

Book Review: Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The State of India's Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 231 pages.

India's Democratic Journey

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As a stable democracy for over sixty years, India has been an important object of study for comparative scholars of democracy. As well it should. Its positive experience with democratization flies in the face of most theories of comparative politics, which predict unstable polities at low levels of economic development, high levels of inequality, high levels of social diversity, and in the absence of a politically active middle class. As such, assessing the state of India's democracy, the subject of this wide-ranging edited volume, is a topic well worth exploring.

The book echoes several important themes, which form broad answers to the organizing questions linking the twelve essays: (1) How did democracy come to be established in India? (2) How has the character of its democracy deepened or regressed? (3) And what challenges does Indian democracy face today? Such questions will be familiar to those readers of Atul Kohli's *The Success of India's Democracy*, which addressed similar questions. Unlike Kohli's volume however, *The State of India's Democracy* focuses squarely on the current trends in and challenges to Indian democracy as seen in the light of the trajectory of India's political development. Despite a variety of changes in and challenges to democratic processes, the book convincingly argues that Indian democracy has thrived and continues to do so.

M.V. Rajeev Gowda and E. Sridharan's description of the Indian party system since independence forms a necessary point of entry into the treatment of Indian democracy, not the least because many comparative scholars concur that political parties form a linchpin role in making democracy meaningful. Their review of the literature on how parties have affected India's democracy is useful, though one is left with the impression that these theories are all equally relevant and valid. One might more usefully divide their literature review into sections which address why Indian democracy was created and why it has survived or even deepened, respectively. The consensus within these various

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literatures might be that a defining force in the *creation* of Indian democracy was the ability of the post-independence Congress party to integrate a broad range of ethnic groups into a power-sharing arrangement, whether it be in a consociational system, as Lijphart or Kohli (as well as Rajni Kothari, whose work is inexplicably neglected) have argued, or as an evolving art, as Paul Brass has argued. The authors demonstrate that all the literature on why India's party system has changed focuses to some extent on the social fragmentation and ethnic identities in Indian society.

Steve Wilkinson's essay explores the question of how democratic politics has deepened through the lens of India's 2004 national elections, in which an opposition Congress party defeated the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in widely unexpected election results. Wilkinson partially debunks the three initially espoused theories, that the results either heralded a rejection of economic liberalization or of Hindu fundamentalism, or that the vote was simply a function of anti-incumbency tendencies in the Indian polity. Congress's success was hardly inevitable and should be read as underscoring the importance of regional electoral alliances. India is now, in Wilkinson's words, entering a new era of coalition politics. The nature of a party's regional alliances, more than the nature of its ideological platform, dictates its success. This trend, he predicts, augurs well for two weaknesses of India's democracy, namely autocratic tendencies in the central government and the protection of minority rights. As the importance of regional parties rises and political competition increases, Wilkinson theorizes that the central government will be more careful about alienating ethnically-based regional parties. He also expects that future economic reforms will be difficult to implement because he contends that to the average Indian voter, economic stability is more valued than growth. If this essay has a shortcoming, it is that it does not explicitly link these recent developments back to the book's theme, namely the successes and failures of Indian democracy. In particular, one is left unsure whether Wilkinson finds that a diminished Congress party heralds a more robust Indian democracy.

Rajat Ganguly's picks up on ethnic conflict as an enduring feature of Indian party politics and assesses its direct implications for the state of India's democracy. Like Wilkinson, Ganguly finds reasons to be optimistic about India's mixed record on ethnic conflict. He organizes ethnic conflict within the Indian polity into four types, each with a complex chain of causation: statehood agitations, regional demands for autonomy, secessionist conflicts, and communal violence. Ganguly provides to the reader a useful history of these kinds of ethnic conflicts across Indian space and time. Yet here also, there is too little assessment of the varied character of ethnic conflict in India and what it portends for the quality of Indian democracy. While Ganguly concludes that democracy is not failing in India, more devotion to the challenges of such conflict and government prospects of grappling with it would have been useful.

Christophe Jaffrelot's thorough description of the rise of marginalized groups in Indian party politics usefully sketches the changing face of party movements, and even more clearly weaves these developments into an assessment of Indian democracy. A post-independence Congress party that was initially resistant to accommodating upwardly mobile lower castes, except in the southern states, has had to change. As a result of a system which institutionalized open political competition, lower castes have mobilized and challenged the post-independence upper-caste monopoly on political power in recent decades, creating what Jaffrelot terms a "silent revolution." While he is careful to qualify his positive assessment of Indian democratic deepening by pointing out that lower-caste mobilization has been unevenly spread and that the changing nature of the Indian state may diminish the importance of political power more generally, Jaffrelot rightly interprets this revolution to be a substantive deepening of Indian democracy, made possible by the existence of formal democratic norms.

That the propagation of formal democratic norms has, on the whole, enabled a deepening of India's democracy, despite challenges, is also highlighted in the next sets of essays on the Indian state, which illustrate the book's core conclusion—that despite variation in space and time, Indian democracy has indeed deepened. In his exposition of the workings of Indian federalism, Subrata Mitra convincingly argues that a federal political structure process, both at independence and more recently in the passing of the Seventy-Third Amendment, has helped ensure the accommodation of regional autonomy, effectively inching India closer to the realization of a liberal democracy. Pratap Mehta's essay is also concerned with the development of a liberal character to India's democracy, which is why he warily evaluates the implications of growing judicial activism. Mehta applauds the public-interest litigation taken up by the Indian Supreme Court, but expresses misgivings about the potential for abuse inherent in the Court's growing discretion. He argues that the expansion of judicial review will ultimately be beneficial for democracy to the extent that it fosters a democratic culture. Whether this is happening, however, requires a strong and *ex post facto* judgment.

Arvind Verma's essay on the Indian police agencies shows how, in another instance, the institutional development of a part of the state has adversely affected the quality of Indian democracy. Verma shows how a repressive police apparatus was a legacy from the colonial period. It is perhaps not surprising then, that in the absence of institutional change, it continues to exhibit distinct autocratic tendencies by undermining civil liberties, a defining feature of democracy. Though democratic procedures provide for an institutional means of changing the state, the record on its ability and willingness to do so has been mixed.

The third section of the book deals with the ways in which the development of civil society has impacted the character of India's democracy. The essays of Niraja Jayal and Rob Jenkins together underscore how the growth of civil society

has enhanced liberal aspects of India's democracy. Jayal details the explosive growth of nongovernmental organizations in a variety of arenas, highlighting that some such organizations have effectively checked autocratic tendencies in state power. Echoing critical trends in the civil society literature more broadly, Jayal correctly points out that not all NGOs work to enhance liberal aspects of democracy and that NGOs are themselves not democratically accountable. Rob Jenkins argues that the development of civil society has contributed to India's democratic deepening. The proliferation of NGOs dedicated to exposing corruption has created new mechanisms of accountability and provided for new avenues of coalition building. The reading aloud of official government records in localized settings, effectively auditing the veracity of such records, is just one example of how the growth in NGOs, though not an unambiguous good, has contributed to the creation of a substantively liberal state. On the whole, therefore, these authors correctly stress that the growth of civic organizations has invigorated a norm of vibrant civic engagement with the state.

Praveen Swami's discussion of India's media provides another example of how institutional innovation has positively affected the quality of India's democracy. An excellent overview of the evolution of the Indian press from colonial times to the present, Swami provides a fascinating account of how a meek press during Indira Gandhi's Emergency has actually served to strengthen norms of media independence since then. Moreover, such aggressively independent norms for the Indian press, which stands in contrast to the press that is regularly silenced in Pakistan, have since been institutionalized.

The concluding section of the book fittingly shows how economic developments, both liberalization and accompanying increases in rates of growth, continue to pose serious challenges to the possibilities of a fully liberal democracy in India. While the net effect of economic growth has been an improvement in the quality of life of an average Indian citizen, Aseema Sinha argues, the fact that these benefits have been so unevenly distributed has not been an insurmountable challenge for Indian democracy. The growth of the private sector, for example, has lessened the intensity of redistributive demands on the state, effectively attenuating rent-seeking. It is a great testament to democratic deepening in India, however, that the losers from market-led reforms have not challenged the democratic system itself. That they may yet do so is the cautionary note sounded by Sunila Kale's concluding chapter. Kale highlights the persistence of inequality, both across time and geographical space, and shows that the presence of significant intra-state inequality has promoted secessionist movements. These challenges and the difficulty of managing them in an era of market-driven development strategies should sound a sobering note for those who would too quickly celebrate the accomplishments of Indian democracy.

The portrait that the volume's authors collectively paint of the state of India's democracy is a cautiously optimistic one. Despite changes in institutional structures and the uneven progress in human, social, and economic

development, Indian democracy has consolidated and continues to prosper. As Sumit Ganguly relates in his introduction, India's democracy is a remarkable success when judged against any common benchmark of democracy. That this is true, even when judged against the experiences of the Western democracies, makes the Indian democratic experiment an all the more remarkable one.

Yet, the authors are also frank about the shortcomings of Indian democracy. In the decades since independence, the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities have been unevenly protected, the central government has shown little regard for civil and political liberties when quashing secessionist bids, India's public institutions are over-burdened and increasingly corrupt, and India's development record, particularly when compared with the successes of East Asian states, remains woefully inadequate. The ongoing challenges to India's democratic character thus lie in improving its record on human rights and civil liberties, streamlining and reforming public institutions while deepening accountability, and making more progress toward poverty alleviation. All this is a tall order for any democracy, but particularly for a developing country democracy.

Ultimately, any assessment of the state of India's democracy hinges on which benchmark one uses. When judged against the standard of the normative characteristics of democracy or against the extent to which democracy has itself led to substantive improvements in the quality of life of its citizens, India's democracy continues to encounter severe challenges. When seen against the failure of democratic experiments elsewhere in the developing world, however, particularly those of its South Asian neighbors, Indian democracy appears robust and, indeed, remarkable.

