

## **Defying Modernization Theory: The Case of India**

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Structural factors play an important role in determining the probability of democratization in developing nations. Economic development and the existence of democratic neighbors have both been identified as important determinants of democratization. Yet several states have defied this pattern and do not conform to modernization theory's predicted model for democratization. These deviant cases include Costa Rica, India, Botswana, Benin, and Mongolia, all of which have successfully transitioned to democracy despite substantial obstacles. These unusual nations challenge the existing theoretical conventions and pose specific problems to modernization theory. This paper will examine the case of India. Indian democracy emerged amidst severe poverty, widespread illiteracy, and a largely agrarian and rural population characterized by vast linguistic and ethnic diversity. However, India was able not only to transition to but also consolidate a robust democratic system that has survived for over sixty years. The historical process of Indian democratization challenges the central premise of modernization theory that economic development must precede democratization.

The minimalist understanding of democracy will be employed in this paper, following Joseph Schumpeter's classic definition. A democratic regime is where citizens select their political leaders through regular elections.<sup>1</sup> Most basically, democracy includes two dimensions: contestation and inclusion. Democratization is a two step process composed of transition to a democratic regime, followed by consolidation and deepening of democratic institutions and practices. Democratic transition is "the interval between the dissolution of the old regime and the installation of a new regime" usually indicated by "the adoption of a new constitution and the successful organization of the first free elections."<sup>2</sup> This paper is primarily concerned with the Indian transition to democracy, as the complex consolidation of Indian democracy is beyond the scope of this analysis. The principal aim of examining democratic transitions is not to examine the quality or strength of the regime that emerges but "the struggle over the fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Doorenspleet and Kopecky, 699.

<sup>2</sup> Doorenspleet and Kopecky, 700-701.

direction of the political change.”<sup>3</sup> Democracy in India was not an inevitable development but resulted from the complex interaction of numerous political and socioeconomic forces.

In 1959, Seymour Martin Lipset was the first to examine the relationship between economic development and democracy. He concluded that democracy is more likely to emerge in more economically developed nations. By focusing on political institutions and the democratic process, Lipset determined that democratic stability was dependent on the level of socioeconomic development as measured by per capita income, literacy, industrialization, and urbanization.<sup>4</sup> His hypothesis received widespread acceptance, and this positive correlation between economic development and democracy has since been confirmed and refined by many subsequent scholars, forming the basis for modernization theory. Modernization theory proposes that the path to development is universal, as modeled by the West, where democracy has emerged out of the growth of capitalism. However, the developing world faces unique challenges not encountered by the West, which enjoyed a long and gradual process of political and economic development. Specifically, modernization theory is unable to account for the successful democratization in India.

Based on India’s lack of modernization and low level of economic development, scholars concluded that it was very improbable that India would be able to transition or consolidate a successful democratic regime. Its unexpected democratization immediately after World War II perplexed students of democratization and defied the standard theoretical and empirical explanations for democratization. India’s exceptionalism is still both “infuriating and inexplicable” to many scholars, because “it is hard to see how a generalization that excludes half of all the people in the world who live in a democracy can have much validity.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of extremely unfavorable circumstances, India defied the odds and succeeded. India demands investigation as what Larry Diamond calls, “the most surprising and important case of democratic endurance in the developing world.”<sup>6</sup> It is an “intellectual puzzle” that a “multinational, agrarian society with rigid and hierarchical social structure” could establish “periodic elections, constitutional government, and freedom of expression and association.”<sup>7</sup> And yet, India established a democratic constitution in 1949 and successfully held free and fair

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<sup>3</sup> Doorenspleet and Kopecky, 701.

<sup>4</sup> Thakur, 331.

<sup>5</sup> McMillan, 733.

<sup>6</sup> McMillan, 733.

<sup>7</sup> McMillan, 743.

elections with universal adult suffrage and widespread participation in 1951. Democracy formed in India against the “conventional laws of political history.”<sup>8</sup> India faced three primary obstacles of being socially unprepared, economically undeveloped, and surrounded by authoritarian neighbors.

During India’s period of transition, much of the developing world was characterized by national independence movements. Yet very few “postcolonial states developed into democracies, let alone stable democracies.”<sup>9</sup> India’s neighbors at the time of independence were all governed by authoritarian regimes. Military juntas existed in Bangladesh, Burma, and Pakistan, an absolute monarchy ruled Nepal, a communist regime governed China. “Even today, India is the only major stable democracy in the whole of South Asia.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars have established a correlation between the regime types of neighboring states and a state’s inclination to transition to democracy. Although further elaboration of this proposition is beyond the scope of this paper, it is valuable to examine the experience of other South Asian states in comparison with India’s experience to understand its exceptionalism.

According to modernization theory, India was socially unprepared for democratization. High rates of poverty and illiteracy, low urbanization, and the pervasive ethnic, religious, and linguistic cleavages led scholars to conclude that democracy would be unsustainable. At the time of independence, 85% population was rural, only 12% were literate, and the majority of school-age children did not attend school. In 1940, the average life expectancy was 32.1 years for men and 31.4 years for females. “For most people, life was ruled by poverty, oppression, and morbidity.”<sup>11</sup> The size and diversity of the population also posed a tremendous challenge for the success of democracy. One study on ethno-linguistic fractionalization including 67 nations concluded that only Zaire scores higher than India. Some scholars call India the “most heterogeneous and complex society on earth.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, at the time of independence, the Indian social structure was very hostile for democracy. Society was characterized by the large peasantry, a weak capitalist class, and almost nonexistent civil society.<sup>13</sup> As “a society founded

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<sup>8</sup> Hasan, 12.

<sup>9</sup> McMillan, 736.

<sup>10</sup> McMillan, 736.

<sup>11</sup> Gupta, 246.

<sup>12</sup> McMillan, 735.

<sup>13</sup> Corbridge, 38.

upon the inequality of the caste order, and of an imperial and authoritarian state,” India’s chances of a successful democratic transition were small.<sup>14</sup>

India also lacked the economic prerequisites for democratization. According to Adam Przeworski et al.’s study *Democracy and Development*, due to India’s small income per-capita, India should have been a dictatorship during the post-war period.<sup>15</sup> At the time of independence, “the economy was characterized by intense and pervasive poverty, a predominant but stagnant agricultural sector, an export sector dominated by commodities and a transport network built for maintaining colonial control.”<sup>16</sup> In 1950, just following independence, seventy percent of the labor force was employed in agriculture and 51.3% of the national income was derived from agriculture.<sup>17</sup> Low agricultural and industrial productivity and a lack of investment in human capital all contributed to the obstacles obstructing a democratic transition. In comparison with other major Asian economies, India was “exceptionally poor.”<sup>18</sup> Colonial policies had also contributed to siphoning off of India’s national wealth. Given the lack of modernization and economic development, the emergence of democracy in India is particularly perplexing. The case of Indian democracy prompts the student of democratization to ask the question: how did India transition successfully?

India was able to overcome the substantial obstacles to democracy due to the British democratic tutelage and the organizational and ideological strength of the nationalist movement and Congress party. Generally, developing nations must engage in simultaneous state- and nation-building. However, India enjoyed the distinct advantage of possessing the “rudiments of statehood” due to the long imperial rule of Great Britain.<sup>19</sup> Indian democratization was strengthened by the nationalist’s movement’s confrontation with the colonial power. The Congress Party was forced to build a broad coalition through a process of compromise and negotiation to challenge the imperial rule of Britain, and when the British left, the old political elite opposing democracy was removed. The one-party dominance of the Congress Party enabled it to protect elite interests to ensure their support for the democratic transition. The Congress Party under the leadership of Gandhi succeeded in having mass appeal from a diverse

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<sup>14</sup> Khilnani, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Przeworski, 87.

<sup>16</sup> Thakur, 317.

<sup>17</sup> Corbridge, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Corbridge, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Thakur, 327.

number of social classes. In addition, the army was successfully included in the project for democratization under civilian control. Each of these aspects enabled India to overcome the socioeconomic prerequisites for a successful democratic transition.

The British established a system of administration and the foundations of a state apparatus capable of maintaining democracy. Under British tutelage, a framework of representation was gradually implemented with steadily expanding franchise. To ensure support of elites, the British gradually introduced a degree of self government and increasing political participation. The 1909 Morley-Minto reforms introduced legislative councils and increased Indian representation. It delegated power at local and provincial levels for education, health, and public works. The 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms promoted the “gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire.”<sup>20</sup> Although with very limited franchise, these elections offered practical democratic experience for Indians. The Government of India Act of 1935 expanded suffrage based on property and created a federal structure. These gradual reforms offered valuable experience for Indians during the pre-independence period. The British left behind established political parties and educated elite with the experience of representative government. By recruiting and training Indian civil servants to largely administer the government, the British helped “create a middle class that was socialized into power-sharing through competition and collaboration.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, some Indian intellectuals such as Ram Mohun Roy welcomed British rule as an opportunity for liberal political education and exposure to Western liberalism based on rational thought. He hoped that this would prompt Indians to recover “their original, rational libertarian philosophy.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to establishing the rule of law and norms of conduct, an effective bureaucracy was formed which included a judiciary, military, police, and civil service. These structures that were already in place enabled the Indian state to maintain order and gain legitimacy during its transition to democracy. This is most clear when comparing Pakistan’s experience with that of India. After partition, India experienced a smooth transition to democracy eased by strength of an established bureaucracy which “provided means for executive control.”<sup>23</sup> This existing

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<sup>20</sup> McMillan, 738.

<sup>21</sup> Thakur, 328.

<sup>22</sup> Gupta, 220.

<sup>23</sup> McMillan, 739.

infrastructure did not exist in Pakistan, significantly hampering the development of democracy. However, some scholars question the contributions of colonial rule:

The British did little or nothing to promote the growth of democratic institutions in India...Indian nationalists can justifiably claim that each step towards self-rule and democratic governance was the result of sustained and unrelenting political agitation by Indians against authoritarian colonial rule.<sup>24</sup>

Although it is important to give due credit to the Indian nationalist movement, it is difficult to ignore the substantial contributions of British rule. It is true that in some ways, the British undermined the Indian transition to democracy by perpetuating and deepening existing social tensions. By implementing a policy of divide and rule, the British sought to “justify British autocracy as necessary for maintaining social stability and effective control.”<sup>25</sup> India was undoubtedly “shaped by more than 250 years of economic, political, and cultural contact with the English East Indian Company and the Raj.”<sup>26</sup> Overall, by establishing the infrastructure of future democratic rule, the British enabled the unexpected democratic transition.

The Indian nationalist movement played a central role in prompting the democratic transition. As early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, “imported ideas were progressively indigenized to serve large-scale movements and enduring organizations that contributed to the subsequent development of democratic institutions.”<sup>27</sup> Indian nationalism was unique in its internal focus on reforming “their own society and not the foreign ruler,” prompting the growth of voluntary associations promoting “religious renovation, social reform, and educational modernization.”<sup>28</sup> In the early days of nationalism, broad popular appeal was limited due to low educational levels. The British only educated a small number of Indians required to be public servants for fear that mass education would prompt instability and subversion. To counteract any such action, the British sought to promote fragmentation of the growing nationalist sentiment, prompting exclusive ethnic politics and religious communalism.<sup>29</sup> Only under Gandhi’s leadership was the

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<sup>24</sup> Ganguly, ix.

<sup>25</sup> McMillan, 738.

<sup>26</sup> Corbridge, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Gupta, 219.

<sup>28</sup> Gupta, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Gupta, 222.

nationalist movement transformed from “an elite to a mass political movement with a broad base.”<sup>30</sup>

The Congress Party was formed in 1885 as the primary vehicle for the independence movement. Its ideology and organizational structure provided stability during the transition in adapting “the colonial framework to the new requirements of an independent India and of democratic practices.”<sup>31</sup> Despite large existing social cleavages, the Congress Party forged a national political discourse and acted as a forum for communication, coordination, and the establishment of political goals. Through negotiation and resolving conflicting priorities, participants received a political education in abiding by democratic norms. By forming an inclusive ideology and a broad coalition, the Congress Party today is “one of the largest and most enduring mass organizations in human history.”<sup>32</sup> The Congress Party acted as a training ground for future democratic leadership, cultivating the skills of managing conflict, balancing interests, and forming consensus. Although elite in its origins, the Congress Party succeeded in forging a broad coalition with support from diverse groups. Through the use of civil disobedience, noncooperation, and mass protests, the Congress Party mobilized the Indian population to resist the British imperial rule;

The Gandhian transformation of earlier liberalism into a strategy of inclusionary participation, progressively channeled within a frame of rules of peaceful conflict and organized collaboration in and with the Congress, helped build an important historical foundation for future democratic development.<sup>33</sup>

Gandhi in particular reached out to the peasantry and labor to include them in the common struggle. The early period of the fight for independence witnessed the “gradual evolution of a consensual strategy of democratic development.”<sup>34</sup> By placing democracy at the center of the national project, Indian nationalism was significant in bringing about a successful transition to democracy.

The democratic transition was also aided by the Congress Party’s virtual monopoly of power after the British withdrawal and the partition of the subcontinent. With the creation of Pakistan, the Congress Party was left unopposed and “in complete control of the process of

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<sup>30</sup> McMillan, 737.

<sup>31</sup> McMillan, 739.

<sup>32</sup> Gupta, 223.

<sup>33</sup> Gupta, 229.

<sup>34</sup> Gupta, 224.

constitution-building.”<sup>35</sup> The military, typically a problematic institution in democratization, was successfully incorporated into the state under effective civilian control. Congress also succeeded in co-opting leaders of minority groups through concessions and the use of patronage. By absorbing opponents into the “Congress machine” through clientalism, the Party remained the dominant force during the transition, maintaining stability and control.<sup>36</sup> The powerful leadership of Gandhi and Nehru, symbolic and pragmatic respectively, “not only protested British rule, but also turned locally and regionally oriented folk into Indians.”<sup>37</sup> Particularly in comparison with Pakistan which had the same colonial experience, Indian benefitted immensely from “an early process of converting nationalist support into electoral support.”<sup>38</sup>

The Congress Party was able to protect elite interests, ensuring their support for the new democratic government. The economic elite were generally not threatened by the new political institutions. Where modest reforms were implemented, elites were compensated through “through formal or informal channels.”<sup>39</sup> New opportunities for social mobility in both rural and urban areas gave many a stake in the system. The educated middle castes and classes were also successfully incorporated and mobilized. Overall, “the establishment of new political institutions did not pose a threat to the core values of the established social order and therefore did not unleash general instability.”<sup>40</sup> Federalism also reassured local ethnic, linguistic, and religious leaders and made allowance for regional rights and autonomy while maintaining national cohesion. By providing stability and protecting interests during the transition to democracy, the Congress Party ensured a successful democratization.

The case of India demonstrates that it is possible for developing nations to defy modernization theory in some circumstances and democratize against the odds. India successfully transitioned to a democratic regime which ensured stability and “reasonably steady development, achieved with a degree of self-reliance and relative freedom from world economic oscillation that is rare in contemporary history.”<sup>41</sup> The two primary factors that enabled this transition were the political infrastructure put in place by the British colonial rule and the organizational and ideological strength of the nationalist movement which emerged to oppose

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<sup>35</sup> McMillan, 739.

<sup>36</sup> McMillan, 741.

<sup>37</sup> McMillan, 740.

<sup>38</sup> Gupta, 258.

<sup>39</sup> Gupta, 258.

<sup>40</sup> Thakur, 294.

<sup>41</sup> Gupta, 261.

them. In addition, the primary force in opposition to democracy, namely the British, was removed, creating space for the emergence of a new elite.<sup>42</sup> During the transition to democracy, India had to address simultaneously a diverse number of challenges; yet this caused public confidence in the system to not be dependent on a single issue. Overall, “democratic political development has apparently not been constrained by the slow development of so-called social and economic requisites of democratic being,” in direct contrast with modernization theory.<sup>43</sup>

Although effectively consolidated, India’s democracy is not without flaws. Sectarian violence, the persistence of widespread poverty, and the suppression of several liberties have all prompted some scholars to question the validity of Indian democracy. In many ways, the state is ineffective and unresponsive; it “regularly fails to protect its citizens against physical violence, it does not provide them with welfare, and it has not fulfilled its extensive ambitions to transform Indian society.”<sup>44</sup> Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s emergency period imposed a twenty-two month relapse into authoritarianism. Yet even with the persistence of disparity, deprivation, and inequality, Indians have a high level of trust in democratic institutions.<sup>45</sup> In a nation with high rates of illiteracy, scholars were concerned that democracy would be hampered. However, in one study, nonliterate and those with little education “demonstrated a strong commitment to parties” with a high correlation between party preference and political issues.<sup>46</sup> Indians have demonstrated many times since the first general election in 1952 that they could exercise their political power at the ballot box responsibly. In 1977, the electorate punished the Congress Party for the misuse of power, and then again in 1980, voted out the new ruling party Janata due to dissatisfaction. Democracy has continued to deepen since 1947, demonstrating remarkable resiliency in the midst of tremendous pressures and challenges during the last sixty years. Few other states that have emerged out of colonialism have maintained such a successful democratic experiment.

The case of India has substantial implications for modernization theory. The thoughtful student of democracy must determine if India is simply an anomaly that may be dismissed or if it poses fundamental challenges to the Lipset’s landmark thesis. Democratization theories need to be tested by India’s experience which deviates from predicted models. Outliers such as India

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<sup>42</sup> Doorenspleet and Mudde, 817.

<sup>43</sup> Gupta, 260.

<sup>44</sup> Khilnani, 59.

<sup>45</sup> McMillan, 737.

<sup>46</sup> Gupta, 260.

reveal the strengths and weaknesses of such theories. As the most populous democracy in the world, it is difficult to discount India's democratic experience as a misnomer.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, "given the size of the country and the longevity of its democratic institutions, India should be the starting point for formulating and testing a theory of democracy in a developing country."<sup>48</sup> This is of great importance particularly for the developing world. India demonstrates that it is possible to undertake the simultaneous development of the state, economy, and society.

India enjoyed several specific conditions that are necessary to make such a spectacular transition. The colonial power gradually promoted democratic institutions and then vacated their place of power to be filled by local elites. The army was checked by civilian control and supported democratization. Civil society was relatively strong, and the nationalist movement succeeded in forming a wide base of support that overcame the pervasive social cleavages. The Congress Party's strength and organization provided stability during the transition and provided experienced leaders to construct the new national project. These aspects enabled India to successfully make a transition that few anticipated could occur. India is a stunning example of "how low levels of socioeconomic modernization could coexist alongside a high degree of political development."<sup>49</sup> Modernization theory needs to be reassessed based on the Indian model. Nonetheless, it remains remarkable that parliamentary democracy, federalism, secularism, and civil rights were established in such a vast country marked by poverty, illiteracy, and social, ethnic, and religious cleavages. The experience of India promises to reveal practical and innovative new models for democratization.

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<sup>47</sup> McMillan, 733.

<sup>48</sup> Thakur, 335.

<sup>49</sup> Thakur, 294.

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