Mapping the World's Largest Democracy (1947-2017)

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Words count (including abstract etc.):   12790

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Abstract: After seven decades as an independent democratic nation, India's social landscape remains marred by persistent contradictions and inequalities. As the country moves from celebrating 70 years of independence towards its seventeenth general election in 2019, this article sets out to survey what democracy has done to India over the past 70 years. How was Indian democracy established and how has it evolved? Why do people vote, and who do they vote for? How does Indian democracy function beyond elections, and to what extent has democracy delivered in terms of social development and the economic and political integration of marginalised groups? These are the key questions that we address in this article. Drawing on Heller's distinction between the formal, effective and substantive dimensions of democracy, we adopt an understanding of the dynamics of Indian democracy that extends well beyond formal institutions and elections. While we acknowledge that Indian democracy in the formal sense is plural, vibrant, and resilient, we also argue that the transition from a vibrant formal democracy to one that is both effective and substantive is impeded by contradictions and inequalities that are both historical and contemporary in nature. We also reflect on the current potential of popular mobilisations from below for forging mutually

reinforcing connections between the formal, effective, and substantive dimensions of democracy, in a context in which an increasingly authoritarian Hindu nationalism continues to gain ground.

On 25 November 1949, the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar addressed the Constituent Assembly for the last time. Ambedkar had chaired the committee for almost three years, and now a new Constitution would come into effect in late January the next year. Although this was in many ways the crowning achievement of more than a half-century of struggle for independence from colonial rule, Ambedkar was less than sanguine about democracy's prospects in the new nation: "On the 26th of January 1950," he told the Assembly, "we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality." Ambedkar's concern gravitated around the limitations of liberal equality: political democracy, he argued, could not be sustained unless it rested on a foundation of economic and social equality. "How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions?", he asked. "How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril."

After seven decades, many of the inequalities that Ambedkar pointed out in his speech still mar India's social landscape (Drèze and Sen 2013). Despite very impressive rates of economic growth in recent years, 41.3 percent of the country's population still lives in poverty, and 57 billionaires own more wealth than the poorest 70 percent of the population (Nilsen 2017; see also Chandrasekhar 2017). Despite India's food surplus, 44 percent of the country's children are malnourished and the rural population eats less today than it did 40 years ago (Mohan 2016). Despite this, poor and marginalized groups have not, as Ambedkar predicted that they would do, blown up the structure of democracy. On the contrary, the poor

– as we discuss below – are among the most enthusiastic participants in what is in fact the largest exercise in universal franchise anywhere in the world. Rather, in the context of the rise to power of the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there are many who are concerned that the key threat to India's democracy comes from above, not from below (Jha 2017). As we substantiate later there has, under Modi, been an authoritarian turn in Indian society and in the country's public sphere where violence against Muslims and other marginal groups, for example Dalits, has proliferated, and where dissident voices are regularly accused of being "anti-national" and subjected to harassment and silencing (Nilsen 2017). Hence, political scientist and civil society activist Yogendra Yadav (2017) articulated a widely-shared anxiety when he recently commented that Modi's hegemony entails "an imminent possibility of rapidly shrinking democratic spaces … We face a real possibility of an onslaught on the foundational values of our republic."

In light of such persistent contradictions and a troubled conjuncture, and as the country moves from celebrating 70 years of independence towards its seventeenth general election in 2019, this article sets out to map the complex terrain of democracy in India through a comprehensive survey of existing research. How was Indian democracy established and how has it evolved? Why do people vote, and who do they vote for? How does Indian democracy function beyond elections, and to what extent has democracy delivered in terms of social development and the economic and political integration of marginalised groups? These are some of the key questions we address in this article. We do so specifically to bring the Indian experience with democratisation into conversation with a larger readership in the broad field of development studies. Our approach is in no small part informed by Patrick Heller's (2000) distinction between the formal, effective and substantive dimensions of democracy. Formal democracy concerns universal suffrage, regular and competitive elections, accountability, and legally codified and enforced rights of association. As we indicated above,

India scores well on this account. India prides itself of being 'the world's largest democracy', and there is little doubt that democracy has indeed struck deep roots. Yet such formal or institutional constellations do not by themselves translate into an effective democracy in which relations between citizens in the public sphere are generally regulated through democratic rule; nor does it automatically lead to a substantive democracy that ensures the political and economic integration of subordinate classes. Rather, these three dimensions of democracy may be realised to various degrees in different contexts, and there is a general agreement in the literature on India's democracy that its achievements in the effective and substantive fields compare, as we elaborate later, unfavourably to its achievements in the formal field.

This article, then, adopts an unusually broad scope in its approach to Indian democracy. This is so both in terms of the wide range of literatures that we survey, but even more importantly because our understanding of the dynamics of Indian democracy extends well beyond formal institutions and elections. Significantly, we look at social movements and civil society as important actors that shape democratic institutions and practices. As Heller has suggested, such popular mobilisations from below can be instrumental in forging mutually reinforcing connections between the formal, effective, and substantive dimensions of democracy, and in producing progressive redistribution, reducing poverty, and integrating subordinate groups both politically and economically – outcomes that we here associate with effective and substantive democracy. Our broad view of democracy also leads us to discuss the exceptions that exist within India. Thus, while a good deal of the politics that we describe in this article – whether parliamentary or extra-parliamentary – operate on the terrain of consent, politics in some parts of India operates more often through, and in response to, coercion and repression. This is particularly the case in the Northeast, in Kashmir, and in the Maoist-controlled parts of central India.

Our mapping of the complexities of Indian democracy is, we stress, carried out first and foremost on the national scale. As John Harriss (1999) has noted, India is characterized by the existence of a multiplicity of political regimes at state level, the character of which is defined in key senses by the balance of class and caste power. As such, a more detailed multi-scalar mapping of the democratic terrain would undoubtedly have brought to light considerable diversity and variation. However, we consider such an exercise – however valuable – to be beyond the scope of a single article and restrict ourselves to pointing to more localised cases, contexts, and events when relevant. We thus proceed below to briefly outline how Indian democracy came into being and how it has evolved up to the present day. After that we focus mainly on the contemporary period. First, we look at why people vote and who they vote for. In this section, we also analyse the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that over the past few years has acquired a significant electoral dominance across most of India. We then look at processes of democratic deepening and especially at popular movements as vehicles for such deepening. Lastly, we turn to the exceptions that exist within the wider democratic polity, and ask what the existence of such exceptions tells us about the limits to the formal workings of Indian democracy.

The Making and Evolution of Indian Democracy

India became an independent country in 1947 and the Indian republic was born in 1950 when the Constitution of India came into effect. The national parliament is bicameral. The Lok Sabha, or lower house, is elected by adult universal suffrage in a so-called first-past-the-post system in single-member constituencies. The Rajya Sabha, or upper house, is comprised by members who are indirectly elected by the different state and territorial legislatures. In almost all matters, the Lok Sabha is the more powerful of the two. Unlike in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Indian army has played a subtler, less visible role in securing centralised

political control (Jalal 1995), although it has, as we show later, been instrumental and highly visible in governing certain parts of India for very long periods.

Below the level of the central state we find the subnational states. Over the past two decades processes of political decentralisation and state rescaling (Kennedy 2014; Tillin 2013) have rendered India's subnational states and, by extension, the state legislatures and state chief ministers (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001) ever more influential in terms of policy making. Further down still we find municipal councils in urban areas, and a multi-tiered *panchayat* system in rural areas. The continuous cycle of national, state, municipal and *panchayat* elections coupled with regular by-elections when individual seats fall vacant makes the act of voting a regular and familiar exercise for many Indians.

Explaining why India emerged as a democratic nation after independence is not particularly difficult. The movement for independence 'took modern politics to the people' (Chandra et al. 1989, 28) and laid strong popular foundations for democratic rule. And, when Indian independence drew near, the Second World War had only just ended in a resounding victory of democracy over various forms of fascism. Many of the possible alternatives to some form of democracy thus stood deeply discredited and, as Pedersen (2011, 27-28) points out, in the debate during the late 1940s within India itself – including in the Constituent Assembly – some variant of parliamentary democracy seems to have been the only option seriously discussed and considered.

Yet understanding why India remains democratic today is a different matter. India is, as the political scientist Ashutosh Varshney (2013) has put it, an "improbable democracy" in an "unnatural nation" (Guha 2007, xi-xxvi). According to mainstream democratic theory, poor countries with little cultural and linguistic homogeneity are unlikely to survive as functioning democracies. Given its low level of income and immense linguistic diversity, the odds against democracy in India were thus always extremely high (Varshney 2013, 12), and

predictions of the imminent collapse of Indian democracy have been an integral part of postcolonial political discourse (Ruud and Heierstad 2016). Varshney's answer to why India has remained democratic is fourfold: The Congress party that assumed power after independence was for a long time so dominant that it actually stabilised democracy; it was, under India's first Prime Minister Nehru's stewardship, committed to regular and free elections; to upholding the primacy of the constitution; and to minority rights. Corbridge et al. (2013, 142) have pointed to similar factors when explaining the persistence of Indian democracy, namely the progressive consolidation of *formal* democracy under a Congress party that was untroubled by threats to its power, and which used an extensive elite-led patronage system under a "fairly benign and committed leadership" to strengthen democratic institutions. Yet while the dominance of the Congress party in the immediate post-independence period thus explains how formal democracy came to be consolidated, it also goes some way towards accounting for why formal democratic consolidation was not accompanied by a comparable effective and substantial process of democratisation. Because the Congress relied on local elites to function, it eventually enhanced the political power precisely of such locally dominant elites, usually of higher caste background. These elites were, in turn, capable of systematically warding off attempts at more substantial redistributive reforms that would over time have led to a gradual but more substantial political and economic integration of the subordinate castes and classes (Nilsen and Nielsen 2016, 5-7).

But this "Congress system" of political dominance in a formal democratic setup (Kothari 1964) did not last forever. In 1967 India witnessed what has been called a "first democratic upsurge" that for the first time saw a large number of people voting for parties other than the Congress. In North India, rich farmers gravitated towards parties that catered more to their interests, while in Kerala and West Bengal the Communists formed governments at the state level. In Tamil Nadu in south India, a party anchored in local

identities and aspirations rode to power, while the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jan Sangh also performed well at the Lok Sabha elections the same year. The Congress remained the dominant party at the national level, but a gradual fragmentation of the democratic landscape had been set in motion by an increasingly active, mature and critical electorate.

Twenty-five years later the political scientist Yogendra Yadav (2000) detected what he saw as a "second democratic upsurge". Yadav noted how, in the 1990s, there were major changes underfoot in the social composition of those who voted and took part in political activities. There was, he wrote, a participatory upsurge among the socially underprivileged, whether seen in terms of caste, class, gender or the rural-urban divide (Yadav 2000, 120). Both Dalits and tribals voted in increasingly large numbers and well above that of the most privileged groups; and village India voted to a greater extent than urban India. In other words, "a poor, low-caste person is more likely to vote here than is an upper-caste, upper-class person" (Banerjee 2008, 65). In some of India's largest and most populous states, new political parties with a clearly identifiable social base among lower or backward caste groups entered the scene with full force to capture state power in, for example, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In the former, the female Dalit leader Mayawati, and the mastermind behind an alliance between backward caste Yadavs and Muslims, Mulayam Singh Yadav, emerged as new champions of hitherto marginalised groups. In Bihar the flamboyant Lalu Prasad Yadav stitched together an equally formidable Yadav-Muslim alliance to become chief minister of the state for many years. The rise of these lower caste leaders and their parties shows how, according to Varshney (2013, 94) by privileging numbers and allowing freedom to organise, democracy had become the biggest enemy of the hierarchies and degradation of India's caste system – at least for certain numerically strong groups in certain states.

To describe this process whereby a large and growing number of backward caste Yadavs have increasingly been drawn into democratic politics and elections, the

anthropologist Lucia Michelutti (2008) has coined the phrase 'the vernacularization of democracy'. What has happened in India, Michelutti suggests, is that the values and practices of democracy have gradually acquired social roots by becoming embedded in the cultural and social practices of particular social groups. Democracy has, in other words, been appropriated through vernacular codes that represent the idioms and socio-cultural practices of such groups. And, it is due to such processes of vernacularization that democracy has come to be not just accepted but also legitimised. That this is the case among the Yadavs who Michelutti worked with is very evident – the Yadavs have come to describe themselves as "a caste of politicians" who claim to have politics "in their blood". But Michelutti suggests that many other marginalised social groups have made democracy 'their own' in comparable ways.

Like Michelutti, Yogendra Yadav saw in the second democratic upsurge not merely a mechanic behavioural response among voters to the invitation to partake in India's formal democracy through the ballot, but rather a deeply meaningful political act on the part of society's lower orders. They not just voted more often than they used to, but also attended election meetings more often, joined political parties in larger numbers, and displayed a growing interest in election campaigns and greater faith in democracy. The biggest casualty of this upsurge was the Congress party that could no longer maintain its position as a catch-all party, and which was increasingly displaced as the political centre of gravity, first at the level of the federal states and, later, at the national level.

Why Do Indians Vote – and Who Do They Vote For?

Yadav concluded his analysis of the second democratic upsurge by stressing how the translation of voting into an act of political participation depends on the meaning structures in which the act of voting is embedded. When Yadav wrote on the topic there were hardly any available studies that had looked ethnographically at how ordinary Indians made sense of

voting; but during the last decade anthropologists have started to analyse these 'meaning structures' in greater detail to better understand the different meanings that Indian voters attach to the act of voting and, indeed, why they bother to vote at all. Voting is at one level almost never a rational activity insofar as single votes hardly ever determine the outcome of an election. And, the persistent failure of India's formal democracy to produce effective and substantial outcomes for India's subordinate classes also raises the obvious question: Why would people whose lives improve very little from one election to the next think of voting as a meaningful political act? And, why would the disadvantaged and socially exploited whose interests continue to be subjected to those of the elite retain their faith in the vote?

These questions have formed the basis of the anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee's work in rural West Bengal and elsewhere over several years. In West Bengal Banerjee (2008) found a highly conscious electorate with a keen understanding of the power that the vote provides them with, even if only for a brief spell. At their best, Banerjee (ibid., 80-81) writes, elections cast a fleeting shadow over otherwise smug and corrupt politicians, reminding them that their end could be nigh, their downfall wrought by an electorate that, despite its marginality during the preceding years, enjoy a simultaneously festive and solemn moment of power and equality. In a situation in which everyday life is otherwise marked by stark inequalities, election day for many provides a cherished egalitarian context in which each person's vote has equal value, and where everybody regardless of class or caste has to queue up to wait his or her turn. The festive and solemn qualities of an election also leads Banerjee to locate them in the same space as religious festivals and rites of passage in which people tend to participate out of moral or social obligations and for the excitement they provide. Voting, she suggests, can therefore be seen as almost a 'sacred' expression of, or way of claiming, citizenship. When casting one's vote is understood in this way it becomes an end in itself rather than a means to, for example, a better society.

A comparable conclusion has been reached by Price and Srinivas (2010; 2016) who in their work in south India found that to vote was seen as an important way of becoming visible to the state – if one did not vote, people said, one would cease to exist in the eyes of the state. Yet while this was important in itself, the belief that being on the voters' list established one's general rights to benefits that the state offered was no less important (Price and Srinivas 2016, 80-81). In this way, a desire for recognition mixed with more material expectations of state benefits to motivate people to vote. And, more generally, voters may of course cast their ballot for a whole range of different reasons – out of resignation, for instrumental purposes, out of loyalty or in protest, or because of peer pressure (Banerjee 2014, 144-168). As Wouters (2015) writes with reference to Northeast India, elections and voting here revolve around bonds of kinship, historical narratives, village and clan loyalties, local standing and dominance, inter-village rivalries, and monetary offers, to name but some. Such very diverse meaning structures frame 'the vote' and provide a useful starting point for understanding why and how elections and the formal dimensions of democracy have become so embedded in India's social landscape. Still, it is important to remember that while there is no doubt that Indian elections and election campaigns can, like rituals, have the character of a festival or a celebration, they may also involve coercion, violence, bribery, rigging and intimidation (see, for example, Witsoe 2011) on a scale that makes any talk of their sacred or sacrosanct nature sound hollow.

But who do people vote for? And what do they look for in a candidate? The answer to this question is no less complex than the answer we provided above as to why people vote at all. For a long time, analysts assumed that very localised issues were what concerned Indian voters when they voted, regardless of whether the election in question was a *panchayat* election, a state election or a national election. Price and Srinivas (2016) identified this tendency in their work and used the term 'patrimonial-democratic' perceptions of elections to

describe a situation in which voters are guided by their impression of the relative influence, performance and capacities of local big men when they vote. Such electoral behaviour is informed by the logic of patron-client relationships, a patrimonial logic where clients affirm their loyalty to an influential patron, expecting to get something in return. 'Patrimonial-democratic' voters thus entertain a hope of getting better persons as patrons, and use their vote to enable a desired shift of patron. The political scientist Kanchan Chandra (2004) used the term 'patronage democracy' to describe the political structure in which voters turn to their democratically elected leaders for benefits, and where politicians distribute the resources at their disposal to stitch together social coalitions that can be turned into votes at election time. In the Indian media this is often spoken of as 'vote bank politics' but, as Price and Srinivas' work suggests, such vote banks can be unstable constructs and contingent on voters' shifting perceptions and interests.

Nonetheless, democratically elected politicians are widely expected to take care of and provide for their electorate or constituency. Indeed, this kind of 'machine politics' where resources flow from the state through influential and well-connected local political bosses in exchange for votes and support was the foundation of the Congress system while it lasted. In their book on political leadership in India, Price and Ruud (2010) identify this form of political behaviour as important in the making of political leaders, and use the term 'boss' to describe leaders who adopt this style. A boss is widely expected to be a 'fixer' of everyday problems, and a person who can 'get things done' for his supporters. He is typically engaged in the redistribution of resources in relatively small-scale domains according to the logic of machine politics, and may also use violence, or the threat thereof, to maintain his support base and ensure territorial control (see e.g. Williams 2004; Witsoe 2013). While this can sound like a straight-forward case of political transactionalism where votes are exchanged for material

goods, it is also a form of social relationship infused with morally loaded expectations about generosity, reciprocity and mutual obligations (Piliavsky 2014).

Other political leaders, in contrast, appear as 'lordly' rather than bossy and will incorporate more pronounced normative elements in their style. A 'lordly' leader appears as superior to and protective of his constituency as, for instance, an ideal and moral patron; a glamorous monarch; or a knowledgeable *guru*. He (as we are most often talking of a male leader) may, however, also appear in a more modest guise as the selfless social worker (Alm 2010), reformer (Jeffrey 2010a; 2010b), or activist (Nielsen 2012) who works for the betterment of the people with no regard for personal gain. The Aam Admi Party (AAP), or the 'common man's party' that has recently established itself in Delhi and Punjab, is an example of a party that often appears 'lordly' in its politics: by claiming to fight corruption and selflessly work to make the life of the common man easier, AAP's leaders draw on a strong moral discourse that works to elevate them above what is otherwise almost universally perceived as the dirty and corrupt world of 'normal politics'.

Lastly, some leaders are 'captains' who dominate large-scale polities. Doing so commonly requires articulating ideological stances and general policy, and also entails moderating among other leaders and managing both bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic institutions. What emerges from Price and Ruud's book is a highly person-centred democracy in which the electorate critically assesses the personal qualities of individual candidates when they vote. This is not an incorrect way of describing what goes on when people contemplate who to vote for and why, and the connect between a constituency and an elected representative generally tends to be much more personalised in the first-past-the-post system than what is the case in the system of proportional representation. But, it is important to also take into consideration that there are many voters who profess – sometimes life-long – loyalty to a particular political party regardless of the candidate, and for whom a party can come to

provide a deeply meaningful sense of belonging (see e.g. Chaturvedi 2015). And, as Price and Srinivas (2016) write, there is a large and perhaps growing number of so-called 'programmatic-democratic' voters who will stress processes and policies over persons when casting their vote.

India's most recent general election, however, witnessed an almost unprecedented degree of personal dominance by one man: the BJP's Narendra Modi. Modi campaigned on a carefully calibrated combination of Hindu nationalism and economic liberalisation and growth – boosted by massive media coverage – that successfully captured the imagination of large segments of the Indian electorate. In the next section, we look closer at Modi and the style of Hindu nationalist politics that he represents, and reflect on its implications for Indian democracy.

The Modi Regime: Reinventing Hindu Nationalism

Narendra Modi brought the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP back from years of electoral decline and organizational in-fighting to capture Parliament with a clear majority in 2014 of 282 out of 543 seats. He has consolidated his rule with a series of BJP wins in state elections — including in the largest state Uttar Pradesh — in the years that have followed. With the once-hegemonic Congress suffering its worst election result in its history in 2014, and the Left parties in disarray, it is unclear what national-level party could challenge the BJP's hold on government in the near future. The power of the government and its public face, moreover, are unusually concentrated in Narendra Modi, who positions himself as a classic 'captain', running the state and setting policy personally. His captainship in symbolic terms combines a claim to technocratic skill in managing state institutions and the economy — as demonstrated by his claims to have developed his home state of Gujarat — with a masculinist claim to power and authority — as he proudly demonstrates through references to his 56-inch chest —

with an adoption of a Brahminical or Gandhian ascetic ideal despite his own backward caste background — demonstrated through his vegetarianism and his rejection of a family.

Although decision-making authority and the public face of the government are focused on Modi himself, the story of this government has to be understood in relation to the institutions that it emerges from, most notably the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), from which both the BJP and Modi himself emerge, and its concerted approach to taking control over the institutions of liberal government and civil society.

The RSS, or National Volunteer Organization, now counts some six million members in India alone, and many more outside India through its international wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The RSS was established in 1925, and much of its organizational and intellectual leadership openly announced an intention to build an organization parallel to European fascist parties dedicated to the building of a Hindu nation. As its mid-century ideologue M.S. Golwarkar put it:

> The non-Hindu people of Hindusthan must either adopt Hindu culture and languages, must learn and respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but of those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture...in a word they must cease to be foreigners; Or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizens' rights (Golwarkar cited in Guha 2007, 19-20).

This project has followed a textbook Gramscian approach to building hegemony through civil society: the RSS has spun off hundreds of front organizations, from farmers' groups to

powerful unions to cultural fronts. The most visible of these is the RSS' electoral wing, the BJP. As Aijaz Ahmad (2017) has recently asked:

> The Indian polity of today seems to be undergoing a historically unprecedented process: the irresistible rise of the extreme right to dominance in vast areas of culture, society, ideology and economy, albeit with commitment to observe virtually all the institutional norms of liberal democracy. This will to a 'long march through the institutions' and to capturing total state power not through frontal seizure — as was once customary for revolutions of the left as well as the right — but through patiently engineered and legally legitimate takeover of those institutions by its personnel from within, while keeping the institutions intact, raises a very different kind of question: is there really an irreconcilable contradiction, an unbridgeable gap, between institutions of liberal democracy and takeover of the state by the extreme right?

Modi's personal rise has been through precisely these liberal state institutions, testing the limits of what is possible through them. Modi was an active participant in his local RSS *shakha* from his childhood in Gujarat and led the organization's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), in Gujarat through the rise of the 1970s student movement.

From the start, Modi stood out among RSS activists because of his masculinist style of captaincy: he consistently consolidated power in himself and advocated a more confrontational approach both towards the state and minorities. He rose through the ranks in the state RSS, and only moved to the BJP in 1987, where he began to play an organizational

role in the series of 'yatras' or marches that mobilized youth towards anti-Muslim violence —

 a strategy that would culminate in the 1992 destruction of the 16th-century Babri Masjid in

Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. This winking relationship towards violence directed towards

religious minorities — most notably Muslims, but frequently also Christians — would

characterize the BJP's rise and rule over the following decades. Modi personally as well as

the party more generally hit upon a strategy of creating space for extra-legal violence,

implicitly acknowledging a role in the violence, but leaving enough ambiguity and pious

citation of the laws of liberal democracy to absolve themselves (Jose 2012).

Modi became Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, but had an unremarkable and not

particularly popular term until events provided him with another opportunity to deploy the

BJP strategy of extra-legal violence against minorities. In February 2002, word spread that 58

people had been killed in a train carriage full of RSS-associated men who were returning from

a trip to Ayodhya to demand the construction of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of

the Babri Masjid. The carriage had been set alight, and rumours spread that a group of

Muslims had been responsible.

The next day, on 28 February, groups of men wearing the brown shorts of the RSS

began attacking Muslim neighbourhoods and religious sites in full view of the police, who did

not interfere in the killing and in some cases abetted it (Varadarajan 2002; Sharma 2004).

Sexual violence against girls and women was widespread. A group of Muslims took shelter in

the compound of Ehsan Jafri, a Muslim former MP. The Hindu mob set the compound on fire,

killing 69 including Jafri. A Muslim-owned bakery was similarly set alight, killing 14 people.

Estimates of the total number of dead range from 1,000 to over 2,000 (Jaffrelot 2003).

Modi did not take public responsibility for the killings. Numerous accounts suggest

that he coordinated and protected the rioters, however, including a senior Indian Police

Service official and the former BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat (Langa 2015, Misra 2007).

From all indications, Modi once again created space for extra-legal violence against minorities and then escaped legal responsibility for this violence. His association with the violence, moreover, allowed him to reap electoral gains. Mobilized far-right anti-Muslim sentiment allowed Modi to win his subsequent state elections handily and to increase his grip over the state machinery and civil society.

The reinvention of Modi as a technocratic developmentalist came later, as large corporations that had been scared off by the 2002 violence came to see Modi's authoritarianism as a solution to the political demands of subaltern groups, the new legal rights granted by the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government (see below), and the challenges both presented to the accumulation of capital. In 2008, the company Tata Motors — which had shunned Modi after 2002 — set up a plant to build its Nano car in Gujarat. The government acquired the land for Tata, and a series of other large manufacturers soon followed. This was a claim to technocratic developmentalism that was only buttressed by Modi's authoritarianism, a strong fist to hold popular movements — and the price of labour and land — down.

In the run up to the 2014 national general election, Modi successfully side-lined an older, somewhat more conciliatory generation of BJP politicians to become the party's national prime ministerial candidate. By this time, the full weight of Indian corporate capital was behind Modi: in what was estimated to be the most expensive election in Indian history, INR 300 billion or USD 5 billion was spent, with the BJP raising far more than its rivals, much of it from corporate sources (Gottipati and Singh 2014).

In his three years as Prime Minister, Modi has chipped away at the legal rights established under the UPA government (more on these below), weakening the Forest Rights Act, starving the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of funds, and attempting to make the use of eminent domain for land acquisition by private companies easier. He has met

limited success in these endeavours, hemmed in by the strength of the popular movements that pushed for these laws initially and the ongoing demands of electoral politics. He has failed, similarly, to make significant progress on the liberalizing economic reforms that he promised large companies during the campaign. Modi and his government have met greater success, however, in their hegemonic project with respect to civil society. The number of communal riots increased by 17 percent in the first year of Modi's tenure (Sharma 2016). Starting even before the 2014 election, editors and journalists who were critical were pushed out of newspapers and TV news channels (Choudhary 2013), and a new far-right TV channel has recently been launched. Universities that provide homes to significant Left and anti-caste politics have been targeted by the government and its allied media, from the flagship Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi to the new private Ashoka University in Haryana to an anti-caste student group at the Indian Institute of Technology Chennai. Challenges to Modi's rule still lurk — from economic decline to increased militancy in workers' and Dalit movements — but as of this writing, Modi has gathered power into himself to a degree unmatched since Indira Gandhi during the state of emergency that she declared from 1975 to 1977.

Social Movements: Agents of Democratic Deepening?

India's democracy extends beyond the boundaries of parliamentary politics. A wide array of social movements organize and mobilize poor and marginalized groups to make claims for redistribution and recognition independently of political parties. This claimsmaking takes many forms – from small protests on local issues to nationwide campaigns for wide-ranging policy change – and yield a variety of results and responses: some movements have won significant concessions whereas others have either failed to impact on the state or have found themselves at the receiving end of repression and coercion. And yet other movements have

been agents of upper-castes or landlord coercion. It is precisely this complexity within the movement landscape which makes it difficult to provide a straightforward answer as to whether social movements have acted as agents of democratic deepening in the Indian polity.

The first twenty years of nation-building under Nehru and a hegemonic Congress party were characterized by political acquiescence. Poor and marginalized groups that had rallied around the struggle for independence were demobilized on the assumption that change would be brought about by Congress through its dominance of the parliamentary process and the state apparatus (Ray and Katzenstein 2005). However, by the late 1960s, it had become increasingly evident that this had not happened: poverty was still widespread, class-based structures of power remained more or less intact, and caste and gender-based discrimination and violence persisted in blighting the lives of lower caste groups, Dalits, and women (Omvedt 1993). These conditions provided the setting for a proliferation of movements that aspired to give voice to groups that had been excluded from the realm of parliamentary politics and marginalized by the trajectory of India's economic development.

This proliferation began with the eruption of the Naxalite revolt in 1967. Poor peasants mobilized by a group of radical activists who had broken away from parliamentary communism rose in an armed insurgency that posed a substantial challenge to the Indian state during the first half of the 1970s (Bannerjee 1984; Ray 2012). Parallel with the Naxalite uprising, India witnessed the rise of a wave of social movements which organized groups that had been neglected both by the hegemonic Congress party and by the established left parties and mobilized around issues that had been peripheral to the mainstream of Indian politics (Nilsen and Nielsen 2016). Among the most significant movements of the 1970s were the Chipko movement that championed the livelihoods of forest-dwelling communities in Uttarakhand, the Kerala Fishworkers' Forum that organized poor fisherfolk in Kerala against the depredations wrought on their livelihoods by mechanized trawling, and the Shramik

Sangathana that mobilized Bhil Adivasis in Maharashtra around issues of agricultural wages, land control and forest rights. During the 1970s, a new wave of feminist mobilization also took place in India. This partly took the form of women articulating gendered concerns within the context of new social movements, but even more significantly it revolved around the emergence of an autonomous women's movement – that is, a movement of women's groups that were independent of other social movements and political parties. A key achievement of the autonomous women's movement was to politicize issues such as violence against women, religious fundamentalism and communalism, and the economic marginalization of women (Basu 1987; Vanaik 1990; Ray 1999; Desai 2016). Parallel to this, what has been called the 'new farmers' movement' emerged with force in northern and western India. Typically led by middle or rich farmers, but also incorporating agricultural workers, these movements demanded better terms of trade between agriculture and industry and wanted remunerative prices for what they produced. While the farmers' movements could mobilise spectacularly large crowds to buttress their demands (Youngblood 2016), they have also been dismissed as largely 'kulak lobbies' (see for example Brass 1995; Dhanagare 1995; Banaji 1995) and their politics described as a form of agrarian populism: the new farmers' movements posited a fundamental contradiction between urban and rural India, or Bharat, as they called the latter, while largely ignoring or downplaying questions of inequality and exploitation internal to rural society along the lines of caste and class (Pattenden 2005).

There can be no doubt that the rise of new social movements had a significant impact on the trajectory of Indian politics in the 1970s. Indeed, between 1974 and 1975, a wave of popular unrest shook Indira Gandhi's government to the core: starting as an urban protest against inflation and corruption, the Nav Nirman movement, as it came to be known, rocked Gujarat in January 1974 and resulted in the dissolution of the state's legislative assembly. The veteran socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan in the state of Bihar then took up the cause. The

movement encountered fierce repression from the authorities, as a result of which it spiralled "from a state agitation to a movement of all-India scope" (Frankel 2005, 534) and many commentators believe this to have been a key factor in propelling Indira Gandhi to declare a national state of emergency in June of the same year (Jones and Jones 1976; Chandra 2003). Although right-wing groups such as the RSS, as well as middle and rich farmers, were very much part of this wave of movement activism, other, more 'subaltern' segments successfully criticized the exclusions of poor and marginalized groups in India's democracy and created new visions for a more participatory politics and a form of development that would bring about social justice.

One legacy of this wave of popular protest and the Emergency was the emergence of an emboldened, increasingly powerful higher judiciary. The Supreme Court, which had tussled with successive Congress governments from the 1950s to the 1970s over the constitutionality of land reform, responded in the aftermath of the Emergency to the threat of an over-powerful executive by claiming its own relationship to the country's subaltern groups and social movements (Bhuwania 2017). Through the new jurisdiction of Public Interest Litigation (PIL), starting in the early 1980s, the higher courts waived rules of standing, allowing anyone — including judges on the bench — to bring cases on behalf of the 'public'. Through PIL, trials no longer needed to be adversarial, and courts began to order and execute remedies themselves. In effect, the higher judiciary claimed a representative relationship to the public and an executive role that mirrored that of the executive itself, becoming what has been called 'the world's most powerful court'. Over time, however, this empowered judiciary has moved away from its initial claim to act on behalf of subaltern groups and movements and has begun to act explicitly on behalf of elites, as seen in its orders to clear slums in Delhi in 1996, and to clear the country's forests of unauthorized forest dwellers in 2002.

While social movements in the post-Emergency period thus increasingly engaged with the courts, however they also, in the 1980s, actively searched for agendas and platforms that could unify the diverse struggles that had emerged during the past decade. The attempts to forge a common platform reached a high point with the National Rally Against Destructive Development in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in September 1989. Indeed, by the end of the 1980s, India's new social movements seemed to be in a position of considerable political influence as the elections of that year brought to power a National Front government that espoused a progressive agenda of decentralization, social justice for backward castes, and promises of remunerative prices and debt relief for peasants (Omvedt 1993).

The emergence of new social movements ran parallel to the rise of lower caste and Dalit political parties described above, and together these processes have propelled a deepening of Indian democracy. Subaltern groups that were previously either excluded from the ambit of party politics or co-opted as pillars of upper class and upper caste hegemony have become increasingly capable of making collective claims on the state. However, questions can undoubtedly be raised about the extent to which social movements have in fact been able to translate this capability into the kind of reforms that establish the foundations of a substantive democracy. The National Front government of 1989 was a short-lived affair, and the decade of the 1990s came to be shaped not so much by the policy-changes demanded by popular movements as by neoliberal reforms that were shaped by the interests of economic and political elites. As we indicated in the introduction, almost three decades of neoliberalization have taken a harsh toll on many of the groups mobilized by the country's social movements. As Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze (2013) have pointed out, India is falling behind its South Asian neighbours in terms of infant mortality rates, life expectancy, mean years of schooling, and female literacy rates. This reflects a failure to translate the impressive growth rates of the past two decades into substantial advances in the standard of living for the

majority of the country's population. Persistent poverty combines with increasing inequalities to create a scenario of unequal and uneven development that particularly affects marginalized groups such as Dalits, women, Adivasis, marginal peasants, and the working classes in India's countryside and in its vast informal economy (Jayadev, Motiram and Vakulabharanam 2011; Breman 2016).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that India's social movements have been inconsequential. Collective claims-making has yielded results, and this is perhaps most clearly evident in the legal domain. During the eight-year tenure of the UPA, India saw – as we alluded to above – the introduction of several laws that "enshrine new civil liberties and socioeconomic entitlements through legally enforceable rights" (Ruparelia 2013, 569). These laws include the Right to Information Act of 2005, which aims to enhance state transparency, the National Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, which provides 100 days of employment every year to rural households, the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which is intended to secure land rights for Adivasis and other forest-dwellers, and more recently the Right to Education Act of 2009 and the National Food Security Act of 2013 (see Sharma 2013; McCartney and Roy 2016; Vaidya 2014; Hertel 2014). These laws were devised with significant input from social movement activists, and viewed in combination they arguably constitute a new welfare architecture of justiciable rights, which holds the potential to set "new standards for social citizenship" (Ruparelia 2013, 570). It is too early to give a clear-cut answer as to whether this potential will be realized or not. What seems to be clear, though, is that the extent to which the potential is realized will depend in no small measure on continued mobilization by popular movements. The question is then whether Indian social movements have the capacity to use these laws as a basis for renewed organizing and mobilizing. On the one hand, India's new social movements have confronted significant defeats over the past decade, and many of these movements have stagnated as a result of this. This situation is aggravated by the

willingness of the Modi government to undermine rights-based legislation that constitutes a hurdle to its agenda of promoting private investment in the Indian economy (see Nielsen and Nilsen 2017).

At the same time, Indian popular politics continues to be reinvigorated by new conflicts. Land acquisitions and land rights remain contentious issues that continue to generate widespread popular mobilisation (Levien 2013; Nielsen and Oskarsson 2017; Nielsen 2018), as does questions of caste and social justice. Since Modi's electoral victory, new forms of Dalit radicalism have emerged, including in Modi's home state of Gujarat where Dalits organized an *azadi kooch* – a freedom march – from Ahmedabad to Una in response to upper caste violence. As the march reached its destination on India's Independence Day, thousands of Dalits vowed to refuse stigmatizing work such as manual scavenging and disposing of dead cattle. Claims for recognition and dignity fused with calls for social justice as the emergent movement demanded that the state government distribute five acres of land to each Dalit family in Gujarat. *"Gay ki doom aap rakho; hame hamari jamin do!"* – "you keep the cow's tail; give us our land!" emerged as key slogan directed against the BJP government and the Sangh Parivar more generally. In the context of a regime that is no stranger to authoritarianism, it is this renewal of popular mobilization that holds a promise of further democratic deepening in India.

Limits to Democracy: Exceptions and Violence

Our discussion of electoral politics and broad based social movement mobilisation should not gloss over the fact that, in 2010, around one in every six Indian citizen lives in areas where armed conflict is ongoing (Chenoy and Chenoy 2010). This is astonishing. In fact, what makes it astonishing is not only the brutal implications for the lives of a large number of people, but also the fact that armed conflict is so often left out of accounts of India's

democracy. Heller's overview with which we began this chapter, for example, does not make explicit reference to armed conflict. From the point of view of the Indian state, attention to the country's armed conflicts is not wanted, and the Indian state does not recognize 'armed conflict' as a reality in the country. Other phrases are used instead, such as 'insurgency' or designating conflict zones as 'disturbed areas' (Chenoy and Chenoy 2010, 75). Major conflict zones encompass parts of central India, Northeast India as well as Kashmir. Among these it is only Kashmir that has drawn sustained international attention.

Focusing particularly on the Maoists, in this section we find that exploring the implications of armed conflict for India's democracy opens our eyes for forms of governance that are strikingly dissimilar to the institutions of liberal democracy. Or, as we will see, Heller's formal democracy may coexist uneasily with undemocratic, violent counterparts (Baruah 2005). In the conflict zones the rule of law is sometimes close to absent; sometimes it is violently enforced with impunity by police forces, paramilitaries and the army; sometimes it is co-opted by rebels; and sometimes it is imposed with exceptional powers for purposes of militarization rather than democratization – all with the hollowing out of citizenship as its consequence.

Some people may have noticed that things are amiss, though. In 2010, readers of *The Guardian* could follow renowned Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2010) as she was wandering the deep woods of central India in the company of revolutionary guerrillas known as Maoists or Naxalites. Roy's vivid and romantic descriptions showed a hidden conflict between Maoist rebels and state counterinsurgency forces unfolding in parts of the forested and hilly, underdeveloped and largely Adivasi populated central and eastern India. The conflict, Roy forcefully contended, revolved around issues related to land, to exploitation of natural resources, to citizenship and the rights of indigenous people, and to the weaknesses of Indian democracy in all its dimensions. The Maoist revolution has been simmering (Banerjee

1984) in parts of the country ever since the late 1960s, at times flaring up. In the 2000s the Maoists have become increasingly stronger and have repeatedly been called 'the greatest internal security threat to our country' by a former prime minister. In 2004 the Communist Party of India (Maoist) was established and became the strongest ever Maoist organization in the country. The CPI (Maoist) is organized under a central committee, with hierarchical branches down to the local level where Maoist guerrillas operate dispersed in inaccessible terrains in small, mobile squads (e.g. Chandra 2014; Mukherji 2012). In 2013 it was estimated that close to 15,000 people had been killed in the Maoist conflict since 1980. While such numbers are unreliable, they do reveal that we are talking of a conflict of magnitude; it is not uncommon for scholars in India and beyond to use the term 'civil war' (Sundar 2016). The Maoist conflict pales in comparison to Kashmir, though. Between 1989 and 2002, when the Kashmir conflict was at its most violent, wildly varying estimates put the number of casualties between 40,000 and 80,000 (Bose 2003). For the Northeast numbers are harder to compile.

Maoist revolutionaries have put in sustained efforts over decades at mobilising marginalised people in rural areas where the Indian state and democracy is at its most dysfunctional. Operating first in the plains with support from Dalit groups in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, since the year 2000 or thereabout the Maoists have relocated to the forested central parts of the country, mobilising among Adivasis (Kennedy and King 2013). As the few ethnographers – important among whom are Alpa Shah (2013a, 2013b, 2014) and George Kunnath (2012) – who have studied the Maoist movement systematically tell us, the revolutionaries build their struggles on relations of 'intimacy' to local people, albeit always uneasily and tenuously so in their mix of armed struggle and popular mobilisation. The Maoist movement builds support from engaging in issues that are pressing in local contexts – usury, exploitation by landlords, dominant castes or civil servants and (as Roy narrates)

incursions by mining companies (Das and Basu 2013). As such, the movement is in practice often less driven by the lofty ideology of seizing the Indian state than by its ability to identify problems in marginalised rural areas. Maoist recruitment shares features with recruitment to militant groups in the Northeast as well as Kashmir: the rank and file tends to be recruited primarily among the unschooled or educated but unemployed youth, whose futures are compromised primarily because of discrimination and economic underdevelopment (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2009).

But this does not mean that Maoists are veritable Robin Hoods. Again looking at the Maoists' activities in local contexts, they can turn to less than 'noble' methods, including extortion and murder. Apart from their guerrilla squads, Maoists attempt to organize local-level structures of governance in areas where they have some degree of control. These structures, called 'people's governments' (*Janatana Sarkars*), can have 'proto-state' functions such as claiming to provide safety to the local population (often evidently untrue); impose taxes; carry out trials; and engage in rudimentary infrastructure provision (Sundar 2014, 2016; Navlakha 2012). In the Northeast, militias are known to be more fully entrenched as parallel governments of sorts. The coexistence of rebel and official governance can even be perceived, argues Sanjib Baruah in his book *Durable Disorder*, as institutionalised and 'part of the evolving actually existing governance structure of the region' (Baruah 2005, 14). It is this structure that he pertinently calls 'durable disorder'.

To return to the Maoists, they are presently most active in Bastar – the forested parts of the central state of Chhattisgarh. These forests stretch continuously across several state borders, providing Maoists the opportunity to move around clandestinely. In such a manner, the rebels can take advantage of organisational state weaknesses and lack of coordination between police forces from different states. The local population in Bastar consists of a majority belonging to several *Adivasi* groups living under sorry conditions of poverty and

destitution as a result of a long history of underdevelopment and neglect by the state. These people are part of what Stuart Corbridge and Alpa Shah (2013) have called 'the underbelly of the Indian boom'. To the degree that the state has taken any interest in these forested hinterlands it has largely been in order to extract taxes and exploit the region's natural resources (Sundar 2007). Governance has thus tended to take authoritarian forms, similar to what one of us in another context has called 'everyday tyranny' (Nilsen 2010) where the state has been deeply felt as an external oppressor.

Since the mid-2000s the Indian national government has taken a more central role in deploying counterinsurgency forces from centrally controlled paramilitary units, the subject of sustained critique from civil society organizations across the country. Yet paramilitary repression and human rights abuses are not the only causes of serious concern. In Bastar the state administration has played an active part in constructing what the sociologist Nandini Sundar (2013) calls a 'state-supported vigilante group' under the name of Salwa Judum. The Salwa Judum took the form of roaming bands consisting of a motley crew of local thugs, Maoist detractors, displeased local dominant sections and others – all armed and led by local politicians and police officers. Leading processions through villages, the vigilantes threatened people who were alleged to support Maoists, burnt numerous villages, killing people in the process and displacing people in the tens of thousands, later to be put into makeshift camps. However, this whole experiment in outsourcing law and order failed miserably to curb Maoist activities in the region; to the contrary, evidence shows that the Maoists gained manifold strength from the Salwa Judum, as people who were alienated by the rampant violence turned to the Maoists for protection (for details, see Sundar 2016).

More generally, the police are used as the main instrument of rule in situations of armed conflict. But human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch (2009) have for many years underlined that Indian police forces often operate in unlawful, violent ways with

impunity. This includes extrajudicial killings – known in India as 'encounters', that is, confrontations between police and alleged 'militants' or 'criminals' resulting in the police shooting the other. These encounters are documented to be frequently staged and wholly unlawful and have in fact become, according to the ethnographer Beatrice Jauregui, 'a routine though highly controversial mode of maintaining law and order in contemporary India' (Jauregui 2011, 378). Police forces tend to be under the influence of forms of authority in local society – landlords and mining companies, for example – that make it difficult to regard the police as 'neutral'. And people do not. Indians instead tend to see the police as a danger to be avoided (Brass 1997; Subramanian 2008).

The special paramilitary forces that are being deployed in huge numbers are also generally prone to using violence. Human rights organizations have documented a frightening array of abuses against alleged rebels and civilians alike, including killings; torture; rape; beatings; and arson (see e.g. Sundar 2016). This is the case not only in the Maoist zones but in all other conflict zones – Northeast India and Kashmir where militarization is both hollowing out effective and substantive democracy, while also being part and parcel of the practice of formal democracy in the conflict zones. During the national elections of 2014, for example, paramilitaries were a significant element in the conflict zones across the country. Newspapers reported that 200,000 extra paramilitaries were being deployed, which indicates that paramilitary presence was crucial to the carrying out of a national elections in the world's largest democracy. Maoists, in fact, tend to use elections as occasions for showing muscle. Threats and occasional attacks against polling booths are not uncommon, and they impose 'boycott orders' in their areas of influence (Jaoul 2009).

Unlike the central areas of Maoist operations, Kashmir and the Northeast are regions that were recognized as 'exceptional' from the start in India's constitution. Northeast social structures are markedly different from most of India in that they consist of mosaics of

ethnolinguistic groups that have distinct traditions from 'mainland' India. The governance of Northeast India evolved out of colonial jurisdiction, and independent India followed suit in constitutionally envisioning a limited, internal self-rule for tribals (Suan 2014, 91). The limits of this self-rule have, however, been consistently maintained forcefully. Prolonged armed conflicts in the Northeast revolve around claims to self-determination that have been denied – and, when people resisted by taking up arms, subsequently coercively repressed – by the Indian state (Chenoy and Chenoy 2010). In this region ethnically based militias fighting for various sub-national claims for nationhood or 'homelands' along ethnic lines have dominated the political scene since independence. The longevity of these insurgencies can be better understood by acknowledging that the militias actually form part of the structure of governance in the region (Baruah 2005). Where the state is absent or weak in terms of providing basic services, militias can step in and fulfil such functions. Consequently, local people may perceive militias as more legitimate forms of authority than the state. The anthropologist Beppe Karlsson's (2011) ethnographic work in the Northeast shows that feelings of being under 'siege' by the Indian state – expressing strong alienation from any sort of inclusive democracy – are widespread in the population.

While the Maoist conflict has not seen army involvement, only paramilitaries, the conflicts in Northeast as well as Kashmir indeed have. This has been done through legal means. When the Nagas rebelled shortly after India's independence, the young Indian state responded by imitating colonial rule: it reinvented a legal act deeming areas of armed conflict as 'disturbed' in order for the armed forces to be called in and provided with special powers. What acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act do is provide police, paramilitaries and the army with special powers in the designated areas, including permission to arrest and search wantonly – which may mean virtually anyone in conflict zones is at risk of being

arrested. Abuse and severe human rights violations have been facilitated by such exceptional acts (Chenoy and Chenoy 2010).

Conclusion

The complex dynamics of India's democracy defy unambiguous conclusions. Indeed, ambiguity – an ambiguity rooted, to a very large extent, in the persistence of those inequalities and contradictions that Ambedkar articulated some seventy years ago – is perhaps what defines democracy in India today. As our comprehensive mapping exercise has sought to highlight, democracy in its formal sense remains plural, vibrant, and resilient. On the other hand, our discussion has also made clear that Indian democracy is shot through with limitations in terms of its effective and substantive dimensions.

While we in our introduction registered the caveat that we have carried out our mapping of Indian democracy first and foremost on the national scale at the expense of a more multi-scalar approach, we recall here John Harriss's compelling analysis of how lower caste and lower class success in rupturing upper caste and upper class power has tended to pave the way for at least some measure of redistributive reform at state level. Following Harriss – and Heller – it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the *dynamics* of democratic deepening are fairly similar across spatial scales in the Indian polity (see also Kohli 1987; Jaffrelot and Kumar 2009). Ultimately, what this entails is that if a transition from a formal democracy to one that is both effective and substantive is to happen, it will be driven by social movements who organize and mobilize around claims for redistribution, recognition, and political participation. At first sight, it is hard to currently identify forces capable of animating such movements – the hegemony of Modi's BJP seems, in many ways and for the immediate future at least, to be impenetrable. And this regime, in turn, appears to

be bent on consolidating an authoritarianism that pushes organized dissent and collective claimsmaking to the margins of political life. Moreover, the historical experiences of people living in and through the exceptions to formal democracy in India — Kashmiris, Manipuris, and Adivasi communities in central India — should serve as cautionary tales. Such groups have found very few effective avenues for claimsmaking on the state, and the repeal of laws such as AFSPA seems as remote today as it was in 1990. While there are thus valid reasons for scepticism, such a view arguably attributes too much strength to the current regime and fails to acknowledge the ruptures that are also crystallizing – the women who protest sexual violence and patriarchal power; the Dalits who reject caste discrimination and demand equality; the intellectuals who practise their right to free speech; the peasants and Adivasis who fight against dispossession; and the slum-dwellers and workers who assert the right to dignified lives and livelihoods. In the face of inequality and authoritarianism, it is ultimately their collective action that will decide the future trajectory of India's democracy.

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