



# **Battles Half Won**

## **India's Improbable Democracy**

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# India post 1947



# Outline

- ✦ Introducing the Key Question
- ✦ The Improbability of Indian Democracy: Empirical Relationships
- ✦ What is to be Explained?
  - Mill, Stratchey, Twain
  - Gandhi, Nehru, After Nehru
- ✦ What are the failings/unfinished tasks?
- ✦ Conclusion

# Longevity and Quality of Democracy

- ✦ Whatever one can say about the quality of Indian democracy – and the critiques are many – there is a prior question that is not often asked.
- ✦ Why has democracy lasted for so long?
- ✦ Why did India not become a Pakistan or an Indonesia? All three started poor and democratic, but in India, democracy survived. In Pakistan and Indonesia, it collapsed and is still to stabilize.
- ✦ In the West, universal franchise was introduced only after societies became rich. India is longest surviving low-income democracy in history.

# An Improbable Democracy (1)

- ◆ Adam Przeworski *et al*, *Democracy and Development* (2001)
- ◆ The dataset covers 141 countries between 1950 and 1990.
- ◆ Income is the best predictor of democracy. It correctly predicted the type of regime in 77.5% of the cases; only in 22.5%, it did not. No other predictor – religion, colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, international political environment -- is as good on the whole.
- ◆ India is in the latter 22.5% set. Indeed, if we consider only decolonized countries, democracies that emerged from decolonization survived only in **India, Mauritius, Belize, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.**

# An Improbable Democracy (2)

- The most surprising case is India which “was predicted as a dictatorship during the entire period”, 1950-90. “The odds against democracy in India were extremely high” ( p. 87). All other poorer exceptions had higher income than India.
- Some other countries have defied the pattern on the obverse side. They were rich enough to be democratic earlier. Those that became democracies later than their income levels would have predicted include Mexico, South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, Portugal and Spain. And Singapore “had a 0.02 probability of being a dictatorship in 1990” (p.87), but it is authoritarian till today. If India is biggest exception on the low-income end, Singapore is the greatest surprise on the high-income side.

# Explaining Democratic longevity

## ◆ **Structural Issues:** Identity Structure

- ◆ Dispersed, not centrally focused
- ◆ Cross-cutting, not cumulative

## ◆ **Political Issues:** An act of political creation

### ◆ (1) Construction the Nation

◆ -Why Important for democracy?

- ◆ John Stuart Mill

### ◆ (2) Role of post-1947 political leadership

- ◆ Critical role of Nehru, Indira Gandhi unable to undermine
- ◆ Post-Nehru factors

# Nationhood and Democracy: John Stuart Mill

✦ “It is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities”. Mill thought linguistic diversity was a “special, virtually insuperable, hindrance to nation-making”.

✦ Difference between elections and referendums



# Improbability of Indian Nationhood (2)

- ✦ "There is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India possessing, according to any European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious", and "that men of the Punjab, Bengal, the Northwestern Provinces and Madras, should ever feel that they belong to one Indian nation, is impossible. You might with as much reason and probability look forward to a time when a single nation will have taken the place of the various nations of Europe." (John Stratchey, 1888)

# Improbability of Indian Nationhood (3)

- ◆ India had ... the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects.. It would seem as if she should have kept the lead, and should be today not the meek dependent of an alien master. But, in truth, there was never any possibility of such supremacy for her. If there had been but one India and one language--but there were eighty of them! Where there are eighty nations and several hundred governments, fighting and quarreling must be the common business of life; unity of purpose and policy are impossible; patriotism can have no healthy growth." (Twain 1899)

# Gandhi's Response

- ◆ **Hyphenated Indian identity.**
- ◆ **De-link language and nationhood. Even English acceptable as an Indian language/**
- ◆ **“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”**
- ◆ **De-link religion and nationhood**
- ◆ **Even the English did not have to leave.**
  - **“It is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them”**
- ◆ **Gandhi's ambivalence about democracy, but creation of a nation helped democracy**

# Nehru's Nurturing

- ◆ If Gandhi the father of Indian nationhood, Nehru the father of India's democracy. Nurtured democracy's troubled childhood
- ◆ Four keys of post-independence democratic consolidation
  - Congress party
  - Institutionalizing elections
  - Primacy of the Constitution
  - Minority rights

# Post-Nehru Democratic Mainstays

- ◆ The Supreme Court
- ◆ The Election Commission
- ◆ Ironically, political parties, often viewed unfavorably



# Blemishes, Failures and Challenges

- ◆ National Integrity: the greatest success
- ◆ Caste justice: half won
- ◆ Biggest failure: mass Poverty
- ◆ Electoral vibrancy but weak accountability between elections, plus corruption
- ◆ This is the “democracy deficit” that AAP is plugging into. It seeks to make democracy deeper between elections

# Conclusion

- ✦ Samuel Huntington on American democracy:
  - “Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.” (Huntington,1982)
- ✦ With the exception of “disappointment”, the same lines can be written about India’s democracy. Surveying a history of two centuries, Huntington was disappointed, though he remained rooted in hope of further reform. India has spent only sixty six years under democracy. A deeply hierarchical society, marked by radical inequalities, has come quite far. But it needs to go much farther. A battle for deeper democracy, not democracy *per se*, is under way.

# Defining Democracy

- ✦ “a system in which rulers are selected through periodic elections in which candidates compete freely for votes and in which all adults are eligible to vote” (Schumpeter).
- ✦ Dahl’s breakdown of this definition into “contestation” and “participation”
- ✦ Such polities have survived at high levels of income and literacy and they tend to be urban.
- ✦ Dahl: India “a leading contemporary exception” to democratic theory. (Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Yale, 1989, p. 253.)