

# Making Sense of India

## By Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph

**The history of modern India is one of a series of dramatic transformations that, taken together, have allowed the country to emerge as a modern nation. It is poised to change further, but not without risks, given the continuing tug-of-war between secularists and Hindu nationalists, write Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph.**

SINCE INDEPENDENCE IN 1947, the changes in India have been both sweeping and dramatic, recasting the political and social character of the nation. It has experienced a profound social revolution in governance, as the lower caste *Sudra raj* displaced upper caste *Brahmin raj*. In recent years socialism has yielded to economic liberalization. Politics have been transformed from a one-party dominant system to a federalized multi-party system. The political culture has undergone several shifts, from staunch secularism to Hindu nationalism and back toward secularism. In what follows, we explore these changes.

### FROM BRAHMIN RAJ TO SUDRA RAJ

In India's social system, *Brahmin raj* refers to rule by the upper castes and *Sudra raj* to rule by the lower castes.<sup>1</sup> At independence, Brahmins and other upper castes dominated the heights of political power. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a Brahmin, as were most of his cabinet members.

Now, 60 years later, members of the lower castes hold many of the top elected political positions in the central and state governments. Most famously, Mayawati, the chief minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh (UP), is a *Dalit*, the term many ex-untouchables use these days to identify themselves. In many states and in the central government in New Delhi, politicians with lower-caste backgrounds have taken over the reins of government.

One reason for this is the logic of democracy — a system in which numbers count. Lower castes constitute approximately 80 percent of India's

1 Raj means dominion or rule. A Raja is a ruler, or Indian king. Brahmin raj to Sudra raj refer to the ancient and very complex Indian caste system in which Brahmins, the literate priests, were said to come first. Last came the Sudras, or toilers, and below them the so-called untouchables. Today we speak of ex-untouchables, who have come to refer to themselves as "Dalits," or the oppressed. *The Laws of Manu*, Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, eds and translators (New York: Penguin, 1991).

2 See *Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

3 "Centrist Politics, Class Politics, and the Indian State," in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 19 -59.

4 See Rudolph and Rudolph, "Introduction," *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, 1-18.

population, so it did not take long after the introduction of universal suffrage for the lower castes to figure out they had the numbers to elect their own to office.

Another reason for the political emergence of the lower castes is the role of caste associations that brought together local *jatis*, or sub-castes, for the purpose of collective action.<sup>2</sup> Caste associations provided a way for the common man to practice self-help, participate in politics, gain political power and use that power to dismantle caste hierarchy. Paradoxically, under democracy, caste became anti-caste; caste as a chosen identity and a form of collective action has undone caste as a prescribed hereditary status.

#### FROM STATE TO MARKET

The second transformation has been the move from a state-planned to a market-oriented economy. Socialism, in other words, yielded to economic liberalization. Nehru, who served as prime minister from independence in 1947 until his death in 1964, remained committed throughout that time to the idea of state domination of the economy. He spoke of "occupying the commanding heights" of the economy — basic industry, heavy industry and infrastructure — what the former Soviet Union referred to as primary industrialization. Consumer goods, the agricultural sector and the bazaar and service economy remained in private hands. Investment was, for the most part, state funded and channeled through a Planning Commission created and chaired by Nehru. The industrial and commercial private

sectors were closely controlled through what came to be referred to as "the permit-license raj."<sup>3</sup> Nehru pursued a policy of autarchy that included import substitution that both isolated and protected India from the world economy.

The policy failed. India's economy grew at annual rate of 3.5 percent in the 1960s, in what the late Raj Krishna mockingly called "the Hindu rate of growth." This compared with the double-digit growth experienced by the export-oriented East Asian Tigers — South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Investment in public sector enterprises was massive and furnished India with the heavy industry that characterizes modern economies. But year after year, these public sector units, as they were called, operated at a loss, showing themselves incapable of generating the surplus needed for economic growth.<sup>4</sup> By 1991, when India changed course, the system was literally broke, the Planning Commission had no public funds to invest and India couldn't pay its current account balance.

The centrally planned permit license raj occupied center stage until India's 10th national election in 1991, when a Congress Party government with P. V. Narasimha Rao as prime minister and Manmohan Singh as finance minister took office. The Rao government was immediately confronted with a current account crisis that required a large loan from the International Monetary Fund that was conditioned on India liberalizing its economy along free-market lines. According to many Indians who were in a position to know government thinking at the time, the IMF was pushing against an open door. Rajiv Gandhi's

5 The Hindu, January 31, 2008.

6 The Economist, August 17, 2006. According to the Economist, a "red corridor" runs down a swath of Central India from Bihar to Andhra Pradesh. See also Amarnath K. Menon, "Naxalites: The Siege Within," India Today, February 11, 2008.

government in the mid-1980s had already begun to introduce market reforms. The crisis in India's "socialist" economy coincided with and was reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its client states. A domestic crisis that revealed the failure of India's socialist economy coincided with the global collapse of the Soviet economic model, a world event that was perceived as the victory of market economies over planned economies. India changed course.

In 1991 the Congress Party government launched an economic liberalization program designed to transform India from a planned to a market economy. Over 15 years later, the results show that while much has been accomplished, much remains to be done. India's GDP growth reached 9.6 percent in 2007. Rapid growth in India and China have made them major players in the world economy even as they threaten to place unsustainable demands on the world's supply of fossil fuels and other natural resources, and join the US and the European Union (EU) in exacerbating climate change that threatens global survival. The specter of China and India producing, consuming and polluting at the same level as the US has revived talk of "the limits of growth."

Particularly noteworthy is India's information technology sector, which provides a growth engine for the domestic economy. In terms of purchasing power parity, India's middle class is said to number over 250 million, making it larger than America's or Europe's. The recently introduced stripped-down Tata Nano car that will sell for \$2,500 is expected to enlarge the car market in India and around the world to include an estimated 1 billion customers whose consumption and pollution may prove unsustainable.

There are still enormous weaknesses in the Indian economy. Its proportion of industrial versus agricultural jobs lags China's and the rate of its population below the poverty line,

while down from 50 percent to 25 percent since 1960 remains disturbingly high. The agriculture sector's share of the work force declined over the past decade from about two-thirds to 57 percent but the sector's share of gross domestic product fell from a high of 50 percent to last year's 27 percent. Many attribute the 17,060 rural suicides in 2006<sup>5</sup> and the violent "Maoist" insurrection in 160 of India's 602 districts to the reduction of income in the agricultural sector.<sup>6</sup>

India's market economy enjoys several advantages compared to China's, with which it is frequently compared. First, India's demographic pyramid displays the standard dimensions, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, while China's is the reverse, broad at the top and narrow at the bottom. China's one child policy, while beneficial in the medium term, seems to point to long-run negative consequences. For the foreseeable future, because of their respective demographics, India will have a young, abundant, and perhaps increasingly skilled labor force, while China will be faced with labor scarcity and the burden of an ageing population. We would, however, hedge this optimistic view with the caution that India's secondary and higher education is not now up to training the available pool of labor. Second, India's economy is oriented to its domestic market, while China's economy is export-oriented, a condition that makes China more vulnerable to global economic shocks and to its bilateral relationship with its largest trading and financial partner, the United States. India may have two other advantages: first, the legitimacy that arises from a democratic regime that can and does "throw the rascals out" from time to time; and second, an income distribution pattern that, while producing greater inequality as GDP leaps ahead, remains better than China's rapidly widening income gap.

<sup>7</sup> The first exception was the fourth national election in 1967, the first after Nehru's death, when his relatively inexperienced daughter, Indira Gandhi, led the party. The second exception was in 1977, the election after Indira Gandhi imposed the "emergency" of 1975-1977. Congress lost the election to the Janata Party.

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#### THE EMERGENCE OF A MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM

A third major transformation in India is the move from a system dominated by one party to a federalized multiparty system. The Indian National Congress led the nationalist movement from 1885, the year it was founded, until independence in 1947. From the time Gandhi returned to India after 21 years struggling for minority rights in South Africa until his assassination on January 30, 1948, his leadership and worldview gave Indians the courage to resist British rule non-violently. His chosen heir, Jawaharlal Nehru, became India's first prime minister in 1947.

Congress entered the independence era with a huge amount of political capital from its active leadership during the nationalist era. From independence in 1947 until the ninth national election in 1989, Congress, with two exceptions,<sup>7</sup> was India's dominant party. Its dominance in most state legislatures as well as in the central parliament enabled it to manage policy at both levels. Facing a divided opposition in a first-past-the-post electoral system, Congress was able to win about 70 percent of the seats with roughly 45 percent of the vote in

India's first three national elections in 1952, 1957 and 1962.

1989 was a watershed. For the first time, a national election resulted in a hung parliament in which no party won a majority. This event marked the beginning of a multi-party system and of coalition governments.

The multi-party system was "federalized" by the rise of regional parties. State parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam, or DMK party, in the state of Tamil Nadu (formerly Madras) and of the Telegu Desam Party in the state of Andhra Pradesh, began to play a key role in the formation of coalition governments and in the making of policy.

In the 10th national election in 1991, it became plain that state parties were gaining on the national parties. The national parties, of which the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), were by far the largest, together won 78 percent of the seats. By the 2004 election, the national parties' share of the vote had dropped to 63 percent and their seats to 67 percent. In contrast, the share held by regional parties had risen between 1991 and

8 Article 26 granted “every religious denomination ... the right to establish ...institutions for religious ... purposes ... and to manage its own affairs in matters of religions....” Article 29 declares that “any section of the citizens ...having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same ....” Article 30 declares that minorities based on religion “... shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their own choice....”

2004 from 17 to 29 percent and their seat share from 16 to 29 percent.

For the upcoming national election in 2009, the alliances organized by the two largest national parties, the Congress’s United Progressive Alliance and the BJP’s National Democratic Alliance will again be seeking regional party allies who can win sufficient seats to enable one or the other to form a government.

The central question is whether the center can hold if the vote share of the Congress and the BJP continues to decline. In 2004, Congress got 26.53 percent of the vote and the BJP 22.16 percent. In the typical three- and four-party contests in India’s elections, the national parties need between a third and a quarter of the vote if they are to win enough seats to form a government. Will the Congress and the BJP manage to win the 25 to 30 percent they need to remain viable in 2009?

#### NEHRUVIAN SECULARISTS VS HINDU NATIONALISTS

The fourth major transformation shaping modern India is the move from Nehruvian secularism to Hindu nationalism and back. These moves suggest not only a transformation but also a restoration of sorts, reaffirming the dominance of centrist politics.

What is meant by Nehruvian secularism? Nehru’s secularism starts with his Enlightenment-style rationalism. He believed science to be the only form of valid knowledge; what wasn’t scientific could not be true. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he did his Science Tripos in Chemistry, Botany and Geology. Later in life he became known for his commitment to the ideology of a “scientific temper.” In this view, religion was superstition, a false form of knowledge that would fade away as the world became more enlightened. He thought of India’s

poor as both bigoted and superstitious and deplored the popular belief in astrology.

He deplored, too, the presence of religion in politics and tended to deny, from a Marxist as well as from a rationalist perspective, that religious parties such as the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, could be serious contenders for national legitimacy.

At independence, Nehru saw to it that his ideas about secularism were incorporated into the writing of India’s Constitution. The call by Pakistan’s founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, on August 16, 1946 for “direct action” on behalf of a Muslim nation brought to the forefront of nationalist politics the “communal” or religious ideology that Nehru as a secular nationalist found anathema.

Under Nehru’s guidance, the Indian Constitution separated religion and politics by providing that there could not be an established state religion. Religion was confined to the private sphere. In the language of Article 25 of the Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, every person shall have the protection of the law to profess, practice and propagate his/her religion.

The Constitution’s version of secularism had to take account not only of Nehru’s views but also those of his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi thought of truth as multiple and inclusive. He didn’t privilege either religion or science as the only valid form of truth. For Gandhi, all religions were a source of spiritual truth and their truths should be actively sought, but if a religious belief or practice violated conscience or reason, conscience or reason was to prevail. The constitution recognized Gandhi’s inclusive view of religious truth by establishing all religions.<sup>8</sup>

Nehru and Gandhi were both committed to secularism but they differed profoundly about its meaning. Nehru expected religion to be replaced by a “scientific temper;” Gandhi embraced the truth of all religion and thought of

9 K. B. Hedgewar founded the RSS in 1924. At the time of Gandhi's assassination, the RSS was headed by M.S. Golwalkar. V. D. "Veer" Savarkar, a contemporary rival of Gandhi's in 1909 London, was also an early advocate of violent Hindu nationalism. Savarkar, along with Golwalkar, are thought by some to have played a role in Gandhi's assassination.

himself as a *karma yogi*, one who sought God through action in a life of service. In the late 19th century and up to independence, various leaders challenged this view by arguing that India was a Hindu nation and that its constitution and laws should reflect that fact.

The rise of Hindu nationalism had its roots in the nationalist movement. A colonial-era political party, the Hindu Mahasabha and its post-

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independence successor, the Jan Sangh, sought to represent what they perceived as a Hindu nation. The Jan Sangh was aided by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), a civil society organization founded in 1924 that sought to strengthen Hindu character, consciousness and actions by providing an allegedly inchoate community with the organization, discipline and ideology it lacked.<sup>9</sup>

After independence, Hindu nationalist organizations appealed to the putative Hindu majority's grievances toward the Congress Party's supposed favoring of India's post-partition Muslim minority. Congress governments were eager to recognize, respect and protect Muslims who had not opted for Pakistan. The secularists argued that allowing Muslims to keep their per-

sonal law of marriage, divorce and inheritance would make them feel secure. Hindu nationalists thought recognizing Muslim laws was "minority appeasement."

Hindu nationalist extremists turned to violence soon after independence. On January 30, 1948, in a defining act, Nathuram Godse, incensed by Gandhi's lack of martial masculinity and efforts to pay Pakistan its promised share of post-partition revenue, shot him at point blank range in the garden of Birla House as Gandhi was about to begin a prayer meeting. The act, by a former RSS member, shocked the nation, led to the temporary banning of the RSS, and for a time discredited Hindu nationalist organizations.

Hindu nationalists didn't return to the mainstream until after the Emergency of 1975-1977. Party leaders from across the political spectrum, secularist and Hindu nationalist, came to know and respect each other when Indira Gandhi's emergency government put them in jail together. On the eve of the 1977 election that Indira Gandhi called because she was confident of winning, opposition party leaders came together in the anti-Congress Janata party. The emergency regime had succeeded in uniting opposition parties that, over five national elections, had divided the anti-Congress vote. By uniting that vote, the Janata party won the 1977 national election. For the first time in independent India's history, a non-Congress party formed a government.

The Janata Party included secular parties of the left and "communal" parties of the right, not least among them the erstwhile Jan Sangh. With the fall of the Janata government in 1979 and its loss in the election that followed to a resurgent Congress Party, the Janata Party broke up into a variety of parties including the Jan Sangh's successor, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. Its initial ideological orientation featured moderation and a form of Gandhian socialism.

Seemingly, Hindu nationalism had been brought in out of the cold. But in the 1984 election the moderate BJP did badly, with Congress winning 415 of 542 parliamentary seats; the BJP won just two seats. Moderation, it seemed, did not pay, and the BJP soon turned to the politics of Hindutva, an ideology that claims India is an exclusively Hindu nation in which Muslims and other religious minorities have no place.

The Hindu turn worked. In the next national election in 1989, the BJP won 85 seats. In 1991 it won 119. Congress under P. V. Narasimha Rao formed a government, but the BJP was now India's second largest party.

The 1991 results were attributed in part to the movement launched in 1990 by BJP leader L. K Advani, demanding that a temple dedicated to Lord Rama be built in Ayodhya on the spot where, according to the BJP, a Ram temple had stood until Babur, the first Mughal emperor, replaced it with a mosque circa 1528. According to the BJP, the Babri Masjid [mosque] was erected on the site of Lord Rama's birthplace.

In support of his demand, Advani embarked on a pilgrimage from the sacred site of Somnath in the west to the sacred city of Ayodhya in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Fitting out a bus as a *rath*, or chariot, he mounted a cage on it with a martial Lord Rama in chains inside. Lord Rama was thus carried to Ayodhya where a new temple was to be built on the site of his alleged birthplace. Along the way throngs of devotees brought *shilanyas*, bricks dedicated to the construction of Lord Rama's temple. Thousands lined the route and the country seemed about to be engulfed in a wave of Hindu nationalism.

On December 6, 1992 a crowd conservatively estimated at 150,000 surrounded the Babri Masjid, and as the country watched on national television a mob of youths wearing headbands and wielding pick axes broke through police

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barricades to attack and destroy the mosque. Advani was present at least part of the time. The politics of Hindutva roused communal passions and sparked violence between Hindus and Muslims throughout north India. Two thousand people, mostly Muslims, are said to have died.

Was this a watershed moment marking the hegemony of extremist Hindu nationalism in Indian politics or was it the crest of a retreating wave? In hindsight it seems clear that while many Indian voters were willing to be more Hindu in their preferences few were willing to embrace a politics of extremism. Over the next decade, until the Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, BJP governments presided over a period of relatively peaceful relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India.

In the 1996 national election, the BJP won 161 seats, 20 more than Congress, to become the single largest party in parliament. But the BJP was unable to form a government because no party would cross the aisle to join it in a coalition. In 1998, the BJP reached the apogee of its electoral success with 182 seats and 25.6 percent of the vote.

Having learned the art of making pre-poll electoral alliances based on a common minimum program, it was able to form government. But it did so at a price. The regional parties it recruited insisted that the BJP drop its *Hindutva* policies as a condition of joining the alliance. As a result, the policies eliminated were building a Ram temple at Ayodhya; removing Article 370 giving India's only Muslim majority state, Kashmir, special status and creating legislation that would eliminate the special standing of Muslim personal law. By abandoning extremist Hindu nationalism for centrist politics, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance governed for six years, from 1998 until 2004.

We have considered four major transformations since India's independence. A social revo-

lution that displaced upper castes in the seat of power has peacefully democratized the country. The transformation of the political system from a one-party dominant to a multi-party system has allowed for democratic deepening with stability. The introduction of economic reforms and a market economy after 1991 have facilitated higher growth rates, the creation of a middle class of some 250 million people and India's emergence as a global economic power. At the same time, 25 percent of India's population remains below the poverty line and endures a quality of life that, in some respects, is inferior to that of the poorest African countries.

Finally, Indian nationalism's secular heritage has been challenged by Hindu nationalism. The success of the BJP has opened a space for *Hindutva* ideology and politics and the possibility of religious conflict. But at the same time, the imperatives of coalition politics have enabled centrism to prevail over extremism.

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