

REVIEW ESSAY

INDIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE CRISIS OF GOVERNABILITY

**India's Democracy:
An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations**

Edited by Atul Kohli

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 348 pp., with notes, \$49.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

**Democracy and Discontent:
India's Growing Crisis of Governability**

By Atul Kohli

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 400 pp., with notes and bibliography, \$64.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State

By Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 520 pp., with notes, \$42.00 cloth, \$21.00 paper.

The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India

By Achin Vanaik

London: Verso, 1991, 302 pp., with notes, \$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by Shalendra D. Sharma, Ph.D

"India today is a nation embroiled in a million mutinies" warns novelist V.S. Naipaul, whose "violent passions" and "bloody excesses" if not contained could push the troubled country into the dark abyss of anarchy and national disintegration. While India has defied such dire predictions before, few today would dispute that as the world's largest constitutional democracy lumbers toward the twenty-first century, its political future is beset with more uncertainty than at any time since its independence in 1947.

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The period beginning in the early 1980s has been particularly turbulent, as India has been confronted with an unprecedented series of crises notching up one deadly milestone after another: the assassination of two prime ministers; continuing insurgency and terrorism in the strategic states of Kashmir, Assam, and the Punjab; and the rise of religious fundamentalism and exacerbation of communal and sectarian violence that has claimed thousands of lives in the past two years. The mounting problems of daily governance, made acute by government prevarication and ineptitude and the breakdown of civil law and order, not only bring into focus the simmering "crisis of governability" in this populous multi-ethnic, multireligious democracy, but also underscore the fact that, despite the current political calm, Indian democracy remains vulnerable and precarious and will require concerted resuscitation in order to safely negotiate the storms ahead.

The four volumes reviewed here help make sense of the kaleidoscopic nature of changes that have occurred in Indian society, economy, and polity since Nehru's death. The books examine the roots of the governability crisis from different theoretical and methodological perspectives: Specifically, how and why, in this season of democratic awakenings, has the developing world's most successful experiment in democratic nation building been unable to diffuse the challenges to its authority and legitimacy, or to honor its commitments to civil liberties and socioeconomic justice? Moreover, the volumes chronicle this political crisis and explore a significant question for this Asian democracy: Can India's political institutions successfully negotiate this period of painful transition by finding new solutions to the problems of governability? Can they promote redistributive development within the framework of a secular, consensual and democratic polity? The explanations the authors provide are varied, ranging from the illuminating to the superficial.

Achin Vanaik's *The Painful Transition* turns out to be extremely unenlightening. The author's attempt to apply a coherent Marxist epistemology to the "crisis facing India's bourgeois democracy" is marred by gratuitous phraseology. Precluding critical analysis, the author leaves the reader in a labyrinth while he resorts to Marxist incantations and a facile, discredited critique of "bourgeois democracy." In sharp contrast, the Rudolphs' *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, an empirical study, rich in theory, presents the most encyclopedic account of India's political economy since Francine Frankel's *India's Political Economy*. Similarly, Atul Kohli's scholarship provides a balanced commentary on Indian politics as well as an assessment of its future. *Democracy and Discontent* combines an analytical framework of state-society relations with empirical research of national, regional, and local trends to examine "why the world's largest democracy has become difficult to govern" (p. 3). In doing so, Kohli produces a cogent study that not only captures the vicissitudes of Indian politics, but also analyzes the administrative and organizational decline of India's premier political party, the Indian National Congress.

While the essays in *India's Democracy* were originally presented at a conference held at Princeton University in the late 1980s, the volume has not grown

stale. Its nuanced state-society framework and the combined knowledge of the nine contributors yield superb, insightful essays that constitute the best surveys to date on the different facets of India's evolving state and society. An examination of these works reveals the roots and nature of the current political crisis.

The essays by Henry Hart, James Manor, Stephen Cohen, and Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph analyze India's changing political institutions and delineate the complex forces responsible for the decay within these institutions. The authors also examine how the process of organizational decline can erode the legitimacy of an established one-party system. They agree that the pace of political decay in the post-Nehru period has increased. Hart and Manor point out that the institutional decay has been so widespread that it has become a part of the political process. They note that in the past two decades, the previous codes and commitments to the ethics and conventions of parliamentary democracy have given way to arbitrariness, arrogance, corruption, and violence at all levels of the polity. While the causes of this decline are complex, the authors contend that the "power-hungry" political elites (in particular, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her "loyalist" apparatchiks) are responsible for squandering the political capital accumulated by an earlier generation of Congressional leaders.

Marshalling an array of evidence, Hart and Manor note that Mrs. Gandhi's autocratic and confrontational style became the norm during her 16-year tenure. The institutions of governance (such as the cabinet, the parliament, the judiciary, and the civil service) were ignored and their authority and legitimacy greatly weakened. Further, as the bulk of the strategic positions in these institutions became rewards for sycophants and palace courtiers, these institutions and their managers lost their legitimacy as well as their professionalism and *élan*. The Indian state, once seen by society as the mediator of conflict, itself became the source of conflict. The Rudolphs sum up the two contrasting political eras since independence:

Unlike her father, Mrs. Gandhi depleted India's political capital by eroding the autonomy, professional standards, and procedural norms of political institutions and state agencies. She tried to make those responsible for Parliament, the courts, the civil services, and the federal system answerable to her. The effort succeeded, to varying degrees, in orienting their conduct to her personal will. A paradoxical consequence was to diminish the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state. Centralization based on personal loyalty and obedience to a monocratic executive lessened the state's capacity to amplify itself through multiple agencies extending beyond the limited control and attention of one person. Jawaharlal Nehru was the schoolmaster of parliamentary government, Indira Gandhi its truant (p. 84).

The Deinstitutionalization of the "Congress System"

For Kohli, Manor, and the Rudolphs the most damning legacy of Mrs. Gandhi's tenure was the progressive weakening of India's premier political organization, the Congress Party. The Congress system has dominated Indian public and political life since the 1920s when Mahatma Gandhi transformed the Congress Party into a mass organization. As the hegemon of the system it provided the state with political and institutional continuity. Its intricate networks provided structural and normative links between the political center and the vast periphery. The decline of the Congress Party has thus proven intrinsic to India's problems of governability.

Moreover, the authors sharply criticize Mrs. Gandhi's Machiavellianism, blaming the Congress Party's organizational decline on her own intransigence and the "criminalization of politics" under her son and putative heir, Sanjay. They note that as prime minister, and later as Congress Party president, Mrs. Gandhi repeatedly ignored both constitutional and legal constraints; she winked at the violations and transgressions of her coterie and used her position to centralize power as a means of perpetuating her cult of personality and dynastic ambitions. As the Rudolphs aptly note, Mrs. Gandhi's "imperious, self-righteous" and inquisitorial (p. 134) governing style ultimately eroded intraparty democracy and accelerated the trend toward political and institutional decline.

Under this arbitrary system, Congressmen no longer entered national politics through traditional means of election to local party committees, but had to demonstrate their allegiance and deference to the prime minister. Similarly, the prime minister and her coterie in New Delhi directed the process of selecting candidates for elections to district and state assemblies and to the Lok Sabha (the lower House of Parliament). In many instances, individuals chosen to run on the Congress Party tickets had no support and only a pro forma party affiliation. Yet they were selected because they could collect large sums of money for the party (usually by dubious means), and proved to be loyal to Mrs. Gandhi. In fact, the authors contend that nepotism, corruption, and venal conduct became so pervasive that the "new breed of Congress politicians" engaged in an orgy of self-aggrandizement and manipulated the political process. Their tactics ranged from using their offices to enrich family members, enrolling bogus members to produce fictitious majorities, arming criminals, and colluding with the police to capturing voting booths during elections. They also protected businessmen and criminals from prosecution for possession of "black money" and colluded with them in elaborate kickback schemes. Indeed, the party's thorough degeneration was exposed when an authoritarian "emergency" regime was imposed in 1975.

Hence, India entered the 1980s with fractured and polarized political and institutional structures. The personalization and centralization of power eroded the polity's autonomy while it reduced the party to a shell of its former self. In effect, Congress came to resemble a lame Leviathan, omnipresent but hardly omnipotent. It reacted, but was unable to govern or to promote social or

economic development. When Mrs. Gandhi returned to office under these conditions, she was forced to rely on populist appeals and demagogic manipulation to consolidate her political base and to keep the opposition at bay. In the absence of structured and dependable institutions, however, populist "waves" were too superficial to meet the needs of this complex society.

Politics became increasingly capricious and erratic as provocative slogans and excessive promises became a substitute for performance. Manor and the Rudolphs point out that Mrs. Gandhi was unwilling and unable to engage in meaningful "conciliatory dialogue" with a growing array of disaffected and restive groups. Rather, she substituted draconian edicts for the rule of law. The authors document the ways in which Mrs. Gandhi's strident appeals to religious and communal themes and her partisan abuse of government authority exacerbated communal and secessionist demands, while widening the gap between the Congress Party and the public. In fact, when Rajiv Gandhi assumed office in 1984, the All India Congress Committee and the Congress Working Committee—two of the party's highest organs—were so compromised that they ceased to have any voice independent from that of the prime minister. Moreover, the elimination of democracy within the party diminished its capacity to communicate with many restive interest groups. This setback, in turn, reduced its ability to govern.

The Decline of the Congress Party

In *Democracy and Discontent*, Kohli explains how the Congress Party's decline contributed to the crisis of governability. In the mid-1980s, Kohli visited five districts (Madurai, Guntur, Kheda, Calcutta, and Belguan), which Myron Weiner first surveyed in the early 1960s.¹ Weiner attributed the existence of "stable and good government" in these districts to the Congress Party's "integrative" organizational structures, especially its ability to regulate conflict and accommodate competing interests. In contrast, Kohli found the Congress system mired in factional bickering and institutional ineptitude, as well as being "virtually defunct" in some districts.

Kohli blames the decline of the party on a complex array of pressures emanating from both state and society. He argues that Mrs. Gandhi's political style was as much a symptom as a cause of the breakdown in the Congress system. Kohli notes that the consensual system worked well as long as the party was not politicized and patronage was distributed carefully, so that the power-brokers were above politics and available to settle factional disputes. He finds that the "top-down" Congress system was already in decline by the time Mrs. Gandhi assumed power, but it took almost a decade before the full impact of this decline was felt. The decay of formal party structures has made the peaceful

1. Weiner, after consultation with Congress leaders, selected these districts because they were deemed to represent areas of Congress strength and provided a good cross-section of India's diversity. Weiner's findings were subsequently published in his book *Party Building in a New Nation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967).

resolution of political differences "impossible," causing "in nearly all districts . . . dissensions internal to the parties quickly [to spill] outside the party boundaries and . . . [be] fought to a decision on the streets" (p. 188). By contrasting trends at the local and state levels, Kohli shows that the state lost its connections to society; it exposed latent socioeconomic cleavages while encouraging undisciplined political competition and mercenary behavior.

The politicization of legal institutions and the state's subsequent inability to enforce its legal authority have undermined the state's capacity to maintain peace. Kohli, Hart, and Cohen contend that the professionalism and autonomy of police and paramilitary forces have been eroded by their politicization, and by the state's excessive reliance on these organizations to solve civil law and order problems. Indeed, due to the breakdown of these official law enforcement instruments, some parts of the country have endured random violence, politically motivated acts of murder and terrorism, and "unofficial civil wars."

The political elites view the growing social unrest as evidence that "antina-tional" forces are trying to destroy national unity. Hence, they are quick to equate any form of popular opposition (especially by minority groups) with disloyalty and treason, and have sought harsh authoritarian measures to "protect" the country's integrity. The self-perpetuating cycle of violence in the Punjab, Kashmir, Assam and elsewhere is a consequence of this *modus vivendi*.

The essays in Kohli's *India's Democracy* by Paul Brass on the Punjab crisis and by Jyotirindra Das Gupta on the relationship between ethnicity and democratic development (with reference to Assam) carefully examine the failure to accommodate regional demands.

Brass and Das Gupta do not deny that ethno-religious and regional interests have aggravated the problems of governability; they nevertheless argue that the root of the problem lies more with serious failings at the political center than with minority demands. Minority and regional grievances were accommodated successfully during the Nehru era because the political environment was open and accessible, favoring what Das Gupta calls "inclusionary strategies" of nation building. However, Mrs. Gandhi's need to bolster her political base among the Hindu majority, and her tendency to view even legitimate minority and regional aspirations with suspicion, prevented her government from responding constructively to minority demands.

Brass discusses the sequence of events that culminated in the Punjab tragedy. Beginning in the late 1970s, Mrs. Gandhi and her son Sanjay began to meddle in the Punjab's internal affairs in order to dominate the ruling moderate Akali Dal party. They harnessed the support of "Indira loyalist" Giani Zail Singh, who introduced the militant Sikh fundamentalist preacher Bhindrawale to the forefront of Punjab politics, with the intention of weakening the Akali Dal's leadership by dividing Punjab politics along religious lines. However, their scheme set off a series of violent events culminating in the assault on the Golden Temple, the rise in support for Khalistan separatism, the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, and the spread of violence against the Sikhs. Similarly, Das Gupta argues that Mrs. Gandhi's many foibles (most notably her "exclusionary" self-serving

tactics and overreliance on coercive means to solve political problems) prompted the rise of murderous agitations in Assam and Mizoram. Das Gupta and Brass agree with Kohli and other scholars that the source of India's governability crisis lies with its ruinous politics.

Brass and Das Gupta's essays provide a corrective to interpretations that blame the crises in the Punjab and elsewhere either on Mrs. Gandhi's alleged personal vendetta against the Sikhs and other minorities, or on the fanaticism of religious groups. They demonstrate that Mrs. Gandhi's manipulative statecraft did not respect any particular socioeconomic or cultural-religious boundaries. Moreover, the authors correctly note that demands for decentralization and greater autonomy are not necessarily antithetical to democratic national integration, and may indeed strengthen nation building. The example of Rajiv Gandhi's reconciliatory stance toward the Sikhs and the Assamese illustrates that whenever the central authorities accommodate religious and regional demands, the results for nation building have been positive. Hence, Das Gupta notes that respect for political pluralism, legislative autonomy for the states, socioeconomic decentralization, and the adoption of "inclusionary strategies could turn yesterday's adversaries into constructive partners for national development" (p. 154).

Marxism and India's Democracy

Achin Vanaik presents a different analysis of the problems facing India's democracy. He maintains that, in contrast to the "distortions" and the "deliberate obfuscation" of "bourgeois" and "liberal-pluralist" writers, his Marxist analysis provides a comprehensive study of the "crisis facing India's bourgeois democracy." Such grandiose claims notwithstanding, *The Painful Transition* turns out to be a retrogression to the ideological shibboleths of the past.

Vanaik believes the roots of India's governability crisis are structural and not political. They arise from the "growing class contradictions and conflicts" inherent in India's bourgeois democracy. He states:

The principal social force exercising influence on both sides of this dialectic is the agrarian bourgeoisie. This class is, at one and the same time the major factor behind the microlevel erosion of the norms of bourgeois democratic functioning and its macrolevel anchorage (p. 34).

For Vanaik, the state is controlled by a "hegemonic class coalition" composed of the "industrial bourgeoisie, rich peasantry and a state elite of professionals" (p. 67, 78); this coalition has been engaged in an intense class conflict since the mid-1960s because:

an agrarian bourgeoisie [is] seeking to extend its political influence in general and to alter in its favour the relationship of forces within

the ruling-class coalition, to tip the balance towards itself and away from the industrial bourgeoisie (p. 68).

The "growing power of the agrarian bourgeoisie" and its drive to establish "hegemonic dominance" over the other classes "constitutes the origin of the current crisis of bourgeois political leadership" (p.78). The agrarian bourgeoisie, pejoratively called "kulaks" by India's Marxists, is an extremely shrewd "class-for-itself," with powers to advance its own interests. Vanaik is so convinced that this class will stop at nothing to advance its interests that he accuses it of championing Hindu fundamentalism and communal politics to achieve its goals. Indeed, he attributes the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu nationalism to the bourgeoisie.

Extending this logic to its extreme, Vanaik concludes that the agrarian bourgeoisie and its allies, who have much to gain from political and economic decentralization, are responsible for fueling divisions and violence between the central and state governments, as well as interstate agitations. Also, "the regionalisation of politics," including the demands for political autonomy and independence in the Punjab, Kashmir, and elsewhere, is part of "a wider all-India pattern whose driving force is the greater assertiveness of the agrarian bourgeoisie in various regional and state-based manifestations" (p. 168). He concludes that unless the many demands of the upwardly mobile and assertive agrarian bourgeoisie are satisfactorily met, this class will continue to flex its growing political and economic muscle, intensifying conflict and exacerbating the crisis within India's bourgeois democracy.

Those familiar with Indian politics will immediately see that Vanaik's account is surreal; his crude and reductionist analysis is out of touch with India's reality. Competing socioeconomic groups *have* placed substantial pressure on India's democracy. Unlike Kohli, the Rudolphs, Bardhan, Frankel, and Shah (who show that an array of politicized demand groups have contributed to India's political crisis), Vanaik attributes the problems of India's democracy to one variable: the agrarian bourgeoisie. This premise stretches the logic of his arguments to such extremes that it loses its conceptual and explanatory power.

The Painful Transition vividly illustrates the Marxist failure to reconcile theory and ideology with the realities of the Indian state and society. Vanaik delivers a set of poorly linked and repetitive chapters, which degenerate into jargon-laden incantations that add to the analytical confusion. In fact, *The Painful Transition* represents the doctrinal time warp of India's Marxists so clearly that this book could have been written decades ago. Marxists of all hues have long blamed the so-called "kulak-landlord alliance" for keeping India underdeveloped. Further, Vanaik's claim that only a victorious proletarian party can guarantee genuine democracy seems out of place given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. He fails to appreciate how well the Indian masses understand the rules of the democratic game and the extent to which they cherish their democratic rights and freedoms.

Among *The Painful Transition's* methodological flaws, the most glaring is the author's failure to define the term "agrarian bourgeoisie." Although the term

may conjure up images of powerful modernizing landed elites such as the Prussian Junkers, Japanese daimyos, or English landed gentry, such classes do not exist in India: a country of small farmers where 12 percent of the rural population is landless. While 16 percent own between two and four hectares of land, another 53 percent own less than two hectares. The "very large farm households," which constitute 19 percent of the population, own between four and eight hectares of land. Not only does the composition of the upper two deciles of landholders vary, but rural society is also heterogeneous; it is sharply segmented along ethnic, cultural, and caste lines that blur class distinctions and reduce political salience.

On the contrary, India's "big" landholders are an "awkward class" whom the Rudolphs have called "bullock capitalists" or "self-employed and self-funded cultivators of modest means" (pp. 333-92). In light of this subtle understanding of the agrarian structure, Vanaik's claims regarding the extraordinary powers of the bourgeoisie sound even more hollow. By assuming that "hegemonic classes" dominate India's polity and economy, he views the state as a mere instrument of class rule. In this framework, politics are controlled by classes whose goals and strategies determine the contours of political change. Vanaik conveniently ignores the insatiable, dictatorial ambitions of modern caesars which have undermined India's democracy.

Social Mobilization and its Implications for Governability

The essays of Bardhan, Frankel, and Shah address the ways in which politicized socioeconomic groups have impinged on Indian democracy. In contrast to the conventional Marxist view, Bardhan argues that the "heterogeneity" of India's "dominant proprietary classes" and the fact that "none individually is substantially more powerful than the others" make them "more interested in the maintenance of democratic processes" (p. 215). The democratic regime allows each member of the dominant coalition to appropriate the tangible public resources through "legitimate" means. This tacit alliance worked relatively easily in the first decades after independence.

Nevertheless, Bardhan warns against undue romanticization of India's "elite-managed democracy." The state's inability to meet the appetite of the dominant classes has eroded its legitimacy and capacity to mediate among competing interests. He argues that the "ravages of patronage politics" (p. 224) have diminished the pace of economic development. The unwillingness of the dominant alliance to play by the rules of democracy has unraveled the state's *raison d'être* and undermined democracy. Unless conflicts over subsidies and patronage are effectively curtailed and public resources reinvested properly, the author warns, the problems of governability will worsen. For Bardhan, the key to ameliorating the crisis is by building institutions that can resolve conflicts over resources peacefully.

Frankel and Shah examine how political activism among the formerly acquiescent has strained democracy. They paint a picture of diverse and restive groups — including students, workers, rural producers, "intermediate groups"

(that is, the "backward castes and lower-middle classes"²) and the poor and dispossessed — all clamoring for political recognition and state largess. Frankel documents the way that the "gradual revolution" has undermined Hindu society's hierarchical social order. This revolution has imbued the disadvantaged and the "scheduled castes" with confidence and has given them new opportunities to challenge the socioeconomic and political dominance of the "forward castes" and proprietary classes. Frankel argues that this struggle between the "forwards" and the "backwards" constitutes "a double assault on the caste system and the class structure" (p. 257).

Unfortunately, Frankel minimizes the fact that the breakdown in these states has much to do with the ploys of unscrupulous politicians. Nevertheless, she analyzes the changes in the relations between the state and society that have eroded the power of the Congress Party. Furthermore, she shows how new groups entering the political domain have fundamentally changed the rules of Indian politics, as the old Congress, upper-caste alliance appears to have broken down. She warns that unless the social and economic inequalities underlying the hierarchical social order are remedied democratically, politics will descend into violence and leave the nation more divided.

Shah, in his essay on the view of the underprivileged masses on Indian democracy, agrees with Kohli and Frankel that the poor and marginalized are no longer easily swayed by the populist and sanctimonious promises of demagogues. Elite groups can no longer depend on the poor for votes, or maintain their dominance by relying on the link between ruler and ruled that figured so prominently in the Nehru years. Rather, because state and local governments have failed repeatedly to make good on their promises of social and economic justice, the weaker groups are turning to political activism, using extraconstitutional and extraparliamentary means to fight for their slice of the economic pie. In place of Vanaik's scenario of an imminent revolution by a "worker-peasant alliance," Shah presents a richly textured study that explains why the poor have an ideological affinity for left-of-center organizations. His survey of "grass-roots mobilizations" shows that the mounting pressures from below may hinder democratic governability in the future. To enhance the state's legitimacy and its ability to promote sustained national development, Shah makes a compelling case for rejuvenating democratic institutions and empowering excluded groups.

If "India has had too much of the wrong kind of democracy and not enough of the right kind," as Kohli notes, can India turn towards the "right kind" of democracy? While the rise of Hindu chauvinism and its politics of ethnic and religious "cleansing" threaten India's future, democracy has become a permanent part of Indian politics, and when coupled with India's ecumenical tradition

2. The term "backward castes" is used to refer to an enormous range of *sudra* sub-castes of intermediate ritual status in the Hindu caste hierarchy between the upper or "Forward Castes" and lower SC/ST's or the Scheduled Castes (consisting of the erstwhile "harijans" or "untouchables") and the Scheduled Tribes. The Indian constitution recognizes the "backwards" and the SC/ST's as "disadvantaged" or "weaker sections" and has empowered the states to make reservations for these groups in government employment and educational institutions.

of tolerance, can lead to creative and harmonious solutions to the problems of governability. Despite the disillusionment with "politics as usual," Indians continue to maintain a deep philosophical commitment to democracy and embrace the idea that the state's authority is derived from the consent of the majority. Victory in elections is a prerequisite to political legitimacy in India. However, as Kohli notes, such norms and values alone may not be enough. India's democratic future depends on building communitarian solidarities that transcend the current exclusivist versions of culture and religion, and on replacing the monopolized apparatus of power and the centralized linkages between state and society with institutional structures that reflect the pluralistic character of Indian society. Whether or not the world's largest democracy can meet this formidable challenge remains to be seen.



