

**THE INDIAN EXCEPTIONALISM: WHY DID INDIA BECOME
A DEMOCRACY? A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE
AND SOME OBSERVATIONS TO THE DEBATE**

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Introduction

The emergence and consolidation of the democratic regime in India has always represented a *puzzle* within the political science field. Indian democracy is seen as an exceptional case and it is difficult to explain using the standard determinants from different constituents of democratic theory. After it became independent from British rule in 1947, all its domestic conditions militated against the establishment of a democratic political regime; India was a large, ethnically diverse, multi-religious, multilingual, poor, and largely illiterate country, beset by massive refugee crises, food insecurity, security challenges. India's democracy paradox is even more intriguing if one considers that Pakistan (which shared numerous institutional, historical, social and economic features with India) experienced a totally different type of regime outcome. Paradoxically, Pakistan's history is more consistent with the normal pattern of political development, as expected by experts and scholars.

In this article I will give an overview of some respected academic positions in the debate concerning why and how India came to be a democratic political system. The article focuses on this debate for two reasons. First, rather curiously it has been characterised by very few contributions: while many studies have addressed the problem of the resistance of Indian democracy¹. Second, understanding the origin of

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¹ A. KOHLI, *The Success of India's Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 4.

Indian democracy is important as it can yield a beneficial spill-over effect on the democratisation literature in general².

This article is organised into three sections. The first explains briefly how the democratic regime is defined. The second deals with a survey of the relatively few contributions made to the why-India-became-a-democracy debate. The third section covers critical observations and considerations on the debate.

1. *What is democracy?*

In common with many other studies of democratisation, this article opts for a procedural or minimalist definition, according to which democracy is a system of government in which citizens choose their political leaders in periodic elections, thereby giving their leaders the right to rule. This minimal concept also implies two main theoretical dimensions: the competition (important and wide competition among individuals and organised groups for all effective government positions and excluding the use of force) and the inclusive suffrage (a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of office positions and no major – adult - social group is excluded)³. A third (normative) dimension is needed for the minimal conception: the existence of basic civil and political liberties as a precondition for participants (no major violations of civil and political liberties and the rule of law for all citizens)⁴. A further requirement may be added: no other power (such as the military, for example) can constrain or veto decisions made by elected rulers.⁵ Finally, two further considerations are necessary. The

² M. TUDOR, *The promise of power: The origins of democracy in India and autocracy in Pakistan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

³ G. SORESENSEN, *Democracy and Democratization. Processes and Prospects in a Changing World*, Boulder, Routledge, 2008, p. 14.

⁴ M. BRATTON, N. VAN DE WALLE, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 13; D. BERG-SCHLOSSER, *Concepts, Measurements and Sub Types in Democratization Research*, In D. BERG-SCHLOSSER (ed.), "Democratization. The State of the Art", Opladen and Farmington Hills, 2007, pp. 31-32; G. SORESENSEN, *Democracy and Democratization*, cit. pp. 13-14.

⁵ P. C. SCHMITTER, T. L. KARL, *What Democracy is ... and is Not*, in "Journal of Democracy", n. 3, 1991, p. 81.

first observation is that the possession of democratic values or the democratic nature of certain decisions taken are not requirements of this procedural definition. The second observation is that no particular form of democracy is privileged.

2. *Unlikely democratisation: why and how did India become a democracy?*

The survey is organised according to the approaches and perspectives mainly used in democratisation literature; these are the structural, strategic and social forces' approaches.

2.1 *Structural approach*

The structural approach identifies the most significant determinants of democratic development outside the immediate reach of human agency: domestic economic and social determinants⁶.

The classic account of Indian democracy which uses a structural perspective is that of Rajni Kothari. It identifies the origin of India's democracy in its indigenous civilisation and religious tradition. According to Kothari the presence of particular beliefs, values, and principles favours the creation of suitable societal sub-strata for the future democratic system⁷. He argues that Hindu civilisation has always featured a certain supple, plural, and open quality; it lacks a single, authoritative source from which a centre of orthodoxy can be developed; it has neither generated nor offered broad acceptance of orthodoxies which might facilitate the rise of autocrats claiming either to be defending an orthodoxy against threats⁸. This feature permitted the toleration of various forms of social existence and groups (it has always featured a richness and profusion of subcultures within subcultures, each functioning according to its own distinctive code and outlook). Moreover, political power and spiritual

⁶ J. TEORELL, *Determinants of democratization: Explaining regime change in the world, 1972–2006*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 17-19.

⁷ R. KOTHARI, *Politics in India*, Orient Blackswan, p. 25.

⁸ R. KOTHARI, *Politics in India*, cit., p. 48.

authority were firmly separated; they are two distinct spheres of action; and politics is an autonomous, but limited, sphere of human action. Political authority inhabited the realm of necessity (where politics had its own autonomy and internal logic that brooked no outside interference), but political order drew its legitimacy from its service to the spiritual order. The ambivalence of the Hindu tradition in politics produced a lack of centrality of politics in society. Indian society was organised more around its culture and tradition than its politics. This often led Hindu society to coexist with different types of political regimes (sometime dominated by non-Hindus), and with no interference between the two. This helped to produce a rather more relaxed attitude to political power, insulating Indian society from the traumas and disruptions of political crises, and thus Indian society accepted political changes without feeling that its existence was being challenged. The result was the lack of a strong identification with a specific political order. This explains why the presence of rulers from the outside was not considered a threat or a challenge to the existence of Indian society; and why *stateness* in India tended to be rather weak.

Another classic structural-perspective-based contribution to the debate on why India became a democracy comes from W.H. Morris-Jones. This account argues that the success of Indian democracy was due to the British colonial legacy; to its beneficial and tutelary role. For Morris-Jones, having inherited an efficient and professionalised administration, India was then able to develop a real and an efficient state, placing the postcolonial regime on the path of political development⁹. The bureaucratic organisation was hierarchical, but well structured, efficient, well-functioning and highly professional; it had spread and branched out throughout the colonial territories¹⁰. He also emphasises several British institutional reforms which favoured the involvement of local political actors in the political system (such as the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford reforms; Government of India Act in 1935). Thus, each of these reforms highlighted a marked trend: the initiative and influence of the provinces was largely in Indian hands, increasing the stakes of provincial politics, laying down the access points and ground rules, and

⁹ W.H. MORRIS-JONES, *The Government and Politics of India*, Hutchinson University Library, pp. 22–27.

¹⁰ W.H. MORRIS-JONES, *The Government and Politics of India*, cit., pp. 22–27.

inviting Indians to adjust their political styles and their horizontal and vertical linkages. They expanded opportunities for elected individuals and sought the increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration for gradual self-governing institutions. Indians found themselves involved in electoral procedures; they began to participate in electoral competitions, and politicians began to create new connections with the voters (despite the lack of party organisation, funds, and propaganda). The reforms introduced under colonial rule also established a mode of formal political interaction: Indians learned to combine opposition and cooperation in sequence and at different levels; they learned the party competitions; a complex process of consultation created a plethora of associations and societies each claiming to speak for a particular section or subsection of Indian society. Further proof of these dynamics and patterns was the very large increase in the membership of movements and groups, in the late 1930s. Overall, it was a sort of large *apprenticeship to politics* which allowed the transformation of mobilised Indians from “seditionists to responsible ministers”¹¹. During British rule, Indian elites, politicians, and individuals learned to cooperate, accept, and become familiar with the liberal and representative system. This political know-how accumulated was considered to be so important that Morris-Jones pointed out that it allowed the Indian politicians to avoid ‘groping in the dark’ when self-government and independence arrived¹². Clearly, in most cases adherence to liberal ideals was not genuine: many Indians engaged in the institutional structures and practices mainly for their interest in, and for the harnessing of, power and patronage. However, the experience was helpful and produced the positive result of spreading certain ideas and practices, also making people accustomed to them - even after British domination.

Jyotirindra Dasgupta’s explanation proposes a mix between colonial legacy and indigenous civilisation. According to him, Indian democracy has deep roots in a favourable sub-stratum of ideas, values and principles drawn from western culture and adapted by intellectuals, Indian political intelligentsia (also through the prism of the indigenous cultural heritage) and by the movement for independence¹³. This cul-

¹¹ W.H. MORRIS-JONES, *The Government and Politics of India*, cit., p. 141.

¹² W.H. MORRIS-JONES, *The Government and Politics of India*, cit., p. 41.

¹³ J. DASGUPTA, *India: Democratic Becoming and Combined Development*, in L.

tural sub-stratum is referred to as ‘an inheritance of ideas and institutions’, and it is collateral (as a background) to, but not narrowly coincidental with, the Hindu religious heritage. This intellectual process took place in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, and it was the result of a small intelligentsia of scholars and politicians (such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Romesh Chunder Dutt) who were fascinated with liberal ideas and organised associations. These intellectuals felt that the most impressive aspect of the strength of the West lay not in its force and firepower, but in its rational thought¹⁴. This intellectual elaboration led them to the notion that Indians should re-examine the very foundations of their existing organisations of religion, society, and education. Modern voluntary associations emerged with the task of assisting efforts to affirm reforms and principles, such as establishing education, freedom of the press and of association, the rule of law and legal reform, and the rights of women. Although these efforts were interrupted in the late nineteenth century, ideas and principles flowed into the movement for independence which was born as an elite-led movement or as a forum for representing the interests of the elite. During the struggle for independence, these ideas were transformed into political rules and practices by its effective leadership, and they contributed to a mass incorporation and better perception of Indian self-identity and national interests. Of course, although values alone cannot support a democratic regime; they are nevertheless significant because the individual choices are not only inexorably determined by social and economic structural factors, the presence of this sub-stratum of ideas aided the support for authority and the resilience of system¹⁵.

A very similar contribution to the debate on why India developed into a democracy comes from the Indian historian Sumit Sarkar’s account on the historical origin of Indian democracy. According to him, the intellectuals of the Indian nationalist movement through their intellectual and ideological elaboration favoured the creation of a *public*

DIAMOND, J.J. LINZ, S. M. LIPSET (eds.), “Democracy in Democratic Countries: Asia”, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1989, p. 64.

¹⁴ J. DASGUPTA, *India: Democratic Becoming and Combined Development*, cit., p. 53.

¹⁵ J. DASGUPTA, *India: Democratic Becoming and Combined Development*, cit., pp. 94-97.

sphere - a sort of fictional place where private people could come together to constitute public forums or groups, developing communications network sites for the production and circulation of discourses and ideas, which could, in principle, be critical of the state¹⁶. Albeit with many limitations and shortcomings (elitism, the lack of appeal of ideas and an efficient organisation) this public sphere laid the foundation of national political discourse as well as national interests¹⁷.

A short account on the explanation of the different political regime outcomes in India and Pakistan by Christophe Jaffrelot reviewed the question of the structural determinants of Indian democracy and proposed an interpretation that includes structural factors not present in previous scholarly explanations, as well as their use within a broader multi-factor explanation. According to him four factors explain the disparate political outcomes in the two South Asian countries: (1) different type of colonial legacies; (2) difference in the ethnic pluralism; (3) very dissimilar political culture and size of two key political parties and (4) different state apparatus inherited by two countries¹⁸. Emphasising the political training under the British Raj, Jaffrelot argues that the different geographical areas inherited different types of colonial legacies. He points out that since the nineteenth century onwards the gradual devolution of power to Indians at the local and regional level drove British policy¹⁹. This policy produced several institutional reforms which allowed the Indians to benefit by a political training on political and democratic practices and principles; these principles and practices became firmly rooted in the behaviour and political culture of the Indian élites and the majority of the population. A term was even coined for this training in politics, “Colonial Parliamentaryism”, which highlighted the two levels of involvement, both at institutional framework level and at political experience level. However, as Jaffrelot highlights, the provinces that would later become the core components of Pakistan were among the least solidly anchored to the

¹⁶ S. SARKAR, *Indian Democracy: The Historical Inheritance*, in A. KOHLI (ed.), “The Success of India’s Democracy”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 24–28.

¹⁷ S. SARKAR, *Indian Democracy: The Historical Inheritance*, cit., pp. 29–30.

¹⁸ C. JAFFRELOT, *India and Pakistan: Interpreting the Divergence of Two Political Trajectories*, in “Cambridge Review of International Affairs”, n. 2, 2002, p. 266.

¹⁹ C. JAFFRELOT, *India and Pakistan: Interpreting the Divergence of Two Political Trajectories*, cit., pp. 253–254.

benefits of this political training. At the same time, the large and complex ethnic structure existing in India prevented any ethnic or ethno-linguistic group becoming dominant²⁰. India was able also to convert its ethno-linguistic diversity to political pluralism; this was used as a basis to reinforce its democratic framework. Conversely, in Pakistan the competition for power among the limited number of ethno-linguistic groups yielded an unfavourable configuration for a successful democratic transition. Moreover, Jaffrelot argues that Indian democracy was favoured by the Congress with its very large mass appeal, its well-structured and effective party organisation as well as its effective operational strategies. The Pakistani Muslim league suffered from both narrow elitism and the lack of an effective organisation and operational strategy²¹. Finally, Jaffrelot emphasises that India inherited an operative and effective state apparatus; whereas Pakistan inherited a weak and small state structure, which fell prey to security concerns²².

2.2 Strategic approach

The strategic approach (also known as *agency-approach* or *transition paradigm*) stresses that the establishment of a democratic regime can be explained through processes of strategic elite interactions²³. According to this view, there are no structural prerequisites for the start of such processes, the results of which are conditioned to a high degree by the bargaining skill of the actors involved. Moreover, regime outcomes are likely determined by a number of random conditions and unexpected events²⁴.

²⁰ C. JAFFRELOT, *India and Pakistan: Interpreting the Divergence of Two Political Trajectories*, cit. p. 256.

²¹ C. JAFFRELOT, *India and Pakistan: Interpreting the Divergence of Two Political Trajectories*, cit., p. 261.

²² C. JAFFRELOT, *India and Pakistan: Interpreting the Divergence of Two Political Trajectories*, cit., p. 255.

²³ J. TEORELL, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*, cit. p. 20.

²⁴ D. A. RUSTOW, *Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model*, in “Comparative politics”, n. 3, 1970; G. O'DONNELL, P. SCHMITTER, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Univ Press, 1986.

The classic strategic-approach account is the work of James Manor. While acknowledging that an adequate explanation must also consider “certain aspects of Hindu culture and Indian social structures [...] [as well as] the distinctive character of British rule and the formidable Indian response to it”, Manor emphasises the Indian National Congress as being a key determinant of post-independent democratic developments of India, without which India would not have had this regime outcome²⁵. Manor points out that the Congress party provided the *glue* for the tenure of the social political system. By integrating the two main sources of order in India - the state and the dominant mainly agrarian socio-economic order - Congress installed an integrative mechanism which ensured stability, legitimacy and support for the post-independence political system²⁶. The party also provided a legitimate channel through which the goals and aspirations of the citizens may be satisfied as well as serving as a form of conflict-management, thereby reducing the clashes among the various fragments of the social structure. During the struggle for independence, the nationalist movement sought to capture, develop and use the links and accommodations which the British had established with powerful groups in local society (although it initially sought to undermine them). Congress was able to maximise its effectiveness and presence at every level, insinuating itself in the space between British rulers and the powerful Indian social groups on which British power was dependent. Congress was able to include a remarkably broad range of interests within its coalition and channel patronage to powerful groups, thus ensuring the distribution of resources derived for the control of state power²⁷. After independence, Congress presided over the completion of the integration between the state *machine* and society. This was combined with the process by which leaders in post-independent India retained and adapted much of the institutional structure of the colonial state apparatus. Congress soon gained substantial control over the bureaucrats. This authority reassured members of the Indian establishment as well as the In-

²⁵ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, in “Political Studies”, n. 1, 1990, p. 20.

²⁶ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., p. 20.

²⁷ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., pp. 28-32.

dian military élite. In particular, Manor notes that civilian leaders had a sympathetic attention to the needs of the armed forces, and the structure of command; preventing any attempt of seizure of power from the military. As most of the structures of colonial state were retained, this was more a case of maintaining and adapting a settled order rather than creating or imposing a new one²⁸.

The complex network of Congress's powerful groups operated as a political machine, distributing resources, cultivating support, collecting and transmitting information, managing conflict(s) and overseeing the work of the bureaucrats. The result was that the groups became even more powerful, reinforcing their authority within Congress at local level, while at the same time, enabling Congress to respond sufficiently to the demands from these new social groups which had become involved in the political process. Moreover, since they had become increasingly politically assertive, Congress, protected state institutions from potentially damaging issues, by mediating demands, defusing potentially destructive discontent, and bargaining between the different interests²⁹.

At the same time, Manor's explanation emphasises that Congress was able to provide political training for the political leadership and citizenry³⁰. Furthermore, Manor recognised that the individual qualities of leading Indian politicians had a significant impact³¹. Manor also recognised that India benefited from the considerable experience with democratic practices and institutions that it had gained under colonial rule. He also argued that the Congress party would probably have had a less positive result in the absence of such an apprenticeship to politics.

Another most prominent example of strategic-approach-based account on the why India became a democracy is that of Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph. In their account of the political economy of the Indian state, they emphasised the key leaders' individual qualities

²⁸ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., p. 33.

²⁹ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., p. 34.

³⁰ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., pp. 29-30.

³¹ J. MANOR, *How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India*, cit., p. 31.

as well as their peculiar liberal and democratic ideas and beliefs³². According to the two authors, democracy in India was not merely the result of debates and deliberations of constituent assembly. Instead, it was a consequence of the stature of Nehru, as well as unpredictable events: the death of two of Nehru's principal rivals for national leadership, powerful spokesmen for authoritarian state ideologies. Once political alternatives were eliminated, Nehru was able to strengthen a liberal and constitutional state.

A partial similarity to Rudolph and Rudolph's argument is found in Ashutosh Varshney's account on why India became a democracy. According to Varshney, Indian democracy was the result of both the leadership's specific choices as well as leaders' democratic attitude. On the choices issue, he argues that leadership successfully achieved a threefold-process strategy: the nation building, the mass party building and democratic development building. Varshney emphasises that political leaders achieved a crucial and successful process of *nation-building*: instead of a simple sum of individuals (who only shared some cultural elements), leadership created a nation which merged the cultural and political aspects through the union between the simple cultural unit (civilisation) and the political unit³³. Furthermore, political leadership transformed the nationalist movement from an elitist and urban middle-class group to a real mass party, becoming the institutional groundwork of a competitive political party. The Congress party achieved a legitimacy and popularity that no other competitors with a similar nationwide base ever succeeded in doing³⁴. At the same time, the leadership was able to develop a strategy of political economy for combining welfare, development and democratic practices. the leadership chose democracy over development. By not forcing the narrow development issues, the leadership avoided putting the democratic regime at risk. In particular, Varshney points out that the leadership had

³² Unpredictable and accidental events were also seen as vital influence factors. L. I. RUDOLPH, S.H. RUDOLPH, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*, Chicago, Delhi, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

³³ It was a similar process to that which happened in France with the transformation of "[...] peasants into Frenchmen", A. VARSHNEY, *Why Democracy Survives. India Defies the Odds*, in "Journal of Democracy", n. 3, 1998, pp. 38-39.

³⁴ A. VARSHNEY, *Why Democracy Survives. India Defies the Odds*, cit., pp. 39-46.

sought to reduce the contradictions and problems that would have modernised the country, but would endanger democracy: the peasant has not disappeared and technology has made peasant agriculture productive enough to blunt the contradictions between industrialisation and the existence of the peasantry³⁵. On the democratic attitude issue, Varshney argues that leaders accepted institutional constraints on their decision-making. He points out that democracy cannot function if the institutional logic is made subservient to the personal ambitions or ideological predilections of leaders³⁶.

A very similar argument is presented in the complex and outstanding work of Sunil Khilnani on modern India. He claims that, like other eighteenth-century democratic experiences in America and France, India became a democracy without really knowing how, why or what it meant to be one. The idea of Democracy: “[...] has penetrated the Indian political imagination [...]” and has begun to change the previous authority and social order³⁷. He argues that a capable political leadership made this result possible³⁸. In particular the author identifies Nehru - above all - as the leading figure who was able to achieve two important results for post-independence Indian democracy. Firstly, He placed the state at the core of Indian society, transforming it from a ‘distant alien object’ into something that deeply infiltrates the daily life and imagination of Indians, making it responsible for their wishes (job, education place, safety, cultural recognition). Secondly, Nehru accomplished a non-religious and liberal constitution, economic development reforms, social opportunities and sovereignty, and autonomy at the international level³⁹. According to Khilnani, no previous political agency had ever achieved this result; given the misshapen muscularity of the state, which made it strong in certain respects but feeble in others - the democratic regime outcome would have been impossible without the crucial thrust of a strong leadership⁴⁰.

Two contributions have re-examined the leadership-based perspec-

³⁵ A. VARSHNEY, *Why Democracy Survives. India Defies the Odds*, cit., pp. 41-42.

³⁶ A. VARSHNEY, *Why Democracy Survives. India Defies the Odds*, cit., p. 46.

³⁷ S. KHLNANI, *The Idea of India*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 17

³⁸ S. KHLNANI, *The Idea of India*, cit., pp. 18-23.

³⁹ S. KHLNANI, *The Idea of India*, cit., p. 30.

⁴⁰ S. KHLNANI, *The Idea of India*, cit., pp. 41-42.

tive of why India became a democracy and have proposed a very complex model of the leadership influence.

The first is a short analysis by Alistair McMillan. While McMillan recognises the importance of the administrative and representative framework established by the British rulers, he highlights the special role played by political leadership and by the Congress party in the establishment of Indian democratic regime. In particular, two aspects of the Congress party proved to be a fundamental determinant of the democratic regime: (a) its *inclusive ideology* and (b) its effective organisation. The Congress' inclusive nationalist ideology favoured the achievement of independence, providing the diffusion and circulation of democratic norms and practices. It was also crucial to favour the involvement of the public and outstanding figures from outside of the party, thereby enlarging party support (particularly leaders from disadvantaged social groups.). The Congress' inclusive ideology also allowed the adaptation of the colonial framework to new requirements for an independent India and democratic practices⁴¹. The administrative basis of independent India was formed by the institutional structures of British colonial rule. These were adapted to new democratic practices and demands, which provided (within the state administration) a framework for representative government. The organisation of Congress was able to expand, adapt and entrench electoral politics. It also favoured maintaining the military outside the political arena. The military were incorporated into the administration but not in the political domain. This process was helped by the fact that the highest ranks of the military shared "the nationalist ethos of Congress"⁴². But the role of Congress' organisation was also crucial in stabilising the democratic political system in post-independence years. Here, the ability to manage the patronage system was essential⁴³. In a society divided by numerous social cleavages, including language, caste, religion, tribe, region and class, Congress became the management mechanism and channel of patronage connections. Patronage, controlled by Congress, together with federalism, became one of the pil-

⁴¹ A. McMILLAN, *Deviant Democratization in India*, in "Democratization", n. 4, 2008, pp. 739-740.

⁴² A. McMILLAN, *Deviant Democratization in India*, cit., pp. 740-741.

⁴³ A. McMILLAN, *Deviant Democratization in India*, cit., p. 741.

lars and mechanisms which supported and preserved the unity of the political system. This element is considered to be so important that some scholars have come to think of it as a characteristic feature of the new political system⁴⁴.

The second contribution is the published work by the American scholar Philip Oldenburg on the different political trajectories of India and Pakistan. Oldenburg recognises that, at the moment of independence, India was somewhat advantaged in terms of its colonial institutional legacy (for example, India inherited more professional bureaucracy, smaller military forces, and a less powerful state apparatus than Pakistan). Nevertheless, as Oldenburg admits, it does not necessarily follow that inheriting a relatively low level of the military or a higher quality of administrative personnel promotes a successful democratisation⁴⁵. He argues that the dynamic and bargaining skills of the leadership explain why India became a democracy. The core of Oldenburg's explanation emphasised that the political part of the state (elective, and composed of politicians) was able to achieve (and maintain) control over the non-elective and bureaucratic part of the state. This result was made possible by the higher moral strength and support of the leadership and Congress than the other components of the state. On the one hand, the leadership wanted to build democratic institutions but also to maintain a strong politicians-citizens link. Moreover, the leadership was able to achieve and to maintain a high level of popular legitimacy⁴⁶. On the other hand, it wanted to achieve dominance of the political arena by controlling the bureaucratic part of state. According to Oldenburg, the exact opposite happened in Pakistan.

2.3 *Social forces approach*

The social forces perspective locates the origin of democracy in the organised interests and collective actions of society as well as the re-

⁴⁴ A. McMILLAN, *Deviant Democratization in India*, cit., p. 744.

⁴⁵ P. OLDENBURG, *India, Pakistan, and Democracy. Solving the Puzzle of Divergent Paths*, London, New York, Routledge, pp. 33–34.

⁴⁶ P. OLDENBURG, *India, Pakistan, and Democracy. Solving the Puzzle of Divergent Paths*, cit., p. 226.

relationships among social classes. As has been highlighted, this perspective combines structural with actor-centric perspectives⁴⁷.

The classic social-forces-based interpretation on why India became a democracy is that of Barrington Moore. Moore identified two conditions that indirectly favoured the establishment of democracy in India: 1) the prevention of an alliance between aristocratic and bourgeois against peasants and workers and 2) the political weakening of the landed aristocracy (due to its alliance with the British). According to him, British colonial policies blocked the development of a coalition between the landed elite and the commercial and industrial classes. The lack of this class coalition prevented reactionary and authoritarian political outcomes (as happened elsewhere because of the existence of this kind of class coalition)⁴⁸. At the same time, nationalist political leadership and the movement for independence favoured a connection between urban commercial class and the peasants. This class alliance (and the nationalist political leadership's strategy against the British) prevented dominant interests in the countryside and urban areas being threatened by peasants and workers; it also prevented peasants and workers alienating landed, commercial and industry bourgeoisie. According to Moore, the establishment of a democratic political system in India was the result of this specific class alliance. However, in India these political processes had a negative side effect: the lack of economic development. Moore argued that this alliance limited a significant transfer of economic resources from countryside to the modern urban industrial sector; there was only a small incentive towards industrialisation; resources were not being properly utilised for the construction of an industrial plant; agriculture was stagnant and inefficient; the countryside was not generating resources that could be used for industrial growth. Furthermore, landlords and moneylenders used surplus resources mainly for unproductive purposes⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ J. TEORELL, A. HADENIUS, *Determinants of Democratization: Taking Stock of the Large-N Evidence*, in D. BERG-SCHLOSSER (ed.), "Democratization. The State of the Art", Opladen and Farmington Hill, 2007, p. 71.

⁴⁸ B. MOORE, *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston, Penguin University Book, [1966]1974, p. 371.

⁴⁹ B. MOORE, *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, cit., p. 385.

Another major work which uses a class-based argument to explain Indian democracy is the account by Robert W. Stern. In essence his argument suggests that democratic institutions in India are the natural result of the affirmation of a class coalition formed by the Indian urban, educated, middle class and the rural middle class. This class coalition had interests in creating more representative and re-distributive political institutions, and also established the Congress movement which it used to advance its upward mobility and to become politically dominant⁵⁰. It was the British who set this class-affirmation process in motion in the second half of the nineteenth century. They sought to rule India effectively and to exploit it for their own economical advantage, but they also needed the active collaboration of the Indians. For this reason, they sought to gain the support of the Hindu professional middle class (who were also often university educated in England and were already working in indigenous services) by gradually involving them in the administration and government. But the Indian professional middle class began to demand greater involvement: more positions in important posts and in the bodies of the colonial government (access to higher positions in the administration, seats in legislative councils, and the possibility of representing their own interests). Moreover, the Indian professional middle class formed a coalition of interests and built a political movement to pursue its goals more effectively and with greater strength. Thus, the British changed their attitude: they sought to curb the claims of the middle-class coalition's demands; and in order to do this British used the most backward, traditional and reactionary parts of the dominant social classes in India (mainly the princes, aristocrats and agrarian landlords) against the middle-class⁵¹. However, this connection between the British rulers and the dominant social class had a positive side effect: it kept these conservative social classes out of the Indian class coalition, and prevented it from gaining a relevant or dominant role in the class coalition itself. Unburdened by the weight of this backward, traditional and reactionary part of the dominant classes, the

⁵⁰ R.W. STERN, *Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia: Dominant Classes and Political Outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, Westport, Praeger Publishing, 2001, p. 2.

⁵¹ R.W. STERN, *Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia: Dominant Classes and Political Outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, cit., p. 9.

middle-class coalition pushed towards independence and the construction of free and democratic parliamentary institutions⁵². Thus Stern's explanation is that a democratic regime in India was the result of an Indian elite, high-caste and upper-class adaptation of imported structures of representation, and it was favoured by the acquiescence of the wealthy and powerful as well as those who coveted wealth and power⁵³.

Another class-based argument attempting to explain Indian democratisation is the study by Adeney and Wyatt. Their main purpose is to overcome what they consider the main shortcomings of mainstream theories of democratisation: an erratic fluctuation between the agency contingency and structural determinism⁵⁴. In explaining the South Asian regime outcomes, they give an account of the contributions made by elite actors during a period of political change. However, they also examine the extent to which structures constrained or enabled agency during this same period. Their core argument is that the nature of the political party and the structure of ethnic diversity at the critical juncture of decolonisation were critical factors for explaining the Indian democratic regime outcome. The two authors argued that the democratic regime in India was the result of compromise between elites, whereas part of these elites was formed by anti-democratic and authoritarian forces and class structures (such as rural social structures, large landowners)⁵⁵. According to the authors, the party structure played a crucial role in these compromises. The Congress acted as a bridge between the state and social and class structures; the strength and legitimacy of Congress successfully enabled it to be a place for accommodating tensions and conflicts in Indian society. This mediating and accommodative role was an important stabilising factor for the new political system during the transition: it facilitated the establishment of universal suffrage, as well as the working of elected and representative aspect of the new Indian political system. At the same time, the authors

⁵² R.W. STERN, *Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia: Dominant Classes and Political Outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, cit., pp. 9-13.

⁵³ R.W. STERN, *Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia: Dominant Classes and Political Outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, cit., pp. 77-85.

⁵⁴ K. ADENEY, A. WYATT, *Democracy in South Asia: Getting beyond the Structure-Agency Dichotomy*, in "Political Studies", n. 52, 2004, pp. 6-8.

⁵⁵ K. ADENEY, A. WYATT, *Democracy in South Asia: Getting beyond the Structure-Agency Dichotomy*, cit., pp. 7-10.

argue that the structure of ethnic diversity was also important: Indian social heterogeneity reduced the potential for prolonged and intractable conflicts; moreover it ensured that no sizeable ethnic or linguistic group could challenge the status quo or the primacy of Congress. The cross-cutting nature of social cleavages also strengthened the Indian political leadership. The particular structure of political parties as well as ethnic diversity provided a favourable environment to Indian elites; it allowed them to act autonomously from the anti-democratic class structures, as well as to make significant choices for democracy⁵⁶. Thus these conditions allowed leaders to act effectively: it was no coincidence that key leaders were effective in steering India away from the authoritarian regime outcome.

Finally, the most recent class-based argument is the full-bodied and sophisticated study of the divergent regime outcomes in India and Pakistan by Maya Tudor. Tudor suggests that the divergent political regimes of India and Pakistan have their roots in the crucial role of the specific class interests and class coalitions during the pre-independence period. She argues that class interests critically conditioned both the organisational structures as well as the main goals of independence movements in India and Pakistan and that a coherent distributive coalition between urban and educated middle class and rural middle class took place in India; this coalition shared interests in limited redistribution away from the colonial regime and the large landed-aristocracy⁵⁷. It was able to create a movement for independence as a means of advancing its interests and involvement in politics: the movement for independence was equipped with a strong and well defined ideology as well as a strong intra-party organisation⁵⁸. Moreover this class coalition and the independence movement were also committed to favouring substantially pro-democratic political reforms and in providing regime stability⁵⁹. By contrast, in Pakistan, the colonial-based entrenched

⁵⁶ K. ADENEY, A. WYATT, *Democracy in South Asia: Getting beyond the Structure-agency Dichotomy*, cit., p. 8.

⁵⁷ M. TUDOR, *The Promise of Power. The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*, cit., p. 207.

⁵⁸ M. TUDOR, *The Promise of Power. The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*, cit., pp. 69-86 and pp. 100-122.

⁵⁹ M. TUDOR, *The Promise of Power. The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*, cit., p. 206.

landed- aristocracy dominated the Pakistani struggle for independence, and it was committed to a substantially anti-democratic process for the protection of its interests. Contrary to India, the Pakistani landed-aristocracy created a weak national party (the Muslim League) which was unable to provide regime stability after independence. Thus, Tudor's explanation emphasises the significant connection between the middle-class coalition and the movement for independence.

3. *Some critical observations and comments*

The first observation is that the strategic/leadership-approach-based explanations seem to be the most trustworthy in explaining democracy in India. To a certain extent, it is possible to agree that structural factors may have contributed positively to the political development of the democratic regime in India and the social class-and interests-based explanation has, at least in part, some plausible and shared elements. But many aspects remain unclear and none of these explanations is entirely convincing. The use of the colonial legacy as an argument to explain Indian democracy quickly becomes unsatisfactory (or at least less reliable), when one simply considers the two contrasting political outcomes in India and in Pakistan. The two former British colonies shared the same territory, colonial state, and had similar institutional inheritances; yet, Pakistan embarked upon a dramatically different regime outcome shortly after its independence. Religion, civilisation and traditions also fail to provide a satisfactory answer of democracy in India. Hinduism (both as a belief system and in practice) has specific elements and attributes which are both favourable as well as antithetical to democracy. Moreover, the nationalism of the Indian democratic regime was based upon a secular and nonreligious interpretation of Indian identity rather than a religious one. The cultural traditions of societies obviously influence the political system; however, it is almost impossible to separate the specific cultural factors in order to assess their explanatory importance⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ C. WAGNER, *Democracy and State in South Asia: Between Fragmentation and Consolidation?*, "Asian Survey", n. 6, 1999, p. 915.

Furthermore, most of the socio-economic class structures in India (e.g., the powerful landowner class) were essentially autocratic., the mere existence of the middle class does not necessarily lead to a democratic regime outcome: the middle class could provide their own stabilising and meliorating regime effects, also towards an authoritarian regime (as Germany showed in the 1930s)⁶¹. In addition, the class-based explanations often examine the relation between class and democratisation, assuming that class means the same thing in different societies and has the same impact in widely different situations. But India did not possess the same class relation as in Western countries. As Myron Weiner argued, other linkages and ties (such as caste linkages) have been a far more potent form of social identity and political action than class in India⁶². Moreover, the social-forces/class-based explanations appear to follow a sort of determinist approach: the democratisation process developed and proceeded without problems, smoothly, without threats of derailment or of failure; social actors seem always to act in a consistent and internally conflict-free way. A similar perspective runs the risk of reducing and constraining even the role of politics and its contingencies⁶³. In addition, while these answers are able to account for the establishment of strong political parties and the use of certain practices and ideas as a means to mobilise and politicise the social classes and groups, the same explanations were, nonetheless, unable to account for why, if motivated solely by self-interest and by the acquisition of resources, these same party elites, groups and class coalitions adopted particular democratic structures and values, which also increased the political awareness of the subordinates and the masses.

Conversely, the strategic/leadership-approach-based accounts seem to be the most convincing in explaining democracy in India. The path of democratic development in India was by no means preordained and the fact that certain historical outcomes appear to be natural to us is

⁶¹ P. OLDENBURG, *India, Pakistan, and Democracy. Solving the Puzzle of Divergent Paths*, cit., p. 195.

⁶² M. WEINER, *The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics*, in A. Kohli (ed.), "The Success of India's Democracy", cit.

⁶³ C. HAY, *Structure and Agency*, in D. MARSH, G. STOKER (eds.), "Theory and Methods in Political Science", Basingstoke, 1995.

only because we repress the memory of possible alternatives⁶⁴. Events in the process of transition from colonial rule to the new independent state, with all their incertitude and confusion could have been potentially dangerous for the very existence and survival of a democratic India. Even after independence, numerous events contributed to a high level of instability and insecurity. The fact that these terrible consequences did not occur suggests that one crucial factor managed this critical situation. This article shares with other studies the idea that the crucial factor in Indian democratisation was political leadership. Leadership had the important role of both mediating, and defusing potentially dangerous dissent, by negotiating between the conflicting parties, thereby not only avoiding the implosion of state institutions, but also favouring the (relatively) rapid development of the state and the new regime. Thus, the crucial and complex processes of Indian history demonstrate that a guided process of state building and democratisation took place following independence. Of course, while social structures and economic resources and interests may also have played an important role (central, for example, in motivating actors to choose their alliances and their mobilisation strategies), the political development in India cannot be understood without reference to *who* created and crafted these strategies. If a strategic/political leadership approach appears to be a more convincing explanation of Indian democracy, then it suffers from one intrinsic shortcoming. This is the poor theorisation of the political leadership concept and how it influences political processes and regime change. The agency/transition perspective devoted little attention to the precise *mechanism* by which the political leadership had an impact on regime outcome; the role of leadership has remained analytically limited and under-specified⁶⁵.

The agency/transition approach has treated democratisation as a process of stages. It results in a large oversimplification of the analytical framework itself⁶⁶. This could lead to a dangerous deterministic

⁶⁴ L. I. RUDOLPH, S. H. RUDOLPH, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State*, cit.

⁶⁵ U. MÖLLER, I. SCHIERENBECK, *Political leadership, nascent statehood and democracy: A comparative study*, Routledge, 2014.

⁶⁶ T. CAROTHERS, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, in "Journal of Democracy", n. 1, 2002, pp. 7–9.

perspective of the democratic outcome. It demonstrates a limited understanding of the mechanism by which leadership affects democratisation⁶⁷. Moreover, the transitional approach looks like an almost tautological perspective, because the explanatory factors included in the transitional model are usually very proximate to the outcome that they purport to explain; it does not explain what determines the actors' interests, beliefs, and preferences, or how they are able to impose them⁶⁸. The consequence is the paradoxical reduction (curiously) in the role of contingency, in the randomness, and in the choice⁶⁹. These considerations call for further analysis on the relation and the mutual influence between leadership and democratisation.

The second observation is that the literature reviewed here neglects the role played by international factors in the establishment of Indian democracy. It is true that many of the common theories on international determinants of democracy do not work when applied to the post-independence Indian context⁷⁰. However, representation of the democratic establishment process in India would be partial, if the role of the international context is totally neglected.

On this point two distinct contributions give rise to further research. The first contribution is the interpretation by scholar Ayesha Jalal of the failure of Pakistani democratisation in the late 1950s. According to her, the mix of the security threat from outside and the *geopolitical position* of the country altered the balance of civil-military relations in Pakistan. She argues that the anti-democratic forces in the Pakistani state were strengthened by the (perceived) threat of India to the security of Pakistan: the "security threats" enabled the military elite to use the geopolitical location of Pakistan to consolidate its power and its role in the state⁷¹. Jalal's argument was not that the external threats directly lead the anti-democratic elite to power, but that external threats facilitated processes that were already well underway. However, if it is un-

⁶⁷ T. CAROTHERS, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, cit., p. 8.

⁶⁸ J. TEORELL, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*, cit., p. 21.

⁶⁹ T. CAROTHERS, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, cit. p. 15.

⁷⁰ K. ADENEY AND A. WYATT, *Democracy in South Asia: Getting Beyond the Structure-Agency Dichotomy*, cit., p. 4.

⁷¹ A. JALAL, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 22-23.

likely that international factors can form the basis of mono-causal-factor explanations, they should not be neglected.

The second contribution on the literature of Indian democratisation is by scholar Jorgen Dige Pedersen. He recognises that the studies on the establishment of democracy in India have paid little attention to the international context⁷². According to him this is strange because in the aftermath of the Second World War democracy was the only internationally acceptable form of regime, and the democratic regime was the only serious option, within India and in political debates in the late-1940s. Moreover, he argues that all key Indian Congress leaders had a broad international orientation and were thus influenced by foreign environments. Pedersen goes on to point out that the direct involvement of the military in government and the adoption of an authoritarian regime in Pakistan can be justified by a change in the international climate: in the late 1950s authoritarian solutions had become more internationally acceptable in regime outcomes (because of an anti-communist approach and the need to preserve the stability and security of the South Asian state). If true, then the debate on why India became a democracy should also presumably consider the international context and climate.

Conclusions

After 60 years India's democracy is almost universally accepted as a stable and resilient political phenomenon. Yet no definitive answer as to why India became a democracy has been agreed upon. From the analysis of the debate on why India became a democracy emerges some hints.

The first concerns the political-leadership-approach-based descriptions. While these seem to be the most convincing in explaining democracy in India, the political leadership as a causal determinant of democracy is still under-theorised. This failing calls for further analysis on the relation and the mutual influence between leadership and democratisation.

⁷² J. D. PEDERSEN, *Why did India Become a Democracy and Why did it Remain Democratic: A Survey of the Literature and Some Comments to the Scholarly Debate*, In S.T. MADSEN, K.B. NIELSEN, SKODA (eds.), "Trysts with democracy: Political practice in South Asia", 2011. p. 27.

Finally, the second one concerns the lack of any theoretical and empirical reference to the influence of the international context and factors on the establishment of democracy in India.

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Riassunto - Dopo 70 anni, la democrazia indiana è considerata, quasi universalmente, come un fenomeno politico consolidato e resistente. Eppure, come la democrazia si sia affermata in India rimane quasi un enigma: le classiche teorie della democratizzazione hanno sempre avuto difficoltà nello spiegare il caso indiano. Per questa ragione, quest'ultimo è stato spesso considerato un "caso eccezionale" o un caso di democratizzazione "deviante".

Questo articolo fornisce una rassegna delle principali posizioni accademiche all'interno del dibattito sull'emergere della democrazia in India. L'analisi della letteratura ha messo in evidenza punti di forza, ma anche ele-

menti di debolezza. In particolare, due elementi di debolezza necessitano di ulteriori ricerche e approfondimenti. Il primo riguarda le leadership politica come fattore esplicativo della democrazia in India. Se le spiegazioni che enfatizzano il ruolo d'influenza della leadership politica nell'emergere del regime democratico indiano sembrano essere le più convincenti (di contro quelle basate su fattori strutturali e sociali lo sono meno); come questa influenza effettivamente avvenga (e come sia avvenuta in India) rimane ancora poco chiaro.

Il secondo elemento di debolezza riguarda la scarsa attenzione prestata dalla letteratura ai fattori internazionali per spiegare l'emergere della democrazia indiana.