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Four Revolutions and India's Future

For the better part of the past three decades the Indian polity has been in the throes of four revolutionary changes. They are in the realms of political mobilization, secularism, foreign policy, and economic policy making. These transformations have not moved in tandem but have overlapped with one another. Nevertheless, they collectively represent a steady and potentially fundamental remaking of many features of the Indian political landscape.

Of the four transformative movements, the social revolution in India has been in the making for perhaps the longest time span. It involves the rise of India's lower castes especially in northern India, from what Marx once referred to in another, but related, context as "the sleep of ages." Such a revolutionary upsurge had already taken place in southern India during the 1960s. Now through the process of growing media exposure, increased literacy, and, above all, through participation in local, regional, and national elections, India's hitherto dispossessed are finding their political voice. Since the 1980s this process has accelerated and altered the texture of Indian politics dramatically by throwing into disarray long-held assumptions about the predictable voting behavior of the lower castes. Instead of routinely turning to the once-dominant Congress Party, lower-caste voters have demonstrated much-greater independence and have switched their loyalties to local, ethnic, and regional parties. Accordingly, their political

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unpredictability has made and unmade governments at state and national levels. There is little reason to believe that this growing political sophistication will come to a close in the foreseeable future. Instead, the dramatic process of political mobilization under way promises to steadily erode upper-caste dominance in Indian politics and to make India a more representative polity.

The rising political consciousness and acumen of lower castes along with occasional political alliances with north India's Muslim communities has posed a threat not only to the dominance of the Congress Party but also to an upper-caste-based political order. This challenge, along with other contingent developments in Indian politics, generated a backlash against India's secular order from the mid-1980s. The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rode the crest of high-caste anxieties and sought to adumbrate them in the political arena. Thanks to its deft exploitation of upper-caste misgivings, throughout the 1990s its political rise appeared inexorable and the fate of Indian secularism appeared rather dire. However, the seeming willingness of the BJP and a number of its ancillary organizations, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), to create permissive conditions for much political violence directed against minorities may have contributed to the decline of its initial appeal. That said, the BJP through the relentless pursuit of its antisecular agenda when in and out of office during the 1990s and beyond managed to change the terms of political discourse in India. The taboo in Indian politics against the explicit scapegoating of minorities suffered under the BJP's assiduous antisecular barrage. Though it suffered significant defeats in two national elections (2004 and 2009) it would be premature to write off the BJP as a spent force in Indian politics. An antisecular strain has long existed in Indian politics and was present in substantial measure during India's anticolonial nationalist struggle. Consequently, this strand of India's political culture can again be drawn upon under particular circumstances if dexterously resurrected.

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Although Indian secularism is not moribund or faced with an imminent demise, it does face potentially formidable challenges in the future. If the BJP and its associates were able to undermine the secular order, India would cease to be a liberal democracy as it would effectively consign its religious minority to the status of second-class citizens. The long-term survival of Indian secularism is critical to the health of India's democratic polity.

Since the early 1980s, India's policy makers have also chosen to challenge another cornerstone of the Indian polity, namely the commitment to a strategy of state-led economic growth and industrialization. Growing domestic dissatisfaction with India's sluggish growth, ideational changes in economic-development strategies in other parts of the world, and the rise of the fast-growing economies of East and Southeast Asia all contributed to the reassessment of India's economic-growth model. However, it was not until an unprecedented fiscal crisis in 1991 that India undertook a fundamental shift in its economic policies. The results of these policies proved to be nothing short of dramatic. India managed to end its anemic rate of economic growth and started to make a dent in rural and urban poverty.

The profound changes that are sweeping across the Indian polity are also reflected in its foreign and security policies. Until Indian forces suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1962, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had deliberately limited defense spending and kept the Indian military on a short leash. Three related concerns had animated his defense policy. First, he had feared that an inordinate emphasis on military spending could lead to the militarization of Indian society. Second, he believed that military spending would impose significant opportunity costs that the nascent country could ill-afford. Third, he was concerned about the dangers of Bonapartism.

In the aftermath of the disastrous Sino-Indian border war India was compelled to increase defense spending dramatically. However, even though the war left Nehru a spent and

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broken man, the commitment to nonalignment remained. In later years, especially under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the country drew increasingly closer to the Soviet Union. The reasons for this shift are discussed at length in the chapter about foreign policy (see Chapter 2). Suffice it to say that the alignment with the Soviet Union stemmed mostly from geopolitical exigencies rather than any profound ideological affinity.

This reliance on the Soviets started to undergo a slow but steady shift during the early 1980s for a complex set of reasons. The Soviets were not in a position to provide India with the technologies that it needed for boosting economic growth, India was disenchanted with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the United States, under the Reagan administration, made important overtures toward India. However, it was not until the Cold War's end that India, for all practical purposes, abandoned the practice if not the rhetoric of nonalignment.

The Political Backdrop of the Past

A brief sketch of the political backdrop that preceded these revolutionary changes is in order. Prime Minister Nehru, in a schoolmasterly fashion, had encouraged parliamentary debate, maintained internal democracy within the Congress Party, continued the British tradition of a politically neutral civil service, fostered judicial independence, encouraged press freedom, boosted secularism, and firmly entrenched civilian control over the military.

Despite this extraordinary legacy, decay soon set in. Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi much of the democratic and secular scaffolding that Nehru had so carefully constructed was taken down. Under her watch, the Congress Party's local roots withered, elections became increasingly plebiscitary, the independence of the judiciary was undermined, the principles of federalism were flouted, the civil service was politicized,

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and secularism was compromised. Her most destructive contribution, however, was the increasing personalization of politics and the deinstitutionalization of the polity. The Congress Party, a remarkable umbrella organization and a vibrant microcosm of Indian society, simply ossified.

As she dismantled the Congress Party, Gandhi also resorted to a series of populist gestures in an effort to garner personal popularity. She nationalized banks, dispensed with the annual payments to India's former royal families, and promised to abolish poverty. In the process, she raised the expectations of the poor and the disenfranchised and boosted their political mobilization. It was also under her tenure that India experienced its only bout of authoritarian "emergency" rule (1975–6), when civil liberties were suspended and personal rights squelched. The harshness of the brief authoritarian interlude led to an ironic comeuppance for Gandhi, however, as it was the very poor – whom she had mobilized – who used their newly invigorated franchise to oust her from office in 1977.

She would later return as prime minister, only to be assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in 1984. The democratic institutions that had survived her machinations also survived her demise. Her son and successor, the untried Rajiv Gandhi, did not consciously seek to worsen his mother's infelicitous legacy but did little to reverse it either. Deep-seated forces and powerful personalities in the Congress Party blocked his feeble efforts at reform. Once the mainstay of national unity, the Congress Party continued its steep decline, and political life began to fragment along regional and caste lines. Ethnoreligious conflicts in the Punjab and Kashmir intensified, and the federal features of the Indian polity, already parlous, became even more threadbare because of Rajiv's ill-considered policies.

His efforts did not stop with politics. His limited and overcautious economic-reform efforts – meant to free an economy that had been brought to its knees by the all-stultifying weight of what the eminent Indian economist Raj Krishna

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called the "license, permit, quota raj" – ran afoul of powerful interests.[1] Career bureaucrats, fearing the loss of political prerogatives, dug in their heels against the implementation of reforms. Labor activists and their political allies led street protests. Businessmen who had grown rich in the statist hothouse showed scant hunger for more competition. Bereft of imagination and intestinal fortitude, Rajiv let reform lapse.

His May 1991 assassination by a Sri Lankan suicide bomber and the subsequent convergence of a series of political and economic forces, internal and external, brutally laid bare many of the structural weaknesses of the Indian polity. His killing came almost at the end of the Cold War, during the last two decades of which India had fashioned a cozy arms-transfer and security relationship with the Soviet Union, all the while professing a firm commitment to nonalignment. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia showed little interest in continuing the relationship on its previous basis. Consequently, Indian foreign- and security-policy makers abruptly found themselves adrift in a new and uncertain world.

The Cold War's end not only undermined the foundations of India's foreign policy but also helped to dissolve any consensus regarding economic growth and performance. Swelling deficits, rising oil prices, and the need to repatriate the more than one million overseas Indian workers whose jobs had been interrupted by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War exposed the Indian state to an ineluctable fiscal crisis. The long-sheltered, state-dominated economy, already smothered in regulations, now faced a huge challenge that was intellectual as well as practical. The Soviet collapse had robbed India's dirigiste bureaucrats and economists of what seemed to be a viable model for state-led economic growth. In a stroke of good fortune, however, the new prime minister and Congress Party stalwart, Narasimha Rao, and his Oxford University–trained finance minister, Manmohan Singh, had

[1] Meredith Woo Cummings, ed., *The Developmental State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 334.

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the wit to seize upon the crisis as a potent lever against statism. Instead of seeking short-term loans as a safe harbor in a storm, they cut the cables that had bound the Indian economy to its old intellectual and institutional anchors and set a course for economic transformation.

Renewal and Reform

Despite the success of the Rao-Singh team in reversing the country's disastrous economic course, the Congress Party's political fortunes kept sliding. The reasons were structural; Indira Gandhi had let the party ossify, and no successor could or would repair the damage. Rajiv and Rao, for example, showed an anemic commitment to intraparty democracy and allowed significant corruption – ranging from illegal payments for government contracts to the bribing of legislators to defect before crucial votes – to go unchecked. Finally, despite their official commitment to secularism, the Congress Party's leaders showed little zeal in its defense. In 1985, for example, Rajiv overturned a Supreme Court judgment that provided a maintenance allowance to an indigent Muslim widow because he feared a backlash from Muslim clerics angered by the court's decision that Indian civil legislation should take precedence over Islamic law in this case. Later, in 1992, the Rao administration shamefully failed to stop Hindu-nationalist supporters of the BJP and its affiliate, the militant RSS, from tearing down the Babri Masjid, a mosque said to be have been constructed on the ruins of a Hindu temple. Worse still, the Rao government proved singularly inept at quelling the anti-Muslim riots that swept across India in the wake of the mosque's destruction.

The Congress Party's losses turned out to be the regional parties' gains. These formations, representing a wide array of local interests across the subcontinent, increasingly began to draw votes away from the Congress Party among India's hitherto disenfranchised minorities, whom the ruling party

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had long taken for granted. Apart from its defeat in 1997, in the wake of the end of Indira Gandhi's ill-conceived "state of emergency," the Congress Party first lost its outright parliamentary majority in the 1989 elections. Ever since then, India has been ruled by coalition governments that reflect the newly diffuse distribution of political power. A national party – typically the Congress Party or the BJP – is at the core, with regional parties acting as crucial makeweights in a fragile, multilateral marriage of convenience. Stable policy making under such circumstances is no mean feat. Faced with a slew of interests that need to be aggregated and accommodated, some coalitions have taken to hammering out "common minimum" policy agendas at the outset in order to avoid coalition-busting disputes. However, even such arrangements have not proven to be foolproof.

Coalition governments are likely to be a fixture in India for some time to come. The Congress Party, now under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi's Italian-born widow Sonia, has shown some signs of rejuvenation. In the 2009 elections it managed to trounce the BJP even though it fell short of a parliamentary majority. The BJP, which received a severe drubbing, is now in the midst of a significant internal debate about its ideological and political future.

The fragmentation of the polity dictates that any nationwide political party must rely on smaller, regional, caste- and interest-based parties in order to obtain a governing majority. Such a development, although making for more contentious politics, may have an unintended positive consequence: national governments will increasingly reflect the diversity of the country and compulsively will make India a more "federal" republic in fact as well as in theory. Furthermore, because many of the coalition partners are likely to be represented at state levels, national cabinets will find themselves far less tempted to seek arbitrary dismissal of this or that state government under a clause in the constitution that allows for direct "president's rule" of states by New Delhi – a persistent occurrence as recently as the 1980s.

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The rise of violent religious intolerance, the failure of national governments to curb it, and the growth of political corruption are all dangerous and corrosive trends. Yet focusing on them alone would provide a sadly incomplete account of the state of Indian political life and the prospects of Indian democracy. At least two important institutions within India have shown newfound resilience: the Supreme Court and the Election Commission. A piece of legislation, the 2005 Right of Information Act, has had a significant salutary effect on governance in India. A discussion of the two institutions and the new legislation are apposite.

From the late 1970s, the Indian Supreme Court, primarily at the instance of Justices V. R. Krishna Iyer and P. N. Bhagwati, embarked on an unprecedented burst of judicial activism. Their actions involved a dramatic expansion of the court's powers. They undertook this largely to give voice to significant segments of Indian society whose members could not otherwise afford to obtain legal redress when faced with arbitrary state policies and actions. To this end, the court introduced a system of public-interest litigation that enabled bonded laborers, disenfranchised tribal people, indigent women, the homeless, and other formerly powerless citizens to approach the bench in search of justice. Subsequently, journalists and civic activists have also used public-interest litigation to enforce existing environmental laws, prevent the maltreatment of inmates in state prisons, and expose corruption in high places.

The Election Commission, which had become a somnolent body, was rejuvenated in the 1990s. The revitalization began under the aegis of a senior former civil servant, T. N. Seshan. Using powers vested in the commission, Seshan began the Herculean task of cleaning out the Augean stables of an electoral process increasingly beset with corruption, violence, and the plotting of criminal elements. Not surprisingly, Seshan became the hero to legions of exasperated Indian voters and the scourge of many a venal politician. His successors cannot match his dramatic flair, but in their own quiet way they enforce an evenhanded regimen of regular procedures and fair

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regulations. The continuation of Seshan's innovations suggests that they were not the refulgent yet transitory attainments of one strong-willed man, but rather solid achievements that bespeak of a lasting improvement in the conduct of elections.[2] Thus, despite the decline and decay of a number of institutions, the renewal of other constitutionally mandated bodies such as the Supreme Court and the Election Commission bodes well for the future of Indian democracy.

Finally, the Right to Information Act has also bolstered the prospects of democratic governance in India. This act now empowers citizens to seek information regarding general government expenditures, inquire about arrears in pensions, seek information about spending on roads and public works, and ensure the delivery of various public services. The act, though quite extraordinary in terms of its scope and reach, has not always been implemented with great vigor. On many occasions bureaucrats have sought to intimidate individuals seeking information and have sought to obfuscate matters. Nevertheless, the act can play a significant role in increasing transparency and induce the bureaucracy to be more responsive to public needs.[3]

The Emergence of a New Social Order

In addition to the fitful renewal of political institutions, a fundamental transformation of India's social order is under way, with implications pointing in two directions: one promising for democracy, the other not. The salubrious development involves the mobilization of India's lower castes and minorities. Efforts to promote voter education and turnout, rising

[2] M. S. Gill, "India: Running the World's Biggest Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 9:1 (January 1998): 164–8.

[3] Alasdair S. Roberts, "A Great and Revolutionary Law? The First Four Years of India's Right to Information Act," *Suffolk University Law School Research Paper*, No. 10–02 (2010).

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