tore down the

49. This result is in line with finding by Gouws and Gibson in South Africa. Gibson and Gouws,
*Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion.*
mosque at Ayodhya and those who carried out the pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. In 2010, the 22 year-old Ajmal Kasab was convicted of the assassinations in Mumbai in 2008. His background is in several respects like Bouyeri’s. But as stated, the personal characteristics of certain individuals who may become radical losers are not enough to rock a whole democracy. There has to be an interaction of more factors. The effect of the actions of radical losers is naturally also decided by institutional, economic and cultural factors. For example, political tolerance remains a characteristic cultural trait in Spain even after the Madrid bombings in 2004.

CONCLUSIONS

The diversity of India is not an adequate safeguard against oppression in India, despite the observation by Paul Brass that India cannot become a fully-fledged dictatorship because the country is too heterogeneous. In saying this, Brass challenged Muhammed Ali Jinnah’s theory of two nations, which propounded the view that the British Empire in India comprised two great cultures and thus, two nations, the Hindu and the Muslim. They were destined to go their separate ways. Otherwise, Muslims would be condemned to live forever under a kind of oppression of the majority under the Hindu regime. So Brass succeeded to some extent in undermining Jinnah’s argument by pointing out the great heterogeneity that is hidden under the lid of the Hindu cauldron. But I do not believe that Brass wants us to be excessively optimistic on the strength of his thesis. The argument may very well hold good as long as many different individuals and groups direct their intolerance at many different targets at the same time. This creates countervailing pressures and a kind of equilibrium with everybody keeping each other in check and therefore, preventing anyone from achieving complete domination. However, research shows that group identities, alliances and loyalties are constantly changing and that heterogeneity is not in itself any guarantee against a tyrannical majority, as James Madison, and later Jinnah, feared, taking hold of power.

Figure 9.2: Pluralist countervailing pressures vs. tyrannical majority

Figure 9.2 may serve to illustrate the two extreme positions discussed. It is not particularly strange that groups can from within themselves establish the pluralistic countervailing pressure we see in the left-hand part of the figure. Groups react, first and foremost, to the group that is close to them, and if they are competing for important resources, it is not unusual for this to result in intolerance. Also sheer fear of strangers may lead different groups to oppose each other. In certain situations, the intolerance begins to focus principally on one group in the population. If that process is allowed to continue, it results eventually in a tyrannical majority as illustrated by the situation in the right hand part of the Figure. From this, it is clear that a tyrannical majority can be formed even though it is not homogeneous in itself. Figure 9.2 also shows that the tyrannical majority is hardly likely to emerge simply because individuals and certain groups bear ill feeling towards each other. Effective oppression of a minority by a majority requires a capacity for coordination, which is something that many of the radical losers we mentioned are not particularly good at. In all important respects, they lack the resources they need in order to coordinate their frustration, e.g. education and social capital. On the other hand, they constitute a category of individuals who can be easily mobilized by others, i.e. by the political elites. In contexts where institutions are weak or corrupt, there is room for such politicization, and the institutions may even, as we discussed earlier, accelerate the process.

So if we return to the three actors that we had at the start in Fig. 1 and simplify everything by imagining two possible positions for each of the factors, we can illustrate as follows the eight possible outcomes that may ensue.
Table 9.1 shows that all three factors have to reinforce each other before a worst-case scenario can occur. With one deviant factor, the tendencies are alleviated and with two, the potential for democracy soon becomes good in a pluralist setting. For example, even if political elites aim for a populist message with an adversarial content, the effects of this are countered by an educated and enlightened population and strong institutions that oppose injustice. But the picture also demonstrates that we cannot pin excessive hope on isolated factors in order to obtain a functioning democracy. For example, literacy and a higher level of education alone are no panacea. Nor can high levels of education alone be expected to lead to democracy. Nor can we expect that building a large and stronger state by itself will be enough to strengthen democracy. We must bear in mind the warning we have had to remind us since Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto – big bureaucracies in the West tend to first and foremost serve the prosperous elites. They make ‘true’ democracy impossible.

So the answer to the question of whether there can be too much popular participation in India depends in particular on how elites, institutions and the citizens

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53. The terms in Table 9.1 that describe the behaviour of the elites (coalescent and adversarial) have been taken directly from Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.


56. Ibid.
and their characteristics interact in the political process. We have the most important analytical tools to show us the direction in which a country like India is moving. However, we do not have enough information to give a clear picture of the whole country. India’s size, social and institutional complexity make it difficult to draw conclusions. It is easy to find depressing examples and tendencies, mainly because we receive most information about violent events and negative trends. We create our understanding from the material that has been filtered by the mass media, the politicians and the debaters. As Stein Rokkan pointed out in the 1970s, there was a great shortage of reliable data on countries like India. Even if this is to some extent true today, certain positive trends can be detected with the information that is available now. We can see how administrative reforms in India have strengthened at least parts of the country’s administration. The *panchayati raj* reforms are an important example. It is no exaggeration to claim that in the modernization process that India is going through, with increasing numbers of workers leaving the land and more and more people becoming unemployed, functioning institutions are becoming ever more important in order to stabilize the country. The panchayat system appears to offer a valuable basis for this. As the human capital of India is growing, it is also becoming increasingly literate, and more people than before can now influence their own lives. Infant mortality is falling and life expectancy is rising. The country contains a huge and poverty-stricken population but the poor are becoming relatively fewer in relation to other citizens who enjoy reasonable living conditions. But what about the political elites? Are they becoming better democrats? The Congress Party needs to become a substantially more responsive and democratic political institution – there is no doubt about that. It simply needs to abandon the undemocratic and dynastic principles it relies on today. Not only to provide a better chance to win future elections, but also to strengthen India’s democracy in general. The BJP is the strongest force in Indian politics at national level and will remain so for a long time. It needs a real and democratic opposition party, or parties, in order for the democratic system to evolve in the right direction. As long as the Congress (I), or strong regional parties, do not find a way to cooperate and present the electorate with viable and credible strategies against corruption and pollution, and with economic reforms that create jobs, then it is mainly the BJP that decides if India’s democracy will continue a path towards the upper left, or lower right corner, in Table 9.1.

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