

How the Politics of Recognition Enabled India's Democratic Exceptionalism

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Abstract This article explores a significant puzzle: the persistence of modern representative democracy in post-independent India. It demonstrates how a politics of recognition, based on identities of caste, language, and religion, is crucial for understanding the origins, character, and trajectory of modern Indian democracy. These politics suffer various infirmities. Yet liberal, Marxist, and republican critiques of the politics of recognition in India, while offering valid theoretical alternatives and powerful moral visions, also suffer their own limitations. Perhaps more importantly, they evade questions of historical possibility, political efficacy, and practical reason that confront every political theory. The relative historical predominance of the politics of recognition in post-independent India, in contrast, reflects its capacity to engage powerful social imaginaries that enabled the realization of democratic norms, institutions, and practices. The general argument put forward develops several key themes that distinguish Charles Taylor's philosophical vision of alternative modernities—the power of social imaginaries, nature of explanation in the human sciences, and vicissitudes of culture, politics, and history—to explain the trajectory of modern Indian democracy.

Keywords India · Democracy · Politics of recognition · Charles Taylor · Social imaginaries · Practical reason

Introduction

The persistence of modern Indian democracy, in the face of unprecedented historical odds, has attracted considerable attention in recent years. On the eve of independence in 1947, following two centuries of British colonial subjugation, few observers believed that India

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could be governed through a representative democratic regime based on universal suffrage. This is not to deny its impressive advantages. The anticolonial movement, led by the Indian National Congress, was a genuine mass formation.¹ The party had acquired legislative experience in limited representative elections at the local and provincial level in the 1920s and 1930s. Crucially, its political leadership was also committed to establishing a modern representative polity and used its wide-reaching organizational apparatus to accommodate the interests of a grand social coalition. But the obstacles to democracy loomed far larger. India was a country marked by widespread illiteracy, massive poverty, and a variety of entrenched social hierarchies. It was also a land of incomparable cultural difference, of deep regional diversities and a plurality of religious faiths. Historically, no country with these characteristics had attempted to construct a modern representative democracy. Moreover, modern social theory provided few reasons to believe that India could defy the weight of history. Hence, most observers thought that its democratic experiment was doomed to fail (see Varshney 1998). Indeed, several thought it might not even last as a nation—a plausible fear given its inequalities, differences, and the level of violence, trauma, and displacement that accompanied its partition at Independence.

Yet the institutions of modern representative democracy survived in India. The radical idea of formal political equality has spread throughout Indian society, transforming its bases of authority, modes of struggle, and languages of contestation (see Khilnani 1999). Rather than posing an obstacle, its postcolonial elites sought to manage the problem of diversity amidst inequality by constructing a semiconsociational democratic regime, which recognized the claims of particular social groups in the formal political arena.² Put differently, a politics of recognition, based variously on identities of caste, language, and religion, was a crucial feature of democratic struggle in post-independent India. The unexpected success of India's fledgling democracy exposed the limits of modern social theory and political understanding.

Still, many scholars express a sense of disquiet about its recent condition. There are many reasons for their lament. Despite high rates of economic growth in recent decades, poverty continues to afflict the vast majority of its citizens. Social inequalities—between classes, sectors, and regions—have grown. Many political institutions—such as parties, parliament and the state bureaucracy—have become less deliberative, rule-bound, and impartial in their functioning. The criminalization of politics—the entry of individuals with criminal records into the electoral arena in particular—is cause for mounting distress. Religious, caste, and gender-based violence, although varying in intensity geographically and over time, nevertheless remains a living threat (see Brass 1997a; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2004). One particular argument, however, has struck a powerful chord: the failure of modern Indian democracy to produce a citizenry bound by a sense of reciprocity (Mehta 2003: 35). According to proponents of this view, a strong *demos* requires citizens to make responsible moral choices in the public sphere in their capacity as autonomous individual agents. But the dominance of particular group identities in India's democratic imaginary and the belief that such collective identities are the most effective agents of

¹ However, it faced opposition from many different quarters—communist parties, Hindu nationalists, various peasant, caste, and regional movements—which contested the Congress' claim to represent the nation. See Chatterjee 1993; Chaturvedi 2000; Sarkar 1983.

² As Varshney (2008) notes, there are several other reasons why democracy survived in India: the decision of the Congress to forsake rapid industrialization for democratic stability in the early decades after Independence; the dispersed pattern of ethnic cleavages and workings of federalism, which localized outbreaks of conflict; and the commitment of its political leadership, particularly under Nehru, to democratic practices.

emancipation, undermines the development of such an ethos. Indeed, it arguably exacerbates the poverty, inequality, and violence that mar contemporary Indian democracy.

What explains the emergence of the politics of recognition based on distinct group identities in post-independent India? Was the consolidation of modern Indian democracy a result of these politics? To what extent do its contemporary burdens impact their legacy? Do we need to embrace other intellectual traditions—such as liberalism, republicanism, and Marxism—to remedy the deficits of democracy in India, or are its various forms of identity-based politics capable of overcoming their own limitations?

This essay addresses these questions. It demonstrates how the politics of recognition in India, based on identities of caste, language, and religion, is crucial for explaining the origins, persistence, and character of its democratic regime. The recognition of historically subordinate groups enabled the consolidation of modern Indian democracy by allowing its poorer citizens to vernacularize important norms, institutions, and practices (see Yadav 1998). The achievements of group-based recognition in India are not unvarnished, however far from it. As mentioned above, many scholars trace the travails of contemporary Indian democracy to its legacies. Indeed, their reservations echo well-known critiques of the politics of recognition in Europe and North America. Yet such appraisals, while theoretically powerful and morally significant, cannot themselves fulfill the claims for dignity that fuel a politics of recognition. Perhaps more importantly, they evade questions of historical possibility, political efficacy, and practical reason that confront every political theory. What enabled the politics of recognition to acquire deep resonance in modern Indian democracy, in other words, was its relationship to the powerful social imaginaries that informed its citizens' shared understandings. In making this general argument, I develop several key claims put forward by Charles Taylor in his famous yet controversial essay, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Yet, I also wish to show the relevance of several other themes that animate Taylor's larger philosophical vision of alternative modernities—such as the power of modern social imaginaries, nature of explanation in the human sciences, and vicissitudes of culture, politics, and history—for understanding the trajectory of modern Indian democracy.

Taylor on the Politics of Recognition

The publication of *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* represented an important moment in contemporary political theory. It posed a significant question: whether classical liberal theories, institutions, and practices could promote social equality and civic freedom in deeply diverse democracies. Taylor believed that a universal liberal conception of politics, where equality meant granting individuals uniform treatment, rights, and entitlements, was ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of integrating minority communities in multicultural societies. This was for two reasons (1994: 37–43). On the one hand, the philosophy of liberalism was reluctant to extend special compensatory rights to individuals belonging to communities that suffered grave historical injustices. To consider the descendants of slavery, indigenous nations, and other subaltern groups with equal respect and reverse the damage inflicted upon these communities by centuries of exploitation, oppression, and humiliation, enjoined granting their members special treatment. Treating individuals from such communities identically, in short, jeopardized the promise of genuine social equality. On the other, the principle of neutrality in liberal societies reflected, in practice, the prerogatives of a dominant culture in a given society, or at least allowed it to express its preponderance through the weight of numbers or by

imposing a self-justifying hierarchy of values. Worse, it could threaten the survival of subsidiary minority cultures, whose distinctiveness was a source of well-being for their members, which thus required protection and encouragement. Ultimately, liberal democratic societies might need to grant collective rights to particular communities to compensate for long-standing historical injustices or to ensure their cultural survival (1994: 58).

The underlying justification for differential treatment was the fundamentally dialogic character of human life. According to Taylor,

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression... But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us—what George Herbert Mead called “significant others” (1994: 32).

In contrast to the atomistic conception of a person, which conceives of individuals as socially rootless beings (Taylor 1985a), our identity “is partly shaped by recognition [by others] or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others” (1994: 25). The lack of proper social recognition could take various forms. It could mean the absence of significant cultural ties—bound by language, ethnicity, race, region, and religion—which diminished the lives of individuals in historically marginalized communities. It could also manifest itself through inferior, demeaning, or dehumanizing beliefs and images of, and behavior toward, particular social groups. Addressing these forms of misrecognition and their sources, consequently, became an imperative for liberal democratic societies. This was particularly the case in contemporary Western democracies in the late twentieth century that exhibited deep social diversity.

Taylor’s pioneering thesis drew admiration from scholars pursuing similar projects (see Kymlicka 2000; Parekh 2000; Phillips 1995; Tully 1999; Young 1990). But it also found critics, sympathetic and otherwise. Classical liberal proponents questioned the legitimacy of granting special rights or collective entitlements to particular social groups on ascriptive grounds in order for these communities to survive (see Barry 2000). Some criticized the static, bounded, and homogenous notion of culture that allegedly informed Taylor’s argument (Benhabib 2002). Such a conception threatened to obscure the hierarchies of power, wealth, and status within particular communities—a matter of concern to feminists in particular (Benhabib 2002; Okin 1999)—and the fact that all cultural formations were sites of political contestation and historical change. Indeed, some even argued that the disempowerment of historically subordinate groups was caused by structures of exclusion, making cultural protection a moot point (Jung 2008). Most significantly, liberals defended the right of any individual to “cut loose” (1994: 58) from their communities, as Taylor put it, to pursue their own conception of self-realization. The search for authenticity that defined the modern self, according to Taylor (1992), often compelled individuals to struggle against forms of convention in their communities of belonging (Appiah 1994). Consequently, liberals maintained that individuals, and individual rights, remained the foundation of any defensible theory of justice.

Traditional Marxism offered a second line of critique (see Gitlin 1995; Fraser 2000). The problem with a politics of recognition based on specific group identities was its failure to tackle the material economic bases of inequality in society. The rise of identity-based politics even threatened to displace the politics of redistribution in liberal democratic societies based on class, whose political fortunes were already embattled due to the ascendancy of capital, multinational corporations, and elite social networks in an

increasingly global economy (Fraser 2000: 110–112). In fact, proponents of the politics of identity neglect the material economic basis of misrecognition, as if it were a “free-standing cultural harm” (Fraser 2004: 128). The insights, history, and commitments of traditional Left politics were still crucial to achieving democratic equality.

Lastly, the politics of recognition as propounded by Taylor clashed with some principal tenets of the civic republican tradition (Beiner 1995; Sandel 1982; Walzer 1983). On the one hand, Taylor shared the belief that modern democratic life required active civic participation and strong cultural roots in order to flourish. This was partly for instrumental reasons. As Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville cautioned, the greatest threat to modern representative democracies was “soft despotism,” a tutelary power that arises when citizens pursue their private interests without considering the public good. The enjoyment of modern liberty required vigorous civic participation. It also required a community with a distinctive political culture that encourages loyalty, belongingness, and mutual self-sacrifice among its members—virtues necessary to safeguard democracy. Contemporary proponents of civic republicanism extolled these virtues for substantive reasons as well. A vibrant form of democratic citizenship, in which members of the political community deliberate the common good, offered the greatest potential for human self-realization (Beiner 1995: 105).

Yet the politics of recognition also sat uneasily with civic republican arguments. Taylor’s claim that modern liberal democracies could justifiably grant special rights to specific minority groups, either to ensure their cultural survival or rectify historic injustices, could easily collide with the notion of a single common good or a civic political culture. The politics of recognition based on particular group identities threatened to fragment the national frame of modern democratic states. The potential centrifugal tendencies of the politics of recognition, understood as preserving group differences within a larger political community, could jeopardize the sense of commonality, belonging, and fraternity such communities required.

Some of these critical responses raised significant issues that Taylor overlooked. His understanding of the sources of inequality and misrecognition emphasized the cultural, not the economic. This is not to say that he was unconcerned with the costs of severe material deprivation and dynamics of class in advanced capitalist societies (Abbey 2004: 26). But his original essay failed to address the potential clash between a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution and ask if they might be squared (in contrast, see Fraser and Honneth 2003). In addition, the tension between individual liberties and collective rights could also pose serious challenges. In practice, the protection of particular social communities would clash with the rights of individuals in many scenarios. Given these conflicts, many scholars remained wary of the politics of recognition based on particular group rights.

Yet some critics distorted Taylor’s position. He was fully aware of the fluidity of cultures. Indeed, his concern for the survival of distinct cultural groups only makes sense in the context of their vulnerability to change, crisis, and collapse. Taylor was also conscious that individuals frequently needed to challenge the values, expectations, and practices of their first community in order to lead an authentic life, since he believed that “we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (1994: 33). Hence, certain individual liberties, like *habeas corpus*, were fundamental and inviolable (1994: 61), and he realized the dangers of a fractured democratic polity in which distinct cultural groups espoused rival political visions without a larger overarching commonality (1995). But what distinguished his position was an awareness that demanding choices existed, that no single theory could resolve the ensuing tensions, that some goods were irreconcilable—a mark of his belief, as one commentator

put it, that philosophy should embrace the untidiness of life (see Rogers 2008). The difficulty of reconciling liberalism, democracy, and deep social diversity was a genuine dilemma. It required innovative conceptual work and a willingness to reconsider time-honored commitments, in order to meet a new social reality.

These difficulties were not unique to the advanced industrial democracies of the West at the end of the twentieth century, however, nor were they historically new. The question of whether to grant differential collective rights and whether to recognize these rights on the basis of particular social identities, was an imperative that faced many postcolonial nations upon their independence several decades earlier. The manner in which India's postcolonial elite resolved these questions marked the fate of its unprecedented democratic experiment.

The Politics of Recognition in Modern India

The desire for equality—for equal standing in various realms—fuelled three major forms of identity-based politics in postindependent India. Each was essential to the consolidation of its nascent democratic regime. The first concerned the politics of language and region. In the 1950s and 1960s, several non-Hindi speaking movements in various regions protested against plans to impose Hindi as the official state language, demanding that New Delhi recognize their dominant regional vernaculars as official subnational languages. The idea was not new. During the anticolonial struggle, the Congress party had organized its provincial units along regional linguistic lines to facilitate greater political communication within the movement. But Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, remained wary. He shared the fear of several contemporary observers that acceding to these agitations would lead to the balkanization of India (see Harrison 1960). The postcolonial Indian state agreed to reorganize its federal system along distinct linguistic lines, however, on the condition that these popular regional movements abandoned secessionist aspirations (see Dasgupta 2001).³ It was a providential decision. Rather than instigating the break-up of India, the recognition of these regional linguistic demands fashioned over time the creation of vernacular public spheres in the states, with their own parties, political idioms, and party systems. These developments expanded political participation by making the state less distant and generated a constellation of "peoples" with complex, multiple, and complementary identities. These identities were constituted in dialogic fashion—one could be equally Marathi and Indian, or Tamil and Indian, or Telugu and Indian; indeed, some observers noted that one could not invoke the idea of being an Indian *without* possessing one of these regional identities (see Kaviraj 1998: 164). There were tragic exceptions, alas. The failure of New Delhi to respect the special asymmetric powers granted by the Constitution to the contested Himalayan region of Jammu and Kashmir represented the Achilles' heel of this regionalized national imaginary (see Bose 1997). The unwillingness of the Centre to devolve sufficient autonomy, power, and resources to the states of the Northeast, whose contentious political relationship and complex ethnic demands vis-à-vis the Centre began under British colonial rule, remains the other long-standing failing of India's federal political system (see Baruah 1999; Sathyamurthy 1998; Verghese 1997). Yet

³ The States Reorganization Act of 1956 redrew provincial boundaries in line with distinct regional-linguistic zones. The Centre divided Madras into Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu; Bombay into Maharashtra and Gujarat; Punjab into a smaller core Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh. The Centre did not recognize all claimants, however. Successful linguistic movements had to have a popular base and eschew secessionist demands or attempts to reorganize their states on grounds of religion (Brass 1997:169–174).

these historic failures underscore how important the reorganization of states along distinct regional-linguistic boundaries and devolution of powers to the regions were, in general, for the stability and integrity of the Union.⁴ The failure to respect such principles in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, and in the Punjab in the 1980s, has been a principal cause of the insurgencies in these regions. Yet India remained a model “holding together” federation that militated against the culturally homogenizing tendencies of the traditional nation-state (see Stepan et al. 2007). The survival of India as a nation and the deepening of its democracy, in other words, required the recognition of its distinct regional communities. The integrity of the whole depended on the survival of its parts.

The second form of the politics of recognition that deepened Indian democracy involved the traditional caste order. The postcolonial state legally abolished untouchability. It reformed various Hindu practices that denigrated the standing of members of formerly untouchable castes—*dalits*, literally “the downtrodden,” and *adivasis*, indigenous tribal peoples—in various public domains. The most significant of these measures was the Hindu Code Bill, which legalized inter-caste marriage and divorce, granted equal rights of inheritance to sons and daughters, and banned polygamy. Other acts protected the right of dalits to enter Hindu temples and authorized the state to handle their administrative affairs. Collectively, these provisions created a new single code of personal law that broke with the idea that traditional Brahminical principles applied to all Hindus (see Chatterjee 1997). Finally, the postcolonial state recognized individuals belonging to these subaltern groups as deserving special treatment. It established strict numerical quotas—known as “reservations” in India—for the most historically oppressed communities in higher educational institutions, legislative assemblies, and government posts. Indeed, the state recognized these subaltern classes through constitutionally defined categories: *dalits* as Scheduled Castes; *adivasis* as Scheduled Tribes. The justification of such recognition was to compensate for, if not redress, the brutal historical injustices suffered by individuals in these groups and to promote the integration of society (Galanter 1997). Significantly, it was based on grounds that one could lessen discrimination against specific individuals only by empowering the groups to which they belonged.

The results of these reforms have been mixed, and passionately debated, in subsequent decades: over whether these measures helped to entrench or weaken caste identities; over whether reservations uplift the more economically privileged sections of a caste as opposed to their poorer members; over their impact on the meritocracy, autonomy, and impartiality of the state and its institutions. These concerns acquired greater prominence in the 1980s with the decision to extend similar recognition to other lower caste groups, designated as “Other Backward Classes,” which ignited fierce intellectual debate and political conflict, and whose ramifications continue to unfold (I return to some of these issues below). The recognition of caste-based identities by the state, however, has proven to be salutary in several crucial respects. Since the 1970s, lower caste political leaders have formed their own parties, which have become a vehicle for the participation, empowerment and self-representation of traditionally subordinate groups in political society. Indeed, members of lower caste groups tend to vote in greater numbers in elections than their social betters—a striking contrast to the record of minority electoral participation in advanced industrial democracies in the West (see Yadav 2000). The greater representation of lower caste

⁴ In comparative terms, India was a relatively centralized federation. The Centre continues to enjoy disproportionate powers in financial, administrative, and political realms (see Corbridge and Harris 2000: 28). Nevertheless, from the beginning, the states possessed important devolved powers, which have grown in recent decades.

individuals in government offices, state assemblies, and the national parliament has expanded the realm of democracy by infusing popular idioms into national political discourse, undermining old hierarchies of rule and demonstrating the possibilities of collective self-representation. In short, the politics of recognizing caste-based identities has ushered a “silent revolution” in modern Indian democracy (Jaffrelot 2003).

Finally, the third form of political recognition that anchored Indian democracy after independence was understanding of secularism: a regime that sought to maintain “principled distance” from and between different religious communities (see Bhargava 2000). As previously mentioned, the postcolonial state intervened in the affairs of the majority Hindu community in order to eradicate barriers against lower-caste groups.⁵ It also refused to reorganize states, allocate public quotas, or reserve electoral constituencies on grounds of religion (Bhargava 2000: 50).⁶ But it allowed minority religious communities—Muslims in particular—to retain personal laws governing their practices of marriage, inheritance, divorce, and so on. The special dispensation toward Muslims also led the Centre to constitutionally enshrine asymmetric rights—privileges that, as mentioned above, have been breached in practice—to the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir upon its accession in 1947. The state pursued this differential secular regime in order to protect minority communities against the spectre of majoritarianism by the dominant Hindu community—a palpable fear in the wake of Partition.

The legacies of India’s secular regime, similar to its attempts to reform caste, continue to attract much debate. Critics argue that by privileging Muslim law and granting special rights to Kashmir it produced flagrant contradictions that were bound to erupt. More ominously, these reforms created the possibility for cynical political leaders to manipulate the fears of different minority groups for short-term electoral advantage. The decision by Indira Gandhi to pursue this strategy in the early 1980s in Assam, Kashmir, and Punjab, in order to restore her power after the failure of her Emergency rule in the mid-1970s, provided a pretext for others to press similar claims (see Brass 1997b: 192–228; Manor 1988). It cost her her life at the hands of militants whom she had backed against the demands for greater political devolution by moderate Sikh groups.⁷ The accession to office of Rajiv Gandhi, her son, initially resisted these short-sighted calculations. Yet he soon adopted similar opportunistic practices vis-à-vis conservative Muslim leaders following the Shah Bano affair.⁸ Indeed, it was for these reasons that militant Hindu nationalists attacked

⁵ The codification of Hindu personal law had its drawbacks, however, as far as women were concerned. Put simply, it destroyed the diversity of Hindu law, especially its more liberal versions (Menon 1998: 244–245). Moreover, the majority of Supreme Court verdicts in India have denied women equality in cases of discrimination, regardless of whether they claimed differentiation vis-à-vis men or invoked the principle of equivalence to men (see Kapur and Cossman 2001).

⁶ For a more elaborate defense of the idea that secularism requires “principled distance” from religious communities in general, see Bhargava 1999.

⁷ In 1984, Mrs. Gandhi ordered the army to attack the Golden Temple, a revered Sikh institution in Amritsar, to dislodge Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a radical preacher whom she had supported against the moderate leadership of the Akali Dal. The attack compelled two Sikh bodyguards to assassinate her on 31 October 1984. The Congress retaliated by massacring thousands of innocent Sikh civilians in northern India. For background on the roots of the conflict and how it unfolded, see Brass 1997b: 193–201.

⁸ In 1987, Rajiv Gandhi supported the passage of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill that, notwithstanding its title, adopted the provisions of *shariat* into secular law—a proposal he had previously opposed. But a civil court decision to grant alimony to a divorced Muslim woman—Shah Bano—contrary to *shariat* ignited protests among conservative Muslim leaders. Mr. Gandhi’s desire to retain their electoral support, in the wake of growing identity claims by Hindu nationalists, altered his view (Corbridge and Harris 2000: 115).

the postcolonial Nehruvian state for being “pseudo-secular” on grounds that it intervened in religious affairs of different communities on unequal terms, “appeased” minority groups and stigmatized the majority Hindu population as dangerous. These criticisms were not a plea to banish religion from politics, however, on the contrary. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the electoral front of Hindu nationalism, sought to remake India in culturally homogenous terms—a land defined by “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan.”. The party and its sister organizations advocated a politics of *Hindutva* that sought to celebrate the standing of the majority Hindu community on grounds that it had been misrecognized by the postcolonial state. It was on the basis of these arguments that Hindu nationalists demanded the construction of temples on various dispute sites presently occupied by mosques; the abrogation of Article 370 in the Constitution, which extended special asymmetric rights to Jammu and Kashmir; and the introduction of a uniform civil code that would eliminate special personal laws for minority religious communities. The pursuit of this militant agenda in the 1980s and 1990s produced deadly results: the destruction of the Babri mosque in the town of Ayodhya in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which led to the massacre of thousands of civilians; attacks on other religious minorities in various parts of the country in subsequent years; and most recently, the pogrom against Muslims in the western state of Gujarat, the laboratory of militant Hindu nationalism (see Hansen and Jaffrelot 2001; Jaffrelot 1999; Vanaik 1997). The violence unleashed by these forces has been the worst since the Partition.

These political developments have led some to believe that the prior recognition given to non-Hindi speaking regions, lower castes, and religious minorities provoked militant Hindu nationalism. Yet these early political reforms were necessary, as argued above, to embed representative democracy in India and ensure its survival as a nation. Paradoxically, they have also served to check the forces of militant Hindu nationalism in recent years, which they had earlier provoked. The relatively lesser appeal of *Hindutva* among lower-caste groups in northern India, and its more general weakness in the south as a whole, has tied the BJP to its predominantly high caste, upper class, and metropolitan elite base in northern India. It has forced the party to shelve its more virulent proposals, and it has compelled the BJP to share power with other political formations in multiparty coalitions, representing various social identities and material interests, in order to capture high office in New Delhi. These political accommodations have not eliminated the threat of militant Hindu nationalism. But such pacts, compelled by the logic of recognition in India and its institutional scaffolding, have lessened its dangers (see Ruparelia 2006).

Critiques of the Politics of Recognition in India

What have been the shortcomings of pursuing social equality through a politics of recognition based on distinct group identities? Can a politics based on such identities overcome their limitations? Or do other schools of thought and political traditions possess greater capacity to relieve the burden of inequality that persists in modern Indian democracy? These are large, difficult, and complex questions. I will address some of the concerns they raise, however, by focusing on the issue of caste.

The first inadequacy of a politics of recognition based on lower caste identity concerns its relationship to questions of distribution. Historically, there is a significant relationship between caste-based hierarchies and relations of class, even if they are not reducible to each other. Yet, India's Marxists have long contended that lower caste parties, particularly since

the late 1980s, focus disproportionately on the politics of status, respect, and self-esteem.⁹ Lower caste politicians have sought to empower their constituents through policies, strategies, and instruments that appeal to their shared identity: by expanding the scope of reservations in higher education, government services, and legislative assemblies; seeking high elected office for themselves; and pursuing symbolic acts of pride, resistance, and insubordination in the public sphere, such as building statues of lower caste leaders, renaming city streets, and so on. As a result, these parties have ignored the underlying economic interests that shape the massively unequal distribution of material resources in Indian society. Indeed, according to Marxists, it is these basic class antagonisms that produce the subordinate position of lower caste groups. They also divide their ranks. This is evidently the case regarding the question of reservations for OBCs. Compared to *dalits* and *adivasis*, OBCs are a more economically heterogeneous grouping of castes in the countryside, ranging from agricultural laborers and sharecroppers to small- and medium-sized cultivators. The former seek higher agricultural wages and effective land reform; the latter greater, state largesse to subsidize agricultural inputs and higher food prices (see Bêteille 1997: 157; Hasan 1999: 70–121; Weiner 2001: 200–207). Their basic material interests clash. The failure of these lower-caste parties to engage adequately in a politics of redistribution has consequently deprived their most dispossessed constituents of the material goods—primary education, basic health care, productive employment opportunities, transfers of assets and wealth—necessary to achieve an adequate standard of living (see Hasan 2000). Similarly, the recognition of religious personal laws has not alleviated the shocking material deprivation of Muslim communities in India, whose circumstances today are worse than even *dalits* and *adivasis*.¹⁰ Comprehensive social empowerment requires a politics of distribution based on material interests and class struggle.

The second failing of group-based recognition, according to liberals in particular, is that it disfigures the ideal of justice. Some assert that a key imperative of modern democratic politics is to fashion a citizenry in which individuals are bound to each other by a sense of reciprocity (Mehta 2003: 35). The politics of recognition in India has allegedly failed to achieve this task, however. On the one hand, lower-caste parties often seek power for particularistic ends: to direct the spoils of office and benefits of representation to their own communities. The politics of recognition in India has led to competition between particular lower-caste groups based on envy, of the kind that Tocqueville observed in America and attributed to democracies in general.¹¹ It inculcates a sentiment that transforms what should be basic social entitlements into special collective privileges, encouraging a politics based on “competitive debasement,” where empowerment means the subordination of others (Mehta 2003: 46). Empowerment is seen, thus, as a nondivisible good. The result is a jockeying for position within existing social hierarchies, allowing the dialectic of master–servant relations that characterize inter-caste relationships to persist, rather than a transformative collective project (Mehta 2003: 89). On the other, a politics of recognition based on groups in Indian society leads to a polity “diverse in our unities” rather than “united in diversity” (Mehta 2003: 15). It views individuals primarily as members of particular social groups and seeks equality between groups, thereby undermining the

⁹ Prior to the 1980s, the parties of the middle and lower castes tended to champion *kisan* (farmer) politics, to address their material agricultural interests. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, many of these parties increasingly pursued quota politics, making reservations their major policy issue. See Jaffrelot 2000.

¹⁰ See the Sachar Committee Report, Government of India, 2006.

¹¹ Tocqueville primarily saw the danger in America, however, as the withdrawal of individuals into their private lives. See Siedentop 1994.

possibility of equality between individuals (Mehta 2003: 62). Only by engaging in politics as individuals and seeking equal respect in universal terms, argue liberals, can we escape the restrictions of identifying as members of any single group and the nonreciprocal relations such a politics engenders.

Finally, the politics of caste-based recognition is seen to undermine the demands of citizenship and a sense of nationhood. This invokes a familiar republican sentiment: democratic politics requires civic virtue, public deliberation, and shared understandings to realize a larger common good. Realizing these goods requires either a democratic society—of the kind Tocqueville witnessed in the early nineteenth century New England—or a form of politics that can inspire these habits and feelings in its citizens. A flourishing democratic society must aspire toward an ideal of citizenship based on reciprocity between individuals. It should nurture a generalized moral order. Yet, the nonreciprocal character of caste-based politics in India has, on this reading, discouraged its citizens from making choices that reflect an enlightened self-interest—the pursuit of particular individual ends that takes into account the interests of others (Mehta 2003: 47), nor has it instilled the mores of a truly free people.

Assessing the Critics of Recognition in India

How should we assess these criticisms of the politics of recognition in India? To what extent are the burdens of contemporary Indian democracy a legacy of its various identity-based politics? Can such a politics generate new forms of solidarity that bind its citizens as equal individuals? Each of the preceding critiques reveals the dangers of narrow identitarian politics. Yet each perspective inevitably suffers from its own inadequacies.

The parties of the communist Left Front have made great strides toward greater social equality in their bastions in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. The presence of a coherent ideological vision, strong political leadership committed to constructive class compromise, and a powerful cadre-based organization with extensive links to the peripheries enabled successive Left administrations to implement land reform, increase public spending on agricultural wages, and introduce local self-government at the village level. These reforms decreased income poverty, empowered local communities to determine their collective welfare, and redrew the balance of power in the countryside (see Heller 1999; Herring 1983; Kohli 1987).¹² Crucially, they also created a powerful electoral bloc for the Left Front, enabling the coalition to alternate in power in Kerala and win successive assembly elections in West Bengal since the late 1970s—an unprecedented feat in any long-standing consolidated democracy in comparative historical terms.

Yet as the towering *dalit* leader B.R. Ambedkar (2004) observed during the anticolonial movement, Marxists in India have often been blind to, or dismissive of, the significance of caste as lived social experience: how its hierarchies of value, practices of purity and pollution, and the modes of humiliation demean individual lives and entire communities and violate the idea of a democratic public sphere (see Omvedt 1993). The high political ranks of the Left Front, a coalition of communist parties, are occupied by upper caste groups (Corbridge and Harris 2000: 117–118). Furthermore, notwithstanding their bastions,

¹² For a more critical account of the achievements of the Left in West Bengal, see Mallick (1994).

the parties of the Left are marginalized in much of the country. Their electoral success in other states and political influence in national politics depend on their willingness and ability to enter multiparty coalitions with lower-caste and regional parties, whose contemporary influence is the result of their demands for recognition in previous decades.

Liberals correctly highlight the inequalities of power, wealth, and status that can mark tightly bound communities. Indeed, more than liberals per se, feminists—of various persuasions—have been particularly sensitive to position of vulnerable groups within different communities, given that women have traditionally suffered the greatest deprivation. The conflict between personal interests and communal laws became a political flashpoint in the 1980s with the Shah Bano affair, which pitted the material interests of a Muslim widow against the minority personal laws of her religious community, in the context of rising Hindu nationalism. The incident exemplified the quandary facing advocates of minority group rights who simultaneously wished to protect individual well-being without abetting the homogenization or majoritarianism (see Menon 1998; Jayal 2002: 101–151). In such circumstances, the politics of competing identity claims quickly runs aground.

Yet a liberal point of view can be guilty of assuming the very essentialism associated with group-based politics. Caste is not a frozen social identity. Its meaning, self-understandings, and practices have changed over time. The use of caste-based appeals in politics has transformed an order based on hierarchy, ordained status, and roles and positions defined by ritual to one based on plurality, negotiated status, and more political definitions of roles and positions (Kothari 1998: 444). Put differently, such changes have occurred *through* politics (see Khilnani 1999). Moreover, in recent years, many lower-caste parties have included high-caste individuals within their ranks to expand their appeals—a form of complex social engineering from below (see Jaffrelot 2003). Granted, such developments have been driven by the exigencies of competitive electoral politics. It is also still unclear whether these strategic compulsions will encourage a more integrative form of lower-caste politics, capable of breaking its tendencies to fissure, or merely a more extensive form of “ethnic head counting” in a bid to capture state power (see Chandra 2004; Pai 2002). Nonetheless, these changes belie the stasis, rigidity, and inwardness simplistically attributed to these political movements.

Finally, the fear that a politics of recognition based on particularistic group identities has undermined larger social purposes is real. The charge made by critics of meritocracy—that its principles *simply* reflect hierarchies of power—undermines the basis on which their demands for equality finally rest. It inhibits judgments of worth that all societies must make if they are to achieve excellence in various fields of endeavor and avoid the leveling of distinction to which democracies are ostensibly prone (see Kaviraj 1998: 171–175), and the belief that democratic institutions can never represent an inclusive social order undermines their historical legitimacy. These classic republican arguments warrant serious attention.

Yet it is important to make these arguments without discounting how the legacies of the old regime skewed the practice of citizenship in post-independent India—as if we could have had another history of the present. India was not a democratic society in 1947. Hence, there are limits to exploring the insights of Tocqueville of *Democracy in America*, as several leading scholars have imaginatively done, to assess the predicament of modern Indian democracy. Indeed, the challenges that faced democracy in India at independence arguably resembled to an equal degree those of France in the late eighteenth century, as Tocqueville described in the *Old Regime and the Revolution* (1983): of a society divided and enumerated, if not atomized, by the British colonial regime into distinct communities of

caste, ethnicity, and religion (Chatterjee 1993; Cohn 1990; Dirks 2001).¹³ In these circumstances, it was natural, if not inevitable, that a politics of recognition based on distinct group identities would emerge after Independence. To put it more firmly: the desire for equality of condition unleashed by the idea of democracy—a central theme of *Democracy in America*—compelled a politics of recognition based on differential group entitlements *due* to the absence of equal social conditions in pre-independent India.¹⁴

The shortcomings of the preceding critiques suggest a more fundamental issue. The problem that critics of the politics of recognition in India (and perhaps elsewhere) face is that they invoke theories of society that discount—to use Taylor's insightful formulation—powerful social imaginaries. For Taylor,

a social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society. (2004a: 2)

Social imaginaries constitute the larger background understanding of a community. They evoke its constitutive practices and the “distinctions of worth” these practices signify. According to Taylor, social imaginaries differ from theories of society in three significant ways (2004a: 24). First, imaginaries of society are often implicit, tacit, or semiconscious within a given community, whereas social theories tend to assume a more abstract, explicit, propositional form. Members of a society may not be able to fully articulate these background understandings, but they remain powerful nonetheless (Abbey 2004: 3). Second, social imaginaries frequently tap into the common understandings of ordinary people in a given community. In contrast, elites are normally the progenitors of theories of society, which may be far removed from ordinary social understandings. Finally, social imaginaries are thus shared widely throughout a society, whereas theories of society are typically only fully grasped by the few in most circumstances. As a result, social imaginaries enable common practices, and these practices in turn allow participants to actualize their meaning.

Of course, theories of society bear a relation to the imaginaries that inform their members' self-understandings (see Taylor 1985b: 101). A social theory can make explicit what is important about our norms, institutions, and practices, and how these features relate to each other and define our self-understandings. Theories of society can also alter the latter by making us grasp more clearly what our practices signify so that we “stumble less” and see “more clairvoyantly” (1985b: 111). Finally, critical social theories can illuminate new interpretations of our norms, institutions, and practices, showing the gap between the

¹³ A number of scholars have recently turned to *Democracy in America* to understand the situation in contemporary India. But they have curiously ignored the *Old Regime and the Revolution*, a text whose relevance is just as great. Indeed, after writing *Democracy*, Tocqueville studied contemporary European views of caste in India, which influenced his interpretation of the *ancient regime* and how its politics contributed to the failure of revolution. See Siedentop (1994).

¹⁴ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, perhaps the most eloquent, forceful and committed liberal intellectual in India today, is fully aware of these historical origins. He remarks: “a society that is adept at humiliating its members is more likely to make them adept at humiliating others than teach them about justice” (2003: 46). He also recognizes that the salience of caste was “rational” given that it was an “axis of domination and insubordination in Indian society,” that “the search for social coalitions inevitably involves appeals to group identities,” and that “there were few other competing ideologies that allowed people to make sense of their circumstances [after Independence] in the way caste did” (2003: 75–77). Yet there remains a tension between his awareness of the salience and consequences of caste in modern Indian democracy, on the one hand, and his appeal that modern Indian democracy must become a sphere of individuals exercising independent choices as good liberal citizens. His explanation of the burdens of democracy in India, in other words, seems to undermine his prescriptions for change.

meanings we attribute to them and their actual ramifications, or suggest radically different ways of ordering collective life. Such critical perspectives expose the potentially conservative, hierarchical, or dehumanizing aspects of the imaginaries that dominate a given society. The promise of critical social theory is to develop better norms, institutions, and practices. Ultimately, it is to inspire new social imaginaries capable of achieving greater human freedom.

Yet the move from theory to imaginary, as Taylor argues, is not a simple matter. Unlike natural science, theories of society cannot explain their object of study in a fully independent manner. Social theories seek to explain how a given community works. But how it works is partly constituted by the self-understandings of its inhabitants. Hence, we cannot validate a social theory through a simple correspondence test “where a theory is true to the extent that it correctly characterizes an independent object” (Taylor 1985b: 101).¹⁵ As theorists, we are implicated in our study of society, not external observers. This does not mean that “anything goes,” however, or that “thinking makes it so” (Taylor 1985b: 102). We still need to assess the validity of competing social theories. Some may be partial, distorted, or even wildly mistaken. Moreover, even if a particular social theory clarifies ill-understood aspects of how our communities function, it may still be unsuccessful in *practical* terms. To be effective in politics, it must bear some relationship to the social imaginaries that inform our common self-understandings. For this reason social theories, according to Taylor, should be compared to physical maps. They should elucidate the most important features of a given society. For practitioners, “the proof of a map is how well you can get around using it” (1985b: 111). As Taylor remarks:

The transition [from theory to imaginary] can only come off, in anything like the desired sense, if the ‘people’, or at least important minorities of activists, understand and internalize the theory. But for political actors, understanding a theory is being able to put it into practice in their world. They understand it through the practices that put it into effect. These practices have to make sense to them, the kind of sense the theory prescribes. But what makes sense of our practices is our social imaginaries (2004a: 115).

As importantly, if not more, the practices have to make sense to the individuals whom political actors seek to represent.

The political test of a social theory, in other words, lies in its practical efficacy. Success in politics requires pragmatism. “Getting it right” in politics is partly a function of seeing things as they are. It requires a “sense of reality,” which

is to see the data (those identified by scientific knowledge as well as by direct perception) as elements of a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically—that is, in terms of what you and others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you. To seize a situation in this sense one needs to *see*, to be given a kind of direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data, and not merely recognize their general characteristics, to classify them or reason about them, or analyze them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them. To be able to do this well seems... to be a gift akin to that of some novelists... a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life (Berlin 1996: 46).

¹⁵ Indeed, since the writings of Thomas Kuhn, even the idea that natural scientists engage their objects of study with complete objectivity, impartiality and detachment is unconvincing.

But it is also a function of practicality—“of what works for us”¹⁶ (Taylor 2004b: 75–76). Imaginative theoretical reasoning may be necessary to explain ill-understood causal structures of the social world. But political activity demands, ultimately, the exercise of exemplary practical reason, and if we are to explain the world adequately, let alone try to change it, it also requires us, as theorists, to cultivate such capabilities ourselves. It is not a task that can be simply relinquished to those who practice real politics. The character of politics as it is has to inform our theories.

Understanding the relationship between social imaginaries and theories of society, then, helps to explain the trajectory of modern Indian democracy. As Taylor noted years ago,

An appropriate concept—or concepts—of politics in India will only arise through an articulation of the self-definition of people engaged in the practices of politics in India (1985c: 133).

The reason why a politics of recognition based on caste, language, and religion dominated rival political movements in India was its relatively greater ability to recast the common self-understandings, institutions, and practices of ordinary people in ways that made sense of their desire for equality. It also required an able political leadership, led by Nehru, capable of recognizing these claims and how to make them realizable (Khilnani, 2008). This is not to say that liberalism, Marxism, and republicanism, or identities based on classes or individuals, were not espoused in Indian society, nor is it to suggest an orientalist view that caste, language, and religion, or other “traditional” social markers, defined its essence. A cursory examination of the anticolonial movement and Constituent Assembly debates reveals the plurality of distinct political visions prior to Independence. Each influenced the shape of the postcolonial democratic regime. Yet neither Marxism, nor liberalism or republicanism, at least in their classical unrevised versions, adequately engaged the norms, institutions, and practices of caste, language, and religion that dominated India's social imaginary. To be successful, each perspective required an act of translation that would resonate with popular self-understandings and concrete social practices (Kaviraj, 2008).

Hence, critiques of the politics of identity in India, whether at Independence or more recently, face a dilemma. They are universal in scope but thin in practice; theoretically elegant and normatively compelling, but politically weak. To say this is merely to characterize the predicament we face. But it helps to frame the problem more clearly. Politics is a highly competitive field of activity that demands rigorous practical judgment of the possibilities and constraints of particular historical situations (Hawthorn 1991: 157–189), and modern democratic politics, whatever else it may entail, is always a game of numbers. Hence, it raises two questions: Was it possible to organize subaltern groups in the highly mobilized modern representative democracy *without* appealing to distinct social identities that resonated culturally in post-independent India, such as religion, language and caste? and Is it possible today to transcend the limits of these identities, and the politics they champion, without appealing to them in some way? It enjoins those who view a politics of recognition as limiting to show how we might actually refashion the identities they find so restrictive. This requires the exercise of skill, imagination, and judgment in understanding the conditions of participation that existed in India at Independence and how these have altered over time. Such a task demands a political theory that articulates an ethical vision

¹⁶ Taylor contrasts the idea of ‘getting it right’, which involves the pursuit of and belief in a notion of truth, with a potentially radical notion of ‘what works for us’ that is solely concerned with practical efficacy. It is hard to imagine a particular social arrangement ‘working well’ in a sustainable fashion, however, which bore no relationship to things ‘as they are’ in some significant sense.

within historical possibilities. Such a conception of politics highlights the importance of *phronesis*: the capacity to realize ethical values in a manner that is practical, contextual, and particular (Flyvbjerg 2001: 57). It demands practical wisdom more than theoretical reason, however pure, clear, and systematic the visions of theory may be.

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