Fading Echoes: Legacy of Empire and Democracy in India

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In a strange irony, democracy in South Asia is usually perceived to be a gift of colonialism. It is seen as a legacy of the British Empire, even though colonial rule was anti-democratic by its very nature.[1] This would seem a counter-intuitive outcome. It appears to rest on the fact that the British had allowed limited electoral participation in the last years of the Raj and presided over a 'transfer of power' in which the successor states adopted Westminster-style parliamentary democracy at the end of the British Empire.

Of the newly created post-colonial nation states, India is seen to have run most successfully with this paradoxical imperial bequest, while others have faltered, with civilian dictatorships or military rule disrupting their experience of electoral politics. The Indian experience demonstrated that widespread poverty and illiteracy was no bar to the establishment and consolidation of democratic political systems. With the exception of a two-year period of 'Emergency' from 1975 to 1977, India conducted regular elections and power changed hands through the ballot box.

However, of late the problems of India's democracy have started to trouble even its admirers. Elections are held regularly, but do not seem to deliver results in terms of addressing the needs of most of the electorate. Corruption and criminalization of politics is rife. Elected assemblies are boisterous, but not necessarily focused on legislative responsibilities, and policy-making too often seems reduced to periods of paralysis punctuated by bursts of pre-election populism. The optimistic view remains that while India's democratic practice is flawed, there were similar problems in Western democracies in the past and it is still early days for a country that is just over 60 years old. Others wonder whether the excuse of 'teething

problems' is wearing thin after six decades, and if India is losing ground on its way to realizing the full potential of democracy.

This chapter reflects upon two key aspects of the legacy of British colonialism and democracy in India: first, the inheritance of a powerful centre in a large, diverse and nominally federal state; and second, rule by elected representatives. It considers to what extent these were truly a legacy of colonialism, and in what ways they have changed over 60 years of independence. Do political trends over the decades of freedom indicate continuity and consolidation of the colonial bequests or has the legacy waned or ruptured? If India is diverging from expected paths, what is the shape of its experience, and how does that relate to the legacy left at the end of empire?

It argues that the trajectory for both elements – the political primacy of the centre and the democratic content of India's politics – indicate a waning of the colonial bequest. Regarding the first, the driving forces of representative politics have devolved to regional levels over time, despite the continuing concentration of resources and constitutional powers at the federal level in India. The devolution of real political power to provincial or even village levels need not pose a threat to India as a polity; indeed it may strengthen Indian democracy and be a more effective way to govern a vast and diverse nation. It would move India in the direction of a genuinely federal union rather than being federal in name and unitary in practice. However, the regionalization of Indian politics is a significant structural shift of the key arena of competitive politics from a single powerful centre to multiple locations around the country.

Secondly, even observers celebrating India's democracy cannot but comment on the 'dynastic' nature of India's politics. Actually, India's politics is not always 'dynastic', but frequently seems to be *autocratic* regardless of whether it is 'dynastic' or not. Party leaders of most major parties are not democratically elected, they remain in office indefinitely and run their parties and governments dictatorially. Autocracy would normally be assumed to be entirely incompatible with democracy. However, so far India's autocrats continue to seek political power and legitimacy through the mechanism of the ballot box within the structure of parliamentary democracy – a political practice I termed elsewhere a 'competitive autocracy'.[2] But if key political players are autocratic, what is the future of parliamentary democracy in India in the hands of those who do not believe in its fundamental principles and to what extent is this 'democratic deficit' a failure of the legacy of empire?

The Regionalization of India's Politics

When the British departed they left the illusion of a single state (or rather two nation states – India and Pakistan). They themselves had governed through a

patchwork of direct rule over some of the territory that comprises India and indirect suzerainty over a large number of princely states and tribal areas. There was no standard form, but a variety of deals done over time with different parties or authority imposed by various means. What was in common was the ultimate supremacy of British authority, channelled through the imperial capital. It is this aspect that suggests that the state of India would not exist but for the British Empire. Indian nationalists liked to imagine a civilizational unity encompassing the whole of the subcontinent, but in political terms, while the Mughals at their zenith had controlled a large proportion of what is India today, it is the British-controlled area that forms the territorial basis of present-day India. The 'transfer of power' in Delhi in 1947 bequeathed these imperial possessions (minus the territories carved out to form Pakistan) to Indians.

The hegemony of the Indian National Congress Party in India for nearly 50 years after independence, and its dominance at both federal and regional levels, helped prolong this monolithic image. Initial breaks in one-party rule proved short-lived. A non-Congress coalition ruled in Delhi from 1977 to 1980, following Indira Gandhi's 'Emergency', but collapsed within a short period, with Mrs Gandhi returning as prime minister in 1980. Her assassination in 1984 brought her son and successor Rajiv Gandhi to power with a massive majority. Rajiv Gandhi was defeated in 1989 by another coalition, which again collapsed by 1991. Following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination that year, the Congress became the largest party in the parliament and formed a minority government under Narasimha Rao. This government lasted a full term of five years and acquired majority status during the term due to breakaway factions of opposition parties joining the government side.

It was 1996 before India arrived at the age of coalition politics at the federal level. After this no single party held a majority in the central parliament until the BJP led by Narendra Modi won a surprise majority in 2014. However, in reality a long process of regionalization had been in motion over decades, in parallel with a gradual decline of the Congress Party from the dominant position it occupied in the early years after independence. Tamil nationalism in southern India was one of the early challenges, but it seemed to have been contained by the 1960s with a linguistically defined state and the success of regional parties which have held power at the provincial level in Tamil Nadu ever since. By the 1980s, regionally defined parties were well established across India: for instance, Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, Akali Dal in Punjab or Asom Gana Parishad in Assam. The first non-Congress coalition in West Bengal was formed in 1967, though it was short-lived. From 1977, a Left Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) ruled West Bengal until 2011.

Even parties with universal or national ideologies, such as the communists or Hindu nationalists, have found their political base restricted to particular regions.

The influence of the communist parties was limited to the eastern state of West Bengal, the small former princely state of Tripura in India's north-east, and Kerala in the south. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's appeal seems limited primarily to north-central India, with a recent success in Karnataka a first foray into the south. Since the 1980s the northern plains have been the site of the rise of caste-based parties: Samajwadi Party (Uttar Pradesh), Rashtriya Janata Dal (Bihar), Bahujan Samaj Party (Uttar Pradesh and parts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh). Several smaller players are also identity-based political formations – for instance, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (based on a tribal identity) or Telengana Rashtriya Samiti, which sought separate status for the Telengana region which was formerly in the princely state of Hyderabad.

India's choice of a socialist path for economic development until the 1990s also buttressed Delhi's supremacy as the ultimate seat of political competition for several decades. The liberalization of India's economic policy since 1991 has transformed its political – economic relationships. With a loosening of a 'command and control' regime, the centre has been losing relevance in many activities in which it formerly monopolized patronage. India has followed a gradualist path of reform, but the post-liberalization period appears to have accentuated uneven regional development even if some of the inequalities have longer roots. This in turn has turned the spotlight more on state-level performance and interstate comparisons.

Two features of the regionalization of India's politics stand out as we consider its meaning for the legacy of empire. The first is the gradual nature of the regionalization. Despite many centrifugal pulls, India appears to have held together, in some areas by the use of coercive power and in others due to the success of accommodative politics, and the federal centre remains a significant political location. However, regional politics as a concept has been transformed from being seen as in inevitable conflict with the nation state project (as in the Tamil case, the taming of which is frequently described as an example of the accommodative characteristic of the Indian state), to a reality presented as a celebration of the pluralism of the Indian political space.

The second feature is that even though many of the regional governments are led by powerful regional leaders whose principal interest is their own locality, they all continue to seek representation in Delhi. They send members of parliament to Delhi, jockey for places in the federal government coalitions and compete for resource distribution through the centre. Regional politics and being part of an 'emerging' India at the federal level are not seen as incompatible. Delhi does not appear to perceive an existential threat due to the regionalization of India's politics, as the regional powers largely work within the Union of India, retaining a stake in the federal government, which continues to be the repository of enormous financial resources and coercive power. The first signs of a different tune were heard at the

turn of the twenty-first century, when some state chief ministers voiced concern that the resource allocation formulas of the central finance commission appeared to penalize well-governed states while rewarding the non-performers. Interestingly, the protest cut across party lines. However, the tone was one of reform, not a radical break from the federal fiscal framework.

'Surreptitious Withdrawal': Regional Politics at the End of Empire

The gradual and accommodative regionalization of Indian politics, and the continued engagement by regional political players with the centre, would appear to indicate that the imperial legacy of a centralized territorial nation state has survived for the long-term. However, both the gradual process of regionalization and the continuing interest of powerful regional players in a stake at the federal centre are in keeping with what happened in India *before* European colonialism, when another imperial hegemony declined and regional power bases emerged as prominent political actors in their own right. Writing about the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century, Muzaffar Alam observed, 'while there was chaos and anarchy in some regions, an emerging political order tended to be constituted in the form of virtually independent principalities, which nevertheless continued broadly with the Mughal institutional framework'.[3]

According to Barnett, 'the central development of the eighteenth century, as indeed during most of South Asia's history, was the growth and autonomy of distinct cultural and historical traditions possessing unique forms of economic and political organization.'[4] Bayly analysed the 'receding tide' of Mughal rule as itself a result of the creation of new wealth and social power in the provinces where it could not easily be controlled by a distant Delhi. The 'decentralization' of politics was anticipated by the very successes of Mughal expansion. Similarly, the devolution of power to the provinces in twentieth-century India may be viewed as a success of the widening and deepening of its democratic politics. The accommodation of regional identities, for instance, resulted in political parties with local, rather than national, aspirations and limited reach; the successful entry of previously marginalized groups such as 'untouchable' castes into electoral politics has also fragmented the political field. In post-colonial India regional political leaders continue to gather in coalitions at the centre and remain part of the centralized system of resource-sharing – so far. In the fading days of the Mughal Empire the areas that were most successful eventually either revolted openly or 'surreptitiously withdrew' from central control in the eighteenth century.[5]

The process of breaking free took a long time in the post-Mughal period: there was no sudden snapping of ties to the centre. Several autonomous states rose from

the ruins of imperial power in the eighteenth century: Awadh, Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore, various Rajput principalities, and the Maratha confederacy – many of them roughly equivalent to the regional political spheres of influence today. Alam described how these virtually autonomous principalities voluntarily retained their links to the imperial centre for a long time. He surmised that the reasons for this could be because the centre played the role of an arbiter or legitimizer, or because of perceived material benefits or security through symbolic links to a superstructure. There was a 'slow pull to provincial independence', with an 'emerging sense of regional identity which buttressed both political, and to a degree, economic decentralization'. In a parallel to powerful contemporary regional parties retaining positions of influence in weak coalition governments at the centre, such was the 'myth and influence of Delhi' in the eighteenth century that 'even after the total collapse of the central government, the governors of the virtually independent provinces continued to make serious efforts to obtain offices at the Mughal court'.[6]

Mughal rule, which was a complex hierarchy of authority, was not a 'centralized' state in the post-colonial sense. During the Mughal period as in the period of European colonialism, a powerful minority ruled vast territories in complicated arrangements with sections of the local populace. Just as in the late twentieth century 'lower' castes and 'untouchables' in India began to form their own political parties and gain power, 'The eighteenth century saw not so much the decline of the Mughal ruling elite, but its transformation and the ascent of inferior social groups to overt political power.' During the 'long metamorphosis' from provincial government to autonomous kingdoms, the ultimate, if nominal, authority of the emperor in Delhi continued to be respected by almost all the autonomous rulers, for instance in Bengal, Awadh, Hyderabad, or Carnatic. Even the Marathas and Sikhs paid ceremonial homage. Only Tipu Sultan of Mysore called himself 'emperor', but he too was respectful towards the Mughal ruler.[7] However, that nominal respect could not ultimately conceal the altered power relations between Delhi and the regions. Some of the autonomous provinces later formed the basis for the next external imperial power, the British.

The political forms may be different today, but the nature of the relationship between the centre and the regions, in terms of the diffusion of real political power seems strikingly similar in the eighteenth century and in contemporary India. The gradual nature of the realignment process does not mean that the centre is secure. While regional satraps appear to remain interested in a stake in the central government, this may mask a modern round of 'surreptitious withdrawal'. In the eighteenth century, the virtually autonomous rulers of Bengal started making their own appointments, and became irregular in sending tributes to Delhi or stopped altogether.[8] Autonomy was short-lived, however, with one fading empire replaced by a new external colonizer, the British. No equivalent external replacement is

evident in the twenty-first century; nor have ideologies with pan-Indian potential, such as communism or Hindu nationalism, succeeded in breaking out of a regional mould. As the arena of politics has nevertheless effectively moved to the regions, it is unclear what the future of Delhi might be, shorn of its imperial purpose.[9]

India's Undemocratic Democracy

The idea of 'democracy' as the best possible political system is virtually unquestioned today in political discussions. Writing about democracy as a 'universal value', Amartya Sen identified the rise of democracy as the pre-eminently acceptable form of governance as the most important development of the twentieth century.[10] There is wide consensus across scholars, policy makers and public opinion about the desirability of democracy as a political system.[11] India's success in sustaining democracy – regular elections and changes of government through the means of elections – is seen as key to its political maturity, stability and progress towards broad-based economic prosperity and inclusive social development. In contrast, the failure to sustain democracy in other post-colonial states in South Asia or other former colonies is perceived as damaging to the prospect of political stability and socio-economic development, and in some sense the transformation of these societies to 'modernity'.

A recent survey of South Asian states found a high level of support for democracy as a political system among Indians. Seventy per cent of Indians surveyed agreed with the statement that democracy was preferable to any other form of government, bettered only by Sri Lankans, whose preference for democracy stood at seventy-one per cent. Only nine per cent of those polled thought that sometimes dictatorship might be preferable. In reality however, Indians are faced with a pervasive lack of internal democracy in their political parties. In this context it is noteworthy that twenty-one per cent of respondents in India – more than a fifth of the 'world's largest democracy' – agreed with the following statement: 'It doesn't matter to people like me whether we have democratic or non-democratic governance.' A more probing examination of the depth of support for democratic rule found a significant level of yearning for 'strong leaders' in South Asia, including India, who would rule unconstrained by democratic checks.[12]

India is a particularly interesting case in this regard due to its long and largely uninterrupted record of electoral politics. The periods of democracy in Pakistan and Bangladesh disappointed their citizens and political analysts alike in terms of the quality of political discourse and governance. However, this is usually explained precisely as a result of not having *enough* democracy – the stunting of democratic political development due to the repeated interruptions. In the case of democracy, the argument seems to be as in so many other activities: practice makes perfect.

India has had plenty of practice, but the quality of its democracy still disappoints. For a country supposedly following the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, India is noted for its political 'dynasties'. Despite the regular ritual of elections and changes of government via the ballot box, it has produced poor governance. India's performance in key socio-economic indicators in health, education or sanitation has been disappointing, indicating that electoral politics is not adequately responsive to the needs of large sections of the electorate who are poor. It appears to have generated a diverse range of identity groups based on religion, ethnicity or caste, rather than political or socio-economic interests (though in some cases, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party, these may largely coincide).[13] Yogendra Yadav demonstrated the 'deepening' of India's democracy through his empirical studies of Indian elections, but also spoke of India's 'democratic deficit', asserting that 'the existence of this democracy does not deliver what democracies are supposed to' and that the key failures were 'the growing distortion in the mechanism of political representation, the growing distance between the electors and the elected, the inability of the mechanism of competitive politics to serve as a means of exercising effective policy options'.[14] Jayaprakash Narayan, head of Loksatta, the Hyderabad-based civil society organization for democratic reforms probing electoral malpractice and poor governance, assessed India as a 'dysfunctional democracy'.[15]

India's admittedly flawed democracy still retains the confidence of 'democracy optimists'. Most feel they need only compare its relative achievements to the conspicuous failures in the region, notably in Pakistan and Bangladesh, or the wider experience of post-colonial nation states in Asia and Africa. Many point out that all of these are young states, and many of the flaws in their exercise of democracy could be found in earlier eras of European democracies, and may similarly diminish with time and experience. For some, India's democracy is taken to have succeeded merely by its very survival in the inhospitable climate of poverty and conflict. It is celebrated for its institutionalization, despite the many shortcomings of its substantive achievements.[16] For others, democracy's success in India is that it has proved to be more than a superfluous structure. As Oldenburg argued, despite many problems, 'Democracy in India is not a façade behind which one finds dominant classes or other societal institutions that exercise power.'[17]

The more disillusioned, however, wonder about the future of democracy in India, and a few even about the idea of democracy itself.[18] The potential problems of trying to make parliamentary democracy work in post-colonial India were articulated by the chairman of India's constitution-writing committee, B. R. Ambedkar. Himself from the 'untouchable' castes, Ambedkar pointed out that a completely egalitarian idea – one person, one vote – was being suddenly superimposed upon a profoundly unequal society. He worried about how the former was supposed to succeed without addressing the latter.[19]

Continuity and Change at the End of Empire

To what extent was electoral democracy in India truly a legacy of British colonialism? Indians were permitted limited electoral participation at local and provincial levels in the last years of British rule. There were several phases of constitutional reform in British India that preceded the adoption of Westminster-style parliamentary systems in both the successor states of India and Pakistan. Unlike Britain, upon achieving independence its former colonies opted for written constitutions. Bangladesh, when it came into being in 1971, also initially adopted the same system. Sumit Sarkar noted that the theme of continuity between the colonial and post-colonial periods is accepted both by those who view this progression as a positive development and those who are critical of the post-colonial state as a structural continuation of colonial rule.[20]

One interpretation of the limited political participation granted to Indians is that the colonial masters saw it as a means by which 'the natives could discuss their own "schools and drains" without subverting the British Empire'.[21] In this view such political reforms in colonized India were conceded so that 'Indians could be given a safe play-pen in which, if they could harm anyone at all, they could only harm each other.'[22] An alternative, more optimistic view finds some benefit – even if inadvertent – in the practical experience it gave Indian politicians in party-building, electioneering and local government.[23]

Empirical studies of the effect of colonial rule on the establishment of democracy in post-colonial states seem to have produced mixed results. The contribution of the 'British colonial model of tutelary democracy' emerged as a significant factor in Myron Weiner's study of the handful of low-income countries that had managed to retain democratic political systems even with occasional setbacks. Weiner identified two aspects of British colonial rule as crucial factors in successful 'tutelage': the establishment of institutions of governance such as a bureaucracy, judiciary, police and army, and the creation of representative institutions and periodic elections.[24] However, other large statistical studies on the survival of democracy in states have found no significant impact of past colonial history.[25]

Indeed, the adoption of universal democracy by India upon becoming independent may be viewed as a calculated break from British imperial legacy, as it 'went far beyond anything evolved under the late colonial state and indeed represented policies deliberately conceived in opposition to its highly constraining influences. In many ways, the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947 shattered the links between the colonial past and the national future.'[26] India became independent in 1947 through a 'transfer of power': Indians did not really experience full democracy until 1952, when the first general elections were held under the constitution of independent India with universal adult franchise. If democracy was

a legacy of empire, it seemed to have been more of a parting gift, chosen by the recipient and bestowed hastily at the moment of departure.

However, while universal adult franchise may have been a break with the colonial legacy, other aspects of the limited political participation in colonial India endured and contributed to some of the problems of democratic practice in India today. A key measure introduced by the British was separate electorates on the basis of religion and caste. This was introduced through the Morley–Minto reforms in 1909 and consolidated and extended in the 1919 Montagu–Chelmsford package and the 1935 Government of India Act. There is consensus that this 'legitimized the language of communal (i.e. religious) and interest group politics' and 'made it much harder, perhaps impossible, for even professedly secular Indian politicians not, at least tacitly, to do the same'.[27] Washbrook points out that while this has been viewed as 'a peculiarly colonial device constructed by the British for the purposes of "divide and rule"', it may also reflect 'British ruling elite ideas about the nature of representation itself'.[28]

The actual powers of the 'playpen' elected bodies were very limited. It delegated 'petty functions' and even then, 'That the extension of these responsibilities should not involve any meaningful shift in power, however, was guaranteed by a complex system of controls'.[29] As Zachariah put it, 'This caricature of parliamentarianism was the highest form of institutional politics in colonial India: even in the last stages of so-called "training for self-government", at the end of the 1930s, a legislature's decisions could be overridden by the governor of a province or the viceroy of India.'[30]

While British colonial rule – perhaps unsurprisingly – did not provide meaningful democracy, it is noteworthy that the principal opposition to British rule was also anti-democratic.[31] The unquestioned leader of the Indian nationalist movement, Gandhi, neither sought nor held any political office. But those who did hold office did so at his pleasure. In the final years of India's independence movement, the President of the Indian National Congress used to be effectively a nominee of Gandhi. In his choice of candidates Gandhi did not exclude those who held different political views from him on how to dislodge the British from India or what kind of society to build in independent India. On the contrary, he opted for co-option. Most of the time it worked smoothly: the Congress went through the motions of election of the chosen candidate, blessings were sought and received. In 1939, though, it went spectacularly wrong.

In 1937 Gandhi had entrusted the Presidency to Jawaharlal Nehru, who held very different political ideas from him but accepted the status of disciple. The following year he chose the younger, more radical Subhas Chandra Bose. When Bose decided to stand again for the presidency in 1939 it caused consternation. As the members of the Congress Working Committee led by Vallavbhai Patel put

it, without even a hint of irony: 'The election, as befits the dignity of this high office, has always been unanimous.'[32] Gandhi did not want Bose to be president again. Bose's refusal to back down forced a real election on the Congress. When Bose was re-elected, defeating Gandhi's anointed candidate Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Gandhi declared it a personal defeat. As it turned out, Bose won the election but lost the war. Gandhi refused to cooperate and as it was impossible to lead the Indian nationalist movement without his cooperation, the democratically elected President of the Congress was eventually forced to resign.

The lack of democracy in the Congress movement, however, did not necessarily affect the legitimacy of Gandhi's leadership. While Gandhi's power was extra-constitutional, nobody could doubt his mass appeal. He did not seek formal office, but he did have immense popular support. Many have viewed this form of leadership as 'saintly', but it would be erroneous to elevate it so.[33] Others who have followed the same strategy do not enjoy the moral status of the 'Mahatma'. In contemporary India Bal Thackeray, leader of the Marathi chauvinistic-cum-Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena, wielded political authority for decades without holding official positions. From 2004 to 2014, though Manmohan Singh was formally prime minister, everyone knew that the real head of the Indian government was Sonia Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi is a legitimate representative of the people of India: she is an elected Member of Parliament and leader of her party. Her role in government appeared to be accepted by the general public even though she eschewed the official form of exercising her power. Power without office appears to have become routinized; nor is it entirely unaccountable. When elections came around, it was on her shoulders that the verdict for the performance of her party fell.

India's Experiment with Democracy

Even if India received no meaningful 'tutelage' in the practice of democracy before independence, it adopted parliamentary democracy and Nehru, India's first prime minister, is usually described as a politician in the Westminster mould. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, was the only prime minister who attempted to rule directly as a dictator, during the 'Emergency' she declared from 1975 to 1977. However, the Nehru period was also not conducive to the development of democracy in many ways. The Congress enjoyed political dominance in the early decades of India's independence at both federal and state levels. Within the Congress Nehru faced no real challenge to his leadership: he was the only front-ranking nationalist leader to survive to rule in independent India. Though nominally the leader of a democratic state, his was the status of a 'raja' among his people.

Many observers struggle to explain India's actual experience with democracy, which seems at first glance to suggest that parliamentary democracy as a political

system has simultaneously succeeded and failed in post-colonial India. The rise of caste-based politics in India, for instance, is seen as a success in terms of empowering marginalized groups in Indian politics, but also as a failure in that it has entrenched caste identities, which many in India had hoped to abolish. An interesting recent argument predicts that the heightened sense of caste identity is actually less permanent than imagined, and that the cross-caste alliances that political leaders have been forced to adopt in a fragmented arena actually weaken the logic of caste politics in the long run.[34]

Discussions about 'dynastic' politics in South Asia sometimes assert that Western democracies also have 'political dynasties', such as the Kennedys or the Bushes in the United States. There is really no comparison between Western 'political dynasties' and family rule in South Asian politics. In Western democracies children do not become prime minister by hereditary succession upon the death of a parent, as Rajiv Gandhi did for example upon Indira Gandhi's assassination. Nor do political parties get handed down to a chosen child in personal wills like family heirlooms, as Benazir Bhutto appears to have done in Pakistan. This development is not a legacy of European colonialism, but a curious product of the interaction between that legacy and the development of India's own peculiar political culture, in which undemocratic political groups compete for power through democracy.

Another feature often overlooked is that India's political leaders are autocratic even when no family dynasty is involved. For instance, the new chief minister of the state of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, comes from a humble background and did not have any family connections in politics. She won her place in Indian politics on merit, by sheer perseverance and effort, after a long struggle to oust the communists from power in her state. In the process she left the Congress Party, which she felt was not truly committed to defeating the communists, and formed a new party, Trinamool Congress, which she eventually led to electoral victory. Banerjee is unmarried and has no children, so it is unlikely that there would be a family succession. However, just like the dynastic leaders, she runs her party, and now her state government, in authoritarian style.

Some other notable leaders of political parties in India have secured their political position after defeating traditional family claimants. Jayalalitha, leader of the AIADMK Party in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, saw off a claim from the wife of her political mentor, the film star turned chief minister M. G. Ramachandran. Like Banerjee, she is unmarried and has no children. In Andhra Pradesh, the son-in-law of another movie star turned political leader, N. T. Rama Rao, won the contest to lead his party after Rao's death, extinguishing the hopes of his widow. Mayawati, who became the chief minister of India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh, is a woman from an 'untouchable' caste. She gained the leadership of the Bahujan Samaj Party from her mentor, Kanshi Ram, the founder of the party. She too is unmarried and has no children. Like Sonia Gandhi and all the other leaders

who treat political parties as family fiefdoms, the leaders without spouses or children also run political parties as personal autocracies. All swear by India's democracy, but none practises democracy.

If parliamentary democracy was a legacy of British colonialism, rampant autocracy in Indian politics would surely be the sign of a failed gift. Did it fail because limited local elections were merely disingenuous diversions by the colonial authorities? Was it because democracy was imposed suddenly on an unprepared society as the colonizers scrambled to depart before the empire collapsed around them? The supposed 'tutelage' of Britain may also be seen in a different light: perhaps what Indians really learned from the British Empire was not democracy but political hypocrisy, in which one could practise democracy at home while denying it to subjects around the world. Perhaps the art of indulging in the rhetoric of democracy while practising something quite different is the true legacy of British colonialism in India.

However, trying to assess India's democracy in terms of 'success' or 'failure' is an unproductive exercise. Such an assessment always implies a standard, often left unspoken and in any case hard to specify. After all, 'success' need not be achieved by becoming an exact replica of the British model, nor might the open suspension of democracy such as the declaration of Emergency in 1975 be the only possible way to 'fail'. Instead of thinking about India's experiment with democracy in terms of the Western model or the 'British tutelary' legacy, it may be more useful to ask what form of democratic politics has developed in India in the six decades of its practice and in which direction it seems to be headed. How is its trajectory related to its colonial legacy, if at all?

What appears to have developed in India is the retention of the form of parliamentary democracy with the substance of personal autocracy and dynastic rule. The autocratic nature of India's political parties is now widely established and does not appear to be a vote-loser. There have been mass protests in India against endemic corruption, but no organized movement against undemocratic political parties, which have become routine. Educated and westernized politicians accept subordinate positions in 'feudal' family retainerships masquerading as political parties. However, while political parties are undemocratic, they continue to compete for power and legitimacy through the ballot box. Leaders who brook no dissent within their parties accept election losses as the verdict of the people. I have termed this form of political practice, which has developed over the last several decades in post-colonial India, 'competitive autocracy'.[35]

The practice of democracy in India therefore appears to be developing its own particular form, which includes some profoundly undemocratic characteristics. Political parties may be undemocratic, but accept elections as the means to compete for political power and legitimacy. Most political leaders are autocrats, whether

representing a family dynasty or not, but may still enjoy genuine popular support and political legitimacy. In this respect India appears to be developing a political system that may be termed *representative*, if not wholly 'democratic' in terms of Western norms. It may be that this hybrid stage is merely a stepping stone to full-blown autocracy. Perhaps it is only a matter of time before India's authoritarian politicians decide to dispense with elections as the means to power. However, it is also possible that India's partially democratic 'competitive autocracy' is a sustainable political practice for the longer term. It appears to marry the notion of 'strong leadership' seemingly valued by a significant section of the electorate with the choice and accountability offered by a democratic system of electing who governs.

Fading Echoes of the Legacy of Empire in India

The shift of the principal location of Indian politics to the regions, its striking parallels with the aftermath of the Mughal Empire, and the widespread phenomenon of autocracy in Indian politics do not mean that India is simply reverting to its pre-colonial past. Rather, it shows how the echoes of European colonialism in the development of democracy in India interact with other societal forces to evolve a new politics which needs to be understood in its own terms.

In 1947 India inherited a centralized nation state and adopted parliamentary democracy. But these were last-minute bequests, rather than a cultivated legacy or the culmination of organic developments in Indian society. The leaders of independent India did not tear down the colonial administrative structures. Nor did the mainstream nationalist movements cultivate democratic values. With the waning of the power of imperial Delhi under the Indian successors to the departed British, the principal arena of politics in India has moved, as in previous post-imperial periods, to the regions. This is similar to the political formations of the eighteenth century, at the end of a non-European imperial period. As at that time, the regionalization of politics in post-colonial India has been a gradual process, and resurgent regions have retained a link to the weakened centre. How long this relationship endures in the face of a faltering centre before covert or overt 'withdrawal' of autonomous regions, or supersession by a new imperial project, remains to be seen.

Democratic governance in the Western mould was arguably never a true colonial bequest. The British did not practise it in India, and most of the Indian leadership in the nationalist movement did not embrace it either. The adoption of democracy can in fact be viewed as a break with British colonial legacy, while the problems of religion- and caste-based politics can be traced to colonial interventions. Over the decades of electoral politics India has developed its own political practice, which includes a host of autocratic political players who – at least until now – seek state

power through the ballot box. While not 'democratic', most of these autocratic leaders are 'representative' of their people in a way the colonial masters never were. They gain or lose power through elections. As the memory of European colonialism fades, the inclination to make polite nods towards the formal democratic structures of the former imperialist masters grows ever weaker, leaving India free to develop its own system of competitive autocrats where real power may be unconnected to formal office. This may be 'undemocratic' in the European sense, but nevertheless a 'representative' form of politics which may endure for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1 By 'anti-democratic' I mean hostile to the concept of democracy as a universal value. I use the term deliberately, on the basis that those who had democracy in their own country, but colonized territories around the world and denied the indigenous peoples of those territories the right to govern themselves, did not believe in democracy as a universal value.
2 S. Bose, 'Indians will Vote, but will they get Democracy?', *The Times*, 10 April 2009.
3 M. Alam, *Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–2.
4 R. B. Barnett, *North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 1.
5 C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 11–18.
6 Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 14–17.
7 Bayly, *Indian Society*, pp. 9–18.
8 See P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: the British Bridgehead*, New Cambridge History of India, vol. II (Cambridge, 1987), Chapter 2, resulting in a 'No' vote.
9 Post-colonial Britain has also devolved power in recent times, creating Welsh and Scottish assemblies and fuelling debate about whether there should be an English assembly as well, and whether devolution strengthens or threatens the Union. A referendum on Scottish independence was held on 18 September 2014, resulting in a 'No' vote.
10 A. Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10, 3 (1999).
11 In the first ever simultaneous survey of attitudes to democracy in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 2004–5, respondents expressed overwhelming support for democracy in spite of significant proportions stating that whether there was democratic or non-democratic governance did not matter to people like them. See Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, *The State of Democracy in South Asia: A Report* (Oxford, 2008).
12 *Ibid.*
13 I addressed some of these issues in 'Is India a Failing Democracy?', Illinois Wesleyan University, March 2005 and 'South Asia's Politics: Can Undemocratic Democracies Work?', Royal Commonwealth Society, Oxford, April 2008.
14 Y. Yadav, 'A Radical Agenda for Political Reforms', *Seminar*, 506 (October) these arguments are reproduced in his essay 'Representation', in N. G. Jayal and P. B. Mehta (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (Oxford, 2001).
15 J. Narayan, 'Electoral Reforms', Loksatta, Foundation for Democratic Reforms, Hyderabad (2002). Loksatta has since launched a political party and Mr Narayan, a former civil servant, was an elected state legislator in Andhra Pradesh.
16 See for instance A. Kohli, 'Introduction', in A. Kholi (ed.), *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge, 2001).
17 P. Oldenburg, 'India's Democracy: Illusion or Reality?', Asian Governments and Legal Systems, *Education about Asia*, 12, 3 (Winter 2007).

18 Notable among those who were originally optimistic but now are concerned about democracy as an idea and as a political system in India is Rajni Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy* (2007).
19 Ambedkar's angst about the contradiction between Indian society and its new political system is famously expressed in his valedictory address in the Indian Constituent Assembly. See for instance *Constituent Assembly Debate*, vol. X: *Official Report* (New Delhi, 1989), p. 979, quoted in Z. Hasan, 'Representation and Redistribution: the New Lower Caste Politics of North India', in Frankel et al. (eds), *Transforming India* (Oxford, 2000).
20 S. Sarkar, 'Indian Democracy: the Historical Inheritance', in A. Kholi (ed.), *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge, 2001).
21 B. Zachariah, *Nehru* (2004), p. 53, citing S. Sarkar, *Modern India* (1983).
22 Zachariah, *Nehru*, p. 35.
23 M. Weiner, 'Empirical Democratic Theory', in M. Weiner and E. Ozbudun (eds), *Competitive Elections in Developing Countries* (Durham, NC, 1987), Chapter 1.
24 *Ibid.*
25 A. Baechtiger, D. Hangartner, P. Hess and C. Fraefel, 'Democracy Survival in Africa and Asia', General Conference of the ECPR, 2007; P. Schleiter and R. Elgie, 'Variation in the Durability of Semi-Presidential Democracies', in R. Elgie, S. Moestrup and Y.-S. Wu (eds), *Semi-Presidentialism and Democracy* (2011).
26 D. Washbrook, 'The Rhetoric of Democracy and Development in Late Colonial India', in S. Bose and A. Jalal (eds), *Nationalism, Development and Democracy* (Delhi, 1998), p. 37.
27 J. Chiriankandath, '"Democracy" under the Raj: Elections and Separate Representation in British India', in N. G. Jayal (ed.), *Democracy in India* (Oxford, 2001), p. 78.
28 Washbrook, 'The Rhetoric of Democracy', p. 40.
29 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
30 Zachariah, *Nehru*, p. 5.
31 Again, I use the term 'anti-democratic' in the sense of being hostile to the idea of universal democracy: see note 1.
32 Statement of Vallavbhai Patel and other members of the Congress Working Committee, 24 January 1939, in *Netaji Collected Works*, Netaji Research Bureau (Oxford, 1995), vol. IX, pp. 69–70.
33 Morris-Jones' classifications of Indian political leadership, discussed by R. Guha, 'Political Leadership', in Jayal and Mehta, *Politics in India*.
34 S. Jodhka, 'Caste and Politics', in Jayal and Mehta, *Politics in India*.
35 S. Bose, 'No Serious Issues in Indian Elections', interview with *Asian Affairs* (May 2009). Online at http://asianaffairs.in/may2009/interview.html (accessed 20 June 2011).