
Political change, political structure, and the Indian state since Independence

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India is, famously, the biggest democracy in the world. And, given the failures of democratic political systems in so many other former colonies, a good many commentators have found it remarkable that the country should have remained a democracy—except for the brief period between 1975 and 1977 when the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, declared an “emergency” and suspended the Constitution. This chapter traces the history of Indian democracy and the implications of political changes for the functioning of the key institutions of government.

In 1990 a leading writer on the politics of India, Atul Kohli, published a book entitled *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*. The idea of “crisis” in his title accurately reflected views that were generally held at the time. By the end of the 1980s the long period of the almost absolute dominance of Indian politics by the Congress Party was coming to an end. Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son, who had won an overwhelming victory in the 1984 General Election, following her assassination, had failed in his efforts to renew the organization of the party. His government had drifted, its programmes in disarray, and it had become embroiled in damaging charges of corruption at the highest levels, notably in the “Bofors affair”,¹

insurgencies had gathered momentum in Punjab and Assam, and latterly in Kashmir, and there appeared to be growing violence and instability across the country, whether in an “advanced” state like Gujarat, or a “backward” one like Bihar (states to which Kohli devoted chapters in his book). Shortly thereafter the fabric of the Indian polity was torn as never before, at the moment in December 1992 when a mob of supporters of the movement of Hindu cultural nationalism, spurred but not overtly led by the Bharatiya Janata Party—that had by this time emerged as the major force of opposition nationally to the Congress Party—tore down an old mosque in the north Indian town of Ayodhya. The 1990s then saw, on one level at least, greater political instability than India had ever known. There were five general elections in ten years in the 1990s (in 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, and 1999) whereas there had been only eight such elections in the previous 40 years, and the country experienced minority governments for the first time (starting with the government of V. P. Singh in 1989–90). Yet this was also the decade in which India changed course in terms of economic policy, as reforms that began to be instituted in 1991 brought in moderate liberalization. This, building on the earlier

development of a policy environment more sympathetic to private business, has borne fruit in recent years in exceptionally high rates of economic growth. Even before the end of the decade Kohli apparently reached a different judgment about the state of India's government from that which he had held earlier, according to the title of an edited book, *The Success of India's Democracy*. The counterpoint between Kohli's two titles suggests the enduring puzzle of the governance of India: how is that a country with so many contending social forces, characterized by high levels of everyday violence, has nonetheless remained united, politically a fairly stable parliamentary democracy, and lately economically successful? The answer lies in large part in India's constitutional design.

India's parliamentary democracy

The Preamble to the Constitution of India that came into force on 26 January, 1950 declared: "WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA [have] solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC." It seems that by the late 1940s it was almost a foregone conclusion that independent India would be a parliamentary democracy, and there was little debate on this point in the Constituent Assembly that drew up the constitution. It is sometimes thought that this was a natural inheritance from the British colonial rulers, but such a viewpoint discounts the extent to which a commitment to a universal franchise, and also to federalism and to secularism, became a necessary part of the struggle for independence. The leaders of the Congress movement needed to build national unity amidst the enormous diversity of India in terms of caste, language, religion, and local patriotisms,² and to manage the groundswell of popular opposition to colonial rule that built up after 1920. Their commitment to democracy was instrumental in the creation of national consciousness.³

Democracy under a universal franchise (extending also to women in India well before a number of western countries) was, in a sense, the gift of a small and privileged, mainly upper caste, professional elite. Certainly India does not fit at all well with structural theories about the social basis of movements of democratization, which hold, alternatively, that democratization depends on the existence of a developed middle class, or of a significant organized working class. Although India by the late 1940s did have an influential industrial bourgeoisie, and a politically mobilized proletariat in the major urban centres, it remained overwhelmingly a hierarchical agrarian society in which the power of large landholders remained pervasive, together with the subtle and not so subtle forms of social exclusion and oppression associated with caste. Pratap Bhanu Mehta has argued that although the nationalist movement and the impulse of social reform that "sometimes accompanied it" delegitimized the more extreme forms of oppression of Hindu society, it did not eliminate them:

[T]he structure of what we might call India's ancient social regime . . . survived into democracy relatively intact . . . The contradiction, between proclaimed political equality on the one hand, and deep social and economic inequality on the other, was too obvious to go unnoticed. But this feature, in part, constituted the uniqueness of the Indian experiment. Rather than political democracy following at least a social transformation of sorts, ultimately it was going to be the instrument of this transformation.⁴

It is not inconceivable that political democracy should be the instrument of social transformation—and the experience of certain regions of India, notably that of Kerala, shows that sometimes it has been.⁵ But with regard to India as a whole, as Mehta notes perceptively: "The irony is that the more unequal the background institutions and practices of society, the more likely it is that

politics will be a struggle to displace the holders of power rather than an ambition to bring about social transformation.”⁶ This point aptly reflects differences across India, and the character of politics in the Hindi heartland as opposed to parts of the south and the west.⁷ Formal political democracy has generally proved to be a limited instrument of social transformation in modern India where, however, Kerala, West Bengal and, perhaps, Tamil Nadu are exceptions to the general rule. Sudipta Kaviraj and Partha Chatterjee have both referred to Gramsci’s idea of “passive revolution” in explaining the process of social change in modern India, and have shown how, under the authority of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, it was believed that social transformation could be brought about from above through state–bureaucratic agency.⁸ Chatterjee argues, however, that even after more than 50 years of independence, it remains the case that the rights of democratic citizenship are meaningful only for a minority of Indians. Only a minority have a role in “civil society,” the sphere in which citizens come together on terms of political equality in voluntary associations through which they are able to deliberate on matters of public concern. The great majority of Indians are left still to struggle for their rights as citizens of democratic India.⁹ Even now the structure of India’s “ancien régime” remains strong.

Act one in the political drama of independent India: The Nehruvian state and the era of Congress dominance

The Indian National Congress, the organization that led the movement for Indian independence, was—it has been said—already “becoming the Raj” even before the end of British rule, as its leaders, notably Sardar Patel, Nehru’s powerful home minister in the first post-independence Congress government, were careful to preserve key institutions of

the colonial government such as the bureaucracy and the police. The Congress was the unifying force of the new India. Nehru could proclaim with justice at the time of the first general election to the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha, in 1952, the slogan that “India is the Congress, the Congress is India.” By this time, following the death of Patel in 1950, he himself held a position of undisputed authority in both party and government, though he was constrained by the majority of Congress conservatives within the Congress Working Committee.

The governments that Nehru headed pursued policies intended to build a broadly socialist, secular, modern state through central planning, but in the context of an accommodative political system. This was what he once proclaimed as India’s “third way,” namely, “planning under a democratic pattern of socialism.”¹⁰ Although India was far from being a one-party state, since the Congress was opposed by parties of both the left and the right throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, the dominance of Congress was rarely threatened either in the central government or in the states. The lone exception was when the Communist Party of India won control of the state government of Kerala in 1957. India’s political setup was described by W. H. Morris-Jones as a one-party dominant system and by Rajni Kothari, in similar terms, as a “dominant party system,” in which dominance coexisted with competition but without a trace of alternation of parties.¹¹ The central government bargained with state governments led by powerful state leaders from the Congress, although, ultimately, authority lay in New Delhi.¹²

Still, Kaviraj argued in 1991 that the political elite of the new Indian state in the 1950s and 1960s largely failed to develop a “common political language” shared with the masses.¹³ In the main, in the context of Indian society in the first 25 years of Independence, the Congress-dominant party system operated through a structure of clientelistic relations extending from local levels, both urban and

rural, up to the apex of the pyramid of power. Those who were locally powerful, commonly the larger landholders and the dominant peasant proprietors, became, over much of the country, critical brokers, mediating between the mass of the people and politicians.¹⁴ In the end these local power holders were able to defeat the reforming intentions of the Nehruvian elite.¹⁵

Act II: Congress dominance contested under the regimes of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi

Nehru's authority was declining even before his death in May 1964, partly as a result of India's defeat in a war with China over borders in 1962, while the modernizing efforts of the Nehruvian state were checked by the failures of planned economic development. Declining electoral support for Congress showed that these failures called into question the legitimacy of the exercise of power by the government that Nehru headed.

Nehru was followed in the office of prime minister by Lal Bahadur Shastri and then, after Shastri's death in 1966, by Nehru's daughter Indira, who the senior leaders of

the Congress mistakenly thought would be the pliant instrument of their will. In 1967, in the fourth general election to the Lok Sabha, the Congress majority was drastically reduced, and the party also failed to win majorities in no fewer than eight states. The era of Congress dominance was over, although it would take another 20 years before it was finally replaced at the end of the twentieth century by an apparently quite stable political system of opposing party coalitions (see Table 4.1 for a listing of India's prime ministers).

Indira Gandhi split the Congress party in 1969 in her struggle for authority with its senior leaders, the immediate cause being a dispute over the election of a new president of India. In the general election that she then called in 1971, she was successful in winning a convincing victory, in spite of having lost control of much of the Congress organization. She was successful, as observers noted at the time, in reaching voters "over the heads" of the local notables who mostly remained stalwarts of the party machine that had continued to be in the hands of Indira's opponents.¹⁶ Thereafter, the Congress organization that had served Nehru well, was broken—and it has remained so to the present.

Table 4.1 Prime ministers of India

	<i>Period of office</i>	<i>Party</i>
Jawaharlal Nehru	1947–1964	Congress
Lal Bahadur Shastri	1964–1966	Congress
Indira Gandhi	1966–1977	Congress
Morarji Desai*	1977–1979	Janata
Choudhary Charan Singh	1979–1980	Janata
Indira Gandhi	1980–1984	Congress (I)
Rajiv Gandhi	1984–1989	Congress (I)
Vishwanath Pratap Singh*	1989–1990	Janata Dal
Chandra Sekhar	1990–1991	Janata Dal
P. V. Narasimha Rao	1991–1996	Congress (I)
Atal Behari Vajpayee*	1996 (for 13 days)	Bharatiya Janata Party
H. D. Deve Gowda*	1996–1997	Janata Dal/United Front
Inder Kumar Gujral	1997–1998	Janata Dal/United Front
Atal Behari Vajpayee	1998–2004	Bharatiya Janata Party/National Democratic Alliance
Manmohan Singh	2004–	Congress (I)/United Progressive Alliance

Note: * indicates that tenure of office ended with resignation (rather than electoral defeat or death).

Atul Kohli revisited in the 1980s the constituencies studied 20 years earlier by Myron Weiner, who had found that the Congress Party had local organization and some semblance at least of internal party democracy. Both organization and internal democracy had withered,¹⁷ and nothing has been done since then to restore the party as an organization. What political scientists have described as the “deinstitutionalization” of Indian politics extends to most other party political formations, which are little more (if at all) than loose followings of more or less charismatic political leaders. Elections in individual states and in the country as a whole have commonly been subject to “wave” effects, and incumbents, more often than not, have been booted out of office by the electorate after one term. Politics has become a kind of business, calling for significant investments in order to win office, but with the prospect then of making major gains from kickbacks of various kinds.¹⁸

When opposition to her mounted in the mid-1970s, in a context of increasing economic failure and political unrest, Indira Gandhi used a clause of the last major act of the British, the Government of India Act 1935, that had been incorporated into the Indian Constitution, to suspend that constitution, with the declaration of an “emergency.” Democracy was suppressed for 20 months. In the elections that followed, in 1977, Indira was defeated, although less comprehensively than some had expected, since Congress remained strong in parts of the south and the west of the country. But, for the first time, India had a non-Congress government. The Janata Party was a coalition in which the Jan Sangh, founded in 1952 as the party of those sympathetic to arguments for Hindu nationalism, held the most seats. The Janata government appears, with the advantage of hindsight, to have been significant for this reason, and also because it saw a much greater share of members of the Lok Sabha than ever before who were drawn from among the peasantry. But the Janata government and the

broad-based Janata Party itself did not last, both broken by petty squabbles among their leaders. As a result, Mrs Gandhi was returned to office in January 1980, an event that had seemed almost inconceivable only shortly before.

In the 1980s, as James Manor put it: “India became increasingly democratic and increasingly difficult to govern.”¹⁹ Despite their electoral majorities, the authority of the Congress governments of both Indira Gandhi and then of Rajiv were fragile, being dependent on the personalities of their leaders. Both were leaders with attitudes rather than policies,²⁰ points of view rather than coherent ideology. Indira developed a highly personalized and centralized strategy of rule, destabilizing state governments if ever a political leader appeared to be developing an independent power base. In the process, however, she created opportunities for regional parties, like the new Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh. The Telugu Desam won success very quickly in 1983 after a year in which, because of Indira’s interventions, the state had as many as three different chief ministers. In one way, the Indian central state appeared to gain in strength, and yet its capacity to realize its will was weaker than before, so that it was described by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph as a “weak-strong state”²¹—a far cry indeed from the Nehruvian state.

Indian politics became increasingly criminalized, too, in this time, with more and more elected representatives having criminal records. There is sometimes an unholy alliance between politicians of this ilk and the police.²² And both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi made increasing concessions, in their efforts to maintain political support, to the Hindu nationalist constituency. Rajiv, in spite of winning the most crushing victory that Congress has ever contrived, taking advantage of the “sympathy wave” that followed his mother’s murder in 1984, signally failed to restore the Congress organizations and his government drifted. By the end of the 1980s there was a political vacuum in India.

Act III: Towards a new political order

Into the vacuum there stepped at first the Janata Dal, a political grouping formed mainly by politicians who had at one time or another been on the left of Congress, which won office in 1989 under the leadership of Vishwanath Pratap Singh. However, in order to govern, the Janata Dal government depended on the support from the outside of the successor to the Jan Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had won 86 seats, and of the communist parties. In the following year, V. P. Singh provoked opposition over his proposal to implement the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission (the Mandal Commission, as it was commonly known, from the name of the senior politician who had headed it), and lost the support of the BJP. In the meantime, the BJP had won control of two state governments for the first time, those of Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, in January 1990.

The Mandal Commission proposals called for an expansion of reservation of jobs in central government services and public undertakings for people from the officially defined “other backward classes,” that is, those castes and classes held to have been socially and educationally disadvantaged and who had not had the benefit of such reservations previously granted to persons from the lowest castes in Indian society, categorized as scheduled castes. In the outcry that followed from members of higher castes, V. P. Singh was soon forced to resign, to be replaced as prime minister by Chandrasekhar, at the head of a minority government that relied on Congress support. The latter government in turn lasted for less than six months before a fresh general election had to be called.

The most significant event at this moment, however, was the Rath Yatra (“chariot procession”) across the country undertaken by the BJP leader L. K. Advani, intended to culminate in “rebuilding the temple” in

Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, on the site occupied by an old mosque, the Babri Masjid, that is held to be the birthplace of the Hindu god, Rama. The Babri Masjid had become the object of increasing controversy since 1984, when a movement for the “liberation” of a number of holy sites in various parts of India had been launched on the grounds that they had been forcibly occupied by Muslim conquerors and converted to use as Islamic sites. The Rath Yatra was only the most recent in a series of carefully staged political dramas through which the BJP, together with its sister organizations of the sangh parivar—the “family” of associations pursuing Hindu cultural nationalism—were successful in winning wider support. From now on, the BJP, a well-organized force that recommended itself to the expanding middle classes as a party of order, in contrast to the fractious Janata Dal, became the center of opposition to Congress.

Through the 1990s, Indian politics eventually settled into a new pattern, not so much of stable two-party politics, but rather of stable “two-coalition” politics, albeit one in which shifts in the balance of power depend on the changing allegiances of minority, mainly regionally based parties. The general election of 1991 saw Congress returned to power, partly as a result of the sympathy vote brought about by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in the midst of the election campaign, but with the BJP, now with 120 seats and 20 percent of the popular vote, clearly in second place. Rather against the odds, the minority government of P.V. Narasimha Rao survived for a full term, but then, in 1996, the BJP emerged as the largest single party even though it did not succeed in expanding its support base. The government that the party formed survived for only 13 days, to be replaced by a 13-party United Front government, which was kept going under two prime ministers (Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral) with the outside support of Congress. When this support was withdrawn in 1998 and fresh elections were held, the BJP won more seats,

and the largest share that it has won so far of the popular vote (25 percent). However, the coalition that it headed failed in April 1999, and it was only after the thirteenth Lok Sabha elections of October 1999 that the party succeeded in managing the support of coalition partners in the National Democratic Alliance in such a way as to run the government through a full term. Then, in 2004, amidst the hubris of its claims to have made “India Shining,” the BJP lost power to Congress, which, on this occasion, managed the coalition arithmetic more effectively, and contrived to remain in office for five years and to win power again in the 2009 elections.

The third phase in the history of Indian democracy has, therefore, at last seen the establishment of a “competitive multiparty system which can no longer be defined with [exclusive] reference to Congress.”²³ In this new system, state-based parties have become nationally significant as never before,²⁴ their rise marking a definite shift away from the centralizing thrust of the Constitution. This change is reflected in the much more sparing use of Article 356, authorizing “President’s Rule,” through which governments at the centre have regularly dissolved state governments (Indira Gandhi used this instrument 39 times between 1966 and 1977; and it was used altogether upwards of 100 times before the end of the last century).

Another very important development in this phase has been what Yogendra Yadav has described as “the second democratic upsurge.” He refers to the way in which certain historically subordinated communities from among the other backward classes, and even some of the scheduled castes, have become politically mobilized and empowered through the electoral process, yet behind political leaders²⁵ and party political groupings that are far from being democratic in their own functioning.²⁶ The most recent, striking expression of this tendency is the majority won by the dalit leader, Mayawati, and her Bahujan Samaj Party in state elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2007. But, as Sunil Khilnani has put it, democracy

in India has come to mean little more than “elections”:

As the sole bridge between state and society, they have come metonymically to stand for democracy itself . . . This . . . has altered how political parties now muster support. The most recent period of India’s democracy has shown a tenacity of community identities, in the form of caste and religion, as groups struggle to construct majorities that can rule . . . But the fact that such identities were less significant for four decades after independence . . . only shows how much they are creations of modern politics.²⁷

So, as Khilnani says further, democracy has reconstituted social identities in modern India, but identities of caste and religion have also “bent the democratic idea to their own purposes.”²⁸

The compromised character of Indian democracy now, therefore, is that while representative electoral politics do represent the means whereby the mass of the people can hope to realize the self-respect that is, as Pratap Mehta argues,²⁹ democracy’s deepest aspiration, these politics provide for only the most limited kind of agency on the part of poor people. There is by now strong evidence for the first proposition, for example in the work of Javeed Alam,³⁰ on the reasons why in India, alone among major democracies, there should be an inverse relationship between income and social status and electoral participation. Yet electoral politics provide for only the most limited kind of agency on the part of poor people, if they actually have to enter into relationships of dependence with powerful intermediaries in order to secure their entitlements as citizens of the country.³¹

The institutions and functioning of the Government of India

Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have argued that, alongside the political changes that have

taken place over the last 20 years, the character of government has undergone quite radical change:

After 1989 both the planned economy and the centralized state have gradually given way to a regulatory state more suited to coalition governments in a multiparty system, to economic decentralization, and to more independent and competitive federal states.³²

An important part of this change in the character of the Indian state, they argue, is that there has come about a shift in the balance of power between the key institutions of government, in favor of the president, the supreme court, and the election commission, and at the expense of parliament, the prime minister, and the cabinet. These arguments are examined here, in the context of a review of India's government institutions.

Parliament

The Indian parliament is bicameral. The 552 members of the lower house, the Lok Sabha, which is the supreme legislative body, are elected under a universal franchise from single member constituencies in a first-past-the-post system. The ratio between the number of seats allotted to each state and the population of the state is supposed to be constant—although there are now concerns that this principle is giving an unhealthy weight to the more populous and socially “backward” states of the north.³³ Turnout in elections has on average been between 50 and 65 percent. The upper house, the Rajya Sabha (“Council of States”), has 250 members, 238 of them elected by state legislatures and 12 of them nominated by the president. The members, who sit for six-year terms (with one-third retiring every two years), can, and on occasion, have blocked legislation passed by the Lok Sabha. It is co-equal with the lower house in the electoral college for the election of the president.

Arun Agrawal concludes his recent analysis of the Indian parliament with the argument

that it is “able to ensure executive accountability to only a limited extent.”³⁴ There has been a steady erosion of procedural norms in the Lok Sabha over the last 30 years, and it has had a poor record in controlling the exercise of executive power. A striking demonstration of this weakness occurred in the ninth Lok Sabha when “19 bills, including one on constitutional amendment, were passed by members on a single day in March, without referral to any committee or any discussion.”³⁵ By now, as we have seen, there has emerged a vocal opposition in India, but because of the disunity of both governing and opposing coalitions, the result “has been less the establishment of accountability, more a pervasive concern for office among those who seek to represent the Indian people.”³⁶

The prime minister and the cabinet

India's system of government was set up following the conventions of British cabinet government of the time, which gave a leading position to the prime minister, but along with the principle of the collective responsibility of the cabinet. And this was how Nehru operated. Then, under his successor, Shastri, and more so under Indira Gandhi, the prime minister's personal secretariat (now the Prime Minister's Office), became an alternative source of influence to the cabinet. Mrs Gandhi's secretariat became an independent executive force; and the pattern of prime ministerial dominance of a weak cabinet³⁷ has continued and developed further. The personal authority of prime ministers has been weaker, however, since the time of Indira and of Rajiv Gandhi, with the series of hung parliaments (following the 1989, 1991, 1996, and 1998 elections) with minority governments. Atal Behari Vajpayee, a powerful prime minister in 1999–2004, was, however, constrained by parliament not nearly so much as by the influence on him of the other organizations of the sangh parivar, while Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–) is constrained by dependence for his personal

authority on the sanction of Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv's widow, as the effective leader of the Congress Party and of what is sometimes called India's "ruling [Nehru] family," as well as by the dependence of his government until mid-2008 on the support of the communist parties.

President³⁸

Under the constitution, virtually all executive powers are vested in the president, although they are supposed to be exercised on the advice of the prime minister and the cabinet. There have been longstanding concerns about the possibility of a president exercising discretionary power, but for most of the time, up until 1989, successive presidents of India restrained themselves.³⁹ Certain of the actions of Sanjiva Reddy during the misadventures of the Janata government in the late 1970s were controversial, and it is known that President Zail Singh considered dismissing the government of Rajiv Gandhi over the Bofors affair,⁴⁰ but these were exceptions to the general rule (see Table 4.2 for a listing of India's presidents). The era of hung parliaments since 1989, however, has created opportunities and even the necessity for assertive action by presidents because s/he is the referee in the game of government formation, while the perception of spreading corruption has pro-

vided space for presidents to act as guardians of fairness and constitutional balance.

Ramaswamy Venkataraman established an important precedent concerning the president's role in the formation of governments in hung parliaments when, in 1989, he first asked the largest single party (Congress, following that election) to form the government, a principle that has been followed by his successors. Among them, the one who most clearly asserted his independence, in the defense of what he saw as constitutional propriety, was K. R. Narayanan. In 1998 he refused a request from the Janata government of I. K. Gujral to impose President's Rule in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Following the election later that year of a government headed by the BJP, he appeared, through several actions, to criticize that government in a way that was unprecedented. He then pushed his powers to the limit in requesting Prime Minister Vajpayee in 1999 to establish, through a vote in the Lok Sabha, that he still had majority support (when he might have been expected to have waited for the opposition parties to table a non-confidence motion). In January 2000 his address on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the republic questioned the BJP government's efforts to change the 1950 Constitution by providing for a directly elected president. Narayanan, and his predecessor Shankar Dayal Sharma, did much to ensure that the use of Article 356 of the Constitution, authorizing President's Rule, has come closer to the position Dr B. R. Ambedkar (generally identified as the principal draughtsman of the constitution) intended for it, "a matter of last resort." More generally and most importantly, these two presidents "found constitutional grounds and appropriate occasions to act independently of the union executive in the public interest."⁴¹

Table 4.2 Presidents of India

<i>Election</i>	<i>President</i>
1950	Rajendra Prasad
1952	Rajendra Prasad
1957	Rajendra Prasad
1962	Dr. S. Radhakrishnan
1967	Zakir Hussain (died 1969)
1969	V. V. Giri
1974	Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed (died 1977)
1977	Sanjiva Reddy
1982	Zail Singh
1987	R. Venkataraman
1992	Shankar Dayal Sharma
1997	K. R. Narayanan
2002	Dr Abdul Kalam
2007	Smt. Pratiba Patil

The bureaucracy⁴²

It has been found that one of the critical features of those polities that have been more

successful in terms of economic development is the quality of their bureaucracies, in which it is considered that merit-based recruitment plays an important part.⁴³ The “higher” civil services of India in which the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is the senior body, are recruited through stiff competitive examination. So, the principle of merit obtains in recruitment—modified by the operation of reservations—although subsequent promotion is based very largely on seniority. The IAS is an all-India service and the practice of allocating large numbers of outsiders to a state cadre is intended to secure a higher level of impartiality. The service continues to be prestigious, and the quality of many officers is undoubtedly exceptionally high, but it is known that whereas it was formerly the preferred career for the most able, now many of the best young people opt rather for careers in the private sector.

The advent of the developmental state of independent India in the 1950s meant that members of the civil service, especially in the higher echelons, were expected to take on a much wider range of functions, and the service continues to face problems having to do with multiple goals. It remains capable of high-quality delivery but there are concerns about the deterioration of its general performance that is thought to have come about as a result of the reduced independence of senior bureaucrats and increased political interference. Political-bureaucratic relationships have been transformed, Brass argues, in a patrimonial direction, with the political leadership selecting officers who are personally loyal and will serve their narrow interests.⁴⁴ The system of transfers of civil servants is manipulated by politicians and is one basis for corruption,⁴⁵ while one of the results of the frequency with which even senior officers are transferred is their very short average tenure in any one post.

Below the senior levels of the civil service there is an enormous army of minor civil servants whose salaries constitute a huge drain on the public exchequer, who are notoriously

inefficient and mired in petty corruption. The extent to which the IAS is involved in corruption is disputed, but senior officials, who can exercise a great deal of influence on public decision making, are certainly part of the dominant class of India and important beneficiaries of the actions of the state.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This review of political change and the functioning of the institutions of government in India suggests two strong conclusions, in answer to the “puzzle of governance” set out in the introduction. First—in line with the Rudolphs’ argument concerning the shift to the “regulatory state”—it seems clear that increased political competition, and the instability of the 1990s, have strengthened some institutions (the president, the Supreme Court and the election commission) and weakened others. The weakening of the centralizing thrust of the Indian Constitution has probably had positive consequences. The fact that the constitutional design sets up many “veto points”—checks on change, ranging from the formal requirements for judicial review to the informal checks of procedural delay within the bureaucracy—has negative consequences, no doubt, but provides defenses against the abuse of power.⁴⁷ This points to the second conclusion. The Indian state remains, it is said, “excessively procedural and rule bound.” This makes for inertia, for sure, but also limits the capacity of particular social forces to manipulate the state. As Kapur and Mehta argue, it makes in the end for the systemic stability that has puzzled so many observers of Indian politics and the state.⁴⁸

Notes

- 1 The “Bofors affair” was a major corruption scandal in which Rajiv Gandhi was among those accused of having taken illegal commissions from the Swedish firm Bofors, for

- winning a bid to supply field guns to the Indian Army.
- 2 On the formation of regional patriotisms in India see Christopher Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
 - 3 Nehru wrote, for instance, in 1938 that a directly elected assembly would “represent the people as a whole”; cited by Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 27. And see Sumit Sarkar, “Indian Democracy: The Historical Inheritance,” in Atul Kohli (ed.), *The Success of India’s Democracy* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001).
 - 4 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 52–53.
 - 5 On Kerala, see Patrick Heller, “Social Capital as Product of Class Mobilization and State Intervention: Industrial Workers in Kerala, India,” *World Development*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (1996), pp. 1055–71; and V. K. Ramachandran, “On Kerala’s Development Achievements,” in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Indian Development* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).
 - 6 Mehta, p. 48.
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- 30 Javeed Alam, *Who Wants Democracy?* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004).
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- 33 Ashish Bose, "Beyond Population Projections: Growing North–South Disparity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 15 (2007), pp. 1,327–29.
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- 35 Agrawal, p. 94.
- 36 Agrawal, p. 94.
- 37 Brass, p. 46.
- 38 This section draws extensively on Rudolph and Rudolph, "Redoing the Constitutional Design"; and on James Manor, "The Presidency," in Kapur and Mehta.
- 39 Brass, pp. 43–45.
- 40 See note 1.
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- 44 Brass, p. 52.
- 45 On the transfer system see Robert Wade, "The Market for Public Office: Why the Indian State is Not Better at Development," *World Development*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1985), pp. 467–97.
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- 47 Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Introduction," in Kapur and Mehta.
- 48 Kapur and Mehta, p. 12.