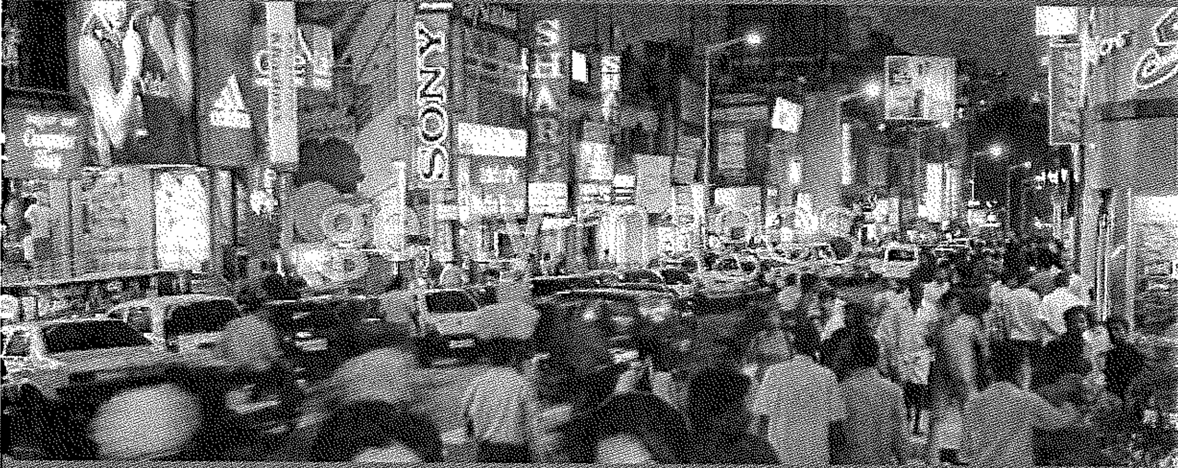
Understanding India's New Political Economy

A Great Transformation?



Edited by

Sanjay Ruparelia
Sanjay Reddy
John Harriss
Stuart Corbridge

Understanding India's new political economy

A number of large-scale transformations have shaped the economy, polity and society of India over the past quarter century. This book provides a detailed account of three that are of particular importance: the advent of liberal economic reform, the ascendance of Hindu cultural nationalism, and the empowerment of historically subordinate classes through popular democratic mobilizations.

Filling a gap in existing literature, the book goes beyond looking at the transformations in isolation, managing to:

- Explain the empirical linkages between these three phenomena
- Provide an account that integrates the insights of separate disciplinary perspectives
- Explain their distinct but possibly related causes and the likely consequences of these central transformations taken together

By seeking to explain the causal relationships between these central transformations through a coordinated conversation across different disciplines, the dynamics of India's new political economy are captured. Chapters focus on the political, economic and social aspects of India in their current and historical context. The contributors use new empirical research to discuss how India's multidimensional story of economic growth, social welfare and democratic deepening is likely to develop. This is an essential text for students and researchers of India's political economy and the growth economies of Asia.

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Preface

This book is an attempt to map the transformations of modern India over the last three decades. From the 1930s until the 1960s, India galvanized attention throughout the world, given its centrality in the nationalist struggles that swept the world, debates over planning, democracy and modernization in the post-colonial world and the non-aligned movement during the Cold War. In contrast, it seemed to be a backwater in international affairs for much of the 1970s and 1980s, attracting less scholarly interest and media attention outside the country than many other regions. How different things are at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when India is quite rightly seen as a major emerging power and one of the most important centres of the global economy. As India's enormous global significance has come to be recognized, so interest in the country has grown. India could once, fairly safely, be ignored. This is no longer the case: there is now a massive demand for more information and better understanding. Of course, India is home to some of the finest social scientists and historians in the world, and their ideas and analyses of how their society has transformed itself over the last few decades deserve to be widely known and appreciated. And they increasingly are, as greater interaction occurs between them and scholars around the world.

This book emerged from one such encounter: an informal workshop organized by Sanjay Reddy and Sanjay Ruparelia at Columbia University in November 2003. A number of scholars from India, Europe and North America, crossing the disciplines, sought to understand India's many transformations, stimulated at least in part by the analysis presented by Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss in their jointly authored book, *Reinventing India*. Encouraged by the liveliness of these conversations the four of us organized a more formal workshop at Columbia in September 2007. The papers in this volume were originally written for that gathering. We believe that together they provide an original analysis, addressing the three most important large-scale transformations that have reshaped India since around 1980: the advent of liberal economic reform, the ascendance of Hindu cultural nationalism and the empowerment of historically subordinate classes through popular democratic mobilizations. Investigations of economic reform in India have illuminated its implications for economic growth, sectoral changes and social welfare; similarly, the rise of Hindu cultural nationalism has generated significant analysis of its implications for citizenship, welfare and India's relations with the world. Finally, many astute

observers have examined the promise and limits of popular democratic politics. Given their scale and complexity, however, there are few analyses that attempt to explain the nexus between these three momentous transformations. *Understanding India's New Political Economy* aims to address this critical absence. Its underlying premise is that only an account that seeks to explain the causal relationships between these central transformations, through a coordinated interdisciplinary conversation, can adequately capture the dynamics of India's new political economy.

It is a pleasure for us to acknowledge, with gratitude, the friends and colleagues who have helped us from the inception of this project to its completion. We thank especially those who actively participated in the 2007 workshop – Ronald Herring, Jos Mooij, Arvind Rajagopal, Raka Ray and Rathin Roy – as well as those who contributed as greatly to it as discussants – Devesh Kapur, Sudipta Kaviraj, Atul Kohli, Dilip Mookherjee, Philip Oldenburg, Vyjayanthi Rao, Siddharth Varadarajan and Ashutosh Varshney. We also wish to express our appreciation to Vidya Dehejia, director of the Southern Asian Institute at Columbia, and her very able staff (especially Ann Levy, Zainab Mahmood and David Seidenberg) for graciously coordinating and hosting our two meetings and taking such good care of us during the proceedings. Our project would have been impossible to pursue without the generous support of the Southern Asian Institute, LSE-Columbia Alliance Collaborative Research Fund, Provost's Fund at Barnard College, Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University and the India China Institute at the New School. Last but far from least, we are grateful to our contributors for their patience, support and good humor in responding to our questions, comments and requests, and to Douglas Voigt and Vanessa Chan for helping us prepare the final typescript.

Sanjay Ruparelia, Sanjay Reddy,
John Harriss and Stuart Corbridge
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1 Introduction

India's transforming political economy

Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss, Sanjay Ruparelia and Sanjay Reddy

This book brings together essays first presented at a conference on India's political economy held at Columbia University in September 2007. The editors asked scholars from different intellectual backgrounds to consider whether and how India's political economy might have been fundamentally transformed in recent years. The volume seeks to describe, explain and assess the changes that have taken place in a rigorous, interdisciplinary and synoptic manner. In particular, it focuses on the three most important transformations in India's political economy since the 1980s: the influence of liberal economic reforms, the ascendance of Hindu cultural nationalism, and the empowerment of historically subordinate classes through popular democratic mobilizations.

Each of these large-scale transformations has received much scholarly attention in recent years. In contrast to previous decades, however, there have been very few attempts to provide a synoptic causal account of India's political economy. Ideally, a synoptic account would (a) explain the empirical linkages between these three phenomena; (b) provide an account that integrates the insights of separate disciplinary perspectives; and (c) explain their distinct but possibly related causes and the likely consequences of these central transformations taken together. Needless to say, constructing such an integrative perspective is extremely difficult for any individual. The lack of an encompassing view reflects the pace, scope and complexity of change set in motion by each of these transformations. Yet our capacity to grasp the contemporary dynamics of India's political economy, and to assess whether and how they are new, arguably requires such an analysis.

We seek to address this critical intellectual challenge. Our underlying premise is that only a synthetic account – one that seeks to explain the causal relationships between these central transformations through a coordinated intellectual conversation – can help to capture the dynamics of India's new political economy in their totality. Accordingly, this volume brings together work by both senior and younger scholars from a variety of disciplines. Each contribution examines how a particular actor, policy domain or spatial arena has shaped, and in turn been shaped by, India's transforming political economy since the 1980s. We hope that when read together, a larger view of the causes, nexus and consequences of economic liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democratic mobilization may emerge.

The challenge of writing such a synoptic causal account of India's new political economy raises a critical question signalled by our title: do these three major transformations, taken together, constitute a "great transformation"? Our motivation for using this term is twofold. The first meaning of "a great transformation," in simple language, is wide: to what extent have liberal economic reform, popular democratic mobilization and ascendant cultural nationalism fundamentally reordered the relations of power, wealth and status in India? Or are the changes set in motion by these phenomena ephemeral and susceptible to reversal? The second meaning is more specific. To what extent can one understand the changes that have taken place in the Indian political economy through the idea of a "double movement," to use Karl Polanyi's well-known phrase developed in reference to the historical European case, in which the attempt to create a market-oriented society from above compels a movement from below to moderate its severely dislocating effects? The question mark in the title of the book registers our openness towards such questions while intimating differences of interpretation amongst the different authors. Our aim was to foster a critical debate, informed by rich empirical detail and sharp theoretical analysis, but unified by common questions.

The "economic reforms" that have taken shape in India over the past thirty years, reaching back at least to certain pro-business initiatives enacted by Prime Ministers Indira and Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, and carried further by the economic policy changes that began to be implemented by a recently elected Congress government in 1991, represent a shift – albeit a moderate one – towards neo-liberalism. It is for this reason that Polanyi's work, about earlier attempts to make a reality of the "self-regulating market" – which is what he meant by "the Great Transformation" – provides one key point of reference in thinking about the political economy of India today. Most contributors to this book, however, pay close attention as well to transformations that are more plural and perhaps even lower case. They are at least fivefold, and they are strongly interlinked. First, there is the economic transformation of India since about 1980. We inquire collectively into its chronology, mainsprings and consequences. Second, we note that economic liberalization has coincided with a period that saw the re-emergence of Hindu nationalism. We take seriously the proposition that these first two transformations are linked in important ways, not least in regard to the formation of identities and political projects among India's urban middle classes. Likewise, we contend that the rise of Hindu nationalism and the pace of economic reform must be understood in relation to a third transformation: the slow-burning but significant deepening of India's democracy. We ask how far and in what ways Indians from among the Backward Classes have been brought into the country's main circuits of political and economic power, and on what terms. Are India's subaltern communities beginning to enjoy forms of political citizenship and market access in anything like the same terms as the country's middle classes, and if so, where: in which parts of India? How too are they engaged in forms of political struggle, including Naxalism and anti-dam movements, which cut against the grain of the production of India as a visibly "new" centre of economic production and exchange?

Finally, we begin to describe and think through what will possibly be India's greatest transformations in the twenty years ahead: the expected movement of perhaps 200–300 million more men and women from the countryside to its towns and cities, and changes in India's geopolitical position. How will political and economic power be redistributed in the wake of such a rural-urban transformation? How, indeed, should we think about the unity of India in the wake of these enormous shifts in labour power, and in the train of growing social inequalities between sectors and regions at the heart of India's economic reform agendas and those that are locked out of them? And what changes can we expect in India's foreign policy? Will India continue to move closer to the United States and other Western powers, or will it establish a more independent path?

There are many ways of thinking about these questions. As editors, we asked authors to deal with one or more aspect of India's "Great Transformation" in relation to the extraordinary shifts in power, identity and wealth that symbolically were prefigured by the controversies around the so-called Mandal report (on reservations), the mandir/mosque dispute that erupted in Ayodhya in 1992 and the pro-market tilt of Manmohan Singh's July 1991 budget. We certainly didn't expect all authors to deal with all the lines of enquiry set out above.

We begin with a reflective paper by Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee's account of "Democracy and economic transformation in India" was produced for and played a prominent role in the 2007 New York conference. More recently it was published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, India's leading journal of political economy and public record. Since its publication in April 2008, Chatterjee's analysis has been challenged by several commentators, including Mary John and Satish Deshpande (2008), Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar (2008) and Mihir Shah (2008). These commentaries inform some of the papers that follow: papers that were prepared first for September 2007, but which in all cases have been re-written in light of further reading and recent events, and exchanges with other workshop participants.

Chatterjee begins his essay by declaring that the Indian economy has been undergoing a series of profound changes that have "since the 1990s ... transformed [an earlier] framework of class dominanc." Nehru and Mahalanobis sought the development of India's economy along the classic lines of capital goods-based import-substituting industrialization. India's push for growth was, however, turned back by the country's dominant proprietary elites. These have been described by Pranab Bardhan (1984) as its monopoly industrial bourgeoisie, its richer farmers, and its better-placed bureaucrats. The first of these groups blocked industrial competition and innovation. The richer farmers in turn blocked agrarian reform, pushing the country instead to a Green Revolution that gathered pace in the 1970s, while many bureaucrats worked the planning and license Raj to their personal advantage and to the advantage of many of the politicians they served. Planning was suspended in India from 1966 to 1969 and the country's first experiments with state-directed development stalled sharply. What Chatterjee now describes as the first stage in India's "passive revolution" delivered improvements in average per capita incomes of little more than 1 percent per annum.[1] By the time that Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980 it was clear that the economy would need to be kick-started in

other ways. Deficit financing was one option that was pursued vigorously in the 1980s, not least in the form of subsidies into and out of the agricultural economy, but this led to a burgeoning debt crisis by the end of the decade. Atul Kohli (2006) has also documented a tilt in favour of pro-business policies in the 1980s under Indira Gandhi and her elder son, Rajiv.

Per capita income growth rose to close to 4 percent per annum between c.1980 and 2003, before shifting closer to 6 percent after 2003 (at least until 2008). Chatterjee attributes this "major spurt" to "much greater confidence among Indian capitalists to make use of the opportunities opened up by global flows of capital, goods and services." The earlier dominance of India's economy by a "few 'monopoly' houses drawn from traditional merchant backgrounds and protected by the license and import substitution regime" has ended. Chatterjee instead sees the emergence of a vibrant and increasingly urbanized economy which is pulling younger people in their millions from a countryside mired in torpor, hardship and uncertainty.

Chatterjee's broader argument is that capital's pursuit of accumulation by dispossession is tempered by various path dependencies in India's democratic polity. Governmental commitments to welfare still bring education, health and subsidies to India's villages, and sanitation and water-pumps to its urban slum-dwellers. The picture that Chatterjee paints is of a double movement. Even as the larger economic pendulum swings in favour of "reform" and liberalization, the fully fledged sway of capital is reined in both by local resistance and by the commitment of government in India to "revers[e] the effects of primitive accumulation" by other forms of market intervention. The state in India remains committed to providing for "a culturally determined sense of what is minimally necessary for a decent life." India's poor might not have gained much directly from the country's pro-market reforms – elasticities of poverty reduction remain disgracefully low by East Asian standards – but the voting power of named communities of the poor (SCs, STs, BPLs, slum dwellers, etc) still translates into claims on the Indian fisc through what Chatterjee calls political society.[2]

Here is the nub of Chatterjee's argument, which is developed at greater length in *The Politics of the Governed* (2004). Chatterjee suggests that what we are seeing in India is the rise to political power of a corporate capitalist class. This class has established an increasing role in a number of India's states – in Gujarat most notably, but also increasingly in Mahrashtra, Tamil Nadu and elsewhere – and is minded more and more to view government as corrupt and inefficient. Calls are growing for the reform of government along "Western" lines, or at least along the lines that Western government is imagined by CEOs, senior managers and a new wave of maverick politicians trained in US universities and management consultancies. Bangalore, not Delhi, is the new model, with some among this camp of competitive capitalists looking to new emerging leaders (such, perhaps, as Rahul Gandhi) to modernize India's polity as comprehensively as entrepreneurs like Nandan Nilekani and Mukesh Ambani are modernizing the economy.

But while this push for rule by experts is growing, Chatterjee suggests that it is restricted as yet to English-speaking elites in urban India. The urban middle-class *is* now coming under "the moral-political sway of the bourgeoisie." Its members

also enjoy the protections of the rule of law and the privileges that accrue to those living in properly civil societies. Where India continues to depart from Western capitalist democracies, however, Chatterjee suggests, is in regard to the dominance of political society in the lives of its social majorities. Ordinary people don't make claims on government in the form of rights or with regard to abstract laws and constitutions. They instead negotiate ad hoc, unstable and often illegal forms of access to basic public services through their political bosses or agents of the state, who acquiesce through acts of omission or commission. In West Bengal, until recently, this patronage democracy was brokered almost exclusively by the CPM; in Mumbai, the Shiv Sena has performed a similar function, offering services in return for votes and occasional acts of thuggery. Meanwhile, in both states, Chatterjee concludes, ruling elites have moved to embrace liberalization. "[A]s far as the party system is concerned, it does not matter which particular combination of parties comes to power in the centre or even in most of the states; state support for rapid economic growth is guaranteed to continue. This is evidence of the current success of the passive revolution."

Chatterjee's depiction of an India increasingly divided between elites and masses, between city and countryside, and between the life-worlds of civil and political societies, will find many takers. There is no doubt that social and spatial inequalities in income and consumption have increased. Trickle-down is generally notable by its absence in the poorest regions of India, and matters are not helped by demographic pressures that are delivering more and more young people into labour markets. During the next two decades India should reap a demographic dividend as the ratio of workers to dependents becomes more favourable. But this can go badly wrong if rates of human capital formation remain low or if educated youths fail to get decent jobs.

What is less clear from Chatterjee's analysis is whether we should expect the urban and the civil to gain hegemony over the rural and the political – whether, to be blunt, we should expect a tenuous equilibrium to be maintained (for fear perhaps of the continuing power of the rural vote), or whether "the inevitable story of primitive accumulation" will progressively break free from governmental duties to provide welfare for the poor and create a volatile disequilibrium in the new India.[3]

Chatterjee argues that it all depends on politics, which of course it does. Still, his critics want to know more about his understanding of the dynamics and aims of "political struggle." Some of them are uncomfortable with Chatterjee's neat mappings of corporate capital on to civil society and of non-corporate capital on to political society. Isn't it the case, ask Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar, that many of India's most civil and progressive welfare measures have been pushed for at "the insistence of … 'political society' or even non-society marginal groups"? (2008: 87): they have in mind the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act and the Right to Information Act. And isn't it also the case that corporate India has been anything but civil or law-abiding in its militaristic adventures in Kashmir, Singur or in Naxalite India? In their view, "Chatterjee inverts what is actually the case: generally, it is members of the so-called civil society who break laws with impunity and who demand that the rules be waived for them,

whereas members of political society strive to become legal, to gain recognition and entitlements from the state" (ibid: 88).

Of course, we don't have to reverse Chatterjee's arguments to engage them. In the essays that follow we find a nuanced range of positions being explored by authors keen to grapple seriously with Chatterjee's broad theses. Nandini Gooptu focuses directly on one of Chatterjee's main themes when she examines the links between economic liberalization, cities and the poor. She points out that efforts to tidy the poor out of India's cities are hardly new. India's urban elites have been keen for decades to punish those who can be coded as dirty, ill-kempt or "un-modern." Evictions, demolition and imprisonment have long and troubling histories in urban India. Gooptu accepts even so that India's obsession with neoliberal urban policies is changing the terms under which "new" urban governance systems are being imagined and put into practice. India's ruling elites are increasingly buying into the view that cities are or should be sites of innovation and entrepreneurship. This is very much the view of the "New Economic Geography."[4] Far from being landscapes of predation – the "old" politics of urban bias, or of "Bharat versus India" – the city is now configured as fully authentic (*pace* Gandhi) and necessarily dynamic: so long, that is, that urban space can be liberated from chaos and cows and remade as sleek, linear and above-all "professional."

Gooptu explores the differential emergence of the new urbanism in India and the booming property markets and gentrification that come in its wake. She shows how gentrification can lead to revanchism, or the politics of revenge against the poor. More significantly, she explores how a desire to push the poor out of desirable urban space is being mirrored in cities like Delhi and Mumbai by increased middle-class distaste for democracy. The sheer numbers of urban poor, Gooptu reminds us, and the continued existence of vote-bank politics, threaten the bourgeois project of city upgrading. Democracy gets in the way of development. Worse, it points to Patna, not Mumbai. It is no coincidence, Gooptu suggests, that Mumbai is then such a heartland of rabid Hindu nationalism. Urban elites mobilize Hindutva politics as a way of resisting mass mobilizations from below, which they find threatening. Key here are the mobilizations of poor voters and of poor migrants.

In practice, the poor simply can't be expelled from India's largest cities, as opposed to being removed from their glossiest colonies. Gooptu ends her paper by showing how India's ruling elites are proposing an ideology of urban regeneration that aims to turn slum dwellers into stakeholder entrepreneurs. (Inevitably, this is on the small scale that most appeals to NGOs, foreign funders and microfinance institutions). India's urban poor are certainly not marginal to the country's changing economy. Gooptu concludes nonetheless that they are increasingly being stripped of just those forms of group identification and solidarity that have provided them with the protections of political society. One danger facing India's urban poor is that they become so "individualized" (as proto-entrepreneurs) that their increasing vulnerability in labor markets is matched by greater vulnerability in the political arena.

It is to be hoped this will not happen. Much will depend on the rate of growth of the economy as a whole, and more so on the terms under which non-elite groups negotiate access to jobs, savings, education and healthcare. Rob Jenkins, in the

next paper, explores the role that Special Economic Zones are coming to play in the New India, or at any rate in imaginaries of the New India. SEZs are winning a special place of affection in the hearts of India's reformers. Not only do they call to mind successes further east in Asia, they also promise to deliver capital from the state and politics. SEZs offer the prospect of growth unbound, and of cascading benefits to local workers and households. They announce yet another site of unbridled entrepreneurship.

As Jenkins reports, however, the reality of SEZs is very different. Export-processing zones in India date back to the 1960s, although the real push came after Murasoli Maran, then Union Commerce Minister, made a visit to China in 2000. In 2005, India passed the Special Economic Zone Act, and within four years about 600 SEZs had been approved. Many are in construction and a few are now operational. SEZs provide investors with tax breaks and an end to red tape. As Jenkins adroitly notes, they offer capital a chance to "secede from the rest of India," a theme picked up also by Gooptu. But therein lies a problem. Jenkins reports that the visibility of SEZs has ensured that they have become a lightning rod for protest by groups outside "the project" (or inside the rest of India). Paradoxically, the multiplication of SEZs illustrates the limits of economic reform in India.

Jenkins has often argued that India's economic reform agenda has been negotiated by stealth and side-payments, and by exploiting a multiplicity of governance jurisdictions. States have been played against States, metros against metros. Now, though, just at a time when the introduction of SEZs on a large scale seems to consolidate the power of capital to produce space in its own image, a powerful coalition has emerged to contest the main instrument that makes them possible. Jenkins focuses in the middle part of his paper on the Land Acquisition Act. Promulgated in 1894 for the purpose of acquiring land for a public purpose, the LAA is now widely seen as a vehicle for private land grabs and real estate manipulation. Some industrialists have joined with grass roots organisations to oppose land acquisitions that too often benefit limited coalitions of state-level politicians and private developers. As Jenkins very fairly points out, public outrage at land acquisitions in West Bengal (notably at Nandigram), Orissa, Punjab and Maharashtra has dramatically exposed not only caste and class cleavages around the accumulation process, but also the limits of Jenkins' own thesis about reform by stealth (Jenkins 1999). Growing opposition to India's SEZs highlights not so much political competence in the States as political incompetence. "A compromised Indian state … undermines the confidence required of people with which the state would like to enter into compacts, without which a political consensus to deepen economic reform will be difficult to engender."

Nowhere is this consensus less evident than in eastern India. Both Jenkins and Chatterjee refer to Nandigram. Stuart Corbridge, in the next chapter, builds on their observations to present a broad account of geography-making in contemporary India. Federalism in India has been reconfigured in the wake of economic reform and the rise of largely state-based political parties. Increasingly, India's federalism is without a centre, as Lawrence Saez (2002) puts it. Corbridge goes further, and documents the drive for the production of abstract space that is embodied in India's

most competitive States not only by SEZs, but also by four-lane highways, new subway systems, giant shopping malls and urban spaces like Gurgaon and Bandra Kurla (in Mumbai). Here is the dull, homogenized, rational space that capital needs for the efficient production and circulation of its outputs. As Henri Lefebvre once put it, capitalism survives "by occupying space, by producing space" (quoted in Harvey 2001: 376).

Corbridge also explores the limits of the competition states hypothesis. Why haven't the pressures of inter-provincial competition weighed as heavily in Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, even in West Bengal and large parts of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, as they have done in Delhi, Haryana, Gujarat, Punjab and Maharashtra? The answers he proposes are fourfold. First, much of eastern India is paying the price of years of relative under-investment or ineffectiveness of investment in its public infrastructure. Some natural resource-rich areas have suffered from the operation of the Freight Equalization Act, which has removed their pre-existing advantages as sites of industrial production. Second, the cost of building a functioning infrastructure in eastern India is running up against a hard budget constraint. This constraint eased substantially from c.2003–2008 but is building again. Annual GDP growth in India slowed to less than 6 percent in 2009, by which time the combined fiscal deficit of the Centre and the States was back above 8 percent of GDP (Govinda Rao 2009). Third, political forces like the (Rashtriya) Janata Dal in Bihar and the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP were able to remain in power for years without feeling the need to respond to the forces of inter-provincial competition. Lalu Prasad Yadav offered honour and empowerment to his Yadav and Kurmi supporters, and protection to Bihar's Muslims. Economic development was taken off the agenda, along with serious attempts at building an adequately functioning polity. Finally, the degradation of public services in eastern India over many years, and the hollowing out of government, has paved the way for other political actors: notably the Communist Party of India (Maoist), as the newly consolidated Naxalite movement is now called. Like many authors in this collection, Corbridge concludes on a cautionary note. His argument is not that eastern India cannot be delivered to the reform project or to a growing middle class. He simply notes that political opposition to this project is now entrenched in Naxalite India, and that the costs of reclamation will be high.

The nature of emerging inequalities in India is explored further in the next two papers, those by Arjan Jayadev, Sripad Motiram and Vamsi Vakulabharanam and by Vakulababharanam and Motiram. Jayadev et al. break new ground by exploring changes in wealth disparities in India between 1991 and 2002. The more usual focus has been on consumption or income inequalities. Like Chatterjee and Gooptu, Jayadev et al. are able to document the rise and consolidation of an urban elite that they say corresponds "roughly to the notion of the Indian middle class/white collar workers/new middle class." This group is comfortably maintaining its share of wealth in India, a country where the top 10 percent of households continue to own just over 50 percent of total assets.

Jayadev et al. also document the continuing power and wealth of a dynamic rural elite. Here they depart from Chatterjee, and from Dipankar Gupta (2005), whom

Chatterjee presents as a herald of India's vanishing villages. This elite has its roots in land but increasingly is involved in non-agricultural activities. It also bridges to India's small towns and cities. There is undoubtedly a crisis in much of Indian agriculture, and horrible signs of distress in parts of the countryside. Famine conditions in Kalahandi and farmer suicides in several states are rightly cited with some regularity. This is painstakingly documented in the paper by Vakulababharanam and Motiram, which also notes (*contra* Chatterjee) that the state is manifestly failing to discharge a governmental duty of welfare to many poor rural households. Yet they also report on India's growing foodgrain stocks, and point towards remarkable sites of agricultural prosperity. These would include fast-growing agricultural economies like Hadar District, in Madhya Pradesh, for example, where rich farmers are growing much richer still on the back of local wheat and soybean booms.[5] Rising global prices for grains and horticultural products have ensured that India's countryside is very far from being uniformly in distress or devoid of young men and women. Vakulababharanam and Motiram argue instead that we are witnessing the consolidation of "hunger amidst plenty," in savage mimicry of broader social and spatial trends in India's political economy.

This suggests that India's urban economy is not yet capable of creating enough urban jobs to accommodate the aspirations of potential migrants out of rural India. There is no Lewisian transformation on the cards that might turn India into the next China, at least not yet, and not in these comforting terms. Migrants to the city are likely to end up in slums and without decent jobs. A new future beckons that is bound up with the urbanization of poverty. And this in turn will begin to change the terms of politics in India. Can the urban poor (or the rural poor for that matter) begin to make headway into the circuits of civil society that Chatterjee believes are closed to them? What forms of politics and what forms of citizenship claims are now open to different groups of the poor in post-reform India? The next three papers, by John Harriss, Niraja Gopal Jayal and Patrick Heller, address these questions, among others.

Harriss takes as his starting point a phrase from Yaswant Sinha's Budget speech in 2000. India's reforms, said Sinha, were being "guided by compassion and justice." Harriss begins by addressing the issue of compassion, broadly conceived. While he accepts that claims about "jobless growth" are exaggerated, Harriss notes that average real daily wages of regular workers have stagnated in recent years (particularly for females). Jobs have come to post-reform India, but they have too often been of poor quality and/or linked to an increase in part-time work or home-working.

As Harriss points out, this helps us to understand why reasonably high and sustained rates of GDP growth have led to lower rates of poverty reduction than might have been expected. So-called "absolute" (income/consumption) poverty has been reduced significantly since the late 1970s, when over 50 percent of Indians were struggling with malnutrition. According to the 61st round of the National Sample Survey, 27.5 percent of Indians were below the poverty line in 2004–5.[6] This achievement, however, while considerable, has been far less notable than in China, where one percent increases in GDP growth translated over the same period into 1 percent poverty reductions (compared to around –0.65 percent in India).[7]

Poorer people are still not accessing the benefits of generalized growth in effective fashion outside Kerala and one or two other states (where they have been helped by high literacy rates and greater equality in the distribution of assets, notably land). Harriss also notes that declines in income poverty have not been matched by declines in most non-income measures of poverty – for example, malnutrition in children. It is hard to maintain that India is shining when 42 percent of children were recorded by UNICEF in 2007 as being underweight, as against 20 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Harriss accepts that the prevalence of ill-being in India can hardly be laid at the door of neoliberalism. It has long and deep roots. But he does insist that India's social welfare regime has been reworked in the reform period in a manner that is inconsistent with government commitments to poverty reduction, or compassion. Public spending on health and education gives the lie to this part of Sinha's homily, as indeed does the poor performance of a supposedly better "targeted" Public Distribution System. Harriss points out that barely more than 150 households in Dharavi, Mumbai, had been issued with BPL cards at the end of the 1990s, despite this being Asia's largest "slum."

Rhetoric continues to loom larger than resources when it comes to India's social policies. The situation might be slightly better, Harriss suggests, when it comes to various recent developments that can be placed under the heading of "justice" – notably, the success of rights-based campaigns for access to education, information, food and employment. Harriss notes that most of these campaigns have been driven by middle-class intellectuals, and certainly they are focused in large degree on individual rights, as per the broader agendas of liberalism. As Niraja Gopal Jayal reminds us, however, in the next essay, citizenship regimes in post-Independence India were written from the start around the figure of the sovereign individual, equal before the law and bearing the right to vote in an ostensibly secular Republic. The main exceptions to this regime were meant to hasten disadvantaged groups into this form of citizenship. This was the ambition both of compensatory discrimination for India's Scheduled Communities and separate personal laws for named religious groups.

By 2000 this citizenship regime seemed to be in the process of transformation. To begin with, the rise of the "BJP and its affiliates in the Sangh Parivar invented new forms of exclusion which were backed with grotesque violence." And second, "the caste-based political parties of north India invented new forms of inclusion, expressed in higher levels of representation for members of the backward castes in legislative bodies and a presence in the institutions of governance." This has variously been described as the "second great democratic upsurge" in India (Yadav 2000), or less positively, as the collapse of universal forms of citizenship in favour of the rise of patronage politics controlled by the Backward Classes (Chandra 2004).

Jayal notes, however, that while this transformation is real enough, the contours of change are more nuanced than a Great Transformation narrative might suggest. Most of the gains made by the Backward Classes have accrued to its "creamy layers," some of whose members are now engaged in oppression of more subaltern communities. Set against this, there is some evidence that women are beginning to

make headway in India's newly vibrant Panchayati Raj institutions, including as *sarpanches*. This is poor compensation, however, for various developments that are impacting India's women in the field of biological citizenship. In some of India's most affluent and reform-affected Districts – including in Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat – there is evidence that sex-ratios are worsening, so much so that ratios of less than 850 females for every 1000 men are not uncommon. Maternal mortality in India meanwhile remains appallingly high at around 330 per 100,000 live births. As Jayal reports, "if a woman gets pregnant three times in her life, the chance of her dying is 1 in 101." Jayal suggests that developments in citizenship regimes that have an impact on the substantive social and economic claims of members of the society, gender relations, the status of non-citizens (including refugees from Pakistan) might be of great significance in the long run.

Much will depend in the years ahead on how well women and other disadvantaged groups can mobilize for citizenship rights and welfare entitlements in the political arena, whether through new forms of decentralized governance and/or with the help of organized political forces.

Patrick Heller begins his discussion of these issues with an account of democratic deepening that takes a more positive line than either Harriss or Jayal. Heller notes that "the democratic deficit in India is both associational and institutional. Despite formal democratic rights, ordinary citizens find it difficult to engage the state meaningfully [while] pervasive and durable inequalities severely constrain the associational capacities of many social categories." The gist of his argument, nonetheless, is that both vertical and horizontal deepening in India's democracy is now apparent. And this is not just in Kerala – what might be called the "usual suspect" in upbeat accounts of the possibility of progressive social mobilizations in civil society. Heller also directs attention to Madhya Pradesh.

Heller, like John Harriss for the most part, thinks of civil society as a zone of free association and mobilization between the state and the household. He does not equate civil society with civility and the rule of law, as Partha Chatterjee is inclined to do. Heller provides strong reasons for believing that citizens are participating more meaningfully and effectively in political life than was the case twenty years ago. Local democracy has made a difference, and so too have repeat plays in other "democratic games," such as participation in village education committees or forest management institutions. Men and women are learning by doing, however slowly and fitfully. Above all, Heller suggests, the "significance of Panchayati Raj is that it represents a potentially very significant expansion of the political opportunity structure." When combined with a deep churning among India's subordinate groups, we might be witnessing, Heller concludes, not only a second or third democratic upsurge in India, but something close to a "silent revolution" (see Jaffrelot 2003) in the ways in which political business can be transacted and how poor people see and engage the state.

Heller's qualified optimism finds supporting documentation in randomized experiments carried out by some economists. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) find that elected women politicians in rural West Bengal are more likely than men to prioritize issues of importance to women, including water provision and collection.

Besley, Pande and Rao (2006) argue that more educated village representatives are less likely to be 'corrupt' or sectional than their less-educated counterparts. Others, however, are less persuaded. John Harriss (2007) and Karen Coelho (2005) largely concur with Partha Chatterjee about the difficulties that poor urban Indians face in dealing with government, where they are generally treated with disdain or as troublesome members of "crowds." As ever, more work is required and we need to be wary of all-India generalizations.

Similar caution is warranted when it comes to formal politics at state and national levels. Three common propositions that were advanced in the 1990s were that national parties were on the wane in India, save perhaps for the BJP; that the unity of India would be enormously weakened by the rise of political parties that pandered to caste, religion or region; and that governmental capacity in India would be eroded by the post-1989 arrival of national coalition governments.

The rise of Hindu nationalist forces is dealt with most directly in this collection by Radhika Desai in her essay on "the great Hindutva transformation." Desai argues forcefully that economic liberalization since the late 1960s has been decisive in advancing Hindu nationalism, as well as the fortunes of India's provincial propertied classes (PPCs). In turn, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar have stood squarely behind the bourgeois agenda of economic reform, notwithstanding their internal debates over the desirability of *swadeshi* in a post-liberalization era. What is distinctive in this argument is not that links are drawn between Hindutva politics and liberalization, but rather its chronology. Desai contends that economic liberalization in India began in 1969 with the Green Revolution. It was at this point that "developmentalism" was laid to rest, and it was from this time that a slow sea change occurred in India's political and economic landscapes. Desai argues that a focus on 1990–2 fails to register the turn to "plutocratic politics" that has accompanied the rise of India's post-Green Revolution regional bourgeoisies. In her view, non-liberal forms of government in India were ended in the near-famine conditions that gripped parts of India in 1966 and 1967. To some degree, too, they were anticipated by the rise to power in western Uttar Pradesh of Charan Singh. Desai accepts that the rise of caste-based parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is indicative of democratic deepening in post-1990 India. Her broader argument, however, is that this moment of deepening has been offset by the rise of various PPCs – political groupings that turned their backs on the Green Revolution that Congress (finally) had given them in favour of a Hindutva politics that allowed them to contest the (prospective) rise to power of the Backward Classes.

Desai suggests that the BJP achieved power in New Delhi by forging a political coalition of the propertied classes that stretched across India's rural-urban divide. This was also the achievement of the BJP in Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Desai recognizes, however, that Hindutva forces have been less successful outside their heartlands in central and north-west India, and that Congress has slowly regrouped following its defeat in the 1999 general election. When in power, too, the BJP has had to moderate its agendas to conform with the centrist nature of Indian politics. It has also had to form coalition governments in alliance with other political parties – just like the Congress Party since 1989 – and in the

teeth of opposition, at least in the late 1980s and 1990s, from a Third Force of political parties that have been demanding "greater cultural recognition and political devolution" (as Sanjay Ruparelia puts it in his paper here). The Third Force came to power in India for the first time in 1989 in the form of a seven-party coalition named the National Front (NF). Ruparelia contends that despite "its short-lived tenure ... the election of the National Front constituted a watershed in modern Indian democracy ... [I]t ushered in a 'post-Congress' polity in which state-level dynamics would determine the face of government in New Delhi."

Ruparelia focuses on the reasons for and significance of the rise to power in New Delhi both of the National Front governments of 1989–91 (led by V. P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar) and the United Front governments of Prime Ministers H. D. Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral in 1996–8. He notes that it is tempting to read the failure to create a durable national alternative to the Congress or BJP after 1989 "as the chronicle of a death foretold." Most observers thought the NF and UF governments were doomed from the start, the inevitable victims of vicious in-fighting, diverse class, caste and regional interests and an apparent lack of coherent ideologies. Ruparelia, however, shows that this perspective is marked more by pessimism and teleology than by empirical insight. What is most remarkable about both governments is that they achieved so much. This was true both in foreign policy – Ruparelia directs attention to the NF government's commitment to better relations with Pakistan – and at home. It was V. P. Singh's government, after all, which acted on many of the recommendations of the Report of the Second Backward Classes Commission (the so-called Mandal Report), which led to increased reservation of jobs for India's Other Backward Classes, just as India's one true neoliberal (as James Manor describes him in the next chapter), P. Chidambaram, cut his teeth as Finance Minister in Deve Gowda's UF government. As Ruparelia notes, "[t]he capacity of the United Front to advance the agenda of liberalization disproved the view that a heterogeneous centre-left coalition would stymie the reform process."

In the end the Third Force was not able to hold together as a coherent opposition to the BJP (whose progress it still helped to slow), or the Congress, even though its elements continue to shape the politics of the latter two parties. On the one hand, the dictates of economic liberalization deepened the regionalization of politics that gave rise to the parties of the third force, which paradoxically made it harder to cohere as a national political front over time. On the other, these conditions simultaneously increased the importance and difficulty of its leaders' exercising good political judgment. They failed to live up to the task. The Congress has learned to adapt to the new rules of federal power-sharing that have shaped politics in India since 1989, most especially so in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, and in lesser degree in 2009, when the Congress Party of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh translated a 28.6 percent vote share into 206 seats.

What might be called the rise and fall and rise again of the Congress Party is the subject of the penultimate essay in this volume, by James Manor. Manor begins his essay with an interesting portrait of Narasimha Rao, the Congress Prime Minister of India during the first phase of economic reforms (1991–6). Manor depicts Rao as a political manager who backed off confrontation and who was anything but a

neoliberal. Nor, says Manor, is Manmohan Singh, Rao's Finance Minister and now the Prime Minister, a neoliberal. Rao was sceptical of the possibility of trickle-down economics and both men embraced social democracy. The reform agenda in India was driven more by events than by ideas, and Rao deserves to be remembered, Manor concludes, more for what he held back (cuts to "huge government subsidies on many goods") than for what he authorized by way of economic liberalization. The pace of reform had much to do with Rao's temperament, and it was generally a slow pace that ensued.

Manor also considers the threats posed to the Congress Party by the rise of the BJP and by the "Backward Castes issue." He finds in both cases that mainstream perspectives have exaggerated the challenge to Congress, except in regard to Hindutva forces in Gujarat. The Congress has faced a far greater threat from regional forces, and has largely been driven from power in States like Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu by "regional parties" of very different hues – ethnic, casteist, communist. Manor, though, more so than many observers, notes that the Congress Party has been reforming itself since the dark days of "Indira is India, India is Indira." Again, Narasimha Rao played a key role in reviving Congress fortunes, before handing on in due course to Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh (who may now, perhaps, pass the baton to Rahul Gandhi). Neither the Congress Party nor the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is dead, a point proved with great vigour in the 15th Lok Sabha elections. The Congress Party still retains the services of many senior politicians who are skilled in exploiting protests against Hindutva and Third Force agendas. It is also beginning to appeal again to a younger, more middle-class India, confidently promoting Rahul Gandhi as the future face of a more upbeat, managerial and still all-India political party.

This new confidence extends to the Congress Party's dealings with the wider world. India now forcefully articulates a claim to permanent membership of the UN's Security Council, something that its large and growing economy, not to mention its status as a nuclear weapons state, would seem to mandate. It is already a regional power, for example doing its best over the past decade to extend its presence in Central Asia and in Afghanistan through increased developmental aid and foreign investment, in the process creating a sense of encirclement in Pakistan. India has also moved closer to the US and, less publicly, to Israel, stoking fears about its commitments to foreign policy independence and to secular politics. These worries increased sharply when the BJP was in power in New Delhi from 1998 to 2004, and especially so at the time of the nuclear tests that Prime Minister Vajpayee authorized in Pokhran in May 1998.

Achin Vanaik, in the book's concluding essay, explores some of these developments. He deploys a vigorously realist sensibility that guards him against the view that only the BJP has supported a Hindutva agenda. According to Vanaik, "The great irony of our times is that although socially-electorally the Congress today is, proportionately speaking, more than ever before in its post-independence history, a party of the lower castes and lower classes. Yet in its policy orientation and behaviour it has never been so right-wing!" The focus on existing politics also leads him to expose the myths of national interest and complete State autonomy

that proponents of Realism in the discipline of international relations in India are determined to promote.

Vanaik ends by coming close to Chatterjee. He argues that a decline in the power of India's agrarian bourgeoisie has opened the way to the ascendancy of "Big capital, Indian and foreign, [which] is increasingly powerful." As these capitals have become more mobile and transnationalized, India and its ruling elites have been brought closer to the US. India's elites have recognized that even mobile capitals have to be regulated within nation-states. India might also need the protection – in extremis: as in 2008–9, as in a war with China – of a hegemon that helps to provide order in a world that tends otherwise to anarchy. This is the real reason, Vanaik concludes, why India is edging closer to the US and to its militaristic commitments to making the world safe for capital (a project usually glossed as "globalization").

For Vanaik this is a tragedy. It is confirmation that the vision of a Third Way, or a New India, proposed by Nehru, and fought for by the Freedom Movement, has been sold out in favour of emulation of a capitalist country that Nehru and Gandhi would have abjured. For others, it is simply confirmation that the pendulum has swung a long way since the deaths of Gandhi in 1948 and Nehru in 1964. The great transformations in India's political economy that are debated here are now being paralleled by significant changes in India's geopolitical and geoeconomic relationships. Achin Vanaik offers a first glimpse into these complex re-inscribings of space and politics.

All countries are in continuous process of transformation. It is probably also true to say that the transformations that have been seen in India over the last two decades have not been as great as those that have occurred in China since the death of Mao, or in Russia since the collapse of state socialism. The spread of capitalist market relations in South Asia is taking place in countries that have not been blighted by concerted attempts to suppress the profit motive.

In other respects, however, the transformations now being negotiated in India, and more broadly across South Asia, are every bit as great and contested. At stake, crucially, are the citizenship, welfare and foreign policy regimes that either connect the region's social majorities to the accumulation projects of ruling elites, or which leave them excluded, dispossessed and angry. The future of India looked dark in the years either side of 1990. It looks far better in 2010, thanks to the efforts of some of its leading politicians, both mainstream and oppositional. But India's continuous and smooth ascent to global power status is far from assured. Much will depend on how the pendulum shifts over the next twenty years, and on whether India can shift its accumulation strategy in a more inclusive direction, better encompassing in both the economic and the political process the poorer and those who have been socially excluded on the basis of caste, gender or religion. Over the past twenty years, India's elites have been in revolt against earlier models of economic accumulation and social regulation. Whether and how they will make space for forms of governance that are more expansive – if not quite "pro-poor" – remains the key issue facing India in the years ahead.

Notes

1 Chatterjee takes the phrase "passive revolution" from Gramsci. It refers to an expensive and technocratic approach to capitalist development from on high that takes the place of (and substitutes for) social transformations from below. India's poor economic performance in the 1970s is often described with reference to the so-called "Hindu rate of growth."
2 The conventional definition of "political society," as used by political scientists, depicts the formal realm of electoral contestation between political parties, legislative assemblies and the institutions that govern the ballot. By expanding its coverage to subaltern classes in the informal sector, Chatterjee offers an alternative meaning.
3 We owe this formulation to Atul Kohli.
4 Paul Krugman and Anthony Venables have been key figures in this enterprise. For a detailed exposition, see World Bank (2009).
5 See Krishnamurthy (2009).
6 Using the Uniform Reporting System that allows for comparability in poverty rates and trends over time. For discussion, see Himanshu (2007).
7 See Besley et al. (2005).

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12 Expanding Indian democracy

The paradox of the third force

Sanjay Ruparelia[*]

Introduction

In 1989, a seven-party coalition named the National Front (NF) defeated the Indian National Congress in the country's ninth general election. The new governing coalition encompassed the lower castes and rural elites of the Janata Dal (JD), a successor to the Janata Party (1977–1980), the first non-Congress government to rule New Delhi since independence. It also included the burgeoning commercial interests of ascendant regional parties, which demanded greater cultural recognition and political devolution. To capture power, the NF had to rely upon the external parliamentary support of the communist Left Front (LF) and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), staunch political rivals that agreed to support the fledging minority administration in order to oust the Congress. Conflicts within the NF led to its premature demise and allowed the Congress to return to power.

Nevertheless, the election of the NF constituted a watershed in modern Indian democracy. According to India's pre-eminent psephologist, Yogendra Yadav, it signalled the beginning of India's 'third electoral system' (see 1999a and 1999b). The rising electoral participation of historically subordinate groups, emergence of distinct systems in the states, and implementation of liberal economic reforms, lower-caste assertion and growing Hindu nationalism, had ushered in a 'post-Congress polity' in which state-level dynamics would determine the face of government in New Delhi. The regionalization of the federal party system heralded the end of the Congress' dominance and single-party majority governments at the Centre. More: the 'second democratic upsurge' of various subaltern groups, and their desire for equality, respect and self-rule, symbolized the radical promise of a new politics. The NF represented the possibility that a 'third force' would emerge as a catalyst of and vehicle for these rising democratic aspirations.

Subsequent events seemed to confirm these expectations. The Congress returned to office following the collapse of the NF. But then India's eleventh general election in 1996 saw the United Front (UF), a coalition of fifteen state-based parties, capture national power. Its lower-caste, communist and regional parties sought to provide a counterpoint to the traditionally dominant Congress and ascendant Hindu nationalists. In many ways the new ruling coalition embodied the most distinct manifestation of the third force.

In hindsight, however, the UF was its apogee. Like its predecessor, the UF was a short-lived minority Union government that succumbed to the Congress' machinations. The willingness of the BJP to moderate its Hindu nationalist agenda enabled the party to craft a rival multiparty coalition – including several erstwhile members of the UF – and capture national power following India's twelfth general election in 1998. The first, short-lived, tenure of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (1998–9) led Yadav (1999a) to retain hope in the second democratic upsurge. But the return to office of a larger BJP-led coalition after the thirteenth general election in 1999, and the unravelling of ties within and between former third-force parties during its second incarnation (1999–2004), narrowed the 'third space' in national politics. The Congress' decision to pursue federal coalition-making during the fourteenth general election in 2004, allowing its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to unseat the BJP, deepened the sense of defeat amongst proponents of a third force. According to Yadav (2004), it signified the 'closure' of the third electoral system.

What explains the vicissitudes of the third force since 1989? To what extent have economic liberalization, popular democratic mobilization and ascendant cultural nationalism shaped and been shaped by the agendas, strategies and judgements of its main constituents? Does the failure of lower-caste, communist and regional parties to forge a durable national coalition represent the impossibility of a viable third force in contemporary Indian democracy?[1]

In general, scholars offer two perspectives to explain the chronic political instability of the third force. The first essentially sees its parties as factions of disgruntled former Congressmen, who come together to capture power for its own sake, with little to distinguish their policies (see Brass 1990). The single-point agenda of these inherently expedient coalitions explains their tumultuous disunity. The second camp attributes the volatility of various third-force alliances to their distinct caste, regional and class interests, diverse state-level bases and provincial outlooks. Hence the inability of these coalitions to imagine, pursue and achieve a distinctive vision of how to govern the country (see Khilnani 2004). Either way, the short life spans of the Janata, NF and UF appear to be reiterations of a theme.

Although well taken, these critical perspectives overstate the case in several ways. First, despite their minority parliamentary status, each of these governing coalitions pushed various initiatives in economic policy, Centre–state relations and foreign affairs against great odds. Second, many of their initiatives resembled proposals and tendencies as opposed to fully developed programmes, reflecting mentalities rather than clear political ideologies (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 176). Nonetheless, they depict a complicated reality that warrants greater scrutiny. Finally, the dominant explanations of the third force are static, deeply structural and overdetermined. Thus we need to examine its trajectory through the agendas, strategies and judgements of its chief protagonists through multiple conjunctures. To do otherwise would be to ignore their impact – as if these parties had little to do with the 'reinvention' of India since 1989 (Corbridge and Harriss 2000), and as if the latter failed to affect it in turn.

Accordingly, this essay explains the trajectory of the third force over several phases: its crystallization (1989–91), culmination (1996–8) and dissolution (1999–2009). Its prospects worsened over these years due to three interwoven processes. First, despite their initial opposition, the decentralizing political logic of rapid economic liberalization after 1991 compelled most third-force constituents – including the Left – to push similar measures in their states. Economic liberalization also caused intra-party rifts, exacerbated inter-state disparities and deepened the regionalization of politics (see Jenkins 1999; Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a). Second, the main constituents of the third force opposed militant Hindu nationalism through much of the 1990s. But the BJP's decision to moderate its official political agenda in the late 1990s, its growing third-party status in several key states (see Sridharan 2004c) and the deepening effects of neoliberal economic reform exacerbated the centrifugal tendencies of the third force. Finally, many parties of the third force spearheaded popular democratic mobilization in the 1990s through a politics of recognition, especially amongst middle- and lower-caste groups and non-Hindi speaking regions. Yet ground-level distributive conflicts within the JD, and the fixed, indivisible and zero-sum conception of power that informed its politics, undermined power sharing within the party and tore it apart. A related conception of power informed the Left, which led to its refusal to share power with other parties, undercutting the wider political alliance. Taken together, the tensions created a grand paradox. The third force epitomized the idea of 'federal nationalism' (see Arora 2004).[2] Yet the practices of power that distinguished its parties, combined with the increasingly divergent compulsions of a federal market polity, undermined its capacity to survive.

The crystallization of the third front

The National Front (1989–91)

The NF was a seven-party coalition that ousted the Congress, following the ninth general election in 1989. The parties campaigned over corruption, inflation and the Congress' alleged incompetence (Kohli 1990: 4). Yet the polls occurred amidst rising communal tensions following the Shah Bano affair and the demand by militant Hindu nationalists to build a Ram Mandir (temple) on the site of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, the 1989 polls proved to be critical. The rising electoral participation of various subaltern groups, and the growing significance of states as the key electoral arenas for voters, would lead to two-party or bipolar competition in the states and parliamentary fragmentation in New Delhi (Yadav 1999a). The fractured electoral verdict in 1989 produced the first minority federal coalition government at the Centre since independence.

The NF was a complex multiparty alliance. Its inner ring comprised pre-poll allies. The core was the JD, which consisted of three main groups: the Jan Morcha of V. P. Singh and other Congress dissidents; factions of the Lok Dal led by Devi Lal and Ajit Singh; and the Janata Party of Ramakrishna Hegde, Chandrasekhar and George Fernandes. Three regional parties – the Telegu Desam Party (TDP)

from Andhra Pradesh, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) of Assam and Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (DMK) from Tamil Nadu – formed the second dimension of the inner circle. All these parties had worked together in a series of opposition-led regional conclaves in the 1980s that sought to reorganize Centre–state relations. The final member of the inner circle was the Congress (Socialist).

The outer ring of the NF comprised two formations that agreed to avoid electoral contests with its inner circle to defeat the Congress. They shared an intense mutual enmity, however, and had differences with the other parties too. The first was the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). The Left opposed V. P. Singh's willingness to accommodate the BJP, which it perceived as a major threat to the nation. It also feared that Singh would continue to deepen the liberal economic reforms that he had begun as the Congress' Union finance minister in the mid 1980s (Chatterjee 1997: 185–7). The second outside supporter was the BJP. It agreed numerous seat adjustments with the JD in northern India, which paid off handsomely (see Sridharan 2005). According to observers, the BJP high command wanted to join the inner ranks of the NF. But the Left objected to its participation, prompting V. P. Singh to devise state-level seat adjustments to ensure that neither party shared an electoral platform (Chatterjee 1997: 161–3, 185–7).

For some, the governing coalition lacked a viable political organization and a feasible alternative programme (Chatterjee 1997: 171–3). Others thought that its prospects of compromise, while not 'insurmountable', were fair at best (Kohli 1990: 21–3). It was easy to see why. Unlike the pronounced 'rural bias' of the Janata in the 1970s (see Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 80–90), the NF's economic policies were not too dissimilar from the Congress. The government financed its expenditures through heavy borrowing at home and abroad while continuing to liberalize trade and investment (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 127, 151). Singh had left the Congress over the issue of corruption, not economic liberalization, which he had helped to initiate under Rajiv Gandhi (Kohli 1990: 15–21). The Left criticized these economic policies. Its stance involved internal tensions, however. The West Bengal chief minister, Jyoti Basu, had introduced several liberal measures in the mid 1980s to cope with industrial stagnation and labour strikes (Chatterjee 1997: 185–7). These contradictions would gradually intensify.

Still, the NF was arguably more attuned to the country's traditional economy policy of industrial support and external protection (Adams 1990: 97). It also increased agricultural subsidies. The power of propertied middle castes in the JD was a result of their previous departure from the Congress. Their growing investment and holdings in the urban and industrial economy transformed these middling agricultural groups into provincial bourgeoisies with their own parties (Desai 2004b: 55). The NF thus represented the continuing electoral ascent of the *kisans* (farmers) in national politics.

The orientation of the NF towards Centre–state relations and foreign affairs was more distinct. It established the Inter State Council, a body to enable chief ministers of the states to address federal issues. Despite the mounting political crisis in Kashmir V. P. Singh and his new foreign minister, I. K. Gujral, sought to improve bilateral relations in the subcontinent (see Rose 1990: 67–74), and the NF

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employed softer rhetoric regarding Pakistan. Gujral renegotiated bilateral treaties with Nepal regarding trade and transit, and sought to improve ties with Sri Lanka following the exit of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (Ganguly 1994: 156). And the government made positive overtures towards China. All these initiatives revealed a more pacific, cooperative and positive outlook towards Centre–state relations and the subcontinent.

But the downfall of the NF, due to conflicts within the JD and vis-à-vis the BJP, thwarted its possibilities. A leadership tussle between V. P. Singh, Devi Lal and Chandrasekhar mired its workings from the start. It evoked the 'single-mindedly self-destructive' struggles within the 'squabbling gerontocratic triumvirate' of Moraji Desai, Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh during the Janata in the late 1970s (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 88–9). The inability of anti-Congress formations to 'act in unity' reflected the 'ambitions of [their] leaders for senior posts' and a 'mercurial politics' where 'power-first principles' prevailed (Kohli 1990: 21–3).

There were important differences, however. First, whereas the Janata championed the agrarian populist dreams that threatened the urban, commercial and industrial interests of the historic ruling bloc (Chatterjee 1997: 71–2), the battles within the JD during the NF represented the clash between '*kisan* politics' and 'quota politics' (Jaffrelot 2000: 87). In August 1990, V. P. Singh implemented the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission (also known as the Mandal Commission Report), which extended reservations in elite administrative services and central public enterprises to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) on the basis of caste. Devi Lal had objected to the Report prior to the 1989 polls and resigned upon its implementation. The policy created a horizontal interest group of backward castes, providing Singh with his own large, newly mobilized, electoral constituency. But Devi Lal's hostility to it was wider (see Jaffrelot 2000: 87–97). The Mandal Commission excluded the rich Jat farmers of northern India to which he belonged, beneficiaries of the Green Revolution in the 1970s, who enjoyed dominant caste status. In contrast, the relatively prosperous Yadavs were not excluded, thanks to successful political lobbying by the charismatic JD leader in Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav (Jaffrelot 2000: 100–1). Moreover, the mantra of 'social justice' employed by V. P. Singh to justify expanding reservations threatened to undercut the *kisan* political front led by Devi Lal by emboldening weaker agricultural groups – tenants, sharecroppers and labourers – belonging to the OBCs. Indeed, Lal had objected to naming the party the Samajwadi Janata Dal, which would have emphasized its socialist commitments, and to Singh's proposal to reserve 60 per cent of the party apparatus for the 'weaker sections' of society (Jaffrelot 2000: 95). In the end, however, quota politics prevailed (Jaffrelot 2000: 106).

Second, unlike the state-level mergers between parties that led to the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) of the 1960s and to the Janata after the Emergency, the NF was a genuine multiparty coalition based on inter-state alliances (Sridharan 2004b: 500). Furthermore, the inclusion of the TDP, AGP and DMK, despite their poor electoral showing in 1989, gave it a distinctly regional face. But V. P. Singh also wished to undermine the image of regional political formations as 'anti-national', which Indira Gandhi had recklessly sown, and to demonstrate that such parties could govern at the

Centre (see Manor 2004c). In short, their participation in the NF signified political learning (Kohli 1990: 8–9), and distinguished its disposition towards Centre–state relations and, to a lesser extent, foreign affairs.

Yet the greatest difference between the NF and its predecessor concerned its eventual stance toward Hindutva (Hindu cultural nationalism). The implementation of Mandal antagonized the BJP, threatening the interests of its high-caste urban base, and instigated social conflicts across northern India. The hawkish BJP leader L. K. Advani launched the Ramjanmabhoomi, a modern chariot journey across the country to mobilize support for a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Mounting communal violence led Lalu Prasad Yadav, then JD chief minister of Bihar, to arrest Advani in October 1990.

The decision prompted the BJP to withdraw its external parliamentary support to the NF government. It exposed a simmering division between the Hindu nationalists and their more secular lower-caste allies that had originated after the Emergency. On the one hand, the Lok Dal of Charan Singh had opposed Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) parliamentarians having 'dual membership' with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Jaffrelot 1998: 282–314).[3] On the other, the BJS had resisted the appointment of the Mandal commission by Moraji Desai (Jaffrelot 2000: 94). These two conflicts had compelled the BJS to quit the Janata and rechristen itself as the BJP in April 1980. The two sides entered various electoral alliances after 1984. But the implementation of Mandal ten years later, combined with the participation of various regional parties in the NF, helped to crystallize the idea of a third force vis-à-vis the BJP and the Congress.

The fall of V. P. Singh's ministry led to another minority Union government led by Chandrasekhar, now the leader of the Janata Dal (Socialist) (JD[S]), with the Congress' outside support. But it only lasted a few months. The Congress accused Chandrasekhar of spying on Rajiv Gandhi and toppled his government, triggering the tenth general election in 1991 and enabling a minority Congress administration to return to power.

Congress in minority (1991–6)

The JD was the main casualty of the failure of the NF. Its three main groupings split into competing forces in the Hindi heartland, partly as a result of its fall from office. More importantly, the gradual popular acceptance of the Mandal Commission Report and its implementation by the Supreme Court in 1992 dissolved the unity amongst OBCs that opposition to the Report had initially created (Jaffrelot 2000: 101). Ironically, however, its official terms and subsequent operationalization created future difficulties for the JD. In Uttar Pradesh, the Ajit Singh faction of the Lok Dal, 'susceptible to Hindu chauvinist appeals' (Frankel 2005: 665), left the JD after the 1991 polls to support the minority Congress government. In contrast, the rising OBC leader Mulayam Singh Yadav stuck with Chandrasekhar and his JDS, now rechristened the Samajwadi Janata Party (SJP). But Mulayam Yadav's desire to form his personal organization, and patronize his own community, led to the establishment of the Samajwadi Party (SP) in 1992. Finally, in 1994, George

Fernandes and Nitish Kumar created the Samata Party (SAP), due to micro-level vertical conflicts amongst the OBCs. As chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Yadav had directed considerable patronage towards his own community, excluding the Kurmis and Keoris who supported Fernandes and Kumar. The two Yadav leaders had 'instrumentalized' the empowerment of OBCs for their particular castes. The emergent power of the OBCs, reaching its zenith as a horizontal interest group due to politics of the Mandal, weakened at its moment of triumph (Jaffrelot 2000: 104–6).

In some ways, the break-up of the JD reflected previous divisions. The party was principally an amalgamation of the Lok Dal, which privileged the interests of rich capitalist farmers, and the Janata Party, whose socialist leanings favoured extending reservations in public institutions. The implementation of Mandal exacerbated these disagreements. Yet these material conflicts and ideological differences could not explain the fierce leadership disputes within these groupings. Explanations diverge. Many commentators lamented the desire for short-term political aggrandizement. Others claimed that such self-destructive internecine struggles reflected a failure of these leaders – who frequently established new political groups based on their self-proclaimed personal charisma (see Kumar 2004b) – to grasp that long-term political success required organizational discipline and personal self-restraint. But these practices suggested, in turn, an underlying belief: of power as a fixed, indivisible, zero-sum good. In particular, the manner in which these leaders exercised their newly acquired strength resembled the techniques of resistance, insubordination and defiance practised by genuine subaltern groups.[4] It was a conception of power essential for the governed, but self-liquidating for its elites.

The immediate beneficiaries of the collapse of the NF, of course, were the Congress and the BJP. Yet neither could turn back the tide. Despite the sense of disorder surrounding V. P. Singh's administration, and a wave of sympathy for the Congress following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the tenth general election, the Congress failed to acquire a parliamentary majority upon returning to office.[5] It also had a crisis of leadership. The party stalwarts urged Rajiv's widow, Sonia Gandhi, to assume the mantle of rule. Her refusal allowed Narasimha Rao, an aging Congressman from Andhra Pradesh, to become the prime minister of a minority Union government. He took the helm amidst growing economic turbulence, driven by unchecked fiscal deficits and a mounting balance-of-payments crisis. Rao and his newly appointed finance minister, Manmohan Singh, responded by introducing the most sweeping liberal economic measures the country had seen, dismantling India's 'permit license raj'.

Economic liberalization reduced the opposition to Mandal by creating new avenues of prosperity and status for historically advantaged groups (Jaffrelot 2000: 101). Yet neither it, nor the return to office, failed to reverse the Congress' deteriorating fortunes. Structural adjustment created a federal market economy with two distinct consequences (see Jenkins 1999; Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a; Sinha 2004b). On the one hand, fiscal restraint in New Delhi gradually led to a decline in public investment and central economic assistance to the states and raised the cost of greater commercial borrowing. On the other, the decision to 'liberalize from above' forced every state to compete for scarce private investment, exposing

them to new constraints imposed by the Centre, credit-rating agencies and international financial institutions. Thus economic liberalization intensified the centrifugal political logic of the third electoral system. The two previously independent causal processes became mutually reinforcing (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a: 1548). These devolutionary processes both embedded the reforms and spurred the rise of the third force. But it would test the unity of the latter as well.

The second immediate beneficiary was the BJP, which emerged as the second largest party in the Lok Sabha after the 1991 polls. It made important gains in Rajasthan, Delhi and Gujarat at the expense of the JD. The BJP also strengthened its position in Maharashtra through a coalition with the Shiv Sena, whose regional nativist concerns increasingly reflected an anti-Muslim ideology (see Katzenstein, Mehta and Thakkar 2004). The furore created over Mandal, particularly in urban north India, galvanized the privileged high-caste votaries of Hindu nationalism.

But the brutal reductive logic of 'Hindu, Hindu, Hindustan' – which informed the BJP's resolve to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution granting Jammu and Kashmir special asymmetric rights, and to implement a uniform civil code nullifying personal religious laws – also stiffened the resolve of its opponents. The formation of a BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh, aided by the increasingly charged rhetoric of the Ramjanmabhoomi and passivity of the minority Congress government in New Delhi, ended with the demolition of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. The ensuing communal violence brought losses for the BJP in state assembly elections between 1993 and 1995. The party emerged stronger in Delhi and Rajasthan but lost its incumbency in Himachal and Madhya Pradesh (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 131). It faced an emboldened JD in state assembly elections in Karnataka in 1994 and in Maharashtra and Bihar in 1995. And it encouraged the SP and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to join hands in Uttar Pradesh, creating a lower-caste coalition of *Dalits*, OBCs and Muslims that deposed the BJP in the 1993 state assembly elections. Unfortunately the *dalitbahujan* alliance ended in acrimony after two years. Personal animosity between Mulayam Yadav and Mayawati, its respective leaders, leading to violent partisan conflicts; the marginalization of Kurmis, a lower OBC community that largely supported the BSP, in the state bureaucracy (Jaffrelot 2000: 103); and deeper material conflicts in the countryside between dominant Yadav castes and landless *Dalit* labourers, were to blame. Nevertheless, these events isolated the BJP. They encouraged the party high command to ally with parties that appealed to lower-caste voters ('indirect Mandalization') and to promote lower-caste leaders within the party structure ('direct Mandalization') (Jaffrelot 2000: 104–6). The second democratic upsurge of historically subordinate groups, despite its strong internal contradictions, began to constrain the politics of Hindutva.

The culmination of the third force

The United Front (UF) (1996–8)

The UF was a diverse coalition of fifteen state-based parties that came together following the highly fractured verdict of the eleventh general election in 1996. Its

principal aim was to stop the BJP, which had emerged as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha, from coming to national power. The new coalition was a complex political entity. The inner circle of the UF comprised four partisan blocs. Its leading protagonist remained the JD. Although electorally diminished, its presence alongside the SP reflected the steady political clout of intermediate and lower-caste groups, enabling the JD Karnataka chief minister H. D. Deve Gowda to become its first prime minister. The stronger electoral performance of the TDP, AGP and DMK granted these regional parties greater voice. The appointment of the TDP chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, N. Chandrababu Naidu, as the convenor of the UF symbolized the rise of the regions. The third component was the Communist Party of India (CPI), which broke ranks with its Left Front allies and decided to participate in a Union government for the first time.[6] Lastly, a series of newly fashioned parties joined the coalition. Several were Congress factions disaffected with Narasimha Rao: the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), Indian National Congress (Tiwari) INC (T) and Madhya Pradesh Vikas Congress (MPVC). The most significant was the TMC, led by G. K. Moopanar and the former Union commerce minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, who became the UF's finance minister.

Like the NF, the UF was a minority governing coalition. It required allies to survive. The larger and smaller allies of the CPI in the Left Front – the CPM, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and All India Forward Bloc (FB) – constituted the first. The CPM helped to craft the UF and devise a common minimum programme and participated in a steering committee that it had partly established. But the party rejected an offer to make Jyoti Basu the prime minister, and formal cabinet participation more generally – a decision the West Bengal chief minister would later call an 'historic blunder'.

The CPM's stance ignited controversy. The party central committee argued that the presence of stronger regional parties – with their 'agro-barons' and 'kulaks' – in the newly formed coalition heralded greater economic liberalization (see Ahmad 1996). Participating in government would force it to accept responsibility for policies that it opposed. The minority parliamentary status of the UF made it unstable as well. Thus the CPM preferred to play the role of 'honest broker', arguing that its renunciation of office represented its 'accumulated moral hegemony' rather than a 'lost historic opportunity'. Many political opponents accused the party of exercising power without responsibility, however. Others charged it with hypocrisy. The new industrial policy introduced by the Left Front government in West Bengal in 1995 reflected a neoliberal policy dispensation (see Sinha 2004a). Finally, some argued that the CPM's refusal to enter government revealed a party beholden to 'textbook solutions' offered by 'high theory', eager to trade the 'messy practical realities' of multi-party democracy for the 'pure space' of critique (see Nigam 2000; Menon and Nigam 2007).

Each view had its rationale. On the one hand, the logic of the post-1991 reforms compelled every ruling party to pursue economic liberalization in the states where they governed. In this regard, the CPM's decision to provide outside support was a shrewd political strategy. It enabled the party to fight Hindu nationalism at the Centre and protect its state-level bastions without forsaking its right to dissent.

Yet the refusal of the CPM to join the government also betrayed a 'politics of self-reproduction' that began in the 1980s (see Chatterjee 1999). Arguably, it also revealed a static, moralistic and total conception of power that militated against power sharing with its socialist counterparts and diminished its possibilities of realizing a broader social transformation.

The second prop to the government, the Congress, was larger and far less reliable. The party was the principal rival of most UF constituents. Moreover, it had taken advantage of splits in both the Janata and the NF, only to topple their remnants. The diversity of the UF and its dependence on the Congress led an editorial in *Economic and Political Weekly* to declare:

> What purpose can such a patchwork creature of doubtful longevity serve in terms of the objectives that the so-called Third Front is said to be pursuing, except to invite even more popular cynicism in the face of incessant internal bickering and eventual collapse?
>
> 1996: 1099

As sceptics feared, personal struggles, sectional rivalries and ideological conflicts beset the short-lived tenure of the UF.

Yet in many ways the UF represented a culmination of the idea of the third force, illuminating its promise and limits. In economic policy, it pushed reforms in industry, trade and investment. It set up a Disinvestment Commission to examine the performance of state-owned enterprises. And it continued to devolve economic power to the states. This pro-liberalization thrust was largely due to prime minister Deve Gowda, the staunchly neoliberal finance minister P. Chidambaram and the support of the regional parties, which held key economic portfolios and partly represented the interests of aspiring regional capitalists (see Baru 2000). These developments challenged the view that a heterogeneous center-left coalition would stymie the reform process (see Jenkins 1999: 225–8; Nayyar 1999). There were shortcomings and failures. The UF failed to reduce subsidies to relatively privileged constituencies, highlighted by the Fifth Pay Commission, which placed an immense burden on the fisc. The CPM also rightly criticized the government's failure to increase public investment in primary education, basic health and physical infrastructure, and the restructuring of the public distribution system, where half-baked reforms to 'target' the poor created new perversities (see Harriss in this volume). On the one hand, these omissions seemed to vindicate the party's decision not to join the government. But its unwillingness to do so undermined its political authority to make such demands or set the policy agenda. The presumed moral hegemony of the Left could not trump the expectations of power-sharing and collective responsibility that multiparty national governments required.

In Centre–state relations, Deve Gowda announced new measures for Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, holding state assembly elections after nine years in the former, directing central funds to the latter and making several high-level visits to both regions. The government promised to extend to Kashmir 'maximum autonomy' and resuscitated the Inter State Council. And it accepted the allocation

of a greater share of central tax revenues to the states. To be sure, the UF botched several issues. It marred state assembly elections in Kashmir by failing to engage separatist groups and ensure complete fairness (Bose 2003: 138). The government imposed President's rule in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh under questionable circumstances. And it was unable to resolve longstanding conflicts over inter-state water sharing in the south. Nonetheless, given the vulnerability and composition of the UF, it was surprising that it accomplished anything at all.

Finally, the coalition displayed some flair in foreign affairs. It resisted international pressure to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) but refused the temptation to test India's nuclear devices. More importantly, its foreign minister, I. K. Gujral, offered non-reciprocal concessions in the subcontinent. The 'Gujral doctrine' facilitated the Ganga Waters Treaty Accord, on terms disproportionately favourable to Bangladesh, finessing a major protracted dispute. The government signed a series of understandings regarding power, water and trade with Nepal. And it resumed high-level dialogue with Pakistan. These were not radical departures. In each instance, however, the UF displayed a more conciliatory approach than previous Congress administrations. Its initiatives belied the view that a federal coalition government of state-based parties would be unable to re-imagine the national interest or how to secure it. In several ways, the UF suggested a possible new vision of federal nationalism.

What undermined these potentialities, however, were its politics. In part, they were internal. The JD broke up again. Personal animosities and political differences led Ramakrishna Hegde, a JD stalwart in Karnataka, to form the Lok Shakti (LS) (see Shashtri 2004). The refusal of Lalu Yadav to resign despite allegations of corruption, and the desire of Sharad Yadav to supplant him, ended with the creation of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar. And the souring of relations between Biju Patnaik and the party, and his later death, led his son to forge the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa. The regionalization of the federal party system differentiated the base and orientation of the JD in each of these states: from the prosperous middle-caste agriculturalists in Karnataka, to the Yadav-Muslim combine in the Bihar, to an upper caste-dominated social coalition in Orissa (see Kumar 2004a). But the preceding splits underscored the deeply personalized nature of conflicts in the party.

Nevertheless, the UF government did not collapse due to these fissures, but due to the Congress. In fact, its leading constituents rebuffed the latter on two occasions. In April 1997, the new Congress leader Sitaram Kesri withdrew outside support to the government. Maladroit attempts by Deve Gowda to tarnish Kesri and lure elements of the Congress led to I. K. Gujral becoming prime minister.[7] Yet Kesri's gambit failed to lure a single UF constituent. In November 1997, the Congress ordered the UF to drop the DMK on the basis of the flawed interim Jain Commission Report. But not a single party in the coalition, or faction thereof, broke its ranks. It was the Congress' withdrawal of support, and the failure of either the Congress or the BJP to mount a viable alternative coalition, that compelled the twelfth general election in February–March 1998.

The collapse of the UF government sowed its dissolution as a coalition, however. This was for three reasons. First, many of its parties fought the campaign in their respective states independently or against each another due to the local compulsions of the federal party system. Moreover, the fracturing of the JD cost the party scarce votes. Second, the Congress failed to grasp the exigencies of the third electoral system. Its high command persuaded Sonia Gandhi to lead the party, hoping the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty would restore its fortunes, and decided to contest the polls in most states on its own. But the party failed to improve its tally. Finally, the BJP deftly put together a rival multiparty coalition by projecting the relatively moderate A. B. Vajpayee as its leader and agreeing to shelve its most controversial proposals. These compromises demonstrated astute political judgement. But it equally reflected the growing capacity of various state-based parties to influence the terms of national coalition making.

The BJP emerged at the head of a large multiparty coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), just shy of a parliamentary majority. To counter it, the CPM announced its support for a Congress-led coalition as part of its 'united front strategy' (Muralidharan 1998), which garnered the support of several weakened constituents of the UF. But the former UF convenor N. Chandrababu Naidu, wary of the rising electoral fortunes of the BJP in Andhra Pradesh, crossed the floor. His decision allowed the BJP-led NDA to capture national power.

The TDP's decision earned the opprobrium of the Left. For many observers, it exposed a naïve faith that India's state-based parties were inherently secular. The Shiv Sena expressed a vernacularized Hindu chauvinism. J. Jayalalitha, the leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, had been funding temple endowments and 'allying with prominent Hindu priests' in her home state during the polls (Jenkins 1998b: 5–6). And the SAP, BJD and LS were happy to join the BJP in order to weaken their old colleagues in the JD. Hence the belief that '[r]egionalism in India … is not primarily concerned with halting the rise of centralizing orthodoxies or projecting a new vision of the nation, except occasionally by default' (Jenkins 1998b: 4).

Yet this conclusion, while not invalid, is perhaps extreme. First, the official political moderation of the BJP was due to the demands of such parties. Tragically, it was not a fail-safe guarantee, as later events would show. At this stage, however, it worked. Second, by comparison with the pre-1998 allies of the BJP, its new partners from the third force and beyond had defended secularism until now, while other state-based parties remain opposed to Hindutva. Third, the unwillingness of the TDP to support the Congress was understandable. Unlike the Left, SP or RJD, which dominated the Congress on their respective turfs, the TDP was less secure. The exigencies of power, caused by the uneven multiple bipolarities of the federal party system, compelled its decision. Lastly, the TDP was right to suspect the Congress, which had just toppled the UF. Indeed, the Congress would declare at its Pachmarhi session in September 1998 that it opposed federal multiparty coalitions 'unless absolutely necessary'. It was the start of a long political winter.

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The dissolution of the third force

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (1998–2004)[8]

The first incarnation of the NDA was short-lived. It began with the decision to test India's nuclear devices, a longstanding goal of Hindu nationalists, in May 2008. Rising international pressure on India to sign the CTBT influenced its timing. By equating the tests with 'Hindu pride', however, the BJP sought to claim political credit, outflank its new coalition allies and wrong-foot its rivals. But attempts by the BJP to rewrite school textbooks, introduce new curricula and reconstitute educational bodies sympathetic to Hindu nationalist views encountered stiff opposition from many coalition partners. More ominous was the campaign of violence by the Sangh Parivar against Christians in the tribal belts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. In the end, the unwillingness of Prime Minister Vajpayee to obstruct criminal investigations against Jayalalitha or dismiss the DMK state government in Tamil Nadu led her to withdraw support in April 1999. The first BJP-led NDA lasted just 13 months.

It failed to resurrect the UF, however. The continuing political disintegration of the JD was the first reason. Intense sectional rivalries in Karnataka (pitting J. H. Patel against Deve Gowda) and in Bihar (where Sharad Yadav and the influential *Dalit* leader Ram Vilas Paswan sought to weaken Lalu Yadav) stymied a larger OBC front. In fact, these disputes led to the creation of the Janata Dal (United) (JD [U]) in the summer of 1999, which then joined the NDA. Personal rivalries, and the chance to gain spoils at the Centre, caused these splits (see Ramakrishnan and Pande 1999). Whatever their motivations, the JD's implosion was bewildering. It reduced the presence of former socialists in the third force to the SP, RJD and JD (Secular), now led by Deve Gowda.

The second impediment to the revival of a third force was the short-term calculus of its former regional constituents. The DMK exploited the crisis precipitated by the AIADMK by agreeing to join the NDA with its state-level allies. Reportedly, the Left's decision to reach out to Jayalalitha antagonized M. Karuninidhi, the DMK chief, who justified his about-face by saying that 'Jayalalitha's corruption is more dangerous than communalism' (Muralidharan 1999b). This begged credulity. Yet it illuminated how the third electoral system made Centre–state calculations, which hitherto preoccupied national parties, integral to state-based formations too. Like the TDP in 1998, the DMK joined the NDA to accrue national influence whilst protecting its position at home.

Finally, the changed political strategy of the Left vis-à-vis the Congress sealed the fate of a third force after the 1999 general election. The RSP and FB hoped for an alliance with Jyoti Basu as its prime minister-designate (Ramakrishnan 1999). But Sonia Gandhi rejected the idea, leading Basu to vent the view that 'a communist cannot become prime minister of India' (Muralidharan 1999a), three years after the 'historic blunder'. The political times had changed. Consequently the CPM and CPI backed the Congress, arguing that a policy of 'equidistance' between the latter and the BJP was now too dangerous. But its critics were merciless, claiming that

a 'domesticated' Left, bereft of powerful mass organizations with a national presence, feared taking responsibility as a 'care-taker administration'. 'The passions of youth', said one, 'have become the lust of old men' (Das 1999). Ultimately, neither interpretation mattered. The SP chief Mulayam Yadav, the key Congress ally in Uttar Pradesh, refused to endorse Sonia Gandhi (Muralidharan 1999b). It was a personal rebuke. But his criticism of her 'foreign' origins, echoing the BJP, suggested that its cultural nationalist arguments had spread. Mulayam also feared losing Muslim support to the Congress and that of OBCs to the BJP, which produced an informal understanding with the BJP OBC leader Kalyan Singh.

An expanded NDA won a comfortable parliamentary majority in the thirteenth general election in September-October 1999. Although buoyed by nationalist fervour after the Kargil war with Pakistan, its tally was largely due to clever state-level alliances and the BJP's prudent decision to contest parliamentary seats in areas of strength, which increased its winning percentage (Yadav 2004). Despite its victory, Yadav and Kumar remained somewhat optimistic about the prospects for the third front:

> The third space, occupied by various non-Congress, non-BJP formations, has not shrunk in any significant way. What has declined, of course, is the vision and organizational capacity of those wanting to create a Third Front in national politics.
>
> (1999)

Yet the distance between its erstwhile protagonists grew. In August 2000, the TDP chief minister challenged the recommendations of the 11th Finance Commission, saying it awarded high population-low economic growth states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal, while penalizing the low population-high economic growth performance of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a: 1547). The latter were the home states of pro-liberalizers in the UF: the TDP, DMK and TMC, and southern wing of the JD. Naidu's positive self-portrayal belied the facts (see Manor 2004c; Sen and Frankel 2005; Dreze and Sen 1998). Moreover, the new chief ministership of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya saw the West Bengal government woo foreign capital for public-private-partnerships in manufacturing, software and urban industrial development, while engaging in 'lockouts, retrenchments and closures' of failing public sector enterprises and allowing social sector spending to stagnate (see Bhattacharyya 1999). Nonetheless, Naidu's protest led to supplementary funds for high growth states, weakening the equalizing basis of previous Finance Commission awards.

The centrifugal tendencies of economic liberalization began to stress inter-state relations (see Corbridge in this volume) and wither the 'third space'. States competed to entice private capital, which now accounted for three-quarters of gross fixed investment (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a: 1545). Efforts to end beggar-thy-neighbour competition, including a proposal from the CPM patriarch Jyoti Basu, yielded a common sales tax and uniform central value added tax across the states (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001a: 1546). Horizontal inter-state competition became

the norm, however, testing the redistributive mechanisms of India's federal political economy. It strained ties between various protagonists of the third force, which had previously begun to challenge the unitary visions of national parties and demand more equitable Centre-state relations.

But most damaging to the credibility of the third force, and opposition politics in general, was the failure of ostensibly secular partners in the NDA to stop the growing communal menace during its second term. Many believed federal coalition politics would punish excessive Hindu militancy. The anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, which directly involved the BJP state government, exposed this view. The Left denounced the BJP. The TDP, DMK and to a lesser extent the JD (U) distanced themselves. But neither they nor any other member of the NDA demanded political resignations, let alone left the alliance, in response to the violence (see Sridharan 2004a). Their paralysis highlighted the paradoxical effects of the federal party system in an era of diverse coalition governments, which stopped nominally secular parties from join the Opposition, given their divergent state-level relations vis-à-vis the Congress. Yet it also reflected a brutal political cynicism to weigh the costs of remaining against a possible electoral backlash in the regions. Many parties bore responsibility, including the Congress, for not attacking the BJP. But the collective failure of erstwhile members of the UF belied the promise of the third force.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (2004–2009)

The surprising emergence of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in the fourteenth general election in May 2004 represented a crucial turning point. Commentators debated its possible causes: a popular rejection of Hindutva, the pro-poor tilt of the Congress, a 'rural revolt' against rising social inequalities (see Mishra 2004; Desai and Manor in this volume). Yet what determined the outcome was the Congress' belated recognition that it had to play the coalition game. The party crafted electoral alliances with key state-based parties in a number of regions – including the RJD, Lok Jan Shakti (LJS) and DMK – as well as indirect agreements with the CPM outside its bastions. The willingness of the Left to support the coalition from outside, while again refusing to join government, enabled the Congress' return to New Delhi.

For Yadav (2004), the emergence of the UPA denoted the 'closure' of the third electoral system. It indicated the 'saturation' of the second democratic upsurge and the 'domestication' of national policy choices. The emergence of a bipolar national contest, in which state-based parties oscillated between the Congress and the BJP, ended the hope of radicalism. It signalled the failure of lower-caste, communist and regional parties to construct a viable third force.

Not everyone agreed. Some highlighted the Congress' difficulty in absorbing its new state-based allies or destabilizing political rivals, and its greater willingness to address the needs of historically subordinate groups (see Rangarajan 2005). Others noted that it was the contest over allies – which together won more than half the national vote in 2004 – that determined the fortunes of the Congress and BJP

(see Sheth 2005). Finally, the UPA government managed to introduce progressive initiatives during its first tenure in office: the Right to Information Act, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and other 'flagship programmes'.[9] According to many, the CPM was a major catalyst of these changes, promoting their adoption while opposing the disinvestment of profitable state enterprises, and greater economic liberalization and foreign direct investment in various sectors (compare Harriss and Manor in this volume). These developments suggested the continuing significance of the idea of the third force.

Its credibility, organization and stability had vanished, however. Subsequent efforts to create a viable third front proved to be incoherent, desultory or futile. The temporary formation of the Jan Morcha,[10] which sought to protect vulnerable peasants from land seizures for special economic zones (SEZs), pitted several erstwhile socialists and the Left against the SP (see Pai 2007). In August 2007, the SP and TDP joined the eight-party United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), which declared its 'equidistance' from the Congress and the BJP.[11] But it lacked real purpose; there was little to bond its members. Finally, the Left's decision to exit the UPA in August 2008 over the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement (see Vanaik in this volume) suggested a reinvigorated third force. Yet the CPM could not construct a stable alternative formation. The willingness of the SP to rescue the Congress, a party that it had opposed for as long as it had allied with the Left, enabled the UPA to finish its first tenure in office. Indeed, the UPA returned to power in the fourteenth general election in May 2009 with a larger parliamentary tally, vanquishing a much diminished NDA as well as efforts by the Left to project a third front.

Proximate factors had an impact. The shifting declarations and state-level disagreements of the constituents of a putative third force, and their refusal to agree upon a political leader, created a spectre of instability (see Kailash 2009). The JD (S) of former prime minister Deve Gowda aligned with the Left in Karnataka, but competed against it in West Bengal and Kerala, and flirted with the Congress. The newly formed Telengana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) abandoned its alliance with the TDP and the Left in Andhra Pradesh during the campaign. The BJD broke from the NDA before the polls and entered an alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Orissa, but refused to join the wider alliance. Indeed, the RJD, SP and LJP mounted a 'fourth front'.

But the final outcome also revealed the failure of the third force to deepen popular democratic mobilization and the necessary long-term nexus between economic development and social empowerment (see Yadav and Palshikar 2009). On the one hand, the rise of new regional parties, importance of astute state-level coalitions and the collective weight of state-based parties revealed the continuing impact of the second democratic upsurge and the electoral limits of *Hindutva*. On the other, though, the verdict exposed the absence of a politics that could bind the increasingly capricious elements and serve the natural social base of a third force. In Bihar, the JD (U)-led NDA capitalized on the protracted governance failures and political exclusion of lower OBCs and Maha Dalits by the RJD and LJP by initiating political reforms and targeting public benefits towards these groups. In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress recovered a foothold by exploiting the failure of the

BSP state government to deliver basic public services and the decision of the SP to associate with the former BJP chief minister Kalyan Singh, alienating his traditional Muslim supporters. In Kerala, despite the achievements of the local development planning (see Heller in this volume), the Left suffered a massive defeat caused by high-level rifts over corruption and its alliance with the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which tainted its secular credentials. In West Bengal, the drive towards industrialization through Special Economic Zones (SEZs) had ignited violent conflicts between the Left and its electoral rivals, Naxalites and the inhabitants of rural land designated for expropriation, as witnessed in Singur, Nandigram and elsewhere (see Chatterjee and Jenkins in this volume). The failure of the latest avatar of the third force to overcome its partialities, in other words, allowed the Congress to enter the third space.

Conclusion

It is possible to read the failure to create a durable third force in India after 1989 as the chronicle of a death foretold. Building national power in a country as 'large, diverse and fragmented' as India is inherently difficult (Brass 1990: 19–20). The transformation of India's political economy in the post-1989 era made it even harder. Economic liberalization and popular democratic mobilization have intensified processes of regionalization, creating a federal market polity with proliferating voices, demands and interests. These developments helped to contain, but not eliminate, the threat of militant Hindu nationalism. Collectively, they made it harder for any party, let alone a group of parties, to strike a durable national alliance that cut across multiple boundaries. Constructing a resilient third force in these circumstances was an exceedingly arduous task.

That said, a careful rendering of the third force since 1989 highlights several points that warrant attention. First, its trajectory from the early to the late 1990s suggested a distinct political vision beyond the 'all-pervasive instrumentalism' and 'unending competition for power, status and profit' that allegedly drives Indian politics (Brass 1990: 20). It was neither fully articulated nor consistently realized. Nor did it eliminate the politics of 'ethnic headcounts' (see Chandra 2004) practised by some of its leading parties, which increasingly directed benefits towards particular constituencies and undermined broader political solidarities (see Mehta 2004). Nevertheless, the NF and UF enjoyed some, albeit insufficient, autonomy at the Centre. Indeed, their seemingly myopic character can be attributed partly to the frequency of elections, to their minority parliamentary status and to the rapidly shifting ground of this period, which compressed their time horizons and made it harder to exercise good political judgement.

Second, the two main axes of the third force embraced an understanding of politics that limited their possibilities. Both the JD and Left tended to view power in fixed, indivisible and zero-sum terms. It manifested in different ways. On the one hand, the refusal of the Left to join national coalition governments betrayed an instrumental, static and total conception of power that undermined genuine power sharing amongst the parties. On the other, the unwillingness of many socialists to

share power with each other reflected a conception of power that prized insubordination, protest and defiance. Following Gramsci, one might say that whereas the Left has been imprisoned in a 'war of position' vis-à-vis the BJP and Congress, too many 'wars of manoeuvre' led to the implosion of the JD. The trajectory of the third force over these years demonstrates the importance of old political virtues: of organization, discipline and self-restraint for the JD, and daring, imagination and the willingness to rule for the Left.

Finally, their mutual inability to develop a politics that fused the desire for recognition with the need for redistribution limited their potential. The meagre capacity of the Left to mobilize the lower castes outside its bastions, and unwillingness of the JD and its various splinters to address material deprivation, are well known. The diminishing electoral returns of their respective politics, signalled by the Congress' political revival, underlines these deficits. Whether the Janata parivar or Left Front can develop the political vision, repertoire and skill to transcend their limitations remains a fundamental challenge.

Notes

1 I owe this formulation to Christophe Jaffrelot.
2 Arora uses the concept of 'federal nationalism' to describe the cultural foundations of the Indian democratic regime (2004: 505), in contrast to the outlook, arguments and practices of the third force, as I do in this essay.
3 However, Desai contends the Lok Dal's thwarted desire to use the RSS for itself caused the animosity (2004b: 56).
4 These political leaders were not disempowered individuals – far from it. But their strategies, tactics and manoeuvres of power share a family resemblance with techniques of resistance necessarily practised by micro-level subaltern politics.
5 The government won a majority in July 1993 by bribing the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM).
6 The CPI had supported Mrs. Gandhi and her Emergency in the 1970s before aligning with the Janata.
7 For a remarkably prescient analysis of Deve Gowda, see Manor (1996b).
8 For further analysis, see Ruparelia (2006).
9 More controversially, the UPA also introduced a 27 percent quota for OBCs in central universities.
10 The grouping encompassed the JD(U), Lok Janashakti, CPI, CPM and NCP.
11 The UNPA encompassed the AIADMK, TDP, SP, Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (MDMK), Kerala Congress (T) and Jharkhand Vikas Morcha.