RULERS

I know that most members of Parliament see the constitution for the first time when they take an oath on it.

PRAMOD MAHAJAN, Union minister, 2000

The current resurgence of identity politics, or the politics of caste and community, is but an expression of the primacy of the group over the individual. It does not augur well for liberal democracy in India.

ANDRÉ BÉTEILLE, sociologist, 2002

I

IN JULY 1958 INDIA'S leading journal of public affairs carried an anonymous essay with the intriguing title 'After Nehru . . .'. At the time, Jawaharlal Nehru had been prime minister of India for a full eleven years. He was pushing seventy, and the last representative of the old guard within the Congress Party. Vallabhbhai Patel and Maulana Azad were dead, Govind Ballabh Pant was ailing and Chakravarti Rajagopalachari was sulking in retirement in Madras. The party, and the nation, were being willed along by the moral authority of the prime minister. There was no obvious successor among the next generation of Congress politicians. What would happen after he was gone?

The essay that posed the question in July 1958 provided this answer:

The prestige that the party will enjoy as the inheritor of the mantle of Tilak, Gandhi and Nehru will inhibit the growth of any effective or healthy opposition during the first few years. In later years as popular discontent against the new generation of party bosses increases, they will for sheer self-preservation, be led to make increasing attempts to capture votes by pandering to caste, communal and regional interests and ultimately even to 'rig' elections.

In this situation, argued the essayist, the Congress Party would find it hard to resist the allure of commerce. For

> in a politico-economic system of mixed economy, in which the dividing line between mercantilism and socialism is still very obscure and control over the State machinery can give glittering prizes to the business as well as the managerial classes, the moneyed interests are bound to infiltrate sooner or later into the ruling cadres of the party in power.

Finally, the writer predicted that the growth of caste, communal and regional caucuses would lead to an 'increasing instability of Government first in the States and later also at the Centre'. This instability, in turn, might lead to a competitive patriotism among the different parties.

> For instance, the Congress Party may try to unite the nation behind it by warning of the dangers of 'Balkanisation', the Jan Sangh by playing up the fear of aggression from Pakistan, the P[raja] S[ocialist] P[arty] by emphasising the competition between India and China and the Communist Party by working up popular indignation against dollar imperialism.[1]

Of all the predictions quoted in these pages, this one reads best with the passage of time. The 1967 elections, the first held after Nehru's death, produced instability at the centre as well as in the states. There was a growth of popular sentiment along the axes of region, religion and caste, which found expression within the ruling party and – something the writer did not anticipate – in new parties organized on sectarian lines. As politics became more competitive, the Congress under Indira Gandhi played up the fear, real or imaginary, of Balkanization, the Jana Sangh played up the threats, real or imaginary, from Pakistan and the communists pointed to the diabolical designs, real or imaginary, of the United States. There was an increasing infusion of money into politics, and various attempts to rig elections.

Who was this gifted political astrologer, whose forecasts have been so largely vindicated by later events? He might have been a Western political scientist, constrained to write anonymously about a controversial subject concerning another country. Or perhaps he was a civil servant working within the government of India, precluded by his job from speaking out in his own name. That he was one such is suggested by the remark that 'senior civil servants are

hoping that they will retire before Nehru goes', so as not to work under what was likely to be a less broad-minded as well as less competent successor.[2]

II

While Jawaharlal Nehru was alive, the Congress always ruled at the centre. And of all the opposition parties, only the communists in Kerala had enjoyed power in the states. Beginning with the elections of 1967, the political landscape of India became more variegated. An increasing number of state governments fell into the hands of non-Congress parties. In 1977 the first non-Congress government came to power in New Delhi. The 1980s saw Congress regain power in the centre, but at the end of the decade it lost it again.

This growing decentralization of the political system has manifested itself in the rise of coalition governments. The Janata Party which came to power in 1977 was itself a coalition of four different parties. The next non-Congress government was the National Front that came to power in 1989. This had seven distinct components, and was yet a minority government. Since then no government in New Delhi has been ruled by a single party.[3]

These coalitions have been of three types. The first kind has been dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party, successor to the old Jana Sangh. For two weeks in 1996, and then for six years between 1998 and 2004, the BJP headed coalition governments. In this National Democratic Alliance the BJP kept for itself the post of prime minister and the key portfolios of Home, Finance, and External Affairs, while allotting other ministries to its coalition partners, these mostly regional groupings.

The BJP took to coalition politics in the well-founded belief that it could never come to power on its own. With its roots so strongly in northern India, its expansion depended heavily on alliances with other parties, each based in a particular state. With the exception of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, these parties did not subscribe to the Hindutva (Hindu-first) ideology. Thus, in forging alliances the BJP had to promise to put to one side such contentious issues as the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the abrogation of Article 370 of the constitution (which accorded special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir).[4]

The second kind of coalition was initiated by the socialist remnants of the Janata experiment. These led the National Front government of 1989–91 and the United Front government of 1996–8. They were both minority gov-

ernments, which encouraged a wider dispersal of ministerial responsibilities. While the prime minister came from the Janata Dal, important portfolios such as Home and Defence were allotted to alliance partners.

The third type of coalition has been dominated by the Congress Party. In 1991, in the elections held in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the Congress won 244 seats. It was by some distance the largest single party, but still fell nearly thirty seats short of a majority. However, the support – brought about by persuasion or other means – of independents and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha allowed it to remain in power for a full five-year term.

In the elections of 1996 the tally of the Congress fell to 140 seats. P. V. Narasimha Rao resigned as prime minister and, shortly afterwards, as party president. Now the party bosses turned to Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv's widow. Born in Italy, a Catholic by upbringing, Sonia had married into India's premier political family but had no political ambitions herself. In 1981 she had been deeply resistant to the idea of her husband entering politics. After his death ten years later, she retreated into her home and her family.[5]

Before the 1998 elections, however, Sonia Gandhi yielded to the pressure applied by old colleagues of her husband and mother-in-law, and joined the campaign. When the party won only 141 seats the incumbent president, Sitaram Kesri, was replaced by Rajiv's widow. A year later, mid-term elections were held, in which the Congress tally dropped further, to 114 seats. At this stage pundits were ready to write off the housewife-turned-politician. However, Sonia Gandhi kept her job and campaigned energetically in a series of assembly elections. Her persistence was rewarded: at one stage, although the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was in power at the centre, as many as fifteen state governments were headed by the Congress.[6]

In early meetings held under Sonia Gandhi's leadership the Congress had scorned the idea of entering a wider alliance. The old guard held that, in the future as in the past, they would come to power under their own steam. But the realities on the ground compelled a change of orientation. Before the 2004 elections the Congress put in place alliances with a variety of other parties. In the event, the Congress won 145 seats, but their United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won 222 in all. Since the BJP-led NDA had won only 189, the UPA formed the government with the support from outside of the communists. Sonia Gandhi declined the post of prime minister, which went instead to her trusted colleague Manmohan Singh. Following the NDA model, the Congress kept the Finance, Home and Foreign Ministries. However, important econom-

ic ministries such as Information Technology and Agriculture were ceded to alliance partners.[7]

Table 28.1 – Percentage of votes won by the Congress Party and the BJP, 1989–2004

	1989	*1991*	*1996*	*1998*	*1999*	*2004*
Congress	39.5	36.5	28.8	25.8	28.3	26.4
BJP	11.5	20.1	20.3	25.6	23.8	22.2

The year 1989 marks a watershed in Indian political history. Before that date, the Congress was a mighty colossus; after that date, single-party dominance gave way to a multi-polar system. In the past, some 40 per cent of the national vote had allowed the Congress to win some 60 per cent of the seats in Parliament. Now, behind the fall in the number of seats won by the Congress lay a steady decline in its vote share, as Table 28.1 makes clear.

Between 1989 and 2004, the vote share of the Congress declined by more than 10 percentage points; over this period, the vote share of the BJP increased by roughly the same extent. However, in the last few elections these two major parties have garnered a mere 50 per cent of the vote between them. Where does the other half go? The communist parties, concentrated in West Bengal and Kerala, generally win about 8 per cent. The backward-caste and Dalit parties, strong in north India, together claim about 16 per cent. The regionalist parties, which have a marked presence in southern and eastern India, get about 11 per cent.

The decline of the Congress has come in two phases. The first phase, which began in Kerala in 1957 and peaked in Andhra Pradesh in 1983, saw Congress hegemony challenged by parties based on the identities of region, language and class. The second phase, which began in north India in 1967 and has peaked in the same region in the last decade, has seen the Congress losing ground to parties basing themselves on the identities of caste and religion. On the one hand, the upper castes in particular and Hindus in general have deserted the party and gravitated towards the BJP. On the other hand, the lower

castes have preferred to throw their weight behind parties such as Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party and Mulayam's Samajwadi Party. Even the Muslims, traditionally among the Congress's strongest supporters, were turned by the demolition of the Babri Masjid into voting for other parties.

It is this fragmentation of the party system that lies behind the rise of coalition governments. These coalitions are truly multi-hued: the BJP-led NDA government of 1999-2004 brought together sixteen separate parties; the Congress-led UPA alliance which fought (and won) the last general elections had nineteen. And because they are so variegated these coalitions are also unstable. In forty-two years between 1947 and 1989 India was ruled by ten different governments and had six different prime ministers. In the fifteen years between 1989 and 2004, the country was ruled by seven different governments and had six different prime ministers – i.e. there was a change of government (and usually a new prime minister) just over every two years on average.[8]

The rise of coalition governments is a manifestation of the widening and deepening of democracy in India. Different regions and different groups have acquired a greater stake in the system, with parties that seek to represent them winning an increasing number of seats – usually at the expense of the Congress, which for the first two decades of Independence had claimed, rather successfully, to be a party that represented no section of India in particular but all in general.

This deepening of democracy has come at a cost – that of a steady loss of coherence in public policy. The wide-ranging policies of economic and social development that Jawaharlal Nehru crafted in the 1950s – among them the boost to heavy industry, the reform of archaic personal laws and an independent foreign policy – would not have been feasible in the fragmented and divided polity of today. Even programmes focused on specific sectors, such as the thrust to agricultural development that Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi provided in the 1960s, would now be difficult to bring to fruition. In the past, in allotting portfolios to ministers their relevant experience and abilities were taken into account. Now, the distribution of ministries is dictated more by the compulsions of having to please alliance partners, who demand portfolios seen either as prestigious or profitable. And in the execution of their duties, Cabinet ministers are prone to put the interests of their party or their state above those of India as a whole.

III

From parliamentary elections, let us move now to the unfolding dynamic of party politics in the states. Despite its declining fortunes, the Congress remains a genuinely national party, a force to be reckoned with in most parts of the Union. In many states, there is a stable two-party system, with the Congress providing one pole and the BJP, the communists, or a regional party the other pole. However, in the vast states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Congress has been reduced to insignificance. Here the main players are caste-based parties and the BJP.

State elections over the past two decades have been marked by a great deal of volatility. The phenomena of 'anti-incumbency', the voting out of the party in power, is very nearly ubiquitous. Thus, in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Congress governments alternate with BJP ones. In Andhra Pradesh the Congress alternates with the Telugu Desam, in Kerala with the communists. Rarely does a party enjoy more than a single term in office. One exception was the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, which held office more-or-less continuously from 1989 to 2005. More striking still has been the success of the CPM-led Left Front in West Bengal, which has been in power since 1977.

For the two decades following Independence the Congress was in power in the centre as well as in virtually all the states. Then, from 1967 to 1989 (except for the brief Janata interregnum), the Congress ran the central government in New Delhi while it shared power with its rivals in the states. In this, the most recent period, the Congress has been out of power for long stretches at the centre as well.

These changes have radically altered the form and functioning of Indian federalism. Now, before a general election, the smaller parties, each powerful in a single state, need to be cajoled and placated before joining an all-India coalition. Thus, 'the two aspirants to be "national parties", the Congress and the BJP, now must behave like fast-food franchises. They sell their brand to local agents, who choose, reject, bargain or change sides on the basis of local conditions.'[9] Ideology plays no part in this bargaining – it is all based on strategic calculation, on what one can extract from the national party by way of ministerships at the centre or subsidies to one's state. Thus, the DMK and AIADMK have each been part of both Congress and BJP-led alliances, while the Telugu Desam has been with the BJP as well as the National Front.

The alliance in power in New Delhi tends to favour those state governments run by their own people. A World Bank study for the period 1972-95 found that states ruled by parties which were also in office in Delhi received 4 per cent to 18 per cent more from central funds than did states that did not enjoy this status. Another study, by two Indian economists and for amore recent period, estimated that grants were 30 per cent higher when the same party was in power in the state as well as the centre.[10]

Another consequence of this fragmentation is that the writ of the centre does not run as authoritatively as it once did. When all chief ministers were of the same party as the prime minister, it was easier to make them sacrifice the interests of their state in favour of what was perceived to be the wider national interest. Now, chief ministers are less likely to do the prime minister's bidding. Once, a dispute between two states could be amicably settled after a word to the two chief ministers from Nehru or Indira Gandhi. Now, a dispute once begun becomes increasingly hard to resolve.

Illustrative here is the dispute between the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the waters of the Cauvery river. The Cauvery originates in Karnataka, flows through the state and into Tamil Nadu, from where it merges with the Indian Ocean. The lower parts of the delta have for centuries had a sophisticated irrigation network, allowing farmers to grow high-value paddy. In contrast, irrigation works in Karnataka are of recent origin; the first canals were built in the early twentieth century, with a further spurt in canal building after the 1970s.

In 1928 Cauvery waters irrigated 11 million acres of farmland in what is now Karnataka, and 145 million acres in what is now Tamil Nadu. By 1971 the gap had increased; the figures now were 44 million acres in Karnataka and 253 million acres in Tamil Nadu. However, by the end of the twentieth century the upper riparian state had virtually caught up with the lower one – the figures now were 213 million acres for Karnataka and 258 million acres for Tamil Nadu. This massive expansion of irrigation facilities has generated much wealth for the farmers of the Mandya and Mysore districts of Karnataka. Once dependent on a single harvest of a low-value crop (usually millet), they can now enjoy two or even three harvests a year of high-value crops such as rice and sugar cane.

During the 1970s and 1980s the central government convened a series of discussions to work out a mutually acceptable distribution of the Cauvery waters. Twenty-six ministerial meetings were held between 1968 and 1990; all failed to arrive at a consensus. Tamil Nadu feared that the frenetic canal building in the upper reaches threatened its farmers downstream. Karnataka argued

that its late start should not preclude the fullest development of the waters in its territory.

In June 1990, by an order of the Supreme Court, a Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal was constituted. Three (presumably impartial) judges were its members. On 25 June 1991, the tribunal passed an interim order, directing Karnataka to release 205 million cubic feet of water per year to Tamil Nadu, pending final resolution of the matter. Ten days later the Karnataka assembly passed a unanimous resolution rejecting the tribunal's order. The Karnataka government then passed its own order, which mandated its officials to 'protect and preserve' the waters of the Cauvery for the state's farmers.

The matter went to the Supreme Court, which held that the Karnataka directive was *ultra vires* of the constitution. The central government now made the tribunal's interim order official by publishing it in the official gazette. The Karnataka chief minister, S. Bangarappa, responded by declaring a *bandh* (general strike) in the state. All schools and colleges were closed and, with the administration looking on, protesters were allowed to go on the rampage in Tamil localities of the state capital, Bangalore. The violence continued for days, with an estimated 50,000 Tamils being forced to flee the state.

Karnataka's defiance sparked angry words from the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, J. Jayalalithaa. Her administration, in turn, encouraged the targeting of Kannada homes and businesses in Tamil Nadu. Altogether, property worth more than Rs200 million was destroyed.

While ordering the constitution of the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal, the chief justice of the Supreme Court noted that 'disputes of this nature have the potentiality of creating avoidable feelings of bitterness among the peoples of the States concerned. The longer the disputes linger, more the bitterness. The Central Government as the guardian of the interests of the people in all the States must, therefore, on all such occasions take prompt steps to set the Constitutional machinery in motion.'

However, while the central government could set the machinery in motion, it no longer had the powers to compel the states to accept its recommendations. Fifteen years after it was constituted, the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal has yet to come up with a final resolution. When the monsoon is good, Karnataka has no problems releasing 205 million cubic feet to Tamil Nadu. But if the rains fail, panic sets in all round. Tamil film stars lead demonstrations and go on fasts to compel Karnataka to 'see reason'. In her most recent term as chief minister, Jayalalithaa went on fast herself, surely a less-than-constitutional method of pressing her state's demands on the centre. Meanwhile, peasant leaders in Karnataka warn their government that if water

is released without their consent, the administration will have to face the consequences.

In bad years, between the months of June and September the Cauvery question rarely strays off the front pages of the newspapers in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Protest and counter-protest is followed by the centre ordering Karnataka to release *x* million cubic feet of water to save standing crops in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu chief minister demands more than *x*; her counterpart in Karnataka says he can release only so much less than *x*. A central team rushes to the Cauvery valley to supervise operations. The precise amount of water eventually released is never made public. One can, however, be certain that it is determined more by the fluid dynamics of inter-party politics than by the logic of science or the letter of the law.[11]

Meanwhile, at the other end of the country, in July 2004 the Punjab assembly passed a resolution abrogating its agreements on water-sharing with other states. It would, it said, appropriate as much of the Ravi and Beas rivers as it chose before allowing them to flow on to Haryana and Rajasthan. The resolution was clearly at variance with the spirit of Indian federalism. Moreover, it was piloted by a Congress chief minister at a time when the Congress was also in power at the centre.

The act of the Punjab Assembly was possibly unethical, probably illegal and certainly unconstitutional.[12] It might yet come to be viewed by other states as an encouraging precedent. For water, more than oil, is the resource most critical to India's economic development, critical both for agriculture and to sustain the burgeoning population of the cities. With the increasing fragmentation of the polity, and the declining capacities of the central government, more states might be tempted to take such unilateral action.

IV

In 1993 Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the constitution. The 73rd Amendment mandated the creation of local government institutions at the level of the village, *taluk* (county) and district while the 74th did the same for towns and cities. Office-bearers were to be chosen on the basis of universal adult franchise. Everywhere, one-third of the seats were reserved for women, with additional reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Panchayati Raj, or village self-governance, had been an abiding concern of Mahatma Gandhi. However, both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi were hesitant to devolve power to lower levels, if for different reasons: the former because he felt it would be inimical to economic development, the latter because of a general preference for centralization. In the 1960s Rajasthan and Maharashtra had both experimented with village and district councils. However, the first serious attempts to create village *panchayats* were in West Bengal, after the Left Front came to power therein1977. The process was taken further by the Janata government in Karnataka, which between 1983 and 1987 devolved significant responsibilities to local institutions.

As prime minister during 1984–9, Rajiv Gandhi sought to create an all-India system of local self-governance. His interest was in part a nod to the rise of local autonomy movements, which called for a wider sharing of power and authority, but it was also based on political calculation – namely, the fact that while the Congress ruled at the centre, state governments were dominated by parties hostile to it. *Panchayati raj* would allow New Delhi to bypass these parties and deal directly with the people, putting straight into their hands a portion of the funds previously controlled by the state administration.[13]

The process initiated by Rajiv Gandhi bore fruition after his death, when the Congress regained power at the centre. During the discussions leading up to the amendments, state governments had expressed concern about the undermining of their authority. The legislation as finally passed gave individual states the discretion to specify the functions and powers of the *panchayats* in their territory. The provincial acts varied widely in intent and consequence. Some states gave *panchayats* responsibility over all aspects of development work – irrigation, education, health, road-building etc. – and transferred funds appropriately. Other states followed a more parsimonious line regarding the functions and finances of their local institutions.[14]

In the 1980s West Bengal was at the forefront of *panchayati raj*; afterwards, the lead was taken by another state with a strong communist presence, Kerala. When it came to power in 1996 the Left Democratic Front (LDF) decided to allocate 35–40 per cent of plan funds for programmes designed and executed by local institutions. Across the state, *panchayats* were encouraged to hold meetings at which villagers were helped by officials and technical experts to set their own priorities. Hundreds of locality-specific plans were prepared, which tended to highlight the careful management of natural resources such as soil, water and forests.[15]

In Kerala, as in Bengal, the promotion of *panchayati raj* is based on an unstable mixture of idealism and opportunism. On the one hand, left-wing in-

tellectuals and activists believe that, by devolving power, villagers can spend public money on projects relevant to their needs instead of being subject to directives from above. There is also some evidence that decentralization reduces the leakages in the system, that there is less corruption and thus more money actually spent on development works. On the other hand, in the original Gandhian vision, *panchayati raj* was to be a 'partyless democracy', where the most respected (or able) villagers were elected regardless of political affiliation. In practice, the process has been deeply politicized. In Kerala, and even more so in West Bengal, the CPM has seen in *panchayati raj* an instrument to tighten its grip on the countryside. The power of the *panchayat*, and its officials, is used not merely in and for themselves but, crucially, to mobilize votes during assembly and parliamentary elections.[16]

These caveats notwithstanding, the 73rd Amendment has set in motion a process with possibly profound implications for the future of Indian democracy. A decade after its enactment there were more than 3 million elected representatives in local institutions, a third of them women. They were chosen through a very competitive process, with voter turnout at *panchayat* elections generally exceeding 70 per cent.

One subject of great interest, and greater importance, is the impact that *panchayati raj* will have on relations between castes. In Uttar Pradesh, where the Dalits are vocal and organized, the dominant castes are now forced to share power at the local level with those historically less advantaged. In Orissa, where the Dalits are more submissive, they have been (illegally) excluded from participation in many *panchayats*. In Tamil Nadu, the formation of village councils has sharpened existing conflicts between the landed Thevars and the Dalits. About one-fifth of *panchayat* presidents have to be Dalits, but these often find their authority eroded by the upper castes. Likewise, while some women presidents act autonomously, others are mere mouthpieces for the male members of their family or caste.

Notably, members of Parliament and of the various state legislatures are often hostile to the *panchayati raj* experiment. So are many members of the Indian Administrative Service, who argue that it will merely lead to the 'decentralization of corruption'. Supporters of the new system answer that such criticism is motivated, emanating as it does from groups that would be hard hit if administrative and financial authority were to be more widely distributed than is presently the case.[17]

V

During the 1990s Indian politics became more complex at the *domestic* level, with greater competition between parties and the introduction of a third tier of government. However, when it came to India's dealings with the rest of the world there was a noticeable convergence of views. Whether led by the BJP or the Congress, the ruling alliance was committed to enhancing the country's military capabilities, and to a more assertive foreign policy in general.[18]

One manifestation of this new strategy was a growth in the size and power of the military. India was rapidly moving 'from a defence dependent upon diplomacy to a diplomacy strengthened by a strong defence'.[19] Military expenditure rose steadily through the decade, from US $7,000 million to $12,000 million between 1991 and 1999. Some of this money went on salaries – there were now more than a million Indians in uniform, members of the army, navy or air force, with another million staffing the various paramilitary outfits.

Some of the money also went to buy state-of-the-art weaponry. And some went to manufacturing instruments of war that the richer Western countries were not prepared to supply. In addition to the Agni and Prithvi missiles developed in the 1980s, India now had an intercontinental ballistic missile, Surya (with a range of up to 12,000 kilometres), and another, Sagarika, that could be launched from sea. Indian scientists had also developed a range of defensive options, designing shorter-range missiles to be aimed at any the enemy might throw at them.[20]

These missiles were designed by the Defence Research and Development Organization, one of two scientific institutions that played a vanguard role in the defence sector. The other was the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which had responsibility for the production of both nuclear power and nuclear weapons. An atomic device had been tested in 1974, but in subsequent years the AEC scientists were able to improve considerably its sophistication and destructive capability. From the early 1990s they pressed the government to allow them to test their improved bombs.

In his history of India's nuclear programme, George Perkovich tracks the persistent efforts of the scientists. Those who led the missile and nuclear programmes told successive prime ministers that, in the absence of tangible results, talented young scientists would prefer high-paying jobs in the commercial sector to the service of the state. 'Without full-scale tests', they argued, 'morale would fall and the nation would not find replacements for the aging

cohort that had produced the first device in 1974.' In late 1995 Prime Minister Narasimha Rao sanctioned tests, but backed off when American satellites revealed the preparations, provoking a strong warning from the US government. When a United Front government came to power in 1996, the scientists urged the new prime minister, H. D. Deve Gowda, to give them the green signal. Gowda demurred; he didn't care about American opinion, he said, but his priorities were economic development rather than a show of military strength.[21]

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance assumed office in March 1998. The next month Pakistan tested a medium-range missile, provocatively named Ghauri, after a medieval Muslim warrior who had conquered and (according to legend) laid waste to much of northern India. A quick response was called for, if only because 'the BJP's historic toughness on national security would have seemed hollow if the government did not respond decisively to the new Pakistani threat'.[22] The heads of the AEC and the DRDO insisted that a nuclear test would be the most fitting response. Their calls were endorsed by the atomic physicist Raja Ramanna, who carried enormous prestige as the man who had 'fathered' the1974 tests. Ramanna met Prime Minister Vajpayee, who assured him that he wanted 'to see India as a strong country and not as a soft one'. To this the physicist added a definitive caveat: 'Also, you can't keep scientists in suspended animation for twenty-four years. They will simply vanish.'[23]

In the second week of May 1998 the Indians blasted five nuclear devices in the Rajasthan desert. Three kinds of bombs were tested: a regular fission device, a thermonuclear bomb and a 'sub-kiloton' weapon. Before and after the tests senior members of the NDA government made provocative statements aimed at India's neighbours. The defence minister, George Fernandes, described China as India's 'number one threat'. The home minister, L. K. Advani, said that India was prepared to give hot pursuit across the border to any terrorists that Pakistan may send to make trouble in Kashmir.

Opinion polls conducted immediately after the tests suggested that a majority of the urban population supported them. The most enthusiastic acclaim, however, came from the BJP's sister organizations, the VHP and the RSS. They announced that they would build a temple at the test site, and take the sand, contaminated by radioactivity but nonetheless 'holy' for them, to be worshipped across India. The Shiv Sena chief, Bal Thackeray, saluted the scientists for showing that Hindu men were 'not eunuchs'. The scientists themselves posed triumphantly before the news cameras, clad in military uniforms.[24]

Two weeks later this balloon of patriotic pride was punctured and deflated. On 28 May Pakistan tested its own nuclear device. Their atomic programme had been built on the basis of designs and materials acquired in dubious circumstances from a Dutch laboratory by the scientist A. Q. Khan, supplemented by Chinese technical help. The Indian bomb was wholly indigenous. But these discriminations were made meaningless when six atomic blasts (deliberately, one more than the other side) disturbed the Chagai hills in Baluchisthan province. The Pakistani public greeted the news by dancing and singing in the streets. The 'father' of this bomb, A. Q. Khan, told interviewers that 'our devices are more consistent, more compact, more advanced and more reliable than what the Indians have'.[25]

The Pakistani achievement was glossed as an 'Islamic' bomb, in part because at this time no other Muslim nation had one. In India, too, both supporters and opponents of the tests tended to see them as 'Hindu' inspired. In truth, although the BJP was in power in May 1998, the preparations had been laid under successive Congress regimes. The policy of nuclear ambiguity – we have the bomb, but we won't test it – was becoming unsustainable. Pressed by the West to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, India decided to make its nuclear status a matter of public record.[26]

The BJP naturally tried to make political capital out of the tests, but faced with signing the CTBT and thus shelving further nuclear ambitions, a Congress regime would have acted likewise. Indeed, it had been Congress prime ministers who had, in the past, most insistently laid claim to a 'great power' status for India. These claims became more persistent after the end of the Cold War. Indian leaders demanded that in deference to its size, democratic history and economic potential, the country be made a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. That the claim was disregarded made the matter of nuclear tests all the more urgent. Across party lines, strategic thinkers argued that an open declaration of nuclear weapons would make the Western powers sit up and take notice. Reason and argument having failed, India had necessarily to blast its way to world attention.[27]

VI

The only countries to be acknowledged as nuclear powers were the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, Russia, China, France and the UK. It was also known that Israel had nuclear capability. When, in

the summer of 1998, India and Pakistan simultaneously entered this exclusive club it created some disquiet among the older members. It was feared that the Kashmir dispute could spark the first atomic war in history. Pressure was put on both countries to sort out their differences on the negotiating table.

In February 1999 the Indian prime minister travelled by bus to Lahore to meet his Pakistani counterpart. Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif spoke of increasing trade between the two countries, and of putting in place a more liberal visa regime. No progress was made on Kashmir, but the fact that the two sides were talking was, to subcontinental eyes as well as Western ones, a most reassuring sign.[28]

Barely three months after the Vajpayee-Sharif talks Indo-Pak relations were once more on a short fuse. The provocation was the infiltration into the Kargil district of Jammu and Kashmir of hundreds of armed men, some Kashmiri in origin but others unambiguously citizens of Pakistan. The operation had been planned by the Pakistani army, who told their civilian prime minister about it only when it was well under way. The idea was to occupy the mountain tops that overlooked the highway linking Srinagar to Leh, the only all-weather road connecting two towns of crucial importance. The generals apparently believed that their nuclear shield provided protection, inhibiting the Indians from acting against the intruders.[29]

The Indian army was first alerted to the infiltration by a group of shepherds. Scanning the mountains with binoculars in search of wild goats to hunt, they instead spotted men in Pathan dress digging themselves into bunkers. They conveyed the information to the nearest regiment. Soon, the army found that the Pakistanis had occupied positions across a wide swathe of the Kargil sector, from the Mushkoh valley in the west to Chorbat La in the east. The decision was taken to shift them.[30]

The shepherds saw the Pathans on 3 May 1999. Two weeks later the Indians began the artillery bombardment of enemy positions. Air force planes screamed overhead while on the ground *jawans* made their way laboriously up the mountain slopes. Men reared in tropical climes had now to battle in cold and treacherous terrain. ‘In battle after decisive battle Indian infantry battalions clambered up near perpendicular cliffs the entire night in freezing temperatures before lunging straight into battle at first light against the intruders.’[31]

The exchanges were fierce and, on both sides, costly. Dozens of peaks, each defended by machine guns, had to be recaptured one by one. A major victory was the taking of Tiger Hill, in the Drass sector. The battles raged all through June. By the end of the month the Pakistanis had been cleared from

1,500 square kilometres of Indian territory. The areas reoccupied included all vantage points overlooking the Srinagar-Leh highway.[32]

In the last week of June the American President, Bill Clinton, received an unexpected phone call from the Pakistani prime minister. The two countries were close allies, and now the junior partner was asking to be bailed out of a jam of its own creation. More than 2,000 Pakistanis had already lost their lives in the conflict, and Nawaz Sharif was in search of a face-saving device to allow him to end hostilities. Clinton granted him an appointment on 4 July, American Independence Day. In that meeting Sharif promised to withdraw Pakistani troops if America would put pressure on India to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Clinton agreed to take an 'active interest' in the question. With this assurance, Sharif returned to Islamabad and formally called off the operation.[33]

Approximately 500 Indian soldiers died in the Kargil conflict. They came from all parts of the country, and when their coffins returned home the grief on display was mixed with a large dose of pride. The bodies were kept in public places – schools, colleges, even stadiums – where friends, family and fellow townsmen came to pay their last (and often first) respects. A cremation or burial with full military honours followed, this attended by thousands of mourners and presided over by the most important dignitary on hand – often a state chief minister or governor. The men being honoured included both officers and soldiers. Many hailed from the traditional catchment area of the Indian army (the north and the west of the country), but many others were born in places not previously known for their martial traditions, such as Ganjam in Orissa and Tumkur in Karnataka.[34] And some who died defending India came from regions long thought to be at odds with the very idea of India. A particularly critical role in recapturing the Kargil peaks was played by soldiers of the Naga regiment. Their valour at the other end of the Himalaya, hoped one army general, would allow the 'brave Nagas [to] finally get their Indian identity'. Their bravery was certainly saluted by their kinsmen; when the body of a Naga lieutenant was returned home to Kohima, thousands thronged the airport to receive it.[35]

The Kargil clashes also furthered the reintegration of the Punjab and the Punjabis. Farmers along the border insisted that if the conflict were to become a full-fledged war, they would be at hand to assist the Indian army, providing food and shelter and even, if required, military help. 'We shall fight with the *jawans*', said one Sikh peasant, 'and teach the Pakistanis a bitter lesson for violating our territory.'[36]

Across India the conflict with Pakistan unleashed a surge of patriotic sentiment. Thousands volunteered to join the lads on the front, so many in fact that in several places the police had to fire to disperse crowds surrounding army recruitment centres.[37] The war with China had likewise fuelled a similar response, with unemployed youth seeking to join the forces. Yet there was a significant difference. On that occasion, the intruders had overrun thousands of square miles before choosing on their own to return. This time they had been successfully thrown out by the use of force.

In this respect the Kargil war was a sort of cathartic experience for the men in uniform and, beyond that, for their compatriots as a whole. The Indian army had finally redeemed itself. It had removed, once and for all, the stigma of having failed to repulse the Chinese in 1962. At the same time the popular response to the conflict bore witness to the birth of a new and more assertive kind of Indian nationalism. Never before had bodies of soldiers killed in battle been greeted with such an effusion of sentiment. It appeared as if each district was determined to make public its own contribution to the national cause. The mood was acknowledged and stoked further by reporters in print and on television, whose competitive jingoism was surprising even to those familiar with that profession's hoary record of making truth the first casualty of war.

VII

In October 1999, Pakistan's brief flirtation with parliamentary democracy ended. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was deposed in a coup led by the chief of army staff, Pervez Musharraf. The Indians were not best pleased with these developments; for it was Musharraf who was believed to have masterminded the Kargil operations.

In March 2000 President Clinton visited South Asia. He spent five days in India and five hours in Pakistan, in a historic reversal of the traditional American bias towards the smaller country. This was an acknowledgement of India's rising economic strength, but also a chastisement of Pakistan's return to military rule. The day after Clinton landed in New Delhi, terrorists dressed in Indian army uniforms descended upon the village of Chittisinghpora in Kashmir, pulled out Sikh men from their homes and shot them. In a village of 300 homes, 'nearly every house ha[d] lost a relative, neighbour, or friend'. The tragedy was compounded when the security forces shot five men they claimed had committed the crime, but who were later found to be innocent.[38]

The Chittisinghpora killers were probably freelancers who did not have the sanction of the Pakistani government.[39] Still, there was little question that it was the Kashmir issue which continued to divide the two nations most deeply. President Musharraf issued periodic reminders of Pakistan's undying commitment to the 'liberation struggle' of the Kashmiris. The Indian prime minister chastised his counterpart for adhering to the 'pernicious two-nation theory that brought about the partition'.[40]

Neither country was prepared to accept the other's position on Kashmir. However, a dialogue was recommenced, this motivated perhaps by the need to act as responsible nuclear powers in the eyes of the world. In July 2001 President Musharraf visited Agra at the invitation of the Indian government. He and his wife were put up in a luxury hotel overlooking the Taj Mahal. The general and Vajpayee talked for long hours, with and without aides. The meeting ended inconclusively, when a draft communiqué left both sides dissatisfied, India wanting a greater emphasis to be placed on stamping out cross-border terrorism and Pakistan asking for a more explicit acknowledgement of the democratic aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

While General Musharraf was in Agra terrorists struck again in the Valley. In a dozen separate attacks at least eighty people were killed. This was becoming a pattern – whenever important dignitaries visited New Delhi the violence in Kashmir would escalate. When the US Secretary of State Colin Powell came in October 2001, terrorists launched a grenade assault on the Jammu and Kashmir assembly. Two months later they undertook an even more daring action. Four suicide bombers entered the Indian Parliament in a car and attempted to blow it up. They were killed by the police, who later identified them as Pakistanis.[41]

The assembly building in Srinagar was a symbol of the state's integration with India. The Parliament building in New Delhi was the symbol of Indian democracy itself. Within its portals met elected politicians representing a billion people. The attacks on these two places brought an end to the diplomatic dialogue. India accused Pakistan of abetting the terrorists. Appeals were made to the US government to rein in its old ally. While sympathizing with America after the incidents of September 11 2001, India added that their sympathy was made the more sincere by the fact that they had long been victims of terrorist violence themselves.

In the spring of 2002 exchanges between Indian and Pakistani troops became more frequent. As spring turned to summer, and the troop build-up intensified, the concerns of 1998 returned – would the subcontinent be witness to the first ever nuclear exchange? A respected Nepali monthly thought that

the region was ‘poised on the cusp of war once again’. A leading American analyst believed that ‘the crisis between India and Pakistan is the most dangerous confrontation since Soviet ships steamed towards the US naval blockade of Cuba in 1962’.[42]

In the end, war was averted, although perhaps it had never even been planned. Within India attention shifted to the coming assembly elections in Kashmir. The state had, as a Delhi newspaper bluntly put it, a ‘long history of rigged elections’, the polls of 1977 being the exception to the rule.[43] In the past the Election Commission had, in Kashmir at any rate, ‘always appeared to be in the company of, and therefore in collaboration with, security forces and partisan state government functionaries’. Now it worked overtime to redeem its reputation. The chief election commissioner ordered a complete revision of the voters’ list, which was unchanged since 1988. An extensive survey of all houses led to a new, comprehensive roll, covering 350,000 pages in the elegant but hard-to-print Urdu script. Copies of the electoral rolls were then distributed to all political parties and displayed in schools, hospitals and government offices across the state. A further precaution was the import of 8,000 electronic voting machines, to prevent booth-capturing and rigging.[44]

The assembly elections were held in September 2002. The militants killed a prominent moderate just before the polls, and urged the public to boycott them. Despite these threats, some 48 per cent of Kashmiris turned out to vote, somewhat less than was usual in other parts of India, but far in excess of what had been anticipated. International observers were at hand to confirm that the polls were fair. The ruling National Conference was voted out of power; the winners were an alliance comprising the Congress and the People’s Democratic Party. The 2002 Jammu and Kashmir election, wrote two longtime students of the state’s politics, could ‘be seen as a reversal of [the] 1987 assembly elections which by eroding the democratic space had become [the] catalyst for separatist politics . . . This election has brought about a change in the regime through the popular verdict and to that extent it has become instrumental in providing a linkage between the people and the government.’[45] The new chief minister, Mufti Mohammed Saeed, expressed these sentiments more crisply when he remarked that ‘this is the first time since 1953 that India has acquired legitimacy in the eyes of the [Kashmiri] people’.[46]

In the summer of 2003 tourists from other parts of India flocked to Kashmir for the first time in more than a decade. Fifty thousand pleasure-seekers came in the months of May and June, filling hotels across the Valley and houseboats on Srinagar’s Dal Lake. Indian Airlines announced an extra daily flight from Delhi to Srinagar. Provoked by these developments, terrorists

launched a series of strikes, throwing grenades in shopping centres, kidnapping civilians, suicide-bombing the chief minister's house.[47] But even more tourists came the next year, and more airlines announced flights to Srinagar.

In January 2005 civic polls were held in Jammu and Kashmir for the first time in almost three decades. A handsome 60 per cent of voters cast their ballots in these local elections, despite intimidating threats by terrorists and the assassination of several candidates. Those who voted said they wanted the new councillors to provide new roads, clean water and better sanitation. A shopkeeper in the town of Sopore – a stronghold of pro-Pakistani militants – was quoted as saying, 'We can't wait for civic amenities till *azaadi* [independence]'.[48]

According to official figures, the number of 'violent incidents' in Jammu and Kashmir decreased from 3,505 in 2,002 to less than 2,000 in 2005.[49] The state could by no means be said to be at peace. But, for the first time in many years, the claim of the Indian government over this territory did not seem altogether hollow. In talks with Pakistan, New Delhi could urge a series of 'confidence-building measures', such as a bus service linking the two halves of Kashmir. The first bus was scheduled to leave from Srinagar for Muzaffarabad on 7 April 2005. On the afternoon of the 6th, terrorists stormed the tourist complex where the passengers were staying. They were repulsed, and the next day two buses left as planned. A reporter who travelled on one of the vehicles wrote of how, when it crossed the newly built Aman Setu (Peace Bridge) and entered Pakistani territory, 'divided families were reunited, tears and rose petals flecked their faces. The significance of this extraordinary moment lay perhaps in the ordinariness of the backdrop: two buses with 49 passengers had crossed over – and blurred a line that has divided Kashmir for over five decades in blood and prejudice.'[50]

There were, however, some who would rather that the prejudice persisted and the blood continue to be spilt. On 11 July 2006 there were two terrorist attacks on tourists in Kashmir. Eight Bengali visitors were killed. On the same day deadly bombs went off simultaneously in seven different commuter trains in Mumbai (as Bombay had become known). The toll here was far higher – with more than 200 innocent civilians killed, and more than 1,000 injured. It was one of the worst terrorist incidents in history. While the perpetrators remain to be identified, their aims needed no clarification – these were to pit Hindu against Muslim, Kashmir against the rest of India, and India against Pakistan.

VIII

The great German sociologist Max Weber once remarked that ‘there are two ways of making politics one’s vocation: Either one lives “for” politics or one lives “off” it’.[51] The first generation of Indian leaders lived mostly for politics. They were attracted by the authority they wielded, but also often motivated by a spirit of service and sacrifice. The current generation of Indian politicians, however, are more likely to enter politics to live off it. They are attracted by the power and prestige it offers, and also by the opportunities for financial reward. Control over the state machinery, they know, can bestow glittering prizes upon those in charge.

Political corruption was not unknown in the 1950s, as the cases of the Mundhra scandal and the Kairon administration in the Punjab demonstrate. But it was restricted. Most members of Nehru’s Cabinet, and even Shastri’s, did not abuse their position for monetary gain. Some Congress bosses did, however, gather money for the party from the business sector. In the 1970s politicians began demanding a commission when contracting arms deals with foreign suppliers. The money – or most of it – went into the party’s coffers to be used in the next elections. By the 1980s, however, political corruption had shifted from the institutional to the personal level – thus an increasing number of ministers at the centre and in the states were making money from government contracts, from postings of officials and by sundry other means.

The evidence of political corruption is, by its very nature, anecdotal rather than documentary. Those who take or give commissions rarely leave a paper trail. However, in the 1990s the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) laid charges against a number of prominent politicians for having assets ‘disproportionate’ to their position. The leaders so charged included the chief ministers of Bihar and Tamil Nadu, Lalu Prasad Yadav and J. Jayalalithaa. Each was accused of amassing hundreds of millions of rupees from the allocation of government contracts. In another case, the CBI raided the house of Sukh Ram, the Union minister for communications, and found Rs36 million in cash. It was alleged that this represented the commission on licences awarded to private telecom companies.

In all these cases the charges were not converted into convictions, sometimes because of lack of evidence, at other times because of the timidity of the judiciary. There is also a sense of honour among thieves. In the run-up to an election the Opposition makes a hue and cry about corruption in the ruling administration, but if it is elected it does not pursue cases against the previ-

ous regime, trusting that it will be similarly rewarded when it loses power.[52] Indeed, politicians from different parties and different states often exchange favours. In one documented case, a Haryana chief minister sanctioned the sale of a plot of public land to the son of a Punjab chief minister – while the market value of the land was Rs500 million, the price actually paid was Rs25 million.[53]

In the words of the political scientist Peter deSouza, corruption is Indian democracy's 'inconvenient fact'. Governments in power in New Delhi take kickbacks on purchases from abroad, on defence deals especially. The cut taken on foreign contracts is in the region of 20 per cent. In most states the majority of ministers are on the take, skimming money off licences to companies, postings of top officers, land deals and much else. The Planning Commission estimates that 70–90 per cent of rural development funds are siphoned off by a web extending up from the *panchayat* head to the local MP, with officials too claiming their share. One reason that city roads are in such poor shape is that the much of the money allocated to them is spent elsewhere. Of every 100 rupees allocated to road building by the Bangalore City Corporation, for example, 40 go into the pockets of politicians and officials with another 20 being the contractor's profit margin. Only 40 rupees are spent on the job, which is done either badly or not at all.[54]

Because being in power is so profitable, there is now an increasing trade in politicians. To makeup the numbers and obtain a majority, legislators are bought and sold for a (usually high) price. In the era of minority and coalition governments the trade is especially brisk. Legislators routinely cross the floor and change parties. This has become so common that, in times of political instability, it is not unknown for the MLAs of a particular party to be taken *en masse* for a 'holiday' in Goa, lest they defect to the other side. Here these men – sometimes up to fifty of them – are kept in a hotel, drinking and playing cards, while armed guards watch out for furtive phone calls or unknown visitors. The holiday extends until the crisis has passed, which could take several weeks.

Because politics is such good business, it has also become a dirty business. In 1985 the weekly *Sunday* ran a cover story on 'The Underworld of Indian Politics', which spoke of how, in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar especially, candidates with criminal records were contesting elections, sometimes winning them, and sometimes being made ministers as well. Among the crimes these men were charged with were 'murder, abduction, rape, molestation, gangsterism'.[55] Over the next decade a greater number of criminals entered politics, so many in fact that a citizens group filed a public interest

litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court demanding that parties release details of their candidates. In May 2002 the Court made it mandatory for those contesting state or national elections to make public their assets and their criminal record (if any).

The Association for Democratic Reforms, the group that had filed the original PIL, then setup Election Watch Committees in the states, these comprising local lawyers, teachers and students. The affidavits filed by candidates in five state elections held in 2002–3 were collated and analysed. In the major political parties – such as the BJP, the Congress, Uttar Pradesh's Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bihar's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) – between 15 and 20 per cent of candidates had criminal records. A detailed study of Rajasthan's 2003 Vidhan Sabha election showed that roughly half the candidates were very rich by Indian standards – they had a declared wealth of more than Rs3 million each. And as many as 124 candidates had criminal records. Forty per cent of these had been charged with crimes that qualified as 'serious' – which included armed robbery, attempt to murder, defiling a place of worship and arson.[56]

Equally revealing was an analysis made of the affidavits of the 541 MPs elected in the 2004 parliamentary polls. The Congress had the wealthiest candidates – their MPs each had, on average, assets of Rs31 million. Most MPs had assets in excess of Rs10 million; those who ranked lowest on this scale were the communists. On the question of criminal charges, the lead was taken by parties powerful in UP and Bihar: 34.8 per cent of RJD MPs had been formally accused of breaking the law, 27.8 per cent of Bahujan Samaj Party MPs, and nearly 20 per cent of SP MPs. The Congress and the BJP came out slightly 'cleaner', having had 17 per cent and 20 per cent of their MPs charged with crimes, respectively. However, the situation was reversed when it came to money owed to public financial institutions. Of all such debts, Congress MPs accounted for 45 per cent, and the BJP members for 23 per cent. Again, it was communist MPs who came out best – they reported virtually no debts at all.[57]

From these figures we may conclude that, while in power at the centre, the Congress and the BJP have systematically milked the system, the Congress to a greater extent since it has been in power longer. Meanwhile, to get to power in the states, and to retain it, parties such as the SP, the BSP and the RJD had come to rely very heavily on criminals.[58]

With corruption and criminalization, Indian politics has also increasingly fallen victim to nepotism. Once, most parties had a coherent ideology and organizational base. Now, they have degenerated into family firms.

The process was begun by and within that grand old party, the Indian National Congress. For most of its history the Congress was a party run by and for democrats, with regular elections to district and state bodies. After splitting the Congress in 1969, Mrs Indira Gandhi put an end to elections within the party organization. Henceforth, Congress chief ministers and state unit presidents were to be nominated by the leader in New Delhi. Then, during the emergency, Mrs Gandhi dealt a second and more grievous blow to Congress tradition when she anointed her son Sanjay as her successor.

After Sanjay's death his elder brother Rajiv was groomed to take over the party and, in time, government. When, in 1998, the Congress bosses asked Sonia Gandhi to head the party, it was an acknowledgement that the party had completely surrendered to the claims of the dynasty. Sonia, in turn, asked her son Rahul to enter politics in 2004, allotting him the safe family borough of Amethi. If the Congress Party retains power in 2009, Rahul Gandhi will have precedence over every other member if he chooses to become prime minister.

Apart from its corrosive effects on the ethos of India's pre-eminent political party, Mrs Indira Gandhi's embrace of the dynastic principle has served as a ready model for others to emulate. With the exception of the cadre-based parties of left and right, the CPM and the BJP, all political parties in India have been converted into family firms. The DMK was once the proud party of Dravidian nationalism and social reform; its cadres are now resigned to the fact that M. Karunanidhi's son will succeed him, or else his nephew. For all his professed commitment to Maharashtrian pride and Hindu nationalism, when picking the next Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray could look no further than his son Udhav. The Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal claim to stand for 'social justice', but Mulayam Singh Yadav has made it clear that only his son Akhilesh will succeed him, while when Lalu Prasad Yadav was forced to resign as chief minister of Bihar (after a corruption scandal), his wife Rabri Devi was chosen to replace him, although her previous work experience was limited to the home and the kitchen. The practice has been extended down the system, so that if a sitting MP dies, his son or daughter is likely to be nominated in his place.

Conducting research in a Bengali village, a Norwegian anthropologist found that the term most often used to describe politics was *nungra* (dirty). Politicians were described as those who promoted 'abusive exchanges' *(galagali),* caused 'fist-fights' (*maramari*) and promoted 'disturbances' *(gandagol).* In sum, politics served only to fill society with 'poison' *(bish).* This was not always so, said the villagers. At the time of Independence politi-

cians had been honest, hard-working and dedicated, but now every party was peopled with ‘scheming, plotting [and] unprincipled individuals’.[59]

The statements are fairly representative of matters in the country as a whole. A survey carried out by Gallup in sixty countries found that the lack of confidence in politicians was highest in India, where 91 per cent of those polled felt that their elected representatives were dishonest.[60]

Some consolation can perhaps be found in statements by scholars writing about other societies in other times. Thus, of his own country in the 1940s, Jorge Luis Borges writes that ‘the state is impersonal; the Argentine can conceive only of personal relations. Therefore, to him, robbing public funds is not a crime. I am noting a fact; I am not justifying or excusing it.’ And, speaking of his own continent, Europe, in centuries past, the historian R. W. Southern remarks that ‘nepotism, political bribery, and the appropriation of institutional wealth to endow one’s family, were not crimes in medieval rulers; they were part of the art of government, no less necessary in popes than in other men’.[61]

IX

Corruption in contemporary India is widespread not merely in the legislature, but in the executive branch as well. In times past it manifested itself more in the lower echelons of the bureaucracy, with minor officials taking bribes to allot housing sites, sanction electricity connections or shortlist candidates for jobs.[62] In recent years it has become widespread among higher officials too. The CBI has charged even secretaries to the government of India and chief secretaries of states with having assets ‘disproportionate’ to their income. The lifestyle of some of these officials certainly suggests as much – with private farmhouses and family holidays in exotic locations whose cost must many times exceed their official lifetime earnings.[63]

In Jawaharlal Nehru’s time the civil service was shielded from politics; transfers, promotions and the like were decided within the executive branch itself. From the 1970s, however, individual bureaucrats came increasingly to ally with individual politicians or political parties. When the party they allied with was in power, they got the best postings. In return, they energetically implemented the partisan agenda of the politicians. On deals high and low, officials now work closely with their ministers, and are rewarded with a share of the proceeds. The rot runs deep down the system – thus, every MLA has his own favoured district magistrate, police officer, and so on.

As P. S. Appu points out, the founders of the Indian nation-state respected the autonomy and integrity of the civil services. Vallabhbhai Patel insisted that his secretaries should feel free to correct or criticize his views, so that the minister, and his government, could arrive at a decision that was the best in the circumstances. However, when Indira Gandhi started choosing chief ministers purely on the basis of their loyalty to her, these individuals would pick their subordinates by similar criteria. Thus, over time, the secretary of a government department has willingly become an extension of his minister's voice and will.[64]

In a letter to the prime minister, the retired civil servant M. N. Buch has highlighted the consequences of this politicization of the administration. The way the government is now run, he writes, means that 'the disciplinary hierarchy of the civil services (including the police) has completely broken down. A subordinate who does not measure up and is pulled up by his superior knows that he can approach a politician, escape the consequences for his own misdeeds and cause harm to his superior.' Since failure cannot be punished, 'there is no accountability, there is no monitoring of work, there is no financial discipline and there is a visible breakdown of the system'.[65]

Particularly in northern India, the alliances between politicians and civil servants are often made on the basis of caste. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, when the Samajwadi Party is in power, backward caste and especially Yadav officials seem to get the most influential and lucrative postings. If the Bahujan Samaj Party were to win the next election, however, then many of these Yadavs will make way for Dalits. If corrupt acts are sometimes undertaken on the basis of caste, they are often justified on the basis of that other great and enduring Indian institution, the family. The money made by illegal means is spent on educating children at expensive schools and colleges abroad, and generally in feathering a nest for future generations.

Oddly enough, the corruption of the Indian state has been mimicked by actors that aim at its destruction. Across the north-east insurgent groups have found in kidnapping and extortion a profitable alternative to fighting for ethnic or national freedom. In the tiny state of Tripura, as many as 1,394 abductions were reported between 1997 and 2000 – an average of over 300 a year. The ransom demanded could be as low as Rs20,000 for a child – and as high as Rs3million for the manager of a tea plantation.[66]

At a press conference in January 1997 the former Meghalaya chief minister B. B. Lyngdoh lashed out at the media for 'lionizing' the guerrillas. 'They're cowards, petty thieves, robbers and extortionists,' insisted Lyngdoh. 'Insurgency in the north-east died two decades ago.'[67] Other politicians have

been less brave. A BJP leader in Manipur had fallen foul of an insurgent group called the KYKL; when he decided to stand for a parliamentary election, he took out an advertisement in the papers apologizing for his past ‘mistakes’ and appealing to the KYKL to forgive him. Apart from this public apology, a private understanding was also reached between the politician and the militants. Reporting the incident, the columnist Harish Khare grimly observed that, like everything else in the north east, ‘clemency from an insurgent group is also on sale’.[68]

X

There are, of course, still many upright officers in the Indian administrative and police services. Based on anecdotal evidence, again, it appears that the percentage of corrupt officials is probably considerably lower than the percentage of corrupt politicians. What then of the third arm of government, the judiciary? While here too corruption and negligence are not unknown, ‘ordinary people look up to judges in a way in which they no longer look up to legislators, ministers or civil servants’. This judgment is of the distinguished sociologist André Béteille, who adds that ‘judges, particularly of the higher courts, are by and large believed to be learned, high-minded, independent, dutiful and upright, qualities that one no longer associates with either ministers or their secretaries’.[69]

When politicians can no longer be trusted, and where the sectarian identities of caste and religion determine so much of what passes for public policy, the High Courts and the Supreme Court have witnessed a spate of public interest litigations aimed at stopping violations of the law or the constitution. It was such a PIL that forced candidates to declare their wealth and criminal records. Other PILs have spanned a wide gamut of issues. Some are aimed at protecting the environment from industrial pollution, others at protecting the rights of disadvantaged social groups such as tribals, the disabled and pavement dwellers.

The Supreme Court is usually a court of last resort, appealed to when protest and persuasion have failed. Some of its judgements have been socially emancipatory, enabling bonded labourers to be freed and India’s notoriously dirty and badly run prisons to be opened up for public scrutiny. Others have curbed political corruption, cancelling licences issued under dubious justification or retrieving land grabbed by MPs and ministers. However, the Court has

sometimes exceeded its brief, pronouncing judgement on complex technical matters – the building of a dam, for example – on which its own competence is open to question. And some judges have taken their 'activist' role too seriously, creating rights which cannot be enforced and ordering the cessation of economic activities without a thought for the unemployment and discontent this would generate. And some others have shown an unfortunate penchant for showmanship, as in a Madurai judge who, while allowing anticipatory bail to an MLA charged with criminal intimidation, instructed him to spend five days in the city's Gandhi Museum, reading Gandhian literature.[70]

XI

In so far as it holds regular elections and has a multiparty system and a free press, India is emphatically a democracy. But the nature of this democracy has profoundly changed over the years. In the first two decades of Independence, India was more or less a *constitutional* democracy, with laws passed and enacted after due deliberation in Parliament, by political parties which were themselves run on deliberative lines. The third and fourth decades were a period of transition, as the ruling Congress sought to reshape the constitution to give it itself more power. At the same time, it led the move away from inner-party democracy towards the anointing of a Supreme Leader. The opposition answered by moving outside the constitution itself, through a countrywide agitation that sought to delegitimize elected governments and their authority to rule.

Back in 1949, in his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, B. R. Ambedkar had urged that disputes in India be settled by constitutional means, not by recourse to popularprotest. He had also warned against the dangers of *bhakti*, or hero-worship, of placing individual leaders on a pedestal so high that they were always immune from criticism.

Ambedkar's warnings have been disregarded. As shown most dramatically by the Mandal and Mandir disputes, the settlement of political differences is as likely to be sought on the streets rather than in the legislature. This process has been encouraged by the rise of identity politics, with groups organizing themselves on the basis of caste or religion and seeking to assert themselves by force of numbers rather than by the quality of their arguments. Parliamentary debates, once of a very high order, have degenerated into slanging matches. At the slightest excuse political parties organize strikes, shut-

downs, marches and fasts, seeking to have their way by threat and intimidation rather than by reason or argument. The law-makers of India are, more often than not, its most regular law-breakers.

The decline of Parliament, and of reasoned public discourse in general, has meant that the

> Government forces are swarmed by the opposition almost instantly after an electoral mandate. There is no patience, either on the part of the government or the opposition, to respect the authenticity of the mandate to rule given by the voter to a parliament or legislature. Unbending postures adopted by government even in defiance of persistent and legitimate demands of parliamentary oppositions lead to cynicism and a tendency to take to the streets. Having tasted the tumult and mighty disharmonies of plebiscitary mass mobilizations, the opposition gets addicted to it and never wants to return to the mundane task of rational parliamentary debates and ventilation of grievances.[71] At the same time, most political parties have become extensions of the will and whim of a single leader. Political sycophancy may have been pioneered by the Congress Party under Indira Gandhi, but it is by no means restricted to it. Regional leaders such as Mulayam, Lalu and Jayalalithaa revel in a veritable cult of personality, encouraging and expecting craven submission from their party colleagues, their civil servants and the public at large. Tragically, even Ambedkar has not been exempted from this hero worship. Although no longer alive, and not associated with any particular party, the reverence for his memory is so utter and extreme that it is no longer possible to have a dispassionate discussion of his work and his legacy.

Sixty years after Independence, India remains a democracy. But the events of the last two decades call for a new qualifying adjective. India is no longer a constitutional democracy but a *populist* one.