

The Trajectories of the Indian State

Politics and Ideas

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Introduction

This volume of my essays on Indian politics follows from those in an earlier work, *The Imaginary Institution of India*.¹ In the present book I move my argument about the present history of the Indian state into the period after Independence. The earlier work had sought to understand how a state with India's present-day boundaries came to be established in the collective imagination, how an idea that was initially unconventional turned imaginatively vivid, and eventually, through political action, came to be historically real. Behind the fearfully tangible institutions of the modern Indian state lies a long process of the elusive and contingent movement of political imagination. In the mid-nineteenth century, that imagination appeared to settle on regional linguistic cultures. But through a fascinating ideational change it eventually produced a complex and layered conception of political identity that subsumed, but did not cancel these regional cultures into a larger, second-order 'idea of India'. As against the essays in *Imaginary Institution*, the essays collected here deal with the more structural question of how the system of institutions of the modern Indian state was formed, and how these institutions actually functioned.

I hope that, behind the different and specific concerns of each essay here, a single general argument can be sufficiently discerned. Taken together, the essays suggest that to understand the baffling complexity of the present-day Indian state—the *strategies* of the elites who control power and the *tactics* of the groups who are the targets of these strategies—it is essential to develop a long-term historical analytic. This argument is linked to the one underlying *Imaginary Institution*: namely, that the imaginative unity of India is still historically recent,

¹ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (Ranikher: Permanent Black, and New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

and historically contingent—which does not imply that it is not intense or durable—so the real functioning of the institutions of the modern state cannot be studied without constant reference to this genealogy. Instead of believing that we can understand without recourse to history why what is happening now is happening the way it is, we must look closely at the structures of social power existing over the long term—and even start the structural story of the state not at the time of Independence but much earlier. The essays here suggest that the beginning of the history of the contemporary Indian state lies in the political events and processes of India's pre-colonial past, in a period that is at times designated 'early pre-colonial modernity'—from the sixteenth century.

Two contradictory impulses appear to work in the history of this complex political 'field' called India. It is misleading to view this field as an unproblematically single political unity, even less a single political system, because it lacks the intentional direction and institutional coherence comparable to those of modern European nation-states. It is also misleading to treat it as a merely 'geographic' notion, as the British claimed, because political impulses of various kinds constantly intersect in this territorial region. And institutional structures which span this political field have, over the last century and a half, imparted to it an increasingly causally effective structure.

A primary impulse, at times overstressed in the academic literature, could be called the imperial impulse. Empires arise intermittently and seek to impose a relatively unified set of political institutions; but it is easy to overestimate the effectiveness of the imperial process, to regard the effects of imperialism's work as irreversibly final, and to view the intervals between imperial periods as mere interludes of anarchy—or as a period of waiting till another empire arises to restore order and a sense of India. This is an overstated picture because the intervals between empires are long, and during the interruptions stable, recognizable regional political formations rise and achieve impressive degrees of efficacy. Political unity, it must be recognized, is not a 'binary' fact—in the sense that it either exists or does not: so, we can make judgements about whether India is united or not. It is clearly a scalar fact: the judgement must be about whether, territorially, India is at any historical point more or less united than over the preceding period.

A second impulse, which pulls against the stability of empires, is the durability and intensity of feeling around definable regions—like

Banga or Kalinga or Vidarbha—which go back to Indian antiquity. Arjuna, unsatisfied by the wars of Kurukshetra, went out on an imperial campaign of conquest and brought under Pandava control regional kingdoms which have a remarkable similarity to the states of the federal union. Such military unifications were transient, and, except for a temporary militarily enforced territorial unity, they did not contain other durable features. In pre-modern times, therefore, these two impulses, working across this political field, contradicted and cancelled each other. Modern statecraft has found a way of balancing these two political logics, and the contemporary Indian state shows the workings of both these impulses in moderated form.

It appears from recent research by intellectual and economic historians that some more durable trends appeared during the period preceding the British entry into India. Politically, the Mughal empire was able to bring a substantial part of the subcontinent under its effective political control, and subject it to a more bureaucratically systematic and uniform administrative system. The researches of intellectual historians have shown that, partly because of Mughal tolerance towards a wide and diverse intellectual public sphere, intense intellectual exchanges took place between scholars and literary figures, not merely between North and South India, but also between territories falling within the Mughal dominions and outside. There is startling evidence that renowned scholars of Sanskrit grammar or literary figures were not merely patronized by the court, but received official stipends from both their Mughal patrons and rulers outside the Mughal empire. A vigorous public sphere of debate and interpretation seems to have existed independent of the political boundaries and conflicts attendant on them, which produced a busy circulation of ideas across distant regions. Finally, economic history has uncovered evidence of commercial transactions on an unprecedented scale in the 'long eighteenth century', which suggests greater monetization of the economy and exchanges across vast areas of the subcontinent.

Yet the end of Mughal rule demonstrated the power of the second fundamental impulse of Indian political life: the reassertion of regional kingdoms, when the grasp of the imperial centre slackened, and a transfer of both authority and resources back to smaller political entities which could depend on the cultural self-identification of peoples inhabiting flourishing vernacular cultures. Before the British administration created a stable unity of territories after the decline of the

Mughal state, powerful regional states had emerged in the Maratha, Mysore, and Punjab regions, indicating that the dual logic of political power in India was still powerfully active in the early eighteenth century. Political construction by the British followed the common logic of imperial states. For relatively fluctuating periods of time, empires united vast territories under a single centre of political control, but precisely the vastness of the dominions made it hard to impose on them a relentlessly uniform system of rules and regulative order. Following this imperial tradition, the British too experimented with different styles of revenue system as their empire expanded from the early control of Bengal to conquest of the North Indian kingdoms and Southern territorial acquisitions, and the shift from *zamindari*, *ryotwari*, and *mahalwari* systems. The actual processes of colonial governance thus struck a balance between the two impulses in the long term of Indian political history. These imposed central integrative techniques at times, and in the fields where they were needed, but left alone a great degree of regional specificity of political idiom and governing style. Political structures in India therefore continued to develop a complex pattern of rules and legislative orders, stretched across at least three planes—of ‘locality, province and nation’—to express in modernist language a flexible structure that persisted over the *longue durée*. I suggest that the political structures truly comparable to the contemporary Indian state are not the European nation-states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the pre-modern empire-states of Indian and Islamic history, with the implication that we can find greater analytical assistance from studying not the history of Europe in the modern period—on which the social science studies focus obsessively—but pre-modern Indian history.

Political analysts often work with the wrong genealogy: the nation-state in India, after Independence, is not a structural descendant of modern European states but of pre-modern Indian empires. I believe that the studied ahistoricity of our political science thinking—the plausible but massively misleading convention of starting the story of modern Indian politics in 1947, or even 1858—encourages this misconstruction. There is no epistemically serious way into present politics except through the long past. The neglect of vernaculars, and of the cosmopolitan languages of Sanskrit and Persian, has rendered this exceedingly difficult. A revival of the study of the Indian state requires

not the misguided epistemic selflessness of some dedicated devotion to the works of Weber and Marx or Foucault, but a painstaking reconnection with the vernacular facts of Indian political history. The exploration of Western theory is not unhelpful, but it can provide only oblique illumination to the history of Indian social power.

The essays of this book do not agree with the common periodizing of recent Indian political history. Politics after Indian Independence is usually periodized in terms of party governments. It is quite right, in one sense, to suggest that the long term of uninterrupted Congress rule, from 1947 to the early 1990s, was a continuous stage, disrupted by Congress’ reduction to a minority government in the momentous elections of 1991, after which, for nearly fifteen years central governments depended on explicit or implicit alliances. Several of these essays claim that a more attentive analysis of the functioning of political structures would reveal a highly significant line of separation between the Nehru years and those that followed. At times, this is viewed misleadingly in entirely personal terms—by reference to the personal qualities of statesmanship to be found in Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In fact, it is a combination of several significant changes: of higher political literacy in the electorate, of the new uses of political language, of structural changes in the economy, of the long-term reflexive effects of policies—that is, the manner in which policies, when pursued successfully over a long period of time, have effects that loop back and affect the structures of governance and social institutions. Although none of the essays directly addresses the question of periodizations of political history, collectively they call for a more attentive and minute characterization of historical change.

Regionality, Commonality, and Unity

A surprising result of this historicization is a more complex understanding of the constitution of the political field which we casually call ‘India’. Obviously, this is a highly complex and layered terrain of facts which requires an appropriately complex methodological response. Though it is quite true that, within the varying levels of political power, regional kingdoms—equivalents of our modern federal states—are among the most durable, they are amenable to historical change. In the contemporary world these political regions are also subject to

pressures from other forms of regionality—by which I mean a consistent historical process through which regions of varying kinds are formed and stabilized. Territorial regions acquire common features by being subjected to the same sets of laws and political practices, by being drawn into identical processes of economic production, circulation, and exchange, and by being affected by the same cultural and religious movements. All such processes produce determinate regionalities, they bring individuals and groups together into webs of common experience and control. The expansion of Mughal rule in most of northern and central India subjected varying territories to a similar pattern of revenue administration and principles of political governance. The rise of a Vaishnava religious movement united the territories of Bengal, Orissa, Mithila, and Manipur in a common artistic and cultural sensibility. Colonial economic processes created both clear divisions between coastal urban centres and extensive internal hinterlands—both connected and separated by the specific relations of economic production and exchange.

Region-forming processes of this kind are many in the modern period, and sometimes the economic and the cultural regionalities cross-cut political ones. In recent periods, economic and political regionalities have often accumulated different territorial configurations. In spite of UP being a single state, it is clear that—not merely in some socio-economic terms—it contained three different internal regions, and this was used as an argument for the creation of the new state of Uttaranchal (now renamed Uttarakhand) out of it: but eastern UP and Bihar also have significant common features. At the same time it is also quite clear that economic processes have created a common region incorporating the western parts of UP, the state of Delhi, parts of Haryana, and parts of Punjab. Faster economic growth in some states of India, compared to much slower change in others, creates political pressures, particularly if both growing and lagging states are territorially contiguous.

But Indian political space is also fragmented in other ways which need to be incorporated into an accurate picture of its topography. At times, regions may be quite diverse and geographically distant, yet demonstrate features or processes in common. The specific hierarchies of caste groups are quite different between varying regions, but show properties of inequality in common. Some processes are, however,

more than just common: they unite territorial regions into unitary spaces for particular purposes. In some ways state processes and the growth of the capitalist economy have created such unities at a certain level of the Indian economy and polity. Thus, there is a stratum of Indian space which is united, which works as a single plane of acts and causalities; but there are also other strata which are divided into regionalities of various kinds.

The united space, created primarily by the efficacy of the upper levels of the state structure and the modern capitalist economy, is not however simply an upper storey which does not affect the lower levels of political life. Politicians who are based in their respective states often wield power in distinctly more authoritarian ways in state politics while demanding democratic rules of functioning when they operate at the national level. This is not a matter of mere inconsistency and hypocrisy: it is in a sense rational choice. As none of them can hope to dominate the national stage in the way they do the political stages of their regions, their best option is to guard against an unusual curtailing of their powers because of the possible emergence of political authoritarianism at the centre. The fact that these regions are parts of a democratic Indian union is not a fact external to their political life, but conditions and determines politics at state levels as well. To accommodate all such complexities into our conception of the political field, we need to think of a stratified political space.

Caste, Class, and Consciousness

These essays were written over quite a long stretch of time, and they contain significant methodological shifts. The early essays are marked by a much stronger imprint of Marxist techniques of analysis—though there can be disputes about what constitutes a decisively Marxist approaches to politics. Even the earlier pieces interpret Marxist theory to claim that economic structures are overdetermined by cultural and political causalities to produce specific historical outcomes. Pressures arising from economic structures underdetermine political acts and outcomes. The later essays, however, diverge from conventional Marxist analyses in more significant ways.

The Marxist analysis of politics faces an immediate dilemma in deciding between two alternative constructions of its method. It could

be practised as a technique of resolute economic determinism, reducing political phenomena to underlying economically causal processes: if Marxists accepted this version of political analysis, there was little really to analyse; all that was required was simply to relate political events to appropriate economic triggers. Clearly, Marxist theory also contains a very different strand which recognizes the immense significance, even the 'primacy', of the political—usually in the context of analyses of revolutionary action. But it is not impossible to generalize this condition, and view politics as a highly significant activity which not merely subjugates and holds down subaltern groups, but shapes and gives form to the social world. Economic structures can be viewed as a set of constraints on political initiatives which limit political acts—in the sense of ruling out some options, constraining others, and imparting a direction to political choices consistent with the interests of basic social groups.

A second element of Marxist theory is the injunction to ask questions historically, i.e. instead of answering questions as they are, to give them a radically historical character. This requires that while seeking to understand relations between the state and social groups, or between dominant and subaltern communities, it is necessary first to historicize the question, i.e. to ask 'What is the history of the world about which we are asking such questions?' The impulse to historicize the study of Indian politics, seeking the precise nature and character of social groups, the nature of political conflicts, the precise mechanisms of social oppression, are in these essays drawn from this methodological impulse in Marxist historicism. This can lead to several problems when approaching Indian politics. It makes the standard forms of class analysis less relevant as we move from the relatively more industrialized regions of India to less industrial ones, and from the present to the past. In both cases, conflicts in political life happen primarily between agentive constellations of castes rather than classes specific to modern capitalist economies. In a sense, therefore, the consistent pursuit of the historicizing injunction within Marxist theory leads to a move away from class to caste as the basic category of political conflict.

A rejection of the idea that Marxism is 'a theory of everything' opens up the requirement to supplement its techniques by other theoretical and methodological apparatuses. In several essays, analysis

by using the category of class is often supplemented by techniques for analysing strategic action. The dominance of social groups is seen primarily not in directly intentional but consequential terms—by comparing the varying efficacy of different classes in influencing political outcomes. The subalternity of particular groups does not imply that these groups do not act on the field of political action, but that their actions are less efficacious, which raises the question of why this is so. Some of the essays which focus on analysing the present historically—suggesting a major 'rupture' between the Nehru and Indira Gandhi years, for example—also suggest that, contrary to the conventional analysis of radical commentators which viewed the bourgeoisie and landed magnates as the two primarily dominant classes in Indian society, a more accurate picture should introduce two modifications. First, it should carefully register changes in the historical character of rural agrarian elites that have altered their patterns of economic activity, and often their modes of political control, over rural society. Second, it is important to see the managerial-bureaucratic elites as major participants in the structure and dynamics of political dominance: they do not merely participate in enjoying the fruits of political dominance, but at significant decisional moments play a major strategic and directive role among the dominant classes. This also implies a further splitting of the general notion of social dominance into socio-economic dominance, and dominance as directive capacity.

A collection of essays, though their separate arguments are interconnected, obviously cannot offer a coherent analytical picture of the complexity, vastness, and historical depth of Indian politics. These essays try to work on two fronts of political analysis: some try to sketch a long-term historical narrative of the political; and some seek to explore the logic of the specific constitutive phenomena of political life. I belong to a generation whose understanding of Marxist theory was transformed by the discovery of Gramsci and historicism on the one hand, and of French structuralism on the other. The effect of this double impact was to find the fact that the most creative moments of radical analysis emerged when theorists, after acknowledging that they lived in particular and not universal history, sought to theorize their own historical world by devising concepts appropriate to the surprises that their history threw at them. To follow Gramsci was therefore not to try to apply Gramsci everywhere, because that, paradoxically, would

be to perversely misconstrue the high significance of Gramsci's work. Within the Marxist tradition, Gramsci was a theorist of difference, giving particular attention to those aspects of Italian politics which made it different from all others; and to follow him or to learn from him should lead to a discovery of historical difference in other specific contexts. Gramsci, for instance, turned his analysis different by addressing the peculiarities of the 'Southern question' in Italy, or the peculiar character of peasant culture. Although I must plead guilty to a simple transfer of concepts occasionally, I interpret the methodological injunction of historicity to imply that Indian analysts of politics should try to work out convincing analytical devices for forces which have shaped the history of our politics—such as language, caste, and religion—and meld them into a radical analysis of politics which captures the historical difference of the Indian lifeworld. Some of the essays here try to work out these smaller explanatory sketches, which could be fitted in as subsets of the larger picture.

Studying the modern state is astonishingly hard in some ways; and the theme that is repeated by most close observers of the modern state is that it is something new and unprecedented. Possibly the problem with the analysis of the state is one of semantic anachronism of a special kind. Long before the emergence of the mechanisms which we call the modern state, there were states composed of intricately connected institutions of rule, and there were also culturally specific stable meanings to the term 'state' (or rather terms which we would translate in English as the 'state') which referred to those institutional complexes. When the modern state arose historically in Europe, political analysts and popular discourse simply continued to use the old term for the new entity. In this case, the descriptive expectations folded into the older term 'state' continued to bear connotative effect, sliding the descriptions towards the past, suggesting that institutions and mechanisms existed which in fact did not.

At times, when trying to clarify what is involved in the rise of the modern state, theorists, not surprisingly, use metaphorical language—as Althusser says regarding Marx, this is quite common because there is a new perception of reality, but not a language which is prepared for it. In such cases, authors have to force the old language to do the work of the new, forcing the old concept to describe a new reality. In trying to explicate his difficult idea of 'governmentality' Foucault used a

metaphor which captures this aspect of the unprecedented character of the modern state. A 'state of sovereignty', Foucault remarks, sets up a relation between the ruler and his subjects which resembles one between the shepherd and his flock. His relation to the flock is external: if the sovereign loses his territory, or his dominion is reduced, it has an external relation to him. By contrast, the relation between the ruler and the ruled in a 'state of governmentality'—the exact difference he was so interested in capturing—was like that between the passengers and the captain of the ship: the fates of the rulers and the ruled are inextricably connected, or at least intertwined in a new and quite different way. It is important to note that what Foucault is trying to capture is not democracy, but a relation of reflexive power usually attendant on the modern state.

What I am trying to suggest might not be exactly the same as Foucault's idea, but it is significantly connected to it. The modern state is a new kind of instrumentality in its internal sovereignty, reflected in the crucial semantic alteration of the meaning of sovereignty under the European absolutist regimes. The state continued to perform its conventional—pre-modern—functions, such as defending the realm, fighting with enemy states, being unsubordinated to external command, etc; but gradually the internal functions of the state began to multiply and predominate: the state became involved more with doing things to its own society than to other states. Through taxation, finance, social engineering, the manifold tasks of the modern bureaucracy, the state became an agency primarily concerned with the most fundamental arrangements of its own society. In another way of speaking, it became the primary agency of reflexive social action: and this became its predominant function. Thus political groups try to lay hold of the state—not because they want to fight intruders or conquer territories, but because they intend urgently to do things to their own society. The history of both democratic and authoritarian states in modern times shows that the greatest transformations of the internal arrangements of social power have been made by modern states: the immense transformations wrought not merely by the Soviet state or the Nazi regime, but also the vast social engineering carried out by modern democratic welfare states.

By stressing the notion that the state was a mechanism which emerges out of society but is separated off from it, Marx was probably still

thinking within the older language of the state—as an entity that is drawn out of, yet separated from, society; answering the first picture in Foucault, not the second. By contrast, as modern states developed nationalistic and then democratic institutions, this power, separated off from society, was sought to be reconnected to the whole society by devising new languages of universality, inclusion, and collective intentionality. Nationalism presented this power as not of the monarch, but of the country—of France or England. When a soldier fought in a military engagement the act, sometimes the sacrifice of death, did not carry the meaning that he was prepared to give up his life for a high ruler who owned his country, and to whom he was bound by rules of fealty. It meant, in contrast, that he was willing to lay down his life for a large collectivity which was ennobled precisely by its inclusiveness: he was dying for the French nation of which he was an indispensable part. Clearly, the rise of democratic institutions advances this picture of the power of the modern state stemming from its own people, who, under democratic conditions, procedurally sanction these wars in which soldiers fight. In a sense, therefore, the soldier is fighting in a war that he has played a role in launching, or, in a more elevated and unrealistic sense, has declared himself. Notice that in all these things there is a dual argument: an argument of inclusivity—all people are included and involved in these political acts or processes, and in the case of internal acts such as taxation (not war) there is a dominant quality of reflexivity—of a society sanctioning and enacting these changes to its own structure.

Liberal and Marxist theory appear to misconstrue the nature of this reflexive relation of power in two different directions. The trouble with ordinary liberal political theory is that it takes this picture of inclusivity and reflexivity as true in an excessively straightforward sense. In the common, i.e. extreme, liberal picture, even the captain of the ship is dispensed with: the passengers run the ship collectively through political equality; and this equality can only be seen as equality of opportunity—as at every election, in a legal sense, every citizen gets an exactly equal chance of shaping the decision of the political community. There are well-known difficulties in accepting this simple picture as true. Serious observers of liberal democratic societies would immediately observe inequalities not merely in non-political spheres like the economy and their distortive effects on the putative equality of political

power; there exist real inequalities of power in a purely political sense, by implication, giving credence to the extreme Marxist idea that liberal democracy is a 'sham'. It is an unrealizable ideal, it is argued, and therefore the only reason for its persistence is ideological—to generate a false picture of liberal power, a powerfully plausible distortion of the way political power really operates in democratic societies.

I now believe that this is one of the major centres of modern political thought, in the sense that we should give more attention to this part of the problem; and it is possible to avoid the choice between two oversimple positions offered by versions of liberalism and Marxism (both of which are extreme), in the sense that they pick up a very significant feature of the real characteristics of the modern state, but generalize on that, ignoring other, equally significant features.

These essays are about a historically unprecedented activity called *politics*, an activity, if taken in this definition, that is available only in modern times, within the historical confines of modernity. It is hardly surprising that in many Indian languages this newness, the unprecedented quality of this activity, is captured by the fluent use, inside fully vernacular sentences, of what was originally an English word but is no more—a word which has decidedly lost its Englishness. People without any knowledge of English would today recognize the word, and its precise meaning. This is not because they know the English language, but because they know what that word indicates in their world. Thinking about the state—which is what these essays do—is to think about the historical advent of this activity. This is the indelible mark of modernity on history—the presence of the political in this sense. The least closely guarded secret of the modern world is that, although they do not make it as they please, men do make their own political history. I mean this in a much more narrowly and deeply political sense than Marx's famous remark. Over this particular field, politics, God has lost his sovereignty and the elites have lost their exclusive claim. In the modern world, all politicians, from devoted constitutionalists to radical fundamentalists, share a belief in the plasticity of the social world and feel the irresistible attraction of the activity called politics, the activity which, presupposing this plasticity, means to shape the structures of that malleable social world to their collective preferences. What makes a social world irretrievably

modern, in the political sense, is not the appearance or possibility of some specific form of political power, democratic or totalitarian, but the presence of this activity. Modern state power is so universally sought because it is, when stripped of all pretences, the power to command the reflexive organization of society: turning, paradoxically, the power of a society towards itself to determine its nature and structure. These essays tell the story of how this activity produced a new set of governmental institutions in India, and how all social groups—élites, middle classes, and subalterns—are responding to its demands.



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1

Modernity and Politics in India

This essay is in two parts. The first part suggests that conventional theoretical models about the structure of modernity and its historical extension across the world are faulty; to understand the historical unfolding of modernity, especially in the non-Western world, these theories need some revision. The second part tries to illustrate this point by analysing the role of 'the political' in India's modernity.

Theories of Modernity

Most influential theories of modernity in Western social theory, like the ones developed by Marx and Weber, contain two central ideas. The first is that what we describe as modernity is a single, homogeneous process and can be traced to a single causal principle. In the case of Marx, it is the rise of capitalist commodity production; for Weber, a more abstract principle of rationalization of the world. It is acknowledged that modernity has various distinct aspects: the rise of a capitalist industrial economy, the growth of modern state institutions and resultant transformations in the nature of social power, the emergence of democracy, the decline of the community and the rise of strong individualistic social conduct, the decline of religion and the secularization of ethics. Still, these are all parts of a historical structure animated by a single principle. This thesis comes in two versions. The first sees these as subsets of what is a single process of rationalization of the social world. A slightly different version would acknowledge that these processes are distinct and historically can emerge quite independently.

But it would still claim that these processes are functionally connected to each other in such a way that the historical emergence of any one tends to create conditions for all the others. Social individuation, for instance, is a prior condition for the successful operation of a capitalist economy. All these processes of modernity either stand or fall together.

A second idea usually accompanies this functionalist model of modernity. It is widely believed that as modernity spreads from the Western centres of economic and political power to other parts of the world, it tends to produce societies similar to those of the modern West. A corollary of this belief is that when we come across societies different from Western models, this is because they are not sufficiently modernized; they remain traditional. Modernity replicates Western social forms in other parts of the world; wherever it goes it produces a uniform 'modernity'. Both these theses appear to me to need some revision.

There are at least three different reasons why we should expect modernity not to be homogeneous, not to result in the same kind of social process and reconstitution of institutions in all historical and cultural contexts.

First, the coming of modernity is a massive alteration of social practices. Modern practices are not always historically unprecedented in the sense that the society was entirely unfamiliar with that kind of practice earlier. Most of the significant social practices transformed by modernity seem to fall into the spheres of political power (state), economic production, education, science, even religion. It is true that modernity often introduces a radical rupture in the way these social affairs are conducted. In all cases, the modern way of doing things is not written on a 'clean slate'. Practices are worked by social individuals who come from appropriate types of practical contexts, and these social actors have to undergo a process of coercive or elective willed transformation into a different way of doing things. What actually happens when such modernizing individuals learn new things can be suggestively likened to learning a language. Like the accents from our native languages that always stick to and embarrass our English, working from within or underneath, pulling our speech in the direction of a different speech, the background skills of earlier practices work inside and through the new ones to bend them into unfamiliar shapes. To take a simple example, one of the most startling cultural changes

in nineteenth-century Bengal was the complete transformation of educational structures. The modern Bengali's conversion to Western educational ideals was so complete that traditional systems of instruction and the schools that imparted them disappeared within a very short time and were replaced by a modern educational system that, in its formal pedagogic doctrine, emphasized critical reasoning and extolled the virtues of extreme scepticism in the face of authority. Yet actual pedagogic practice retained the traditional emphasis on memory. Soon, more careful observers felt that one system of unquestioned authority had been replaced by another, and the reverence shown towards modern Western theories seemed particularly paradoxical.

The second reason lies in the plurality of the processes that constitute modernity by their historical combination. In modern social theory, there are various intellectual strategies that try to reduce this diversity into a homogeneous process or outcome. Some of them offer a theory of intellectual origin claiming that an intellectual principle like rationality expresses itself in and takes control of all spheres of modern life. So, the transformations in science, religion (secularization), political disciplines, industrialization, and commodification can all be seen as extensions of the single principle of rationality to these various spheres. Alternatively, some other theories suggest a functional connection among various spheres of modern social life, which often take a causally primacist form. Functionalist Marxism claims that the causal primacy of capitalist relations of production transforms other sectors of the economy, and subsequently other spheres of social life like politics and culture, to produce eventually a capitalist social formation. Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of democracy appears to make a comparable primacist claim about the causal powers of the democratic principle. Historical accounts, however, show that the actual history of modernity does not manifest such strong functional characteristics. On the basis of historical evidence, it seems possible to make the opposite case. Not only is one process insufficient for the production of others, but the precise sequence in which these processes occur and the precise manner in which they are interconnected have a strong bearing on the form that modernity takes. Thus, to consider only the two most relevant to the Indian case—the temporal relation of capitalism and democracy—the absence of democracy might have assisted great spurts of capitalist growth in some East Asian societies,

but under Indian conditions, when democracy is an established political practice, it seriously affects the actual structure and historical path of capitalist development. Similarly, if secular state institutions are subjected to determination by democratic decision-making processes, the outcome might be quite different from what an unworried theory of secularization might expect.

Third, the history of modernity is marked by a principle of reflexivity in two forms.¹ Modern societies are constantly engaged in devising more effective and expanded forms of collective agency. The growth of modern political 'disciplines', like a bureaucratic administration, the training of modern armies, and states of collective consciousness such as nationalism, all contribute to this obsessive search for forms of deliberate and well-directed collective action. The evolution of modern democratic mechanisms provides these societies with a new technique of collective will formation. When all these processes come together, it becomes possible to say that a government acts on behalf of the society, if only to translate its collective intentions into policy. These processes are reflexive in two senses. First, many of these modern devices of collective will and agency are directed not only towards 'others'—i.e., other states in wars, or subjected territories in colonial empires—but also, in crucial cases, towards the society itself. They are reflexive in the second sense in that these techniques require constant monitoring of their own effectiveness and are regularly reformed in response to perceived failures or in search of more effective solutions. This implies that concern for the rationality of systems and institutions generates a constantly recursive consideration of options open to societies and groups for ranging their own structures; societies, consequently, learn from an analysis of their own and others' experience. Because of the existence of this kind of recursive rationality at the heart of modern institutional forms, it is unpractical to expect that later so-

¹ Although societies may have possessed these capacities in earlier periods, they are greatly enhanced under modern conditions (see Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1995), and this transforms the nature of 'risk'. See Beck 1992. I think, however, that this was always one of the major distinguishing characteristics of modern societies and can be seen, as Michel Foucault's later work suggested, in political disciplines of the eighteenth century. See Foucault 1979; Foucault 1974.

cieties will blindly repeat the experiences of the West. The initial conditions of their modernity are different, and therefore they cannot imitate the West.² In other respects, these societies may not wish to emulate the West since the experience of Western modernity is diverse and not uniformly attractive.³

I shall now follow the story of political modernity in India through its three most significant aspects: the modern state, nationalism, and democracy. My argument will be that all three introduce distinctively modern ideas and institutions, but in each case these institutions or movements have evolved in ways that are different from recognized Western equivalents.

Colonialism and the State

The state is utterly central to the story of modernity in India. It is not merely one of the institutions that modernity brings with it, for all institutions in a sense come through the state and its selective mediation. However, some peculiarities of the entry of colonialism into Indian society ought to be noted because they make this history quite different from the principal narratives of state formation in the West. Curiously, British commercial enterprise initially entered India without a serious confrontation with the Mughal imperial authority. This happened because of the peculiar way social power was organized under the caste system. Everyday caste practice disciplined social conduct without frequent direct recourse to the power of the state; rather, the holders of political authority were themselves governed by the rules of caste order and barred by its regulations from exercising legislative power over

² If colonial empires provided a significant part of the capital required for industrialization, this is a condition that late modernizing societies cannot replicate—although some recent scholarship has sought to question the connection between colonialism and the early accumulation of capital.

³ The experience of Western modernity appears attractive now if we adopt a resolutely short-sighted view and refuse to look beyond 1945. On a longer view, the rise of aggressive nationalism, militarism, fascism, death camps, and the repeated failures of democracy were essential parts of the modernity on offer, and, not surprisingly, Indian writers like Tagore and Gandhi had a deeply ambivalent and critical attitude towards its claims to provide a form of the good life unquestionably superior to traditional ones.

the productive arrangements of society. Royal authority is explicitly entrusted with the responsibility of upholding caste arrangements, which includes punishing infringement and restoring society to its normal form. But political authorities lacked the jurisdiction to alter individuals' caste membership or the ritual hierarchy between caste groups. In traditional Indian social order, political power is often distributed between several layers of legitimate authority stretching from the village or locality at the micro level, through regional kingdoms, to immense empires like the ones set up by the Mauryas or the Mughals. Historically, in India's political history constant shifts of power occurred from one level to another. With the emergence of empires, kingdoms were either overwhelmed or subsumed into their control, only to re-emerge as real centres of authority once the empires, usually rather short-lived, began to decline. The relation between these levels of authority is better described as one of subsumption or subsidiarity rather than sovereignty, as the powers of even the highest centres of power were circumscribed in two ways: the caste system set aside certain fundamentally important parts of social conduct from its legitimate field, and its relations with lower levels were often arranged in a way that was closer to modern federal arrangements than to the indivisibility implied by the Austinian definition of state sovereignty.

This explains the peculiarly stealthy entrance of British power in India. The British finally dispensed with the titular authority of the Mughal emperors only after the revolt of 1857. Control over the province of Bengal, which functioned as the indispensable platform for British imperial expansion into other regions, was achieved without formal assumption of 'sovereign' authority. Because traditional Indian society was not organized around the power of the state, the British administration in Bengal could start as a revenue-raising body and gradually extend its control over most other spheres of social life without overcoming or controlling the explicitly political authority of the Mughal empire.

In a paradoxical way, once they settled down in India, the British introduced two rather different types of ideas and practices: the first, the idea of state sovereignty; the second, which in part runs contrary to the absolutist demands of sovereignty, the idea of 'spheres' of social life, only one of which was in the narrow sense 'political'. Both of these ideas were fundamentally different from the conceptual schema gov-

erning traditional Indian social life. After British power was consolidated, it was forcefully used to create a replica of the kind of state authority that by this time dominated Europe. But here again we observe significant differences. This was a process of state formation in the entirely literal sense of the term; i.e. the complex of institutional mechanisms that we call the 'state' was in fact 'formed', literally brought into existence. This does not mean that earlier Indian society did not know social stratification or intricate organization of social power. It surely did. But this points to a central fact that is being demonstrated by trends towards globalization. The regulative functions that are now exclusively invested in the modern state, to the extent that we cannot easily imagine any other institution performing them, need not be concentrated in that manner under all circumstances.

This condensation of functions was a phenomenon of modern history—started by European absolutist states, carried forward at each stage by techniques of 'disciplinary power' and the rise of nationalism, democracy, and the welfare state. Although these processes are very different and are caused and sustained by enormously different circumstances, they led to a secular tendency towards a concentration of all regulatory functions in the instruments of the state. But, in principle, these regulatory functions can exist without being concentrated in a single institutional complex. Before modernity, such strange distributions were possible, as the British title to the Dewani of Bengal showed: even such important state functions as the collection of revenue could be handed over to a commercial body run by a group of foreigners. Colonialism does not come to India as one state invading or making demands on another. It presents itself and is taken seriously as a corporation, the East India Company. But the East India Company had to perform functions that were, in my sense, state functions—the collection of revenue, the introduction of statewide accountancy, and the production of statistics and cognitive registers like mapping, through which the territory could be made familiar to its foreign administrators.⁴ After a lapse of a century, these state processes, introduced piecemeal, at different times, combine to create in a real sense a 'colonial state'. As a next step in our argument, it is necessary to compare the colonial state to the contemporary Western form.

⁴I have argued this in Kaviraj 1994.

