

India's churning democracy: future directions

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Authors: Barbara Nelson and Assa Doron, ANU

Indian democracy continues to puzzle many foreign observers. But for most Indians, democracy — however imperfect — is a matter of practice, something they grow up with.



Indian democracy may not be perfect — which democracy is? — but it would be safe to say that debates that raged until at least the 1980s about whether it will survive are now firmly in the rearview mirror. Millions are going to the polls this year as elections in [Uttar Pradesh](#)^[1], [Punjab](#)^[2], [Goa](#)^[3], [Uttarakhand](#)^[4] and [Manipur](#)^[5] begin this January. Most attention is focused on the Uttar Pradesh poll, India's most populous state and the sixth largest in the world, a state so large that the logistics of ensuring security for voters affects the election; the poll must be conducted in seven distinct phases.

That India has survived as a democratic nation since independence in 1947 has, until recently, remained an anomaly to social scientists. According to the view that democracy requires economic development, a common culture and high levels of literacy, India's claim to be democratic has rested largely on the fact that it holds elections, has universal suffrage, and transfer of power occurs without trouble. Rather than viewing India as an anomaly, democratic theory now accounts more comprehensively for the Indian case.

While political parties jostle for position in the states, the Indian National Congress (INC) maintains its dominance at the federal level, forming the major party in the ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance. The INC receives strong support from among the poor, who continue to participate enthusiastically in voting at both state and federal levels, despite missing out on an equitable share of India's growth. And while the old developmental state espoused by Nehru failed to alleviate poverty and misery among the masses of dispossessed, the glitzy malls and buzzing consumer economy of neo-liberal India mean the poor are all too aware that

India's new shine does not reflect upon them.

Yet the INC continues to champion 'economic growth with social justice' as the [central mantra of its manifesto](#) ^[6]. Indira Gandhi was voted out of office in 1977, not because she failed to fulfil her promise to 'abolish poverty' (*garibi hatao*), but because she curtailed political freedom. Will the poor continue to be content with voting, or will they also want to see evidence that they too might get their fair share?

Alongside such lofty promises, the INC's manifesto consistently claims to have 'maintained India's unity while celebrating her many diversities'. It is tempting to dismiss such a claim as another tired cliché, yet behind it lie some worthy ideas. The cynic may find that India's 'unity' consists of a diversity of chronic ills: poverty, inequality, decaying infrastructure and endemic corruption — 'unity in adversity', perhaps. But it is equally important to recognise India's remarkable achievements, especially in the face of such adversities. These achievements include regular elections, facilitated by an impressive Election Commission; a robust constitution; critical media; and a vibrant public sphere with many civil society institutions. Nevertheless, some aspects of unity are under threat, with the south and west becoming noticeably more prosperous than the north and east, for example, and the middle classes looking more to global values than to Indian ones.

On the one hand, the unity of the Indian state certainly offers economic opportunities, and with less upheaval and insecurity than would otherwise be experienced on a continent of many nations, rather than a federation. On the other hand, the fear of giving in to any separatist movement, especially in the Maoist belt and Kashmir, has led to instability and much suffering.

Can such diversity withstand the onslaught of industrial growth and global capitalism? And for the poor to benefit from 'trickle-down' development, must India become homogenous? For instance, [one of the arguments](#) ^[7] in favour of FDI in multi-brand retailing is that it would lead to a markedly improved supply chain, better infrastructure and less wastage, ultimately leading to a reduced farm-to-fork price ratio. But those [opposing the move](#) ^[8] fear loss of choice and opportunity for people dependent on the unorganised retail sector. Can the diversity of the retail sector survive FDI? The homogenising imperatives of globalisation may prove easier to manage, but they must also contend with the unruly nature of Indian democracy.

The type of nationalism based on one language, one religion and one culture — often promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party — is another, extremely misguided, attempt to iron out the differences of what remains a highly heterogeneous society. But India's diversity goes beyond the usual points of reference: ethnicity, language, culture, religion. Diversity includes being able to hold multiple identities, multiple concepts of citizenship, multiple languages, and commitment to both individual and group rights without feeling compelled to adopt a single, unifying model.

The democratic models developed outside India often jar with the Indian one, compelling us to rethink our own views of democracy as universally applicable, as long as one follows the European path. The Indian case poses multiple challenges to these 'grand theories' of democracy and one-size-fits-all models. In hitching its wagon to European models of nationalism and market capitalism — models that are [facing crises in the region](#) ^[9] where they

first emerged — India may neglect its home-grown potential for solving the country's problems. Rather than letting others dictate its future trajectory, India may be better served by allowing its 'million mutinies' to continue churning its society and polity; perhaps these will offer original directions down alternative paths for the future.

Barbara Nelson is a lecturer at the School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, [Australian National University](#) ^[10], and co-edits the [South Asia Masala blog](#) ^[11].

Assa Doron is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the College of Asia and the Pacific, [Australian National University](#) ^[12].

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[1] Uttar Pradesh:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections/assemblyarticlelist/11352218.cms>

[2] Punjab:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/punjab-assembly-elections/assemblyarticlelist/11352216.cms>

[3] Goa:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/goa-assembly-elections/assemblyarticlelist/11352210.cms>

[4] Uttarakhand:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/uttarakhand-assembly-elections/assemblyarticlelist/11352215.cms>

[5] Manipur:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/manipur-assembly-elections/assemblyarticlelist/11352205.cms>

[6] central mantra of its manifesto: <http://aicc.org.in/new/manifesto09-eng.pdf>

[7] one of the arguments:

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/view-point/parties-should-look-at-spinoffs-from-fdi-in-multi-brand-retail-to-farmers-producers-consumers/articleshow/11076194.cms?curpg=1>

[8] opposing the move: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/01/20/24165/>

[9] facing crises in the region:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/12/06/the-euro-crisis-lessons-for-east-asia/>

[10] Australian National University: <https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/nelson-be>

[11] South Asia Masala *blog*: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/blogs/southasiamasala/>

[12] Australian National University: <https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/doron-a>

[13] East Asia Forum Quarterly, '*Ideas from India*

': <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/EAFQ-4.1.pdf>