
Introduction: a genealogy of the 1990s

India, looked at from the West, appears as a predictable cascade of contrasting images of which it is impossible to make any sense: slums and skyscrapers, call centers and illiteracy, Bollywood and anti-Valentine's Day protests, McDonalds and farmers' suicides.

Suketu Mehta is despairing: "Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us" (Mehta 2004: 3). His book on Bombay, *Maximum City*, written while living for a short period in India, produces that familiar patchwork so deftly (gangsters and tough cops, mini-skirt-wearing socialites, close encounters with human shit) that it leaves the reviewer of *The Economist* exhausted: "Mr Mehta paints a picture of an India that is so vast, complex and confusing as to defy generalisation, and facing such a terrifying array of problems that it forbids optimism." And yet, Indians show "dauntless optimism." How can this be? "To many foreigners it seems almost unseemly: how can a country talk so proudly when so many of its people – 260m at the government's count – live below the poverty line?"¹

Thomas Friedman, on the other hand, is ebullient. "You know, you know you're in Bangalore, you know you're in the Silicon Valley of India ... when you go to play golf and the caddy on the first tee says you can either aim at the Microsoft building or the IBM building. You know you're at Bangalore when you see the Pizza Hut advertisement says 'gigabytes of taste.' And you know you're at Bangalore when you see street signs sponsored by Texas Instruments. This is one hot town ... it's producing a lot of energy, and it's going to be a real challenge to American workers."² Watch out, says Friedman, you know what it is like to be in India? "Shake a champagne bottle for about 15 minutes and take off the cork. You don't want to get in the way of that cork!"³

That's funny, because if you're "*in* India," then you're the cham-

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pagne, *you* gush out with the cork – it’s the cork that’s in your way, not you that’s in the way of the cork. This characteristic Friedmanesque flourish is, in this context, rather more than a mixed metaphor. It is revealing of what Mahmood Mamdani (2007) has identified as a “denial of a history and a politics” – what we might term the denial of an “inside” – to the non-West. There it is, mysterious and inscrutable, its intriguing surfaces always (only) available to be gazed upon from the outside.

Read that sentence from the review of *Maximum City* again. Is there any part of the world today – the USA, Canada, Europe – that is not “so ... complex and confusing as to defy generalisation, and facing such a terrifying array of problems that it forbids optimism”? And yet you can be certain that the particular collections of phrases above would be used – from a Western perspective – only for Asia, Africa, South America.

This book is an attempt to introduce general readers to the vast body of scholarship on India that does behave as if India has a politics and a history. The focus is on the period since 1989, but while 1989 is a critical turning point in India’s contemporary history, it is so for reasons very different from the global ones that relate to “end of the cold war.” Undoubtedly, there are important points of intersection between historical developments in India and those at the global level. As the subsequent chapters will show, however, there are significant internal conflicts and logics that have propelled these developments. Sometimes these are of all-India or “national” significance but, often enough, they are part of other smaller stories, not all of which tie up together into one neat narrative. We have therefore tried to tell these smaller stories even if that seems to deprive us of the coherence of a larger framework, leaving us with a more fragmentary account of India’s present history. In this sense we write from what we call a post-national perspective, one that seeks out political tendencies that work “under” the nation, resisting inclusion into the “larger” national identity, insisting on space/time trajectories that do not mesh with progressivist dominant narratives of nation and history.

Inevitably, the story is told with a particular slant, as all stories are. The slant arises from the (severe!) constraints of space as well

as from the intellectual and political perspective of the authors and their geographical location in Delhi. If readers are looking for a comprehensive account of all the trends shaping power and contestation since 1989, they will be disappointed. What they will find, though, is a selective account of themes that appear, from what we term our specific “New Left” perspective, to be significant. We explain what we mean by the New Left in more detail in Chapter 5, but briefly, from this point of view, *power* is the axis constituted by Nation and Capital, while *contestations* are of two kinds – one demanding inclusion within, the other running counter to these entities.

Our perspective is also, from the outset, feminist. Thus, while the women’s movement (or more accurately, women’s movements) in India are articulate, visible, effective, and rich with internal debate, we have chosen not to restrict this aspect to a separate chapter. Rather, feminist analysis is a thread running through the book, our attempt being to allow a critical grasp of gendered power relations to challenge orthodoxies of all kinds.

Collapse of the “Nehruvian consensus”

The political conjuncture of the years 1989–92 constitutes a truly ruptural moment in contemporary Indian history. At one level, it saw the complete collapse of the “Nehruvian consensus” – a consensus that combined three key features:

- a vision of a self-reliant economy based on an import-substituting industrialization strategy;
- a broadly secular polity; and
- a non-aligned foreign policy that not only steered clear of international military alliances but was also anti-imperialist, especially vis-à-vis the USA, even if inconsistently so.

At another level, this moment inaugurated what seems like an irreversible decline of the Indian National Congress that had ruled the country almost continuously barring three years (1977–79), since Independence in 1947, ushering in an era of coalition politics at the Center. From another angle it could also be said to have ushered in an era of instability, considering that in the seventeen years since then, there have been seven coalition governments at the Center.

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As we shall see below, however, the consequences of this instability were not altogether negative, for some social groups discovered immense liberatory possibilities in this moment.

Scholars have focused on different aspects of this conjuncture and referred to the period inaugurated by it variously as a “post-Congress polity” or a “globalizing economy” or one marked by the rise of the Hindu Right. All these descriptions point to certain important features of this period but their relation to the specific conjuncture needs to be understood. It should be emphasized that this political moment actually condenses within it a whole array of other social conflicts and developments and we may justifiably call it, after Louis Althusser, an *overdetermined* conjuncture, that is to say one where many different social conflicts merge into an explosive unity. Compressed within these four years are almost apocalyptic events in the life of the country:

- The irreversible decline of the Congress and the emergence of an era of coalition politics begun by its defeat in the 1989 elections.
- The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, providing for affirmative action for lower castes (OBCs – Other Backward Classes) and the violent battles fought around it that have permanently changed the nature and language of Indian politics. Further, we see the consolidation, around this event, of a wide range of regional, lower-caste political parties, which emerged thereafter as significant players in national politics.
- The assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991, by a Sri Lankan Tamil suicide bomber in the southern state of Tamil Nadu – a consequence of the perceptions of India’s role in Sri Lanka where the Indian Army had been stationed. The “Indian Peace Keeping Force” as it was called, was meant to assist the government of Sri Lanka in handling Tamil insurgency and turned out to be, ultimately, a complete misadventure.
- The initiation of the structural adjustment program, under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank after India went in for an IMF loan. This development was, of

course, facilitated by the collapse of the socialist bloc, especially the Soviet Union, which deprived the country of one of its traditional trading partners and supporters. More importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union in itself became the major argument for pushing through neoliberal reforms, delegitimizing the voice of left-wing opponents.

- The rapid rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a major claimant for political power at the Center and the unexpectedly successful mass mobilization by Hindu right-wing organizations leading to the demolition, in 1992, of the Babri Masjid, a 400-year-old mosque in the town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. This event also initiated a new phase of sectarian violence and the targeting of minorities, especially Muslims. Symbolically, it constituted the signal event that marked the defeat of secularism and secular nationalism, at least temporarily, and the transformation of public discourse in the media and elsewhere.
- The beginnings of the media explosion that was to gather momentum through the 1990s and 2000s. This period marks the beginning of the end of the state-run media and the advent of a whole series of new media technologies that radically transformed the nature and form of politics and the terrain of social and cultural life in this period.

These different conflicts and tendencies coming together in this conjuncture did not appear overnight. Indeed, they had been developing over a long time, accelerating over the decade of the 1980s. What is crucial about this moment is precisely that they are condensed here into a situation that was potent with innumerable possibilities and dangers.

The long 1980s – after the Emergency

In March 1977, India came out of the trauma of nineteen months of authoritarian rule, presided over by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, during which all constitutional rights and civil liberties had been abrogated, the freedom of the press all but annihilated and political opponents of the regime thrown into prison. The period, known in Indian political vocabulary as “the Emergency” after the

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specific constitutional provision that allowed for the suspension of democratic institutions and procedures under certain extreme circumstances, extended from June 1975 to March 1977. The lifting of the Emergency, following the electoral defeat of the ruling Congress Party, led to a veritable explosion of long accumulated democratic aspirations. It can also be argued that the very fact that Mrs Gandhi preferred to hold elections and seek democratic legitimation rather than opting for the route taken by many other third world dictators, demonstrates how deep were the roots that democracy had struck in India.

The Janata Party (JP) that had defeated the Congress at the elections had emerged out of the merger of a large number of disparate parties, from the socialists to the Hindu nationalist Jana Sangh (the earlier avatar of the BJP), united on the single issue of defeating the Emergency regime of the Congress. The JP brought a large number of lower- and middle-caste peasants/farmers into parliament – more than the parliament had ever had before (Corbridge and Harris 2000: 89). At one level, it was a conflict between this segment and the predominantly upper-caste, right-wing Jana Sangh that brought about the downfall of this government in a little over two years. But at another level, it was the attempt by the Jana Sangh and its fascistic mother organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to seize control of the JP-led state governments that really precipitated the crisis.

Throughout the period of the JP rule though, it should be borne in mind, there were major upheavals and mass struggles, as the accumulated democratic desire dammed by the Emergency burst forth in different ways: militant working-class struggles for wage revisions and restoration of trade union rights, students' movements and, to cap it all, a widespread police revolt against abysmal working and living conditions, which enveloped the police force of seven JP-ruled states. The police revolt in May 1979 was soon followed by a rebellion in the ranks of the Central Reserve Police. Such militant expression of widespread accumulated discontent, and the inability of the JP government to handle it, gave the impression of a dangerous drift, a galloping anarchy, especially to the vocal middle classes. It was in that context that the Congress seemed to appear to many

to be the only force that could restore a semblance of order and stability.

The Congress thus returned to power in January 1980, in an atmosphere of deep cynicism and apathy bred by two and a half years of Janata rule. In retrospect, however, it seems the cynicism and apathy that engulfed urban middle-class India around this time also had to do with the emergence of what the popular news magazine *India Today* called “peasant power” and its spectacular demonstration through huge rallies in the heart of Delhi, the capital of urban India. Rustic, unsophisticated, and untrained in the ways of the old Nehruvian generation of parliamentarians, these new and powerful leaders were clearly making a bid for power. But the picture was far more complicated than it might appear, for this was not simply a rural versus urban divide: condensed into this assertion of “the rural” were also the aspirations of an emergent vernacular elite that was at the same time predominantly lower- and middle-caste. These were the populist leaders of OBC castes that the Mandal Commission was to empower a little over a decade later.

To this new brand of vernacular leaders, then, the ideological battles between the Left and the Right might have appeared, says political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj, as insubstantial differences within a modernist bloc of privilege. Most observers and analysts on the Left, however, seem to have missed not only this very significant fact of cultural exclusion from the institutions of the Nehruvian period, steeped as they were in the normative world and etiquette of Western modernity; they also seem to have been completely oblivious of the lower-caste dynamics of this new assertion. Thus they saw merely the class aspect of this assertion and labeled these sections “kulaks” or “rich peasants,” missing the point of this upsurge altogether.

Let us return to our narrative. In 1980 the Janata government had collapsed and Indira Gandhi had returned to power. Throughout the decade to follow, her party continued to be in command of the situation, even though she herself fell to assassins’ bullets shortly before her five-year term was over. Her assassination was followed by large-scale anti-Sikh pogroms in many parts of the country – with the epicenter in Delhi. Led by Congress leaders, this bloodbath helped the party gather the Hindu backlash around it – so much so

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that even the RSS was momentarily to desert the “revisionist BJP” and rally around the Congress. And thus, in the midst of this blood and mayhem, Indira Gandhi’s elder son Rajiv Gandhi acceded to prime ministership.

Rounding up the highlights of the decade, *India Today* noted in its first issue of 1990 that though the 1980s were years of formal Congress dominance, “they were also years when the grip and authority of the Centre over the country’s several constituents steadily weakened.” The specter that the Center may not hold faced Indians time and again, the report said, as the politics of separatism, terrorism, communalism, and corruption flourished, putting the “entire political fabric” under unprecedented strain.⁴ On her return to power Indira Gandhi and the Congress had to deal, among other things, with two major secessionist movements, one in the north-eastern state of Assam and the other in the northern state of Punjab. The situation in Punjab was largely of the Congress Party’s own making, escalating what was essentially an issue of greater state autonomy into a violent separatist movement using terrorist tactics. Four years later, on October 31, 1984, Mrs Gandhi was shot by her own Sikh armed bodyguards.

The accession of Rajiv Gandhi to prime ministership became an important turning point in more than one sense. As has been often noted, he and his entourage, dubbed the “computer boys,” had neither any connection with the anti-colonial nationalist traditions of the Congress Party, nor any grounding whatsoever in politics. They generally gave the impression of being a group of impatient reformers who wanted to run the country in the manner of CEOs of corporate houses. This group, drawn from among Rajiv Gandhi’s old schoolmates, was basically fired by the idea of the new technological revolution powered by computers and microchip technology. “Preparing India for the twenty-first century” was Rajiv’s pet slogan. And to that end they wanted to rapidly bypass the bureaucracy – of the government as well as that of the Congress. In retrospect, however, what seemed like their major shortcoming was probably also their major strength. The fact that they were not constrained by many of the articles of faith of the old nationalist elite enabled them to push through some of the most significant changes that made possible

the introduction of new technologies, which eventually became an important vehicle for the transformation of life in the 1990s and thereafter. The case of the Telecom Commission, set up in early 1989, best exemplifies this style. Headed by Satyen Gangaram Pitroda (generally known as Sam Pitroda), a US-based businessman and a close confidant of Rajiv Gandhi, the Telecom Commission was set up “in the teeth of fierce opposition from the bureaucracy.” Pitroda explained that this was necessary because “The way telecommunications is changing, it is essential to have a flexible organization that can respond to changes.” The commission eventually heralded a fundamental transformation of the telecom scenario. In a country where there were a mere 4 million phone lines for a population of 800 million, Pitroda emphasized the setting up of a wide network of public phones – and given the low literacy and numeracy levels, he proposed that instead of automated machines, there be human beings handling these.⁵ Within a couple of years, all over urban India there was a wide network of what are called PCOs (public call offices) with facilities for long-distance calls as well. This became the basis, it is now recognized, of India’s telecom revolution.

The years of Rajiv Gandhi’s rule also saw the acceleration of the liberalization of the Indian economy – especially the dismantling of the import-substituting model of industrialization and the rapid opening up of international trade. This regime was responsible, in large measure, for making the 1980s the decade of consumption-led growth. Through the 1980s, the economy maintained a growth rate of 5.5 percent, with industry growing at an annual rate of 6.6 percent and the consumer durables sector itself growing at over 14 percent annually. This also signaled the coming of age of the Indian middle class, whose pent-up consumerist desire was tapped by the new regime to power the new growth of the economy. In the good old days of the Nehruvian consensus, this would have been scandalous: the entire idea of nation-building of that period was predicated upon curtailing present consumption and encouraging savings to finance the development of the capital goods sector.

The other major change since the days of Nehruvian nationalism was the new imagination ushered in by the Rajiv Gandhi regime, which has been described as that of the “global nation” as opposed

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to the idea of the territorial nation that recognized as its citizens only those who lived within its borders (Nigam 2004). In earlier days the diaspora had been the cause of much consternation for the nationalists, who saw in it what they called the “brain drain” – demonstrating an unfortunate lack of patriotic commitment to the nation. In the new dispensation, however, the diasporic Indians who had left the country and settled elsewhere, especially in the West, were seen as the resources to be harnessed for the new economic model. These diasporic Indians, referred to as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), were seen as people with resources for investing in the country’s economy, and as earners of precious foreign exchange. More importantly, however, they were now considered as “brain banks” whose skills and knowledge could be harnessed for the development of the country to “take it into the twenty-first century.”

When Rajiv Gandhi took over power after his mother’s death, he had appeared to the public at large as a relatively unblemished figure who was sincere and was out to clean up India’s public life. His speech to the Congress session in 1985, where he launched a frontal attack against powerbrokers in the party, helped enhance this image and he was soon being referred to in the media as Mr Clean. Within a couple of years, however, this Rajiv died a quiet death at the hands of the other Rajiv whose regime, in popular perception, was now mired in a whole series of scandals and corrupt defense deals. Emblematic of these was the “celebrated” Rs1,700 crore (1 crore = 10 million) Bofors gun deal in 1986, in which people close to Rajiv Gandhi were suspected to have received kickbacks. The Bofors matter first came to light on April 16, 1987, when Swedish Radio reported that Swedish arms manufacturer A. B. Bofors had paid bribes to Indian politicians and key defense figures to swing the contract in their favor. Even though Rajiv Gandhi denied that anybody had received such pay-offs, in the public perception he himself was not free of suspicion. As recently as July 2006, more than eighteen years later, a member of Rajiv’s inner circle, Arun Singh (then defense minister) said in a television interview that he was sure somebody had made money on the deal, though he was not sure it had been Rajiv himself.

Long before the controversies over the defense deals broke out

in public, widespread resentment against Rajiv Gandhi's brash and abrasive style had been building up. What were initially seen as the angry outbursts of an honest and clean reformer against the wheeler-dealing of his politically savvy colleagues, now seemed to the public at large as intemperate attacks on respected leaders – both in the opposition as well as in his own party. All this rapidly alienated him from a large cross-section of people, especially now that the new regime seemed to be immersed in high-level corruption of a sort that compromised national security. It was against this background that the entire opposition united to oust the Rajiv-led Congress regime in 1989. Demands for the resignation of the government started to become strident after the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) report tabled in parliament confirmed serious irregularities involved in the decision to acquire the Bofors guns. Seventy-three opposition members of parliament eventually resigned in protest against the government's refusal to quit. As Atal Behari Vajpayee, BJP leader, put it, soon after the resignations, "From left to right, we have all come together against a common enemy" (Gupta and Roy 1989: 24). Thus was the stage set for the entire opposition to fight the elections in tandem and for the National Front government to take power with outside support from both the Right and the Left.

This year, 1989, was also marked by brutal corporate wars. The rise of Dhirubhai Ambani and his Reliance Industries in this period is illustrative of a change that had already taken hold of India's corporate sector: cut-throat competition and large-scale corporate takeovers on the one hand, and booming stock markets amid serious political upheavals on the other. Reliance Petrochemicals' Rs575 crore public issue was a thumping success and underlined the appearance of another kind of middle-class investor. The mode of household savings among large sections of the middle class switched from holding bank accounts and purchasing savings certificates to capital markets. In a sense, in this decade "the Indian middle class announced its arrival." If, in 1980, there were just about 2 million small investors in stock markets, by 1989 there were 10 million (Vasuki and Taneja 1990: 65). This transformation should be read as a sign of many others, important as it was in itself.

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Enter the 1990s

This brings us right into the period with which the rest of this book will be dealing. Each of the separate chapters will take up different aspects of this extremely important and eventful period. One broad point, however, needs to be made here, conceptually speaking, which seems to us to be crucial in understanding the difference between the 1980s and the 1990s.

The end of the Emergency, as we have already noted, saw an explosion of accumulated democratic aspirations. This was manifested in many ways. First, it gave an opportunity to different kinds of marginalized forces to regroup and to make a decisive bid for power. The formation of the JP government was, in this respect, despite being a failed experiment, an important milestone in their long-term struggle for recognition. Second, the post-Emergency dispensation provided the opportunity for various mass struggles and movements to emerge in a context where outright repression had been de-legitimized as an appropriate response. Third, it led to a deep reflection on the entire experience and the need to develop adequate constitutional safeguards to prevent such a situation from happening again. Both the judiciary as an institution, as well as individual judges and lawyers, played an important role in this respect. In fact, they formed probably the most crucial component of the civil liberties and democratic rights movement that was subsequently to emerge as the voice of conscience of Indian democracy. Fourth, this period saw a veritable explosion of the media – especially a whole range of newspapers, news magazines, and journals that gave voice to all that had been suppressed during what came to be referred to popularly as the “dark days” of the Emergency. The media emerged as important watchdogs of democracy and freedom of expression. And central to the idea of democracy that can be seen to be at work in the new, self-defined role adopted by these institutions, was a concern with “the people” – the faceless and the voiceless who had had to bear the brunt of the Emergency in large parts of the country.

In other words, the judiciary and the media emerged in the aftermath of the Emergency as the sentinels of democracy – a role that was to be rapidly reversed in a matter of a little over a decade. It

is not that these institutions are now advocating authoritarianism; they are in fact engaged in the very different enterprise of *redefining* democracy. By the beginning of the 1990s, these two institutions were to emerge as the standard bearers of a whole new transformation of common sense that seeks to reduce democracy – rather, to redefine it – as a set of abstract rules *sans* politics and people. Another way of marking this shift could be by referring to a new and deep conflict that has probably always been present in India, and perhaps in all post-colonial societies. Political theorist Partha Chatterjee calls this a conflict between modernity and democracy, where modernity is about rights and sanitized public spaces evacuated of all the messiness that accompanies democratic practices and politics. Democracy, on the other hand, Chatterjee suggests, comes alive at the point where politics meets the popular. Chatterjee gives the name “civil society” to the realm of modernity and the domain of rights of which, of late, the courts and the media seem to have emerged as the champions. As opposed to this, he suggests the term “political society” to refer to the domain of democracy and the popular. Our use of these terms in the book will broadly follow Chatterjee’s nomenclature and we hope it will become clear to the reader, as we go along, why this distinction is so critical to an understanding of contemporary Indian politics.

In the first four chapters, we have tried to map the contours of what we think are the three signal moments of the conjuncture of the early 1990s. In Chapter 1, we discuss the revolt of the lower castes that becomes manifest in 1990, around the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report on affirmative action for the backward castes. Chapter 2 focuses on the politics surrounding the second moment, Hindutva (the politics of Hindu nationalism) in India, and the intra- and inter-community dynamics produced by it. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on different aspects of the processes grouped under the rubric of “globalization.” Chapter 3 focuses on the accelerated process of “accumulation by dispossession” and the larger question of the development model to which it is linked. We argue, however, that this is not the only story unfolding with “globalization” and that there are other new arenas opening up in interesting ways. We have called these the “new economies of desire,” and we explore them in

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Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, we present some instances of the processes of production of the Indian nation-state as one illustration of what we think is the historical impossibility of the project of attaining nationhood once and for all. Chapter 6 looks at the strivings for transformation and the state of the Left – both the mainstream institutional Left as well as what we call the “New Left.” In Chapter 7, we take a quick look at the Indian elites’ changing perceptions of India’s role in the world – this is one aspect of power where the contestations are purely between different sections of the elite, “people” figuring only in more quotidian ways as they routinely cross borders legally and illegally. Finally, in the Conclusion, we remark on the extreme heterogeneity of the present moment in India, where the left-of-center UPA coalition represents the contested space claimed both by the “globalizing” elites and alternative, left-wing voices and visions.