

# **The Promise of Democracy: 'Democracy' in the Pre-independence India**

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Sometime in the 1780s, people in Belgium and Holland started using the term 'democratic' to refer to political arrangements based on contract among free and equal individuals. From that point up to the early part of the twentieth century hard battles were fought in various western countries over what we recognize today as elements of democracy: battles for parliamentary control over ministers, for expansion of the suffrage, for accountability to the electorate, for honest counting, for acceptance of political parties, and so on (Markoff 1996: 2-4). Compared to this struggle for democracy which lasted more than a century, no battles were witnessed in India. Not only did the Constituent Assembly (whose members were chosen indirectly and on a restricted franchise) had little disagreement over the democratic republican vision, even in the run up to independence and the making of the Constitution the elements of democracy mentioned above met with little or no resistance.

As a result we find hardly any debates on democracy for the period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the commencement of the Constitution in 1950. There is no doubt that this was partly because of the Indian elites' pre-occupation with the issue of freedom from the British rule. It has been suggested (Greenfeld 1992) that "nationalism is the form in which democracy appeared in the world, contained in the idea of the nation as a butterfly in a cocoon" (quoted in Bhargava 2000: 54). This seems to be more true for countries like India where colonial rule introduced modernity. However, it is doubtful whether it follows from this, as Bhargava thinks it does, that "arguments for nationalism were coterminous with arguments for democracy" (Bhargava 2000: 26). Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2006: 157-8), who similarly cites Greenfeld's argument, however admits that nationalism (and social reform) "would not have been enough to make Indians feel an 'elective affinity for democracy' had certain longstanding features of Hinduism not been present". He identifies the 'supple, plural, or open quality' of Hinduism to be those features. Sumit Sarkar, too, regards 'indisputable', the 'linkage between anticolonial mass nationalism [especially after the First World War] and the coming of democracy' (Sarkar 2001:29). I agree with both Mehta and Bhargava about the logic of nationalism leading to a natural acceptance of democracy on part of the Indian elite. To quote Mehta: "Indians could demand self-determination only by appealing to the authority of a new entity in the social imaginary, 'the Indian people'. But this would require: (a) privileging their status as members of this people - as citizens of a nation struggling to be born, in other words - over older and more restrictive forms of identification such as sect, clan, or caste; and (b) granting this people at least a modicum of participatory access. Thus did anticolonial nationalism tend to bring secular and democratic ideas in its logical train" (Mehta 2006: 157).

One can agree with Bhargava and Mehta and see nationalism and democracy to be in a relationship of affinity and, in some respects, of mutual reinforcement, though not of entailment. It is more helpful to see them as two trajectories influencing each other, though as I will argue, the influence was not symmetrical. It is also important to name the nationalism one is talking about since, as Sumit Sarkar reminds us, neither nationalism nor the anticolonial trends were homogeneous blocks (Sarkar 2001: 24). The Congress-led nationalist project of inventing India, as we know, met with challenges. It is one of the arguments of this essay that the peculiarities of the Indian use of the language of democracy, its preoccupation with certain elements -- especially with 'representation'-- of democracy as much as its easy acceptance of the very idea of democracy arise out of this entanglement of democracy and nationalism under conditions of colonial rule.

## Franchise

The introduction of English education in India created a class of upper class/caste graduates who aspired for positions of honour and influence under the colonial regime. They found to their dismay that the employment opportunities were limited and that the British were unwilling to accept them as their equals. The more articulate among them demanded, during the 1870s and 80s, a greater share of power - more jobs in the bureaucracy, especially at the higher level, and more seats in the legislative councils. The reaction from the British side asserted the superiority of the rulers. The earlier liberal idea that it was the colonial mission to prepare Indians for self-rule and that limited amount of representation introduced at the local and provincial levels "would be a school of self-government for the whole India" lost ground. More and more officials started taking the James Mill and John Stuart Mill line that representative government was 'totally unsuited' to India. Indians were allegedly unfit to rule themselves and introducing British political institutions to India was 'a fantastic dream'. The irremediable problem, according to this perspective, was that the Indians did not have the character required for governing, however well educated they might become. Hence the British rule had to continue indefinitely (Hanson and Douglas 1974: 15-16).

The very first session of the Indian National Congress resolved, among other things, that "this Congress considers the reform and expansion of the ... Councils, by the admission of a considerable proportion of elected members ...essential" (Zaidi 1987: 17). Already in 1863 three Indians had been appointed to the All-India Legislature and, by the 1880s, "[M]ost district boards and municipal councils had large Indian majorities" (McLane 1977: 25).

The early Congress, as remarked in the beginning, reflected the aspirations of the new class of educated Indians. It is no surprise therefore that while the Congress consistently demanded reform of the Legislative Councils through the induction of elected Indian members into it, this did not automatically mean commitment to universal adult franchise. The Home Rule Scheme of 1869, described usually as the 'first attempt at introducing an elective Indian element', envisaged all male British subjects above 21 years of age, and 'possessing certain qualifications and not subject to certain disqualifications', both of which were to be settled later, to be voters (B.Shiva Rao (1967) 2004:4). It is true that the draft of the first non-official constitution for India, ('probably issued under...Tilak's inspiration'), did provide for unrestricted franchise: "Every citizen has a right to give one vote for electing a member to the Parliament of India and one vote for electing a member to the Local Legislative Council" (Shiva Rao (1967) 2004:7). But this seems to be an exception to the general trend, which continued till the late 1920s. The second session of the INC, for example, clarified that the "right to elect members to the Provincial Councils to be conferred only on those classes and members of the community, *prima facie* capable of exercising it wisely and independently" (Zaidi 1987: 24).

In the 27<sup>th</sup> session (December 1912), there was a demand for the broadening of the franchise, but it admitted of property and education related qualifications, asking the government to 'simplify' these restrictions (Zaidi 1987: 341). The resolution passed at the special session held at Bombay (August-September 1918) which discussed the details of a proposal for responsible government was an important landmark. It was resolved that there would be no disqualification on account of sex (Zaidi 1987: 413). This was in response to the handful but influential women suffraget's campaign around that time. Finally, in 1928, the Motilal Nehru Committee (appointed in the wake of the announcement of the Simon Commission by the All Parties Conference to determine the principles of the Constitution for India) recommended (not without hesitation), universal adult suffrage. Admitting that such a system is 'difficult to work', it said that 'the difficulty howsoever great has to be faced if what is contemplated is full responsible government in its true sense and with all its implications' (Motilal Nehru 1928: 93). This was followed by the 1931 Congress resolution on fundamental rights, Gandhi's endorsement of the principle of universal franchise in October 1931, and Nehru's address to the Faizpur Congress of 1936 in which he called for a Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage (Khilnani 2002: 68-9; Gwyer and Appadorai 1957: 249 and 251).

But before this could happen, there was a campaign led by various women's organizations to extend franchise to women. In 1875, it was probably understandable for a Bengali journal to say: "We will not discuss political events and controversies because politics would not be interesting or intelligible to women in this country at present" (Forbes 1996: 122). And when in 1906, Pherozechah Mehta said that men's and women's functions were different (Appadorai 1976: 257-8) -- he was opposing the motion to allow election or nomination of women to Bombay Municipal Corporation -- he was articulating a widely held prejudice. But even in 1918, speaking at the special session of the Congress at Bombay, Sarojini Naidu had to assure men that women's demand for franchise was not meant to upset the traditional perceptions and practices regarding gender roles. She said: "...we realize that men and women have separate goals, separate destinies and that just as man can never fulfil the responsibility or the destiny of a woman, a woman cannot fulfil the responsibility of man." And she went on to say: " We ask for vote not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children we hold upon our laps, and instill into them the ideals of national life" (Forbes 1996: 94). The same year, speaking at the 33<sup>rd</sup> session of the Congress at Delhi, Saraladevi Chaudhurani was far more assertive. She called 'fanciful' the idea that intellect and emotion represented spheres of men and women respectively. Declaring that 'this was the age of human rights, justice, freedom, and self-determination', she argued that 'spheres of women' included 'being the fellow-workers of men in politics and other spheres' (Forbes 1996:94).

The British opposition to the extension of suffrage to women had several different reasons: the alleged backwardness of the Indian women, the sheer impracticability of handling large numbers of voters, and, above all, the anxiety not to antagonize the conservative elements from the Indian society. The Indian (male) reservations stemmed from role perceptions. In Bengal where the franchise was sought to be extended to women in the 1920s (women finally won it in 1926), the men who were opposed to the proposal

predictably claimed that when it came to politics and public affairs, women were inferior, while the supporters spoke of the special contribution that women can make to politics (Forbes 1996: 101). Gandhi himself was of the opinion in 1920 that the need of the hour was to make concerted efforts to rid India of the evil British rule and that the women's campaign would divide their energies. Though next year he came round to accepting the proposal, it has been observed that during the campaign he never warmed up to the idea and even as he said women must have vote, he said that the real problem was how to go beyond relations of lust between men and women (*Women and Social Injustice*, 1970:126-128). On their part women activists based their demand on how women education had made women once again capable of performing various important roles (the implication was that they were no longer 'backward'), that they had something special to contribute, and that 'enfranchised women would be 'a powerful force for progress' (Forbes 1996: 98 and 100-101).

Though the women activists came from urban English speaking sections and though the numbers mobilized by their organizations were never large, there was still a campaign to speak of. In case of the poor and the illiterate, there does not seem to have been any. And yet, the Motilal Nehru Committee recommended vote for them. Arguing that literacy and income were not valid criteria, the Committee said that there was no justification in refusing political education to the poor. As for the literacy criterion it said: " Political experience can only be acquired by an active participation in political institutions and does not entirely depend upon literacy. There should be equal opportunities available to all to acquire this experience. The most advanced countries in the world did not wait to achieve hundred per cent literacy before introducing adult suffrage. Why should India?" (Motilal Nehru 1928: 94).

Around the same time Ambedkar was making an equally strong case for adult suffrage. In his statement to the Simon Commission he argued that the only way to prevent the oligarchy of hereditary ruling classes was to extend franchise to all adults, men and women, irrespective of literacy or income. To make illiteracy the ground of non-enfranchisement was to deny the depressed classes 'the only means whereby they could effectively provide for the removal of their illiteracy'. Every adult must have the right to vote because, since everyone is affected by the associated life that is society, everyone must have 'the right to settle its terms'. This becomes all the more urgent in case of the poor because the 'terms of associated life are from the start set' against them (Rodrigues 2002: 65-70). At this point his demand for separate electorates was a substitute for universal franchise and therefore the Congress (and Gandhi's) acceptance of the principle of universal franchise has been seen as a tactical move against the demand for separate electorates (Khilnani 2002: 69).

## Representation

Views on the Indian side regarding franchise were entangled with matters of representation. The Motilal Nehru Committee report mentioned above shows how in arriving at an agreement on the best scheme of franchise, the committee members were influenced by the pragmatic political need to maintain a balance between the strengths of different communities. The report says: "At present the voting ratio between different communities is not the same as the population ratio. Thus in the Punjab although the Muslims outnumber the Hindus and Sikhs combined the number of their votes is far less than the Hindu and Sikh votes. This is due to the superior economic position of the latter. We are strongly of the opinion that this anomaly should be ended and the voting ratio should be made to correspond with the population ratio. With adult suffrage this happens automatically...." (Motilal Nehru 1928: 92-3).

It is clear from this passage that franchise was a means to representation and that the latter was part of a balancing act. The Congress led freedom struggle had its limitations and dilemmas which its leaders were aware of and which they tried to deal with with a mixture of pragmatic compromises and bold assertions. Some of the examples of the latter - the claims made by its leaders - make an interesting reading today. For example in a statement made in the court at Gorakhpur (November 1940), Nehru said: " If I was chosen, or before me Shri Vinoba Bhave was chosen for this purpose [as Satyagrahis], it was not to give expression to our individual views. We were symbols of the people of India. As individuals we may have counted for little, but as...symbols and representatives of the Indian people, we counted for a great deal". He went on to say that in the name of the people of India he (and Vinoba Bhave) challenged the British imposition of its will (the reference here is to Indians being dragged into the war) (Gopal 1980:52).

Examples of even stronger claims, by Nehru ("When I speak, I do not speak as an individual but I speak with the authority of the hundreds of millions of India") and Gandhi, (The Congress was 'the only organization

which appealed to the nation...') have been provided by Ranajit Guha in his famous work, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (1998:128-131), though he also cites a disarmingly candid admission by Nehru, in his December 1939 letter to Jinnah, that 'the Congress does not represent everybody in India'. In his speech at the Minorities Committee meeting (November, 1931) which was part of the Second Round Table Conference, Gandhi asserted that the Congress represents '85 per cent or 95 per cent of the population not merely of British India but of the whole India', which included all classes and communities (Gwyer and Appadorai 1957: 257-8). Some of these assertions came during the more confident phase of the party, especially after it had successfully mobilized the masses for its programmes on a number of occasions and its support base had widened. But during the initial years it had great difficulty answering charges of unrepresentativeness which came from the Muslim and the British quarters.

Of the second, a few examples will be sufficient. John McLane (1977: 115-6) has given an account of how Hume tried to mobilize peasant support for the Congress in 1887. He distributed pamphlets in some villages which said that the rural impoverishment under the British rule was due to the fact that there were not enough Indians on the Legislative Councils. If these Councils were made genuinely representative, they would become responsive to popular needs. Infuriated by this Dufferin, the then Lieutenant-Governor of Oudh and N-W Provinces charged that the Congress was a 'microscopic minority' (which he calculated to be a few thousands out of a population of 200 million!), and that it was 'a groundless contention' for it to claim to represent the interests of the peasantry (Dobbin 1970: 39-40).

McLane (1977), who has commented upon the 'anglicized life style' of the early Congress leaders and on the 'narrowness of their constituency', has also observed that the "Congress conceptions of Indian political community usually did not envisage participation by people without education or property". The uneducated of course did not figure anywhere in their calculations but even those literate in vernaculars were automatically excluded, in the initial years, from the deliberations conducted largely in English. There was also another, perhaps more substantial, reason for the exclusion of some of these elements from the Congress. When the 1892 Councils Act introduced elections, it enabled the Congress supporters from urban, professional background to win seats at the expense of the landlords who used to be the official nominated members before. The British rulers exploited these rifts and tried to win over the rural, especially the aristocratic and landed classes against the young, urban, educated men from whom the Congress drew its support (McLane 1977: 26, 97-99, and 231-240).

In spite of the narrowness of its constituency and the priority of its objective of sharing power with the British, the Congress did make a case for its representativeness by linking its demand for more number of seats (through elections) in the Councils to the problem of poverty. In the very second session it resolved "that this Congress regards with the deepest sympathy and views with great apprehension the increasing poverty of the vast number of the population of India, and...desires to record its fixed conviction that the introduction of Representative Institutions will prove one of the most important steps towards the amelioration of the condition of the people" (Zaidi 1987: 23). The issue of poverty again came up in the Seventh session in a long resolution on the causes and possible remedies of poverty, and, another resolution in the same session spoke of the 'fifty to sixty millions of half-starving paupers' being the 'primary *raison d'être* of the Congress' (Zaidi 1987: 70). Thereafter for the next several years, every session passed a resolution on poverty. Similar resolutions on 'the recent enhancement' of the Salt Tax being burdensome for the poorer classes kept figuring till the 19<sup>th</sup> session in 1903. In an apparent attempt at showing that it cared for the ordinary people and that it was aware of their problems, the Congress also passed resolutions on subjects like the grievances of the third-class railway passengers, forced labour, famine, and forest laws.

One of the biggest challenges to the Congress attempts at assuming the leadership of 'the people of India' (an expression which starts figuring in the political discourse from early on,) came from the Muslims. In his speech just before the 1887 Madras session of the Congress, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, obviously trying to keep Muslims away from the Congress by calling it a body of Bengali Hindus, warned that if "Congress demands for the expansion of the ...civil services and representative bodies were conceded...the Muslims would lose places to Hindus" (McLane 1977: 106). It was out of similar fears that in 1883 he had opposed the very idea of democracy as a majority rule as it would result in the neglect of the interests of the smaller community (Appadorai 1976: 255-6). In a statement made sometime around 1888 he said that from his study of John Stuart Mill's views on representative government he had reached the conclusion that "the first requisite of a representative government...[was] that the voters should possess the highest degree of homogeneity... in the matter of nationality, religion, ways of living, customs, mores, culture and historical traditions" (Dobbin 1970: 42). Arguing that 'India is inhabited by different peoples', Sayyid Ahmad Khan charged that the

Congress is ignorant of history and present day realities, that 'they do not take into consideration that India is inhabited by different nationalities'. He ended by asserting definitively that the Congress 'can not prove its claim to represent the opinions, ideals, and aspirations of the Muslims' (Dobbin 1970: 42).

A somewhat different line was taken by the United Indian Patriotic Association (in which Sayyid Ahmad Khan led Aligarh Muslims joined the Hindu landlords), formed on the eve of the 1888 Allahabad session of the Congress. The Association claimed that "the Congress brand of democracy was unsuited to India's aristocratic and caste-based social structure". The Maharaja of Banaras, a prominent member of the Association, said that democracy was a western institution, unsuited to Hinduism whose basis was the *varna* (caste) system'. And he asked rhetorically: "How would you care to have Kalvars and Mochis as our legislators?" (McLane 1977: 107-8).

On its part the Congress tried to neutralize the Aligarh Muslims' hostility to it and prevent Muslim alienation from the Congress in various ways. It kept out contentious issues like cow-slaughter; made a rule of dropping a resolution if majority of the members belonging to a religious community objected to it; and Hume declared that the Congress had nothing to do with divisive matters of faith: "The Congress is a community of temporal interests...that qualify men to represent each other in the discussion of political questions". Since the general interests of the Hindus, Christians, Muslims, etc., were common, he argued, they could, 'as members of their respective communities', 'represent each other in the discussion of public secular affairs' (McLane 1977:110-1). In stark contrast to this Sayyid Ahmad Khan saw India as a federation of *qaums* or ethnic communities based on common descent and not a single nation-state based on individual citizenship (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 271).

According to John McLane (1977), after the 1893 cow protection riots, Muslim participation in the Congress sessions (which was never very substantial) declined. The *swadeshi* movement took communal overtones, with reports of reluctant Muslims being coerced at many places in Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 269). The 1905 Bengal partition, ostensibly for reasons of administrative manageability, carved out Muslim-majority districts and, as the Bengali nationalists saw it, 'a Muslim counterpoise to Bengali-speaking nationalists' was created (McLane 1977: 362). In 1906 the Aligarh Muslims made a representation to Lord Minto, the Governor-General, that Muslims were 'a separate political community with political interests different from those of the Hindus', and therefore deserving minority rights in matters of political representation and employment (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 273-4). Already (from the 1870s), the government had been giving Muslims special assistance in education and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a policy to ensure their adequate representation at the lower levels of bureaucracy. The Morley-Minto reforms duly provided separate electorates for Muslims and reserved seats in provincial and central councils. This gave official legitimacy to the minority status and the separate political identity of the Muslims (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 275; 268).

This was followed by the founding of the All-India Muslim League in December 1906 (stimulated, according to McLane, by the 1905 Bengal partition), and marked the beginning of the process of a shift from '*quam* (community based on common descent) to *ummah* (community based on allegiance to common faith)' (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 273-4 and McLane 1977:362).

There was of course no linear growth of Muslim separatism and the formation of the Muslim League did not teleologically foreshadow partition and Pakistan. Bandyopadhyay says that even in the late 1930s, Muslims were not a political community. The 1937 elections, where the Congress fared well and became inflexible towards the League, may have prompted the Muslim leadership to finally demand a separate nation-state (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 339-41).

It is interesting to note that against the background of these developments, Jinnah questioned the suitability of the British parliamentary democracy to India, echoing Sir Sayyid Ahmad's criticism of democracy nearly half a century ago. His main objection was that unlike in Britain, the population in India was not homogeneous. Therefore the application of the principle of majority here would mean 'the domination and supremacy of the majority communal rule over the minorities' (Appadorai 1976: 278-282).

Apart from the Muslim leadership the other group to contest Congress claim to representativeness was the dalits under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. On reserved electorates he said that the higher classes 'have always despised, disregarded and disowned the masses', they have never shared the aspirations of the masses. "It is not, therefore, unjust to demand that candidate who is standing to represent others shall be such as shares the aims, purposes and motives of those who he desires to represent" (Rodrigues 2002: 80-81). This was opposed to Gandhi's claim at the Round Table Conference in 1931 that the Congress (which 'knows

no distinction of race, colour or creed', and whose 'platform is universal'), represented 'the dumb, toiling, semi-starved millions' (Dobbin 1970: 109-110). A little earlier in his statement to the Minorities Committee, Gandhi had said: "I claim in my own person to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables...". Ambedkar attacked Gandhi, Gandhism and the Congress. Making a distinction between the freedom of a country and the freedom of the people in the country, he asked: the Congress is fighting for the former, but is it fighting for the latter? (Rodrigues 2002: 132).

The dalit alienation from the Congress was deep and had a long history. Apart from the upper caste domination of the early Congress, it was also due to the fact that the Congress had ignored for a long time the issues of caste and untouchability. Its anglicized leaders, even Nehru, did not think that caste was a serious political problem. Congress took up the issue of untouchability only when a separate dalit initiative outside the Congress appeared on the political scene. It was not surprising then that when in 1942 Ambedkar started his All India Scheduled Caste Federation, he explicitly stated that dalits were 'distinct and separate' from the Hindus. Unfortunately for him, the Federation could win only 2 of the 151 reserved seats in the 1946 elections and the Cabinet Mission which came to India to hold talks on transfer of power recognized the Congress as the true representative of dalits (Bandyopadhyay 2004:353-357).

James Chiriyankandath has argued that (in plural societies like India and Nigeria) elections decisively influenced the formation of 'mobilizable political categories', 'reinforced ethnic division' of caste and religion, and 'placed the colonial state in the role of an indispensable 'neutral'...autocratic alien arbiter' (Chiriyankandath 2001: 54-56). While it is indeed true that most of the contests over who represents whom took place in the context of the council reforms, the nature of electorates, and the numerical balance between different communities, elections also provided the various political parties with opportunities to canvass and campaign, to communicate with the masses, and this brought to the fore 'the people', an indispensable category of democratic thought and practice.

According to Chiriyankandath's estimate, the number of voters in British India expanded from less than three per cent of the population in 1919 to over forty millions in 1946 (Chiriyankandath 2001: 60 and 78). (In Sumit Sarkar's estimate, the electorate in 1946 was around thirty million, or, 'less than a tenth of population' (Sarkar 2001:28). )The Congress participation in these elections was inseparable from its changing political objectives and its competition with other parties. Nehru used the election campaigns to ground the representative character of the Congress in its ideology, its programme. He made this quite clear in his Presidential speech at the Lucknow congress: "One of the principal reasons for our seeking elections will be to carry the message of the Congress to the millions of voters and to the scores of millions of the disenfranchised, to acquaint them with our future programme and policy, to make the masses realise that we not only stand for them but we are of them and seek to cooperate with them in removing their social and economic burden". He spoke in a similar vein at the All-India Convention of Congress Legislatures at Delhi in 1937: "We went to our people and spoke to them of freedom and of ending their exploitation; we went to that forgotten creature, the Indian peasant, and remembered that his poverty was the basic problem of India; we identified ourselves with him in his suffering and talked to him of how to get rid of it through political and social freedom...We read out to him our election manifesto and explained its significance. He and his kind gathered in vast numbers to hear us and, listening to the Congress message, his sunken eyes glistened and his shrunken body rose up in enthusiasm and the wine of hope filled his veins" (Gopal 1980:33).

Obviously several things are happening in these speeches. The election campaigns and the subsequent electoral results are being used to establish the Congress credentials as a representative of 'scores of millions'. There is a hint of an agreement between the people and the party. The leader of a major political party aspiring to take over power from the British is also demonstrating that he has learnt the grammar of democratic politics and understood the meaning of legitimacy. And through all this the forgotten creatures with sunken eyes and starved bodies are being turned into 'the people', being inducted into a glorious mode of corporate existence.

The conception of representation implicit here can be called paternalistic or, following Sunil Khilnani (2002), 'philanthropic': "an elite self-consciously acting on behalf of a large group of whom they were not part, to whom they did not belong, and with whom they could claim to share neither identity nor interests". (Khilnani 2002:71) (It is helpful here to look at what Nehru had to say in his Autobiography about the crowds at the several peasant meetings he addressed. "I experienced the thrill of mass-feeling, the power of influencing the mass. I began to understand a little of the psychology of the crowd, the difference between the city masses and the peasantry...I felt at home in the large gatherings, though their want of discipline

often irritated me.... I took to the crowd and the crowd took to me, and I never lost myself in it; always I felt apart from it. From my separate mental perch I looked at it critically...." (Gopal 1980: 4-5). Jinnah and the Muslim League leadership was an example of 'self-representation'; so was Ambedkar, though he could also occasionally speak on behalf of larger collectivities like the oppressed and the exploited (Khilnani 2002).

## TRUE DEMOCRACY

The dalit and Muslim attempts at self-representation were at odds with the Congress claim to represent everybody. But within the Congress leadership, one can perhaps make out a case for Gandhi's similar sounding (in fact, at one level, more audacious than anyone else) claims being of a different nature due to the fact that the underlying world-view was so different. In the Second Round Table Conference in London (September-December 1931), Gandhi, who was against the proposal for separate electorates for the depressed classes, said in a statement to the Minorities Committee of the Conference that he, more than anyone else, represented the dalits: "I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast masses of the Untouchables. Here I speak not only on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the Untouchables, their vote, and I would top their poll (Khilnani 2002:72). A few years later he said: "I claim [to be a democrat] if complete identification with the poorest of the mankind, an intense longing to live no better than they and a corresponding conscious effort [towards it]...can entitle one to make it" (Appadorai 1976: 266). True democracy, he argued, "is not inconsistent with a few persons representing the spirit, the hope and the aspirations of those whom they claim to represent" (Appadorai 1976: 266). Even in 1939, he had not changed his views on the matter: "The very essence of democracy is that every person represents all the varied interests which compose the nation". Special representation of special interests there will be, but, 'such representation is not its test. It is a sign of its imperfection' (Appadorai 1976: 268).

In Khilnani's (2002) assessment Gandhi, Nehru and much of the Congress leadership had similar views on representation; they all claimed to represent everybody irrespective of such factors as caste and religion. (In the context of Gandhi's statement to the Minorities Committee quoted earlier, he calls it an 'incarnational' view of representation. Apparently this is the same as what he goes on to call 'philanthropic' notion. However, it may be helpful to distinguish between the two because of the awareness and the admission on part of the other Congress leaders that their class background was different from that of the masses. Gandhi thought that through one's truthful living one could actually become one with them.) His talk of 'true' democracy and his elaborate instructions to the satyagrahis from time to time show that for him politics had to be conducted with the same care and seriousness with which a ritual is performed. Ranajit Guha (1998: 136-139; 141; 144-145) gives a vivid and revealing account of Gandhi's impatience with the irrepressible and coarse sections, drawn from peasantry and the ranks of the urban poor who began to participate in the nationalist movement in large numbers in the wake of the price rise, high taxation, etc., after the First World War. He used strong language in expressing his disapproval of their behaviour: he spoke of 'mob without a mind', their 'unmusical cries', of the 'disorder, din, pressing, yelling and shouting', and of mobocracy. Through discipline, Gandhi wanted to introduce 'the people's law' instead of 'mob-law', to 'evolve order out of chaos'. Guha has also given details of Gandhi's elaborate instructions to the Satyagrahis. There was a reason for his fastidiousness. "The nation must be disciplined to handle mass movements in a sober and methodical manner. This means previous training of volunteers and previous discipline of the masses", he wrote during the non-cooperation movement. In September 1920, he published a virtual training manual, a twenty-point instruction, in *Young India*. All this was related to the idea that swaraj was about self-discipline and self-control. "To be able to win swaraj, we should become pure, and to be pure is to be self-controlled" (Guha 1998: 146-150). Clearly, he was trying to evolve a new paradigm of politics and a new science of collective action. The identification with the poorest that he attempted and often claimed was supposedly made possible not through intellectual understanding or through sentiment but through lived simplicity born out of cessation of desires. This, in turn, was connected to his comprehensive notion of non-violence. If we take that seriously, then we will also have to give due attention to his characterization of [true] democracy as "the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the varying sections of the people in the service of the common good of all" (Appadorai 1976: 267). What is at stake here is not so much a conception of democracy as a new paradigm of politics itself, qualitatively different from those of his contemporaries. Nehru too spoke of 'true' democracy, and so did Ambedkar. Neither of them was uncritical of the western ideas and practices of democracy. The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of high popularity of socialism among intellectuals and leaders,

especially those from the colonies. In his Autobiography (1936), Nehru speaks of his long standing conviction about political independence being a step towards social freedom (Dobbin 1970: 92), and in his speech at the AICC session at Indore in 1957, he stressed the need to combine democracy with socialism. It will take time, he said, because getting rid of the acquisitive tendency and bringing in its place co-operation will require a long process of training the people. It can't be done by law: we have to look for peaceful and legitimate methods' (Gopal 1980: 315-6). Ambedkar too was less than fully satisfied with western democracy because in the name of liberty, it sanctified freedom of contract. When there are extreme economic inequalities, such freedom can only have harmful effect on the economically weak who get defrauded in the name of contract. "Democracy", he said, " is another name for equality. Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made a nodding acquaintance with equality. [It]...did not even endeavour to strike a balance between liberty and equality with the result that liberty swallowed equality and has made democracy...a farce" (Rodrigues 2002: 62).

While Nehru and Ambedkar had an overall left-liberal position which entailed an egalitarian socio-economic supplement to the formal institutional democracy, it is fair to say that neither of them had a new conception of the activity of politics, something that Gandhi was striving towards.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of Gandhian attempts at bringing about paradigmatic change in politics the main contours of the political scene in pre-independence India continued to be determined by identities and interests. Broadly speaking, we witness a triangular relationship between the British colonial rule, elite dominated nationalism, and those like the Muslims and the subaltern castes, who, for varying reasons, were outside the fold of this nationalism. Even as the colonial government perceived, acted upon, and often exploited differences and divisions among the natives, the Congress led nationalism tried, through electoral success and mobilization of support to its agitations, to demonstrate its representative character. The Muslims and the subaltern 'Hindu' castes made a tactical use of the colonial government to create room for themselves which they used to manoeuvre their relations with the mainstream nationalism. Their exact relations with the Congress varied depending on local or provincial factors and on temporal contingencies. Some of them, like the upper caste non-Brahmins in Maharashtra, joined the Congress eventually, and the Congress did succeed to some extent in going beyond its original limitations of constituency and support base. And yet the picture of a triangular relationship drawn here was true for most part of the pre-1947 period.

The reasons why Indian nationalism could not be more inclusive and more homogeneous are complex and beyond the scope of this study. But scholars approaching this period from several different frameworks of analysis have found the British policies to be a major contributing factor. For example, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, using Bernard Cohn's insights, has observed that the "major premise of colonial cognition of Indian society was the theme of "differentiation", which was traced, mapped and enumerated through various official ethnographic studies and finally, since 1872, through decennial census reports" (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 263; endnote omitted). Warren Hastings, in his 1784 letter to the Chairman of the Company's Court of Directors, explained how '[E]very accumulation of knowledge' is 'useful to the state' , and W.C.Taylor, speaking in London on the occasion of the approaching fiftieth anniversary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal declared: "KNOWLEDGE IS POWER" (Cohn 1994: 314-5). Understood in the sense of Foucault and Said, the generation of knowledge by the British officials meant transforming the alien and incomprehensible Indian reality into recognizable and governable objects. Once produced, this knowledge was incorporated into every structure and every opportunity that the colonial government created (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 263). The provision of reservations and separate electorates can be seen (without of course implying context-free, unilateral action on part of the colonial rulers) arising out of the British 'knowledge' of the Indian society as a set of conflicting and competing communities and groups. Introduction of elections, while partly in response to the native demands, served to intensify divisive trends. Chiriyankandath (2001) has argued that the "character of the representative institutions introduced by the Raj helped to determine the channels into which the emerging politics flowed. The introduction of separate electorates in the 1909 Morley-Minto reforms... legitimized the language of communal and interest group politics by acknowledging its primacy and according it institutional recognition". He also quotes Sumit Sarkar (*Modern India*) on the communalizing effects of the 1919 reforms and argues that these trends only strengthened in the 1930s and 40s (Chiriyankandath 2001: 63 and 78).

The council reforms introduced by the Raj from time to time and the electoral politics that followed structured Indian nationalism even as it set limits to the democratic thinking of that period. As Congress-led nationalism used the channels of electoral politics (though not exclusively, nor without resorting to

boycotting it on some occasions), the needs and limitations of this nationalism came to limit the discussions of democracy. The theme of representation became a virtual pre-occupation with all the parties. From the composition of committees and delegations to the colours of the national flag, everything was dictated by the need to preserve 'balance' among major communities. It has been remarked earlier that the Motilal Nehru Committee endorsed the principle of adult suffrage partly out of its compulsion to devise a scheme that will be fair to all the communities. (It is therefore not surprising, that later in the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar's proposal to make voting a fundamental right was successfully blocked by Patel and Rajagopalachari. (See Sarkar 2001 on this).) This obsession with representation was natural since everyone seemed to be thinking in terms of castes and religious communities. The category of 'the people', which could be appealed for legitimation, was invoked and at the same time fragmented in castes and religions in the perception and tactics of the main actors of the time. The non-individualistic or, perhaps more precisely, communitarian basis of democratic thinking was a result of the need of the elite nationalism to evolve (and lead) a broad alliance and consensus on the nation that was in the making and at the same time its limited success in this regard.

Democracy and nationalism are indeed so entwined for that period that it is difficult at times to separate them. But it was nationalism as part of the triangular relationship mentioned above that kept 'democracy' confined to 'representation'. While liberals can see in this a foreshadowing of the trend towards weakening of individual rights and liberties at the expense of group rights and collective interests, the narrowing of democracy has also blocked the radical potential of popular sovereignty.

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