

# “There are phases when India falls remarkably short of the standards you would expect democracies to follow” – Ashutosh Varshney

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Last Friday **Professor Ashutosh Varshney** spoke at LSE on Indian Democracy. Before his presentation **Sonali Campion** interviewed him about India’s electoral vibrancy as well as its liberal deficits, and why these have become more marked under the current BJP-led government. They also discussed the contrasts between Indian and American elections in light of the US presidential vote.



**You frequently speak of how there should be “two rather than three cheers” for Indian democracy. What do you mean by that?**

If you go by the narrower definition of democracy, which is primarily electoral, India has done extremely well. India is today a lower middle-income country, even after substantial economic progress, and the transition from low income only happened around 2000. This is the first time in world history that a universal franchise democracy at India’s per capita income has lasted seven decades, with a very brief interruption.

Secondly, there is no democracy where the subaltern (for want of a better word) have exercised as much franchise. Democratic theory believes that the richer you are, the more educated you are, the higher your social status, the more urban you are, the higher the odds that you will vote. However that has not been the case in India since 1989. So these two features make for a unique historical experience. Adam Przeworski created a data set, which essentially shows not that India is the only low income democracy in the world, but that it is the most exceptional.

That’s the positive story of India’s democracy, but there’s a negative side. There is a broader definition of democracy that goes beyond elections and talks about liberal freedoms, without which the functioning of a democratic polity between elections always falls below standard that theorists would legitimately set. Think of the three basic freedoms that virtually every political theorist since John Stuart Mill has called our attention to: freedom of speech, freedom of religious practise and freedom of association. Despite constitutional protections, India’s polity has not delivered as fully on these freedoms as on the electoral dimension.

Indeed, there are phases when the polity falls remarkably short of the standards you would expect democracies to follow. For example, whenever a group – and certainly a group that is substantial in size – claims injury from a writer or artist, the government invariably supports the group over the artist and bans the book or artwork. This can take other more vicious forms: the idea that someone who is suspected of eating beef could be lynched to death, and that the Government of India would not unreservedly denounce it or launch a sincere investigation, clearly shows you that when it comes to freedom of religious practice India can fall very short.

On the freedom of association, threats faced by non-governmental organisations are worrying. Whatever their demerits, if governments start banning NGOs or taking them to court for things that they are supposed to do, freedom of association as a principle is violated.

All of these problems become much more serious when the Hindu nationalists are in power. The Congress government might not have protected writers or artists when groups claimed injury, it might have harassed some NGOs. But minorities automatically become targets in Hindu nationalist regimes because their view of India is not the view that the constitution has espoused or defended. Their view of India is that of a Hindu India, primarily if not entirely owned by Hindus, which makes non-Hindu minorities vulnerable. So when the BJP comes to power, the

liberal dimension of India's democracy declines even further automatically. This is the real sense in which I use the two cheers term.

**Starting with the positives, what role do you think the election commission in particular has played in the success of India's electoral democracy?**

There have been three phases since 1947. In the first phase, the Election Commission (EC) was empowered by the commitment of the top leadership, especially Nehru, to the sanctity of elections. In 1952 India indeed took a leap in the dark, the first poor country in the world to give universal franchise and hold elections. This would not have been possible without an unflinching, truly principled commitment at the top. The fact that Nehru and his colleagues could hold three elections before Nehru's death institutionalised the election process in India.

That institutionalisation could not have been achieved by EC alone – it was given the political space to do its job. It has independent status in the constitution, but politicians have power and they can undermine independent institutions. Nehru neither undermined the courts, nor the EC. Similarly, those around him were schooled during the freedom movement. The argument against the British was 'you believe that we the Indians are not capable of rationality, and only 10-12% of us should have the right to vote. But this is false and we can govern our own affairs'. Once they made that argument and declared that the denial of franchise to 90% of India in the 1937 and 1946 elections was a sign of Imperial arrogance, it logically followed that the poor would have to be given the right to vote. It simply could not be argued that the elite know the poor's interests better than the poor themselves do.

India therefore had a great electoral start. However, Mrs Gandhi proved that she was anti-Nehru in her politics, despite the lineage. She began to attack all independent institutions including the EC, and of course suspended elections for 18 months. She returned to them somehow in January of 1977 but she wanted to control the electoral process, and the weakening of the EC that took place once again shows you that the political space was important.

The third phase started in the mid-1990s. The EC began to take its constitutional role and powers extremely seriously. However, it mattered that there wasn't an Indira Gandhi-like figure in Delhi at that time: the person they had to contend with was Narasimha Rao, Deve Gowda or I.K. Gujral. You can say the political space once again became available. The EC revived itself and hasn't stepped back.

Now the election process is so institutionalised that even a charismatic leader would find it hard to undermine the electoral process. The only way to come to power is through elections. While I critique Mr Modi for not being liberal enough, I don't critique him for his electoral enthusiasm. He regularly calls adversaries who have defeated him to congratulate them, whether it was Kejriwal or Nitish Kumar. He understands this aspect of democracy. He can play the game of maximising votes, which is not the same as stealing elections.

**Given we are sitting in Ambedkar's alma mater, do you think Modi's idea of India actually conflicts with the one Ambedkar envisioned while writing the constitution?**

On the whole, the answer is yes. Why on the whole yes, not an unqualified yes? Modi for the last two years or so has tried to include Ambedkar into the pantheon of key 20th century leaders of India.

However, the marriage of Ambedkar and Hindu nationalism is an extremely challenging political task, and perhaps an insurmountable one, and of late Modi has dropped Ambedkar from the pantheon. If anything, Ambedkar argued that one of the biggest Dalit battles that had to be fought was against upper caste domination. It was an intra-Hindu battle. Ambedkar was against Hindu nationalism, he had no concept of Hindu family. In this so-called family, some children had been treated so badly that you shouldn't claim they are part of the family; if they were, you wouldn't treat them so ignominiously. The constitution, formed under Ambedkar's leadership, promotes a pluralist India, so you ultimately get an ideological incompatibility between the Hindu nationalists' idea of India and that of Ambedkar's.

Modi's creativity in this direction was beginning to surprise, but appears to have exhausted itself. However, he might return to this because Dalit vote will be critical in so many states, and possibly in the national election too. When

critical for power, these issues will sometimes generate ideological compromise in politics. Whether Modi can pull it off in the future, we don't know. As of now the Ambedkar-Modi relationship must be viewed as virtually permanently severed.

### **Does India's heavily electoral democracy and this prioritising of power lead to issues that affect millions of people's lives getting excluded from the agenda?**

This is why the anti-rape law took so long. Because it was not an electoral issue, politicians felt no incentive to work on a deeply human problem. In this case the civil society in Delhi became so active, it ultimately produced legislation. Think about health or education, too. Neither of these has been an electoral issue. Women's rights have not been an issue either. As a result, politicians don't address these weaknesses.

### **What might change that?**

Civil society needs to be stronger, using the spaces of freedom in a democracy between elections to incentivise the state to take action and generate legislation, which would address non-electoral issues. If you put pressure on the government and make it very hard — between elections — for the government to function, then the politicians would have to respond because a good government wants to function. The best strategy for building pressure is civil disobedience, which Gandhi perfected.

But civil disobedience is also a very hard course of action. It demands a lot of the citizens' commitment and time. As a result, civil society pressure in India has always been periodic, you haven't had sustained civil disobedience except under Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s. The movement was launched in two states and had implications for Delhi in a way that shook the central government to the extent that Mrs Gandhi hit back with coercion and jailed all the leaders. Nowadays, there are periodic outbursts of civil disobedience, lasting a few months at best. Sometimes they generate the right kind of legislation.

When civil society in India has managed to get important people in corridors of power to give their sympathy, attention and time, legislation on issues of concern has been much more in evidence. For example, right to education came out of civil society but they had to work with government. Same with NREGA and the right to information. If rights-based ideas mattered in elections, of course legislation would come forth much more easily. But civil society working closely with that faction of government which was inclined in this direction and had sufficient power, produced some great rights-based legislation during 2004-2014.

### **How has your insight into Indian elections inform your gaze on the current American presidential election?**

They are very different polities. The one thing in common between them would be the electoral search for majorities constructed in ethno-racial terms. When American politicians calculate who will vote, in principle it is the individual who is voting. But they actually target communities. The natural organising principle in a multi-ethnic society like India, or United States, becomes the ethno-racial principle. If you look at Obama's formula, it would take the following form: if I can get 90+ per cent of the black vote, 70+ per cent of Hispanic/Asian vote, then all I need is 39 per cent of white voters to win the presidency. You can complicate this calculation by including gender – women gave Obama an 11 per cent lead over Mitt Romney. Gender is becoming increasingly important in America, while it is not electorally particularly important in Indian politics at the moment. Sometimes class is added to that, as in this election the white working class vote for Trump is very likely.

All that Hillary has to do is follow the Obama principle, except that turnouts are going to be critical. Blacks won't come out in the same way, but Hispanics might make up for this because Trump has insulted and humiliated them so much. 90% black on lower turnout, 90% Hispanic with higher turnout, 75% Asian vote with similar turnout, and women on her side.

Trump's victory is improbable but it can happen, if Florida goes his way, Ohio is looking like it might go his way. Pennsylvania seems unlikely but some are saying it might vote red. He was even campaigning in Michigan and

Wisconsin, which have no record of voting Republican for a very long time. But maybe he sees opportunity there.

Apart from the idea that winning coalitions have to be ethnically constructed, there are so many differences, particularly the electoral college. The House of Representatives represents popular opinion. The Senate does not. Vermont, where I lived for quite sometime, only had 500,000 people but it had two senators – equal to California which has close to 40 million people today. That was America's way of giving a sense of security to smaller states, so they wouldn't be swamped. However, in the process you have an electoral college where 435 out of 538 votes are based on popular opinion, and 103 out of 538 are not.

The other principle that becomes important here is that whether you win 70% of the vote of a state or 51%. you win the whole state (with the exception of two where the college vote can be divided). In the First Past the Post systems in India and the UK whoever is first wins that constituency, but with the college, the constituency becomes more or less irrelevant – it's all about the state. So it becomes a very different kind of strategising. In a parliamentary system, you campaign everywhere but in the US the presidential candidate will allocate most of his or her time to swing states. It is very educative to see this kind of democracy – it is democratic but it's not fully representative of popular opinion.

*Cover image: Image: Bengaluru voting. Credit: Al Jazeera English/Nilanjan Chowdhury CC BY-SA 2.0*

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## **About the Author**

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