Review Essay: India's Democracy: The Point of No Return

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Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology & Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ornit Shani, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Adult Franchise* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Ruchir Sharma, *Democracy on the Road: A 25-Year Journey through India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019).

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the worst riots in the country's history, Indian democracy is now at a turning point. Three recent books illuminate important institutional pillars of India's remarkable democracy in time, both through everyday electoral engagement and through the ideas underpinning India's party system. Ornit Shani's *How India Became Democratic* narrates the historical emergence of citizenship through engagement with elections, Ruchir Sharma's *Democracy on the Road* vividly describes two and half decades of Indian elections through their strongly regional prisms, and Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma's *Ideology and Identity* persuasively evidences how two master narratives of India's party system—the role of state intervention in the economy and on behalf of disadvantaged groups—explain the rise of the BJP as the dominant pole in Indian politics. Together, these books highlight the crucial role that impartial bureaucracies, a historic tolerance of opposition, and ideas, especially of the young and the new middle class, play in brokering Indian democracy.

Keywords: India, democracy, political parties, elections, nationalism

Ensayo de revisión: Democracia de la India: el punto sin retorno

Resumen

En el contexto de los peores disturbios en la historia del país, la democracia india está ahora en un punto de inflexión. Tres libros recientes iluminan importantes pilares institucionales de la notable democracia de la India en el tiempo, tanto a través del compromiso electoral diario como a través de las ideas que sustentan el sistema de partidos de la India. Cómo la India se convirtió en demócrata de Ornit Shani narra el surgimiento histórico de la ciudadanía mediante el compromiso con las elecciones; La Democracia en el camino de Ruchir Sharma describe vívidamente dos décadas y media de elecciones indias a través de sus prismas fuertemente regionales; y la ideología e identidad de Pradeep Chhibber y Rahul Verma evidencian persuasivamente cómo dos narrativas maestras del sistema de partidos de la India, el papel de la intervención estatal en la economía y en nombre de los grupos desfavorecidos, explican el surgimiento del BJP como el polo dominante en la política india. . Juntos, estos libros resaltan el papel crucial que juegan las burocracias imparciales, una tolerancia histórica de la oposición y las ideas, especialmente de los jóvenes y la nueva clase media, en la negociación de la democracia india.

Palabras clave: India, democracia, partidos políticos, elecciones, nacionalismo

评论文
印度民主：不归之路

摘要

在国家出现史上最糟糕的动荡背景下，印度民主如今处于转折点。近期出版的三部著作通过分析每日选举参与和支持印度党派体系的不同观念，阐明了印度长期以来非凡民主的重要制度支柱。学者Ornit Shani的著作《印度是如何成为民主国家的》（How India Became Democratic）叙述了历史上通过参与选举而出现的公民身份；学者Ruchir Sharma的著作《不断发展的民主》（Democracy on the Road）生动描述了25年里强烈区域视角下的印度选举；学者Pradeep Chhibber

与Rahul Verma的著作《意识形态与认同》（Ideology and Identity）有说服力地证明了两大印度党派体系叙事—国家干预对经济产生的作用和代表弱势群体的国家干预—如何诠释印度人民党作为印度政治中主导力量的崛起。总的来说，这三部著作强调了公正官僚、历史上对反对意见的容忍、观念（尤其是年青人和新中产阶级的观念）在协调印度民主中发挥的关键作用。

关键词：印度，民主，政党，选举，民族主义

In late February 2020, within hours of a local BJP politician tweeting an ultimatum and just after US President Donald J. Trump departed, India's capital city broke out in the worst incidents of communal violence since the country's birth. What began with Hindu nationalist gangs attacking non-violent protesters ultimately led to the burning of hundreds of Muslims' houses, shops, and mosques and the murder of more than fifty people. The attacking mobs were supporters of India's governing party, the BJP, and were widely reported to have been chanting "Jai Shri Ram" (glory to Lord Rama) and "Hinduon ka Hindustan" (India for Hindus) as they rampaged.

That eyewitness accounts, supported by video evidence, suggest police forces stood by and in some cases participated in violence as Delhiites were beaten and burned[1] heightens a question already lurking in the minds of many observers: are these acts of violence, instigated by irresponsible politicians and abetted by a complicit police, terrible stains on India's mostly stable democracy? Or is India now, as a grow-ing chorus of observers warn, at a place where its core democratic institutions are so badly frayed that it is no longer recognizable as a democracy, much less a democracy defined by the non-violent civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi and the secularism of Jawaharlal Nehru? Said differently, is democracy dying in India?

It is befitting in this moment of anguish to turn to three books that analyze the historical origins and contemporary practice of Indian democracy. India's enduring democracy has long been a puzzle, since comparative scholarship has shown that low levels of human development and high levels of social diversity hinder democracy's establishment and endurance. Yet India, among the poorest and most diverse countries on earth, speedily adopted a constitutional democracy at independence, a development that was treated with a great deal of skepticism. Winston Churchill famously thundered that India was no more a nation than the equator. Many agreed with Churchill's prognosis that India was likely to "fall back quite rapidly through the centu-

ries into the barbarism and privations of the Middle Ages."[2]

Yet for over seventy years, India defied the odds and ran an imperfect, improbable democracy based on universal franchise, the protection of key civil liberties for citizens, and institutional constraints on executive power. Democracy has not only endured but deepened: the dominance of its nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, has given away to a two-party system that institutionalizes competition; regional movements representing lower-caste groupings have diversified the face of political life, representing what Christophe Jaffrelot has called a "silent revolution"; and even India's darkest democratic hour to date—the twenty-one-month emergency in which Indira Gandhi's government imprisoned political opposition, muzzled government dissent, and curtailed press freedoms—ended in a resounding defeat for the incumbent government.

While democracy is no guarantee of development, a wealth of evidence suggests that on balance, democracies do better on not just economic growth,[3] but also on translating that growth into the ultimate end of human development.[4] Such broad empirical patterns have been borne out in South Asia. Of her neighbors inheriting the same challenges of poverty, diversity, and centuries of colonial plunder, India does far better than her neighbors on human development, outranking Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. Indeed, only Sri Lanka, a country possessing far higher levels of education and literacy,

lower levels of diversity, and a thriving commercial export sector at independence, has higher levels of human development today.

The momentous achievement of forging democracy amid India's pervasive structural challenges is an achievement that now teeters at the point of no return. What exactly is threatened? Ornit Shani's *How India Became Democratic* provides one answer for why we are at an inflection point in India's democracy. Shani investigates how the *sine qua non* institution of democracy—elections by universal adult franchise—was first engaged with by the everyday Indian. Shani, a scholar of politics and the modern history of India at the University of Haifa, seeks to understand how average individuals—and not just the English-speaking, urban elite—first begin to use their voice in a social fabric completely riven with hierarchical distinctions. This is a particularly relevant query at this moment: how did active and engaged citizenship emerge and transform India from a relatively quiescent polity to one where the disadvantaged and poor raise their voices by voting in larger numbers than almost anywhere else in the world? As Shani rightly points out, such sustained political engagement was far from pre-ordained.

Comparative scholarship has shown that British colonialism, relative to other European colonialism, was more conducive to the creation of democracy because British rule was more likely to introduce electoral politics and to create rule-bound administrative ser-

vices—institutions that often remain in place when colonial regimes departed.[5] But as Shani emphasizes, the practice of democracy was not simply a colonial gift because the creation of universal adult franchise was a radical departure from a regime that heretofore resolutely opposed to the idea of universal adult franchise, because it only embraced the principle of electoral politics under severe pressure from the mass civil disobedience movements spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, and because it consistently sought to minimize public engagement with elections.

Especially because the story of how and why India's nationalist elites created universal adult franchise in India's constitution is well-furrowed scholarly ground, research into how ordinary people without a voice in colonial government structures became active citizens is a welcome contribution. Shani's book enriches the study of Indian democracy by providing a window into how the newly independent state introduced the average Indian to electoral politics. When the bureaucracy undertook the herculean task of creating the electoral rolls used to run the country's first general election in 1952, Shani draws upon extensive and varied primary resources to argue that neither colonial mandarins in the form of Indian Administrative Service bureaucrats nor the inclinations of the nationalist high command can explain how everyday Indians made the institution of the universal franchise into their own political reality.

Shani's description of how the civilian bureaucracy effectively brokered Indian citizenship highlights how important an effective bureaucracy and impartial state is to making democracy feasible. The Constituent Assembly Secretariat (CAS), led by B.N. Rau, made significant efforts to educate the public about the country's first elections. A committed cadre of bureaucrats engaged and interacted in ways that made participatory citizenship a practical reality. The CAS made considerable efforts to publicize its plans to create electoral rolls and solicit a range of views by, for example, writing up press notes that were in turn were used by a broad range of citizen groups to comment on and modify the making of India's first electoral rolls. Shani details how India's bureaucrats were autonomous but honest brokers, making concerted and nonpartisan efforts to deal with voting eligibility for Partition refugees, residents of princely states, and the homeless. Through this process of extensive deliberation over the draft constitution, a broad range of citizens was created who began to "conceive of themselves as the protagonists of the [democratic] story."

This linchpin role of professional, autonomous bureaucrats in creating consensus around impartial procedures is under greater threat today than at any time since the emergency. The formative episode of India's history that Shani investigates stands in stark contrast with the current state of affairs under Narendra Modi. Under his first term and especially since his re-election, the Prime Minister's office has centralized economic and political decision-making to a degree that is greater than any in recent history.[6] At a time when the

ability of competent civil bureaucrats to effectively run the machinery of Indian government independently of the Prime Minister is by all accounts severely diminished (and this is to say nothing of their willingness to dissent in view of the widespread categorization of any opposition as treasonous), a crucial and trusted mediator for forming democratic consensus and carrying out state business is increasingly undermined.

While Shani persuasively argues that the preparation of the electoral rolls was a key mechanism for integrating India and making citizens, her argument is at its weakest in providing compelling empirical support for her view that everyday citizens actually *were* engaging. She uses newspaper accounts to show that a range of people were regularly writing into newspapers with divergent views on the electoral rolls, but a very large majority of Indians were illiterate at independence. Consequently, newspaper opinions cannot stand as an accurate gauge of the average Indian's views. Although Shani is correct to note that newspapers were often read aloud in village contexts, she needs more consistent granular support (interviews or ethnographic accounts) to corroborate her views that active citizenship practices were created and widely popularized at this time. Nonetheless, Shani effectively highlights the essential role of citizen engagement in translating distant rules into vibrant democratic practices.

Ruchir Sharma's *Democracy on the Road* is another window on the practice of democracy by everyday Indians.

Sharma, a contributing writer at the *New York Times*, surveys critical general and state elections over two-and-half decades of road trips beyond India's big cities. Enjoyable to read, replete as it is with vivid impressions of dismal hotel rooms and delightful meals, Sharma's colorful accounts of elections fascinate with descriptions of the body language and rhetorical styles of Prime Ministers and voters' reactions to these leaders. Together with a diverse cast of companions, Sharma details the wide-ranging impressions that allow him to predict —usually accurately—the rise and falls of incumbent governments at state and national levels, including Modi's wins in Gujarat and the rise of regional politicians such as Jayalalithaa, Nitish Kumar, Chandrababu Naidu, and Mamata Banerjee.

India's general elections, Sharma concludes, are ultimately a tally of state contests, especially as regional parties have assumed ever-greater relevance to national political fortunes. The 2004 general elections, for example, produced India's largest electoral shock in history with a Congress victory over the BJP, whose "India Shining" campaign fell flat. In this election, neither Sharma nor any of his partners get their election predictions right. A road trip into Uttar Pradesh's *moffusils* where he spent his own childhood summers notwithstanding, Sharma drafts an article on the evening of the election narrating a BJP win. The actual Congress win was "comparable to the shock of the Trump victory in the 2016 US election and echoed some of the same themes, particularly the way urban elites had over-

looked the depth of the alienation in the heartland." The BJP "thought it would be carried to victory by the popularity of Vajpayee, persistent doubts about Sonia Gandhi's leadership, and national pride in India Shining."

The book presciently identifies growing support for Narendra Modi in Gujarat's state elections. In the 2014 national elections, Sharma pinpoints Modis' winning formula: a twin emphasis upon economic growth and Hindu nationalism in the hands of a charismatic leader who purports to simply get things done. Writing before the 2014 elections, Sharma writes, "We had met so many people who saw an all-purpose saviour in Modi that every time a car window jammed or a toilet wouldn't flush in some backcountry hotel, one of our crew would joke, 'Modi will fix it.'" But Sharma also writes that there is "no question that development successes—and Modi's popularity—was real."[7]

Surprisingly for a reporter, however, Sharma does little to situate his impressions in broadly verified facts. Especially at a time when narratives can increasingly trump facts, eliding the broader context of Modi's "development" story is an irresponsible omission. Gujarat unquestionably experienced economic growth under Modi, but growth is not human development. And economic growth in Gujarat has not effectively translated into human or social development for the most vulnerable groups such as Adivasis, Dalits, and Muslims. Gujarat under Modi's leadership was in the top quarter of Indian states ranked by growth. But on the most important indicators of

human development—poverty, female literacy, and infant mortality—Gujarat ranks in the bottom half of states.[8]

Sharma's Pollyanna-ish attitude towards the health of Indian democracy is puzzling because he also observes how Modi's government actively diminished institutional aspects of democracy, namely the freedom to dissent, during his tenure in Gujarat. The last sentences of the book read: "I know where I will be when the [2019 election] carnival begins .... Back on the road, confident that in an era when democracy is said to be in retreat worldwide, it is thriving in India." Yet during the 2007 Gujarat elections, for example, Sharma also narrates the intimidating effect Modi had on potential dissenters and critics: "Though Indian journalists often work in fear of powerful chief ministers, speaking to Gujarati reporters we got a sense that they feared Modi with a special intensity, given the stories about how Gujarat's ultra-efficient administration had kept a tab on rivals, the deaths of suspects in police custody and, of course, the riots of 2002. None of that seemed to matter to his growing base of support. If generating real progress in India required that democracy make room for a strongman, many voters felt, so be it."[9]

Sharma also notes how the BJP's constraints on Modi are minimal, quoting a close ally who ranks Modi numbers one through ten on a list of Gujarat's most powerful people because "there is no second rung." Sharma provides an array of anecdotal observations that paint picture of a Chief Minister turned Prime Minister who centralizes

power and treats dissent as treasonous. Sharma also notes how simply asking critical questions of Modi or Amit Shah, as he does concerning the Gujarat riots, leads these figures to shut out Sharma and his colleagues from future meetings. How Sharma squares the rise of a leader who quashes dissent to the pinnacle of Indian politics with a conclusion that Indian democracy is as vigorous as ever is mystifying.

If Shani and Sharma zoom down to the street-levels of Indian democracy, Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma's *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* zooms out to masterfully highlight the main ideas driving party politics in India. They first take stock of India's democratic record, noting the hundreds of millions living in poverty and deep income inequality, while also recognizing that "democratic politics has made an appreciable dent in the caste system, the longest-lasting regime of social discrimination the world has ever known. Electoral democracy and the institutions of federalism have not been able to thwart the emergence of serious challenges to the sovereign authority of the Indian state in many of the country's border regions, but these mechanisms have successfully addressed issues related to India's deep linguistic diversity."[10]

This brief summary of India's democratic record—its remarkable achievements and its gaping shortcomings alike—serve as the jumping-off point for Chhibber and Verma's core contention, that India's party politics revolves around the answers voters give to two questions: first, should the

Indian state use its authority to reform society (the politics of statism)? and second, to what degree, if at all, should the Indian state actively champion its minorities (the politics of recognition)? In a field of study that has long been structurally hostile to recognizing a causal role for ideas, these two political scientists boldly claim that ideological debates over the politics of statism and the politics of recognition have driven the fortunes of political parties from the country's founding to the present day.

Chhibber and Verma's argument is persuasive because it is well evidenced, combining statistical, archival, and experimental research to back up its claims. They show that although India's postcolonial nationalist leaders were mostly united around the idea that the state should lead poverty alleviation, educational development, and economic growth, some social forces were already contesting the degree to which the state should intervene to create a more egalitarian society after independence. Some founding fathers, such as Ambedkar and Nehru, advocated active roles for the state in remaking society, while Gandhi was generally opposed to a powerful state. The long-governing Indian National Congress generally adopted pro-statist policies during India's early decades and was largely united around embracing a politics of recognition. In reaction, some opposition organizations argued that secular nationalism was simply "a euphemism for the policy of Muslim appeasement,"[11] and social movements arose, e.g., the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that advocated a

more limited role for the state and less recognition for minorities.

Chhibber and Verma are particularly adept at explaining change in the nature of Indian politics across time. They argue that ideological cleavages around statism and recognition explain four distinct phases in India's party systems. The first party system (1952–1967) was defined by Congress hegemony in which traditional Hindu voters and secularists alike co-existed under a Congress umbrella and supported a Congress government that pursued policies of statism and recognition. The second party system (1967–1989) saw the rise of opposition movements opposing Congress, while Congress intensified its commitment to state activism, especially under Indira Gandhi. As the newly formed BJP under Vajpayee did not explicitly reject state secularism, the RSS did not mobilize its formidable organizational troops on the BJP's behalf in the 1984 election.

The third party system (1989–2014) witnessed declining Congress hegemony as the erstwhile nationalist movement found itself unable to effectively respond to a growing polarization in the politics of recognition: caste-based parties demanding a greater recognition and right-leaning BJP generally opposing such recognition. Voters committed to a politics of recognition thus transferred their support to regional parties who better represented their views, while those opposing the politics of recognition transferred their support to the BJP. Similarly, as the BJP advocated a more limited role for the state in the economy, they drew in the support of new mobile middle classes who viewed the state less as a provider of employment and more as an obstacle to economic growth. Opposition to statism gained especial traction under Modi's leadership of the BJP. The BJP "successfully challenged the Congress' version of statism on the grounds that the Congress had made the state a preserve of the few."[12] The result was that Congress's support base was progressively winnowed away, giving away to the fourth and current party system dominated by the BJP.

The current party system, beginning in 2014, is one in which the BJP has consolidated the support of upper castes and middle classes. With its 2014 win, the BJP "has replaced the Congress as the system-defining party and become the focal point of electoral alignments and realignments with parties forming coalitions solely to oppose the BJP."[13] The major challenge for the BJP will be reconciling the opponents of state-sponsored recognition with the supporters of majoritarian nationalism. For example, urban, middle-class youth are against both quotas and anti-Muslim practices. The swelling ranks of young voters may "hold their noses and vote for the BJP, but this support will not last because this group is not enamoured of majoritarian politics."[14]

Yet it remains to be seen if this prediction will come to pass, because Congress must be viewed as a reasonably effective party. Instead, in addition to being seen as a dynastic preserve, Chhibber and Verma also show that the median views of Congress leaders on the politics of statism and recognition is in-

creasingly further away from the median view of the average Indian. Since the Modi government has not been able to deliver effectively on growth, the importance of Hindu nationalism has grown to the government's platform. According to their arguments, the prominence of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics should see the BJP coalition fracture. But this depends on whether the opposition is seen as effective, and crucially, whether it can coordinate both ideologically and electorally.[15]

Overall, Chhibber and Verma's *Ideology and Identity* is the most compelling structural analysis of Modi's rise to power to date because they effectively analyze how new social and political forces polarize ideological cleavages that have long characterized India. What is especially refreshing for two political scientists, and particularly important in the contemporary state of politics, is that they successfully evidence how ideas (requiring both a coherent intellectual tradition and opposition to this tradition) condition both recurring political divides and the tectonic contemporary changes in India's party system.

Together, these three books sound a note of optimism about the future of India's democracy—a system of representative government based on elections, party competition, civil liberties, and, increasingly critically, a free media. Yet that hopeful chord still stands in jarring contradiction to the smoldering ruins and lives lost in Northeast Delhi.

Notes

1   See Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "Delhi's Muslims Despair of Justice after Police Implicated in Hindu Riots," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/delhis-muslims-despair-justice-police-implicated-hindu-riots.

2   Winston Churchill, "Our Duty in India," March 18, 1931, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1930-1938-the-wilderness/our-duty-in-india/.

3   Daron Acemoglu, Suresh Naidu, Pascual Restrepo, and James A. Robinson, "Democracy does Cause Growth," *Journal of Political Economy* 127 (2019): 47–100.

4   Sirianne Dahlum and Carl Henrik Knutsen, "Do Democracies Provide Better Education? Revisiting the Democracy–Human Capital Link," World Development 94 (2017): 186–99.

5   Matthew Lange, *Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6   Yamini Aiyer, "Modi Consolidates Power: Leveraging Welfare Politics," *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2019): 78–88.

7   Ruchir Sharma, *Democracy on the Road: A 25-Year Journey through India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019), 221.

8   Christophe Jaffrelot, "What 'Gujarat Model'?—Growth without Development—and with Socio-Political Polarisation," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 (2015): 820–38.

9   Sharma, *Democracy on the Road: A 25-Year Journey through India,* 143.

10 Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9.

11 Ibid., 79–80.

12 Ibid., 251.

13 Ibid., 246.

14 Ibid., 251.

15 Maya Tudor and Adam Zeigfeld, "Social Cleavages, Party Organization, and the End of Single Party Dominance: Insights from India," *Comparative Politics* 52 (2019): 149–88.