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NEW DIMENSIONS OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Conventional wisdom has it that India is the world's largest democracy, but few have recognized that it is so against the odds. The Indian experience runs against the widely held view that rich societies are much more likely to be democratic than poor ones, and that societies with large minority populations are prone to ethnic cleansing and civil war. Democracy in India, a poor and notoriously diverse country, has succeeded for more than half the twentieth century and seems likely to succeed as well in the twenty-first. India's democracy has proved substantial as well as durable. Electoral participation has been higher than in the United States, elections have been free and fair, governments have alternated at the center and in the states, and free speech and association are constitutionally protected and widely practiced. But democracy is subject to challenge and change. This essay examines why and how democracy in India during the 1990s responded to a variety of challenges. These may be summarized under seven headings:

- 1) A more prominent role for federal states in India's political system. The states are making themselves heard and felt politically and economically more than they ever have in the half-century since India gained its independence from Britain.
- 2) The transformation of the party system. The era of dominance by the Indian National Congress has ended. Congress remains a major party, but it now must operate within a multiparty system that includes not only the nationally influential Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but a host of significant regional and state-based parties as well. Susanne Hoerber Rudolph is professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Lloyd I. Rudolph is professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Their numerous published works on South Asia and India include *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (1987) and *Reversing the Gaze: The Amar Singh Diary— A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India* (2002). *Journal of Democracy* Volume 13, Number 1 January 2002 South Asia Faces the Future Susanne Hoerber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 53
- 3) Coalition government. Stable central governments based on parliamentary majorities have given way to coalition governments that must depend on constellations of regional parties. India has become in this regard like Italy or Israel, both places where small parties can make or break governments and thereby affect the whole nation.

4) A federal market economy. Economic liberalization has been marked by a decline in public investment and a rise in private investment, the displacement of the federal Planning Commission by the market, and the emergence of the states as critical actors in economic reform and growth. The result has contributed to a transformation of India's federal system.

5) The central government as regulator. Despite what the foregoing might suggest, India's central government is not fading away. The center is holding, but its role has changed. The center had acted as an intervenor. Now it acts as a regulator. In the economic realm, it monitors the initiatives of the several states. It tries (albeit mostly without success) to enforce fiscal discipline. In the political realm, the center acts—through regulatory institutions such as the Supreme Court, the presidency, and the Election Commission—to ensure fairness and accountability. Since the emergence of the first coalition government in 1989, this role as “policeman” or honest broker has grown, while the interventionist institutions, the cabinet and parliament, have waned in significance.

6) A social revolution. In most states and to a significant extent at the center as well, there has been a net flow of power from the upper to the lower castes. Indian politics has experienced a sociopolitical revolution that, in Varna terms, has meant a move from a Brahman (priests, intellectuals) toward a Shudra (toilers) raj.

7) Centrism has held against extremism. The imperatives of centrist politics have checked the momentum of Hindu fundamentalism. India's diverse and pluralist society, the rise of coalition politics, and the need to gain the support of the median voter have transformed the Hindu nationalist BJP from an extremist to a centrist party.

1) The rise of the states. In recent years, the 28 states of India's federal system have played a more prominent role in India's public life. Not least has been their contribution to helping India live peacefully with difference. In a world where armed strife has increasingly taken the form of civil war and ethnic cleansing—of the 96 recorded conflicts between 1989 and 1996, only five were between sovereign states—India's federal system has helped to keep cultural and ethnic differences within relatively peaceful bounds. In thinking about something with which to compare India's federalism, the multilingual European Union seems more appropriate than does the United States. Much like the English and the Italians, the Hindi speakers of Bihar state in the shadow of the Himalayas and the Tamil speakers of 54 Journal of Democracy Tamil Nadu at the subcontinent's southern tip speak quite distinct languages. They share little history and few points of contact. Their traditional rulers, legends, and folk cultures are distinct from one another. Their socioeconomic profiles are as different as those of Sweden and Portugal. Bihar is poor and mostly illiterate. Tamil Nadu is prosperous and advanced. No contrast between any two of the 50 U.S. states comes anywhere close. Forty years ago, there seemed good reason to fear that Selig Harrison was right to warn that India's “fissiparous tendencies,” particularly its linguistic differences, would soon lead to balkanization or dictatorship. Today such worries seem unpersuasive. The federal system has helped India to live peacefully with its marked difference. How anomalous is a multinational federal state? India reminds us that the nation-state as we know it is a relative historical newcomer, with roots in the post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic Europe of the nineteenth century. The nation-state reached its apogee after the two world wars. Before 1914, the numbers of people and extent of territory ruled by nation-states were dwarfed by those which lay under the sway of multinational entities such as the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov empires, or the maritime dominions of Britain and other European colonial powers. After 1945, the working out of Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination had seemingly conferred sovereignty on enough aspiring “nations” to bring the era of the multinational state to a decisive end. The nation-state, said many scholars, stood revealed as the natural end toward which the history of state formation had been tending. This claim was soon belied, however, by the formation of the European Community and its successor, the European Union. On 1 May 2001, the New York Times reported the proposal by German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic Party of “a far-reaching plan . . . to turn the European Union into a more centralized federal system.” The EU was becoming more like the sovereignty-sharing Holy Roman Empire than the warring nation-states of the First World War. Had the Holy Roman Empire become the dominant polity in the twelfth century, the process of state formation in Europe would have conformed more closely to the world norm. The path that marks the rise of India's federal, multinational state since 1947 also tracks the emergence of an alternative to the increasingly outmoded nation-

state. By promoting peace among their constituent parts, both the EU and the vast federal republic that is India are saving the world from a great Forty years ago, there seemed good reason to fear that India's "fissiparous tendencies" would soon lead to Balkanization or dictatorship. Today such worries seem unpersuasive. Susanne Hoerber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 55 deal of trouble and strife. If it has done nothing else, the EU, the creation of a Europe bloodied, exhausted, and chastened by two gigantic and terrible wars, has radically reduced the prospect of conflict among its member states. Something similar is true of India. Each of its 28 federal states could well be a nation-state unto itself. The largest, Uttar Pradesh, has more people than Germany and France combined, and is nearly as populous as Russia. If Uttar Pradesh and its neighbors were sovereign nation-states, there would be that many more countries living in the Hobbesian world of anarchy and self-help. Instead of ending in domestic arbitration, the dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka over Krishna River water rights could have led to war. The internal conflicts within Punjab and Assam, like the civil wars that roiled Congo-Kinshasa during the 1990s, could have been made worse by outside forces seeking strategic gain. As it is, the international community has quite enough to occupy it as a result of the longstanding dispute between India and Pakistan over the fate of Kashmir, India's northernmost and only Muslim-majority state. The story of India's state formation since independence has included a story of rising influence on the part of the federal states. At independence in 1947, India inherited the British-brokered constitution of 1935. It embodied two possibilities, a centralized authoritarian "vice-regal" state and a decentralized, or federal, parliamentary state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the "great leader" of Pakistan, chose the former option, in effect acting as the successor to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the British raj's last viceroy and governor-general of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, despite his personal penchant for centralized rationalization, selected the latter course and became the prime minister of a parliamentary government in a federal system. Each choice was a fateful one. Pakistan has known parliamentary democracy for barely half of its five decades as an independent country. The rest of the time, it has been run by generals and authoritarian bureaucrats. Its civilian political landscape has been profoundly troubled, and its unsteady constitutional mixture of unitary and federal features contributed to the violent secession of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) and a related war with India in 1971. India reinforced the federal character of its constitution in 1956 by implementing a sweeping "states reorganization" that redrew state boundaries on the basis of language. Mohandas K. Gandhi had set the stage for this as early as 1920, when he reformed the Indian National Congress by creating 20 Provincial Congress Committees (PCCs) based on regional languages. Arguably, Gandhi's far-seeing decision to provide a form of political expression for ethnocultural identities such as Hindustani, Tamil, and Bengali opened the way for greater popular participation under conditions of democratic pluralism. Gandhi's linguistic reforms, like his strong support of Muslim causes, 56 Journal of Democracy flowed from his inclusive understanding of what Indian nationalism should mean. Inclusive nationalism is reflected in the opening years of the twenty-first century by Indians' capacity to live with dual and overlapping national identities, regional and transregional. As one Tamil writer has put it, "Tamil is my mother, India is my father," a gendered metaphor that captures how the linguistic-cultural "home space" fosters a "subjective" sense of care and affection while the national "civic space" promotes a due respect for the "objective" virtues of security, discipline, and the rule of law. In an era of ethnic cleansing and civil war, this kind of federalism has powerfully enhanced a diverse India's capacity to live with difference. 2) The party system transformed. The dominant-party system of the Nehru-Gandhi era that led to the formation of Congress majority governments was replaced after the ninth parliamentary election in 1989 by a regionalized multiparty system and coalition governments. The 1989 elections resulted in India's first hung parliament. V.P. Singh's Janata Party, which held the largest bloc of seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha, became the nucleus of India's first coalition government. Each of the four national elections since that watershed has led to a coalition government in which parties based in single states have been key. Today, for instance, the coalition government that came out of the 1999 elections is led by Prime Minister Atul Behari Vajpayee of the BJP, but includes in its 300-seat majority fully 120 members from single-state parties. According to the Election Commission's classification of parties (national, state, registered, and independents) and its declared election results, the four national ballotings held from 1991 to 1999 saw national-level parties' vote share drop from 77 to 67 percent, while the proportion of seats they controlled slid from 78 to 68 percent. By contrast, parties based in single states went from 17 percent of the votes and 16 percent of the seats to 27 and 29 percent, respectively. The shift from dominant-party to multiparty politics and the rise of state parties at the expense of national parties have undone the centralizing thrust of the 1950 Constitution. One telling sign of

this is the reduced use of Article 356, the “president’s rule” clause which was used—some would say misused—by majority-party governments at the center to remove irksome state governments. With state-based parties now holding the balance of power in New Delhi, freewheeling invocations of Article 356 are a thing of the past. 3) Coalition government. The third major feature of contemporary Indian democracy, the rise of coalition government, is implicit in what we have said about the transformation of the party system from a dominant to a multiparty system. Strong central governments based on sturdy one-party majorities in the Lok Sabha have given way to Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 57 precarious coalitions that must cater to state parties in order to survive. Since the era of coalition government began in 1989, coalitions have differed in their ideological make-up and caste composition, but all have depended on subnational parties, particularly those from the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Following Indian politics since 1989 has become rather like following Italian or Israeli politics, where smaller parties can and do hold national governments hostage in order to advance narrow partisan agendas. In the 32 years from 1947 to 1989, India had a total of five prime ministers. There have already been six in the 12 years since coalition government began. But perhaps the suggestion of instability carried by these numbers is deceptive. The Narasimha Rao government lasted five years (1991–96), longer than a U.S. presidential term. Until a corruption scandal threatened to trip it up in March 2001, the second government under A.B. Vajpayee seemed likely to complete its five-year term. And at the time of this writing in November 2001, it is still carrying on. Even the combined burden of scandal, Vajpayee’s poor health, and dissension in the ranks could not overcome the absence of any viable alternative to him as a national leader. Now that coalition governments are the order of the day, how are we to judge them? If we think of India as analogous to a potential EU federal government, composed of 15 former nation-states, each with its own identity and interests, we might appreciate the fact that coalition governments can give federal units weight and voice. Coalitions can soften extremism. The BJP, for instance, began as a predominantly north Indian party dedicated to Hindutva (Hindu nationalism), but has had to shelve that agenda in order to accommodate key coalition partners, especially secular state parties from south India that care little for anti-Muslim “communalism.” But this happy outcome is not the only possible result of coalition politics. The unedifying tale of Jayalalitha Jayaram, the corrupt and vindictive chief minister of the ruling AIADMK party in Tamil Nadu, seems to provide a lesson in how coalitions can be hijacked. For years, she shamelessly used the threat of bringing down the Rao and Vajpayee governments to shield herself from the legal consequences of the abuses that she committed while chief minister of Tamil Nadu between 1991 and 1996. Reelected to that post in May 2001 and sworn in by a fainthearted governor after she brushed aside the Election Commission’s ruling that her criminal convictions disqualified her from office, she was turned out only after the Indian Supreme Court upheld the Commission in a landmark September 2001 ruling. While the final disposition of the Jayalalitha case may have reduced the danger that state parties will blackmail coalition governments, there are other exigencies that can undermine or threaten coalition governments. One is the bloated, ineffective cabinets that are the byproduct of 58 Journal of Democracy efforts to cobble together ruling coalitions by handing out ministerial appointments. Another is legislative gridlock as coalition partners and their constituencies jockey for advantage and block ministerial initiatives. The Vajpayee government’s difficulties in keeping economic liberalization moving owe something to this effect. The cabinet is committed to privatizing more public-sector undertakings, to enacting an exit policy for labor, and to promoting new initiatives in energy, telecommunications, and transport-infrastructure policy, but political conflicts among ministers have stymied its efforts. It is clear that coalition government based on a region-favoring multiparty system is a mixed blessing. It has made it possible to avoid ethnic cleansing, civil war, and extremist politics by facilitating the country’s capacity to live with difference and to support centrist politics. At the same time, however, coalition government has weakened the country’s ability to pursue economic liberalization or achieve vigorous economic growth. 4) A federal market economy. When you opened your daily copy of the Times of India back in the 1950s or 1960s, you could read all about the big dams, steel mills, and other megaprojects that master planner P.C. Mahalanobis and his colleagues were launching at the national Planning Commission. The celebrities of the command economy and the “permit-license raj” were the bureaucrats, administrators, economists, and other experts who were helping Prime Minister Nehru build a modern industrial economy of which government held the commanding heights. Today, a decade after the turn toward economic liberalization, newspapers and magazines feature stories about state chief ministers such as Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra, S.M. Krishna of Karnataka, and surprisingly, Jyoti Basu, who until

recently headed the Communist government of Bengal state. These stories describe how the chief ministers of various Indian states are traveling the world to meet with business leaders, woo investors, and persuade the likes of Bill Clinton or Bill Gates to endorse the idea of investing in the future of Kerala, Karnataka, or Tamil Nadu. Economic liberalization, the dismantling of the permit-license raj, and an increasing reliance on markets have fostered the emergence of the “federal market economy.” But economic liberalization is only part of the story. Equally important has been the marked decline in centrally directed public investment, which has reduced the central government’s financial leverage and opened up new fields of initiative for enterprising state governments. In the 1990s, India’s deficit-ridden central government found that it could no longer afford planned investment. The center’s gross assistance to states’ capital formation declined from 27 percent of the center’s revenue expenditure in 1990–91 to 12 percent in 1998–99. The more alert state governments have moved in to fill the gap by securing private investment and multilateral assistance. The decline of central public investment and the growth of private investment have given the federal states a greatly expanded role in economic liberalization and in promoting investment and economic growth. Our use of the term “federal market economy” is meant to draw attention not only to the decentralization of the market and the shift to a region- and state-based multiparty system but also to new patterns of shared sovereignty between the states and the center for economic and financial decision making. This increased sharing shifts India’s federal system well beyond the economic provisions of its formal Constitution. Over the past decade, it has become ever more clear that if economic liberalization is to prevail, state governments and their chief ministers must break through the barriers that are holding back economic growth.

5) The central government as regulator. Despite the fading of Nehru’s vision of a strongly centralized, development-guiding state, the center is holding. But it is holding in a different way. Regulation is replacing direct intervention as the center’s preferred mode of affecting both the polity and the economy. Since 1991, economic liberalization has meant the abandonment of the permit-license raj and central planning. But federal regulatory agencies remain active in monitoring markets for goods, services, and capital to ensure that they perform competitively and effectively. Politically, the shift from one-party dominance to fragile coalition governments has changed the balance among institutions at the center. The cabinet and parliament, the traditional initiators of intervention, have ceded pride of place to regulatory institutions such as the presidency, the Supreme Court, and the Election Commission—enforcers of rules that safeguard the democratic legitimacy of the political system. The role of regulatory institutions is more procedural than substantive, more about enforcing rules than making law and policies. Regulatory institutions are needed not only to create, sustain, and perfect markets but also to ensure procedural fairness in elections, in the operation of a multiparty system, and in the formation of coalition governments. The travails that many countries around the world are now experiencing as they strive to establish democracy and markets show how vital the rule of law and a viable state are to both. Russia and some other post-Soviet and East European states suffer from what Max Weber called “political capitalism,” meaning the accumulation of wealth through political power (often wielded deceitfully and coercively) rather than economic enterprise and open competition. Transitions to a market economy and to democracy require more than privatization and liberty. They require fair regulatory mechanisms. Although India’s case is far less dramatic, a similar logic applies. In the economic arena, the role of the center as regulator has been to monitor the states in the name of fiscal discipline. For a few years after 1991, the center backed state-level economic initiatives with sovereign guarantees, but it is now reluctant to do so. Under Article 293 of the Constitution, the center must approve all foreign loans contracted by the states, and has de facto veto power over all domestic borrowing as well. In the spirit of “Do as I say, not as I do,” the center tries to make the states accept fiscal discipline by imposing conditions that look suspiciously like those which the International Monetary Fund demands of faltering national economies—and enforces them with a similarly wide latitude of discretion. The political front has seen a parallel decline of interventionist institutions and an enhancement of regulatory ones. The Supreme Court, the presidency, and the Election Commission became more visible and effective in the 1990s as the reputations and authority of ministers, cabinets, and legislatures suffered. During the Congress party’s heyday, executives and legislatures had benefited from association with the Congress-dominated party system, the (declining) political capital left over from the independence struggle, and the authority and resources made available to politicians by the existence of a command economy. Today, all this has changed. The complexity and fragility of the coalition governments, their rapid turnover, and their dependence on region- and state-based parties have sapped the executive capacity of governments. As ministerial executives

and legislatures have receded, they have made room for judges, presidents, and election commissioners to act in ways that highlight their constitutional roles as regulators who make democratic politics possible by ensuring that the game is not rigged. Structural conditions alone do not tell the whole story of this shift. National prime ministers, state chief ministers, legislators, and civil servants have discredited themselves in the eyes of India's growing, well-educated, and increasingly influential middle classes. As taxpayers, investors, producers, consumers, and citizens, middle-class Indians care a great deal about the reliability and security that cannot be had apart from good governance and the rule of law. In the mid-1980s, they responded to Rajiv Gandhi's promises to provide clean government and a high-tech, environmentally friendly economy that could carry India into the twenty-first century. Rajiv disappointed them, leaving office under a cloud in 1989 after a scandal involving an arms deal with the Swedish Bofors company. The early 1990s saw an unprecedented number of state and national ministers indicted for taking bribes, and the BJP's carefully cultivated reputation for probity will not recover quickly from The Supreme Court, the presidency, and the Election Commission became more visible and effective in the 1990s as the reputations and authority of ministers, cabinets, and legislatures suffered. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 61 the Tehelka scandal of March 2001, which was blown wide open by hidden-camera videotapes showing top figures in that party taking bribes. Amid this atmosphere of public disillusionment and hunger for integrity, the symbolic and practical words and deeds of the Supreme Court, the president, and the Election Commission have taken on a new significance. These institutions, despite weaknesses of their own, are now the repositories of middle-class hopes and aspirations for steady, transparent, and honest government. The Supreme Court's judicial activism marks a particularly novel turn for a body that spent the first four decades after independence mostly defending the rights of property owners against land redistribution. The Court's decision in the 1980s to begin taking a stand against rights abuses against the poor and powerless and to hear cases based on public-interest legislation—the Indian equivalent of the U.S. class-action lawsuit—paved the way for the judicial activism of the 1990s. With executive power slipping and wobbly coalition governments the order of the day, the Court's activism emphasizes lawfulness and predictability, often in the face of state abuses. Despite overloaded dockets and an often-glacial pace of adjudication, the Court has had some success in protecting citizens' rights, limiting police brutality and inhuman treatment in jails, and safeguarding environmental and other public goods. In the mid-1990s, coincident with a marked increase in ministerial-level corruption, the Supreme Court moved to assert the independence of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Union government's principal investigative agency. That such a proceeding should have achieved even partial success highlights the relative shift in the balance between the executive and regulatory functions of the central government. The CBI had been barred from investigating a department or its minister without prior consultation with and the concurrence of the secretary-to-government of the ministry concerned. "Prior consultation" and "government concurrence" meant that prime ministers, who also controlled CBI appointments, promotions, and transfers, dominated CBI initiatives and actions. In a landmark judgment, the Court removed the requirement of government concurrence that governed CBI investigations and gave the CBI director a minimum two-year term of office. These actions left the CBI somewhat freer to investigate on its own cognizance ministerial cases. India does not lack environmental legislation, but neither does it lack powerful interests ready to block the enforcement of such laws. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Supreme Court—prompted in some cases by assertive NGOs—began to redress the balance by acting to protect such public goods as clean air and water and safe blood supplies. At stake in some of these cases were two of India's greatest assets, the Taj Mahal and the Ganges River. To protect the sixteenth-century mausoleum from further damage by air pollution, the Court had by 1992 closed 212 62 Journal of Democracy nearby businesses for chronic violations of environmental regulations. Almost two hundred polluters along the banks of the Ganges found themselves similarly shuttered by Court order. In 1996 and 1997, the Court began beefing up enforcement of clean air and water laws in the heavily polluted Delhi area. By early 2000, the Court had ordered polluting buses and cars off the roads and shut down enterprises that were emitting pollutants into the Yamuna River. When the environmental minister and industry minister of the National Capital Territory defied the Court by trying to keep the outlets open, the Court countered by threatening to jail noncomplying local officials for contempt. The transformation of the party system and the rise of coalition government have also opened the way for the president to play a regulatory role. In the era of Congress party majorities, presidents had little to do beyond the pro forma duty of asking Congress's leader to form a government. Since 1989, however, the exercise of presidential discretion has become crucial in determining

the make-up of governments. Presidents in turn have leveraged this newfound influence into a bigger regulatory role for their office. Although Article 53 vests the “executive power of the Union” in the president, the president, like modern British monarchs, is expected to act at the behest of the cabinet rather than as a principal. As a constitutional head of state indirectly elected through a weighted voting system in which all federal and state-level elected legislators participate, the president retains a separate and potentially highly prestigious identity as a steward of the nation’s interests. He stands apart from and above mere partisan or bureaucratic politics. In the 1990s, presidents Shankar Dayal Sharma and K.R. Narayanan acted in ways that stressed the autonomy of their office. This was most striking when each resisted political pressure to invoke Article 356, the “president’s rule” clause, as part of a plan to unseat a state government for partisan advantage. President Narayanan also delivered a remarkable address on the fiftieth anniversary of independence (27 January 2000), in which he questioned the BJP-led government’s efforts to change the Constitution by replacing an executive responsible to parliament with a directly elected president and protecting parliament against dissolution by fixing its term. Unlike in other national contexts where presidential powers have been used to undermine or destroy democratic institutions, in India recent presidents have exercised their powers on behalf of democratic transparency and accountability. Starting in 1991 with the tenure of T.N. Sheshan as its chief, the Election Commission joined the Supreme Court and the president in strengthening constitutional government and democratic participation. The Commission is a constitutionally mandated central body whose fixed terms make it independent of the political executive. While the Commission had been a bulwark of free and fair elections in India before Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 63 1991, its task became more difficult in the 1990s as India’s sprawling electoral process came under well-publicized threats from terrorists and criminal gangs bent on using force to impede or distort the expression of the people’s will. The Election Commission gained national fame as a restorer and defender of free and fair voting. Polls indicate that the public trusts it more than any other political institution. When the Supreme Court backed the Commission by removing Jayalalitha from office in September 2001, it enhanced the Commission’s role as the guardian par excellence of the democratic process in India. Like the Court and the presidency, the Commission draws enthusiastic support from the educated, urban middle classes, who are eager for solutions to the problem of official corruption and lawlessness. It is not too much to say that the Commission, the Court, and the presidency are the three vital pillars of the new regulatory state in India.

6) A social revolution. Since 1947, Indian society has experienced a social revolution with massive political consequences. Political power in the states, and to a significant extent at the center, has moved from the hands of the so-called twice-born upper castes into the hands of lower-caste groups, known in Indian parlance as the “other backward castes” (OBC) and the dalits (former “untouchables”). In early postindependence elections, social prestige translated readily into political power. Upper-caste patrons—coming from a social stratum that contained about a fifth of the populace—could tell their lower-caste dependents how to vote, and elections produced state and national cabinets dominated by officials from upper-caste backgrounds. In the 54 years since independence, the OBCs and dalits—together about two-thirds of the population—have displaced the upper castes in the seats of power in many state cabinets. At the turn of the twenty-first century, lower-caste chief ministers are no longer rare, and at least one national cabinet—the one that headed the National and Left Front governments of Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral in the mid-1990s—had almost no uppercaste members. The logic of “one person, one vote” in free and fair elections has put power in the hands of the more numerous lower castes. Analysts of developing countries often stress the importance of economic growth for political stability and legitimacy. What they notice less often is the contribution that social mobility can make to political stability and legitimacy. Status as well as income matter for both. In India, the “status growth” enjoyed by members of the once-reviled lower castes has been rapid, and this seems to have palliated much discontent with the relatively slow pace of economic growth.

7) The center holds. In the early 1990s, the BJP and its Hindu nationalism appeared to be on the march. Today, centrist structural constraints, coalition politics, and the ideological moderation imposed by the need 64 Journal of Democracy to attract the median voter have forced the BJP gradually to abandon communalist extremism in favor of a position much nearer the middle of the spectrum. In 1992, such an outcome seemed unlikely. Two years earlier, BJP leader L.K. Advani had completed an all-India yatra or pilgrimage featuring an image of a martial but caged Lord Ram, the site of whose birthplace at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh was said to have been usurped by a sixteenth-century Muslim mosque known as the Babri Masjid. Everywhere it went Advani’s yatra had drawn large crowds, seemingly galvanizing Hindu militants and swelling the BJP’s electorate: BJP support jumped from a mere 9

percent of the vote and 2 seats in the 1984 general election to 11 percent and 86 seats five years later, and then to 20 percent and 117 seats—more than a fifth of the Lok Sabha—in 1991. On 6 December 1992, young Hindu extremists acting in the presence of BJP leaders and before the eyes of a global television audience stormed the Babri Masjid and tore it down stone by stone. Hindu-versus-Muslim communal violence exploded across northern and western India. Observers split over the likely impact of this episode, with some claiming that this assault on a prominent Muslim place of worship would fuel the rise of Hindu nationalist politics and others maintaining that it would discredit them. The future was more complex than either group expected. In retrospect, it appears that the destruction of the Babri Masjid, instead of being the harbinger of a new BJP surge, was the crest of a wave. The violence of the assault and its wanton indifference to life and property shocked many of the moderate Hindus who had been providing the BJP with the bulk of its support. In the 1993 state assembly elections, the BJP lost heavily in four states, especially in its core state of Uttar Pradesh—India’s largest state and the heart of the populous “Hindi Belt” across the north-central part of the subcontinent. Yet the BJP did not collapse, and even gained ground. In the 1996 general election it took 20 percent of the vote and 161 seats, though it could not form a government because no other party would join it. In 1998, the BJP garnered 25 percent of the vote and 182 seats—its best showing ever. (In the 1999 balloting, the party held on to its seat share but saw its voter support drop slightly to 24 percent.) Having absorbed the lesson of 1996, the party turned decisively toward moderation two years later. Led by the avuncular and moderate A.B. Vajpayee, it managed to put together a governing coalition, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), by working mostly with regional parties. Conspicuously absent from the NDA’s preelection program were such divisive Hindunationalist agenda items as calls for stripping Kashmir of its special constitutional status, demands that a Hindu temple be raised on the site of the Babri Masjid, and promises to override Muslim personal law via a uniform civil code. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph 65 In recent years the BJP’s upper-class leadership has realized that electoral success depends on lower-caste support and living with difference. This explains the party’s about-face on the Mandal Report, a government white paper that recommends set-asides for OBCs in school admissions and civil-service employment. The BJP, it would seem, is now seeking to exploit the very social revolution it once bitterly criticized. Whatever maneuvering the leadership may be doing, however, it would be going too far to suggest that the center of gravity of the entire BJP now lies stably in the middle of the Indian political spectrum, or that Indian voters now believe it does. Important organizations affiliated with the party such as the Hindu-extremist Vishva Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Organization) are showing signs of serious alienation from what they see as the BJP’s excessive centrism. The Swadeshi Jagran Manch (Homemade-Products Promotion Council) continues to challenge economic liberalization. Vajpayee is still shutting the extremists out of the central advisory positions they crave, but his health is failing. The Tehelka tapes have taken a terrible toll on the BJP’s good name. State assembly elections as well as by-elections for the Lok Sabha have lately gone badly for both the BJP and its coalition partners. The successful efforts by the BJP family of “saffron” organizations to infiltrate India’s cultural organizations and activities and to rewrite the history texts used in schools in order to paint Muslims as invaders and foreigners have produced a backlash. Hindu extremists have turned from seemingly politically counterproductive and more dangerous Muslim targets to the softer targets of India’s far smaller Sikh and Christian miIndia’s democracy in danger

India’s Democracy in Danger

Modi first arrived on the national scene when he won an overwhelming victory in the 2014 general election. He had cultivated a reputation for himself as a dynamic, populist and strong leader in his home state of Gujarat. In 2002, not long after he took office, over 1,200 people, most of them Muslims were killed in riots. Many blame Modi for failing to intervene, but that failure only raised his political stock among Hindus nationalists.

Modi’s promise of an economic miracle seduced voters who were unswayed by sectarianism. They voted for him even though they did not support his party's divisive politics, religious polarisation and bigotry. After Modi demonstrated the success of his election-winning formula, the BJP fell behind him. Many senior leaders of the ruling party were sidelined, allowing him to effectively assume the role of president. It boosted his self-confidence so much that he started taking more and more decisions to “transform” India into a Hindu state.

The establishment of a Hindu nation, was a dream of Modi's ideological forefathers. It remained a dream all these decades because the idea of a secular, inclusive India found overwhelming support among the people. However, Modi's statements as well as decisions since 2014 have heartened the Hindu nationalists.

Indians are no strangers to sectarian bias and religious animosity, but such feelings have been largely kept under control by wise and mature political leaders, administrative machinery that largely shunned discrimination, and a judiciary that was generally free and fair. The arrival of a populist leader changed that all. Supported by the hardline Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Modi exploited the faultlines of religion and caste, making polarisation and marginalisation of Muslims the new normal.

The Modi government disregarded the constitution to capture power in the states where the ruling party fell short of a majority in elections. Their electoral strategy has relied on hatred and bigotry, mob violence and smear-campaigns, faux religiosity and ultra-nationalism, fake news and social media trolling buried civil discourse.

Voters were attracted to a strong leader selling the dream of an aggressive India and muscular Hinduism. Those looking for a messiah were mightily impressed by a leader who boasted of his chest size, talked of India's glorious Hindu past and promised to make the nation mighty. While BJP activists have stoked antipathy towards Pakistan, the external enemy, and "anti-national" Indians, the enemy within.

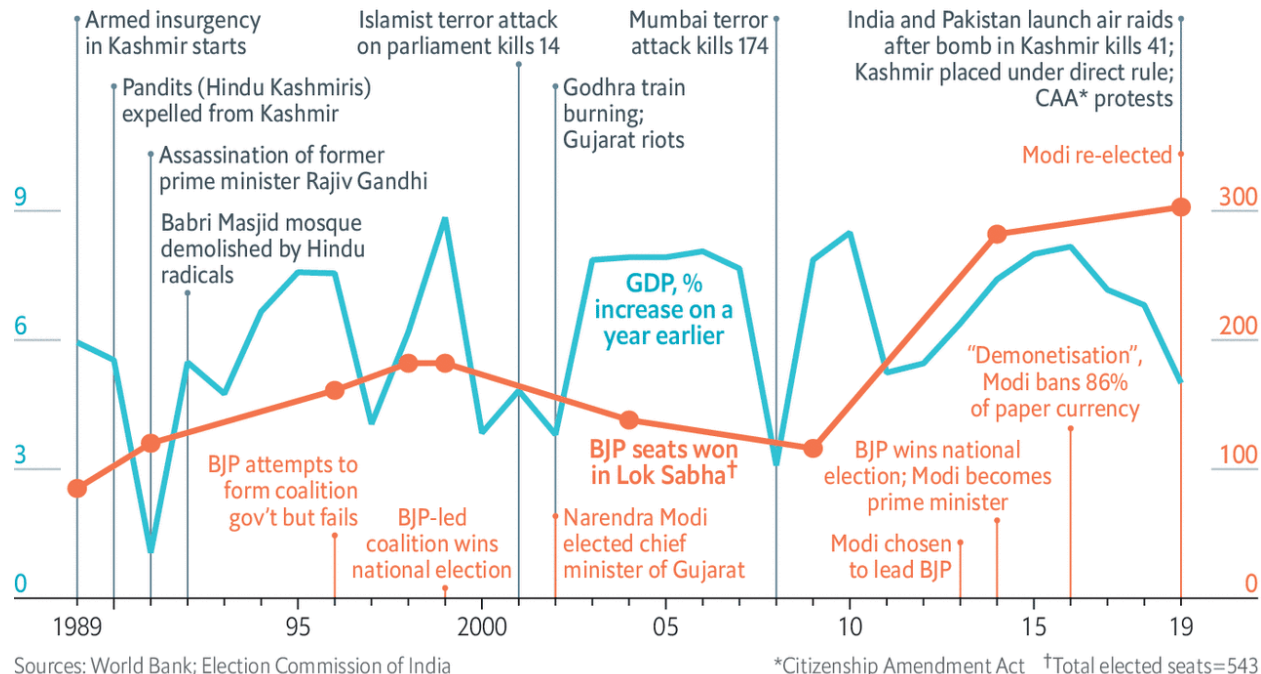
The government is playing the politics of revenge and retaliation with the help of the official agencies as well as state-empowered vigilante groups. The latter intimidate people on the streets and through social media. They have silenced high-profile figures – from business leaders to sports personalities – critical of the government, out of fear of reprisals. A few daring human rights activists have paid a heavy price for their dissent.

Displays of power gained primacy and acquired a stranglehold on the national psyche. Political competition became aggressive and public discourse abusive. Modi's supporters came to be known as devotees ever ready to take offense at any criticism of their leader. In the eyes of many Indians, Modi could do no wrong. If the people suffered, as they did due to demonetisation, they were told that it was just a small sacrifice for the nation.

So, ordinary aggrieved citizens generally thought it wise to grin and bear it lest they are branded "anti-national" and assaulted. They recognised that a large section of the populace swayed by Modi's populism and Hindu nationalism do want an India in which majoritarianism replaces secularism. s

How to win in the world's biggest democracy

India



The Economist

Our current political age and climate, we have seen myriad instances of police brutality and institutional racism. As American people we recognize our constitutional rights and condemn police brutality and racism. Now more than ever, we need to set a positive precedence for international issues and pave the way for democracy.

Currently in India, over 260 million farmers are protesting against the new agricultural laws passed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration in what is now being called the largest protest in the world. Passed in September of 2020, these "black laws" have privatized and corporatized India's agriculture, resulting in the end of wholesale markets and assured prices, leading farmers into debt and suicide. One law enables the removal of the minimum support price (MSP) for farmers, which had guaranteed them a minimum pay for their crops. As such, private corporations now set the price for crops and have the free ability to exploit farmers as they see fit. Another law states that farmers cannot take these private corporations to court. These two laws coupled with each other illustrate the monopolization of the farming sector in India which will inevitably lead to the usurpation of farmers across the country.

Domestic and international economic analysts have repeatedly condemned the Modi administration's selfish interests to monopolize the agricultural industry of India, a sector of business that makes up nearly 60% of the country's economy. With these laws passed, Modi's administration has disenfranchised farmers across the country who have already been dying by suicide because of increasing debt and lower crop yields amid a global pandemic.

Farmers started to peacefully protest in September upon hearing these laws and have now been doing so for more than 60 days. Amid a pandemic, freezing temperatures and increasing famine, protesters are met with the brutality of the Indian police who fired tear gas and water cannons, piled mountains of dirt and even assaulted individuals to prevent them from reaching New Delhi, the capital of India. Some protestors have died after suffering from pneumonia, the flu or COVID-19. Farmers, however, have expressed willingness to lay down their lives for their rights and the future of their generations.

India, a country that was freed from Britain largely because of Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful protests, is now violently retaliating against the desperate farmers' protests. The world's largest democracy has tainted what it means to be a democracy by disenfranchising the low and middle classes to provide assets to the rich. Despite ongoing protests now occurring internationally and steadily increasing international pressure, Modi's administration has not suggested mediating the solution. Rather, the government's efforts are to disperse the protests, unhesitant to use force. This fascism displayed by the Indian government and Modi's administration is just one of many instances in India in which minorities are forsaken.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has publicly shown his support for the farmers and has emphasized his dissent toward the Indian government's actions to disperse the protests. However, the U.S. media and politicians have failed to effectively shed light on this massive breach of democracy and innate human rights. Despite considering ourselves as a national hegemon and the hallmark of democracy, farmers' plights seem to have fallen on deaf ears within the U.S. As models of democracy for the world, we need to condemn the Indian government's actions as a nation, as did Prime Minister Trudeau. Doing so would create international pressure on Modi's administration to reprimand their unjust laws that benefit corporate greed and create a peaceful resolution with farmers.

In the age of social media, an increasing number of videos exemplifying the Indian government methods have been posted online. These videos, however, remain censored or are taken down. In fact, social media companies like Instagram had temporarily censored and removed hashtags that supported the protests. Supporters across the world have risen in support of farmers in India. With protests across the world from San Francisco to Canada to Britain to New Zealand, supporters have gathered to exemplify the power of unity and solidarity.

These protests show one of the many instances prevalent in the status quo of governments consciously choosing to disenfranchise minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status. With India's failure to uphold democratic values on display, it is imperative that we stand in solidarity with farmers. Failure to uphold democracy and equity now will inevitably lead to further breaches of inalienable rights. As such, it becomes our moral and social obligation to support democracy. I encourage you all to take action: Email congresswomen and congressmen, raise awareness on social media and become an active voice for your brothers and sisters fighting for their rights and lives in India.

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