

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2012

The Varieties of Democracy

André Béteille

7 NOVEMBER 2012
SOCIAL SCIENCE BAHA
KATHMANDU, NEPAL

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This is the full text of the Mahesh Chandra Lecture 2012 delivered by André Béteille on 7 November, 2012, at The Shanker Hotel, Kathmandu. The lecture was made possible with partial support from Buddha Air.

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ISBN: 978 9937 597 01 2

Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

Published for Social Science Baha by Himal Books

Social Science Baha

110 Ramchandra Marg, Battisputali, Kathmandu - 9, Nepal

Tel: +977-1-4472807 • Fax: 4461669

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Himal Books

Himal Kitab Pvt Ltd

540 Lazimpat, Narayan Gopal Sadak, Kathmandu - 2, Nepal

Sales outlet:

1981 Tanka Prasad Ghumti Sadak, Maitighar, Kathmandu - 11, Nepal

Tel: +977-1-4440635/2120321 • Fax: 4001596

info@himalbooks.com • www.himalbooks.com

Printed in Nepal

Is there a standard model of democracy to which all nations should conform if they are to regard themselves and be regarded by others as democracies? In the modern world many, if not most, nations claim or aspire to be democracies. These claims and aspirations cannot be ignored in deciding whether or not a nation is a democracy even where the regime acts repeatedly against the principles of democracy.

Such is the appeal of the idea of democracy that few governments would venture to repudiate it in principle, although some might say that the rules of democracy have to be held in abeyance in the interest of some other objective such as economic growth, or social harmony or national security. But people become disenchanted with mere words that do not get translated into action. Public opposition to the abuse of authority gathers strength. At the same time, those who spearhead the opposition do not themselves always act in conformity with democratic or constitutional principles. If democracy is to succeed, its rules must be respected and observed by government and opposition alike.

While ideals and aspirations are important, democracy as a social and political arrangement cannot be sustained by those alone, at least not for long. It also needs a framework of rules and procedures that will be considered just and fair by most, if not all, members of the larger society. Creating and sustaining such a framework in a society riven by the divisions of class and community is a venture whose outcome is often uncertain. The project of democracy comes to grief where that framework stands in jeopardy. The ideals and aspirations

remain, but government and politics become increasingly flawed.

Democracy requires a set of institutions through which its ideals and aspirations can be expressed and made to bear fruit. The institutions of democracy are many and diverse and they do not remain fixed for ever but evolve over time. The course of their evolution cannot be the same for all nations if only because each nation has its own distinctive social order. Democracy changes that social order to some extent but it is also changed by it. The institutions of democracy cannot be the same for all nations because the social institutions with which they become intertwined vary enormously from one nation to another.

The political institutions of democracy are shaped also by the historical conditions of their origin and by the history of the nation's interaction with other nations. In both India and the United States – unlike in England or France – democracy grew in response to the challenge of colonial rule, but the responses were not the same in the two cases. America was a new nation characterised by social conditions that were very different from the social conditions prevalent since time immemorial in India.

I am speaking now not only about variations in institutional practice between different democratic nations, but about variations in the very structure of those institutions. The United States and the United Kingdom are linked by close ties of history, language and culture. But America has a presidential system of government whereas Britain has a parliamentary system. The relationship between the executive and the legislature is quite different in the two countries. The judiciary, too, is constituted differently in them. And of course, the operation of political patronage has acquired a kind of luxuriance in the United States that would strike many people in other countries as unprincipled.

Despite all this, I doubt that the Americans would like to measure the achievements of democracy in their country by the standards of what is commonly described as the Westminster model. France and Britain have historical links that go back to the early middle ages. They are near neighbours separated from each other by only a

narrow strip of water. Yet the French republican tradition that came into being with the French Revolution of 1789 is quite different from the British tradition of constitutional monarchy beginning with the Glorious Revolution of a hundred years earlier.

There are important differences between France and Britain in their legal systems which impinge on the operation of government and politics. French legal practice is based on the principles of civil law whereas Britain as well as the United States follows the traditions of common law.

The relationship between church and state, or, more generally, between religion and politics is no less important than that between law and politics. Modern pluralist democracies have a bias towards the separation of religion and politics and, hence, in favour of secular political institutions. Here, again, the constitutions of France and Britain differ very much from each other. Britain has an established church with the monarch as its head and with its bishops as ex-officio members of the House of Lords. The French constitution gives pride of place to secularism, or what is called *laïcité*, which the French believe to be a defining feature of their republic.

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I have skimmed lightly over a few topics in order to show that democracy has evolved in different ways to take diverse forms among different nations. It will be unrealistic and even unreasonable to expect it to take the same form in India or Nepal that it has acquired in countries that were the first to create democratic institutions, rules and procedures; and to embark on a new course of nation building two hundred years ago.

In many of the countries of Asia and Africa, democracy grew in response to the challenge of colonial rule. The Indian subcontinent had experienced that rule longer than most other parts of the world. The end of colonial rule, which again came to India earlier than elsewhere, created new opportunities as well as new challenges.

It will be unreasonable to condemn colonial rule as a source only of unmitigated evil. It was a source of much evil but also of some

good. It was under British rule that the Indian intelligentsia began to acquire some appreciation of constitutional rules and procedures, and through that process learnt something of the art of constitutional reasoning. Nepal, which remained insulated from colonial rule, was spared many of its evils, but it was also denied the advantage of experimenting with new political institutions. In the broadest sense, democracy is an experiment in learning the art of politics, and this learning never comes to an end. While the learning must start in response to changing conditions in one's own country, one must never turn one's back on the experiences of other countries, particularly in one's neighbourhood.

The writing of the Constitution of India in the wake of independence was a turning point in the history of the country. It was, in the circumstances, natural that many of its elements were adapted from the experiences garnered under colonial rule. Dr Ambedkar made no apologies for adopting elements from other constitutions, including the Government of India Act of 1935. He said 'There is nothing to be ashamed of in borrowing. It involves no plagiarism. Nobody holds any patent rights to the fundamental ideas of a Constitution' (Constitutional Assembly Debates 1987: 38). The borrowing should not be blind or mechanical, and it must be adapted to the needs of the times and the circumstances.

In retrospect, it appears natural that India should have adopted the parliamentary system and the Westminster model as the starting point in its journey as a sovereign independent republic. But it hardly needs to be said that the starting point cannot be taken to be the end point. As I have said repeatedly, our practice has shifted away from the model of constitutional democracy to that of populist democracy (Béteille 2012). But, in India, we still measure ourselves by the criteria of the Westminster model. It is time we began to think of the wisdom of continuing to do so as a kind of reflex action.

I am not suggesting at all that we should turn our back on the Westminster model or close our mind to the mode of its current operation. But we have also to look at experiments with democracy in our neighbourhood. India, Pakistan and China set out to create

new political regimes at roughly the same time – India and Pakistan in 1947, and China in 1949. The Indians began by creating a new constitution that would provide the foundations of a parliamentary democracy. Pakistan alternated between spells of military government and democratic rule. The Chinese regime has had its own achievements and failings, but it would be futile to assess those by the standards of the Westminster model.

* * *

In the modern world, many different regimes of very diverse kinds claim that they are democracies. Are we obliged to take all these claims at face value? Are there no clear criteria that enable us to determine which regime is a democracy and which one is not?

In conventional approaches to the subject, political regimes are classified according to the forms of their government. But what is distinctive of a democratic regime is that there is an acknowledged place in it for an opposition as well as a government. Hence, an alternative route to the understanding of a democracy may be through an enquiry about the opposition: its form of organisation, its legitimacy, and its effectiveness.

Disaffection, dissent and opposition are features of social and political life in all parts of the world and at all times. But they find different outlets and expressions in different societies. In pre-industrial societies, opposition tended to be diffuse and sporadic. It was not characterised by any continuity of organisation. Sometimes opposition flared up in the form of powerful social movements and then died down again. Peasant movements of various degrees of intensity were a common feature of societies of the past. Such movements sometimes acquired insurrectionist forms. Opposition in the form of diffuse and endemic social currents co-exist with more organised forms of opposition in many contemporary democracies.

The co-existence of diverse, not to say divergent, forms of opposition in India gives a distinctive character to the relationship between government and opposition, and to the operation of the political system as a whole. Social movements that grow in

opposition to the government have a different orientation to the legal order from an opposition constituted with the aim of replacing the government currently holding office.

A diffuse opposition is different from an organised opposition that is driven underground by a repressive regime, although the two forms of opposition often co-exist within the same body politic. An opposition may operate from the underground even in regimes that can hardly be described as totalitarian. Its aim might then be to invite further repression in order to undermine the legitimacy of the government. The political underground, like political terrorism, has its own glamour and it attracts idealistic young men and women with a mission to radically change the world. Most such persons drop out after some time and move into settled ways of life, but they are replaced by new recruits so that the political temperature always stays a little above normal.

Dissent and opposition are suppressed more or less effectively in totalitarian regimes. Germany under Hitler and the Soviet Union under Stalin are good examples (Bullock 1993). But there are regimes of the present day where dissent and opposition are viewed with suspicion and mistrust even if not fully or effectively suppressed. Dissent and opposition were endemic in agrarian communities where resistance to authority was generally diffuse and passive (Scott 1985). Where opposition was organised, such opposition was sporadic and intermittent rather than focussed or continuous. In modern totalitarian regimes, opposition is driven underground where it stays until it bursts out in acts of violence and destruction (Figs 2007).

What is distinctive about democracies in the modern world is that there opposition is accepted as normal and legitimate. A democracy in which all citizens speak in one voice would be an anachronism and it would be viewed with suspicion by other democracies. It is natural to fear that endemic and uncontrolled opposition might lead to disorder and chaos. Democracies seek to arrest the descent into social and political chaos not by suppressing dissent but by giving it an institutional form. But the organisation of dissent and

opposition need not have one and the same social form in all places and at all times. It is the legitimacy of dissent and opposition, and not any particular institutional form of their expression, that gives democracy its distinctive character.

The institutionalisation of opposition acquired a new form and focus with the emergence and growth of political parties in the nineteenth century. When we look at the relationship between parties in office and parties in opposition, we see how different the democracies of the present are from the democracies of the Greek city-states or the village democracies of ancient and mediaeval India. Modern mass societies require a different kind of political organisation from those that served the smaller communities of the past. The scale and complexity of modern democracies make the organisation of opposition a very different kind of venture from what might have sufficed in earlier times.

* * *

The successful operation of democracy depends upon what I have called democratic reasoning. Democratic reasoning proceeds through debate, discussion, negotiation, compromise and mutual accommodation.

The accommodation of diversity, which is a cardinal feature of democracy, extends to ways of thought, including conceptions of the good life. The individual citizen is not required to do without his own view of the good life, but he is expected to treat with consideration, if not sympathy, other views of the good life cherished by other citizens. Democracy provides better conditions for political education than other political regimes. It permits citizens to make mistakes while providing opportunities for those mistakes to be corrected.

Democratic reasoning takes a pragmatic view of imperfections in the social and political order. The pragmatic view is to accept that all political regimes – past, present and future – are imperfect, and to act on that understanding in the hope that the future can be made a little better than the present. It takes a sceptical view of any political agenda that promises to carry society forward directly from the

discordant present to a completely harmonious future.

Democratic freedom is necessarily associated with a certain amount of disorder in life as well as in thought. Authoritarian rulers promise to eliminate all disorder and ask only to be given a free hand to do so. Democratic reasoning might be forced to take a back seat not just by an authoritarian ruler but also by a popular upsurge. In India today, the popular upsurge appears to pose the greater threat. The leaders of a popular upsurge demand the immediate redress of their grievances; they have little time to listen to both sides of an argument.

There is an upsurge of anger in India today against corruption in public life. Social activists and leaders of civil society movements demand that all corruption be brought to an end here and now. The mere expression of moral outrage cannot be a substitute for democratic reasoning. Where that expression acquires an intemperate form, it threatens and subverts the very process of democratic reasoning.

In a democracy, corruption can be reduced, but it cannot be eliminated. When social activists mount relentless assaults on the basic institutions of democracy such as the legislatures or even the courts, they set in motion forces that end by increasing, instead of reducing, corruption. It is a mistake to believe that only an excess of concern for order generates corruption. Disorder, too, generates its own forms of corruption which are more virulent if only because their sources are more diffuse and more dispersed.

One can expect some measure of corruption in all democratic systems. Perhaps a certain amount of corruption is inherent in the very operation of the democratic political process. The reasonable attitude will be to understand how it operates with a view to limiting its excesses instead of taking the moral high ground from where we can wish it out of existence.

The operation of democracy sets in motion the distribution and redistribution of patronage. This involves economic transactions that open the way for corruption. Not all economic transactions that affect political decisions are corrupt, but it is difficult to draw a fixed line beyond which what is morally acceptable becomes unacceptable.

I have argued that it is both desirable and possible to reduce corruption on an incremental basis. Why should it be unreasonable to try to keep on reducing it progressively until we bring it to the point where it ceases to exist? The plain fact is that the eradication of corruption has costs and not just benefits. It requires a certain concentration of authority and a degree of firmness in taking unpopular decisions. The most common justification for the concentration of authority in a democracy is that it is required for the elimination of corruption. The military often takes the view that it can ensure the safety and security of the nation better than any civilian authority. Experience has shown that in the long run a military administration turns out to be more corrupt and less efficient than a civilian one even when it wears a benign face when it first installs itself.

* * *

The development of the party as a political institution is one of the great innovations of modern democracies. As an institution, the political party has a name and an identity that continue over time. The party is an institution to the extent that its name and its assets and liabilities outlive its individual members. The success of the party as a political institution depends on its ability to outlive its founders and its most important leaders, and to recruit new leaders and new members to replace the old ones. It is its ability to maintain a presence that is separate from that of its present leaders and followers that makes a party different from a faction, a clique or a coterie.

As an institution, the party typically operates within a system of parties. The relations among the parties in a system of parties may be relations of co-operation, competition or conflict. Sometimes the party in office and the party in opposition develop and cultivate a habitually adversarial relationship. Whatever the one side advocates, the other side feels compelled to reject without much consideration of the merits of the case. This tends to undermine the credibility of both, and to weaken the fabric of democracy.

Party systems have been classified as two-party or multi-party systems (Duverger 1954) according to the number of parties present. Britain and the United States are classic examples of two-party systems. In the United States, political competition between the Democrats and the Republicans has given form and substance to the operation of the political system. There is a regular alternation between the two parties as majority and minority and, correspondingly, as government and opposition. When the Democrats are in office, the Republicans are in opposition – except that a Democratic president may have to sail in troubled waters when the Republicans are in a majority in Congress. A further complication is that one party may control one of the constituent parts of Congress while the other part is controlled by its opponent.

Thus, the symmetry of the system is disturbed when the executive is controlled by one party and the legislature by its opponent, and this is by no means unusual. A president may find it difficult to get his bills passed when the legislature is controlled by his opponents. But the legislature, no matter how united it may be in its opposition to him, cannot dismiss the president before he completes his fixed term of four years in office. This means that a certain amount of compromise between the executive and the legislative wings of the government is essential to ensure that the work of the nation is not seriously disrupted. The leaders of the two political parties play a crucial part in negotiations for a compromise.

In America, the political party plays an important part in controlling the distribution of patronage through its influence in administrative appointments in federal, state and city governments. A great deal of the corruption in public life in the United States arises from the control of administrative patronage by party bosses.

The judiciary is, in principle, autonomous and, in practice, it tends to act independently of the executive and the legislature. But partisan biases do play a part in the appointment of judges. When a vacancy occurs in the Supreme Court, a Republican president is likely to favour a candidate with a conservative bias, and a Democratic president a person with a liberal bias. In the United States, there is

no age limit to the term of office of a judge so that he can serve as long as he wishes to and retire at his own pleasure. This means that where a judge with a Republican colour is appointed by a Republican president, the judge continues in office even when a president from the other party replaces the one under whom he was appointed.

Britain, too, has been effectively a two-party system for most of the time since the formation of distinct political parties. The two principal parties were, to begin with, the Conservative and the Liberal parties, which alternated in office in the early decades of the 20th century. Gradually, the Liberal Party was replaced by the Labour Party, which then became the main adversary of the Conservatives. The Liberal Party has now come back in a new incarnation as the Liberal-Democratic Party. In the nineteenth century, the two main parties were known as the Whigs and the Tories. The term Whig dropped out of use, but the term Tory is still used to refer to the Conservatives. Britain has had some experience of coalition governments but there has been a strong tendency towards the predominance of two main parties, and for those two parties to alternate between government and opposition.

In a system in which two parties alternate between being in government and in the opposition, the relations between the parties, both within the legislature and outside it, are likely to be governed by a certain spirit of accommodation. When the party in opposition knows that it has a fair chance of being called to form the government sooner or later, it is likely to moderate its assaults on the government currently in office and to avoid recourse to desperate measures. The party in office can in turn view the prospect of defeat without despair since it can always hope to regain office after spending a decent interval of time in the opposition.

While the two-party system is taken as the norm in the United States, Britain and other English-speaking countries, in European countries such as France, Germany and Italy the prevalent pattern is of the multi-party system. There, three or more parties contend for power among themselves. Where no single party enjoys a clear majority, there may be arrangements between two or more parties

to form the government and, likewise, to sit in opposition. Coalition partners may remain with each other through good and bad times and form blocs that alternate between government and opposition, but such arrangements tend to be unstable, particularly when the parties needed to form a coalition become numerous.

* * *

I would like briefly to consider two particular conceptions of party systems within the framework of democratic politics, once again with a view to bringing out the role of an opposition. I will take up first the one-party system and then the system of party-less democracy.

The idea of a one-party system will appear as a contradiction in terms unless one sees the system in its historical context. In ordinary usage, a system – any kind of system, and not just a system of parties – requires a plurality of units and a distinctive kind of relationship among the units in order to merit recognition as a system.

If we look at countries that have a one-party system today we are likely to find that the system did not originate with a single party but emerged as a one-party system through the elimination or suppression of all parties except the one that prevailed in the end. While in terms of the logic of systems analysis, a one-party system may appear as a contradiction in terms, the party that prevails in a one-party system fulfils a vital need in its political life. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the Bolshevik Party played a more important part in the Soviet Union than the Conservative or the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. The party has its uses not only in articulating dissent but also in suppressing it.

In the Leninist system, the party is of crucial importance not only in ensuring support for the regime but also in delegitimising opposition to it. The party acts as the eyes and ears of the government and also as an invaluable instrument of agitation and propaganda. It is generally better organised and more tightly controlled than parties in a two-party or multi-party system. There is little scope in this scheme of things for the emergence of a rival political party.

I am not suggesting that all opposition is successfully suppressed

in a single-party state. No state or party, no matter how efficient or ruthless, can root out opposition from the hearts and minds of men and women. When opposition finds no room for open expression, it goes underground. An opposition that is driven underground does not remain quiet or passive for all time. It develops its own methods of resistance and attack. Repressive measures by the state are matched by subversion and sabotage. Negotiation and compromise come to be disregarded and disdained by both sides, and democratic reasoning is left out in the cold.

* * *

I will now turn to the development of political parties in India after independence before returning to the subject of party-less democracy which I believe to be a distinctively Indian ideal drawing its inspiration from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. India today has neither a one-party nor a two-party system, but a system of many parties. The total number of parties runs into three figures. The number and variety of parties reflects the size and the social and political diversity of the population as well as the distinctive historical circumstances of nation building in India. These conditions and circumstances have given a distinctive character to both government and opposition such that any attempt to interpret and assess the operation of politics in India through a blind and mechanical application of the Westminster model, or the German or the French model is bound to come to grief.

The operation of the party system in India cannot be understood without reference to the unique role of one single party, the Indian National Congress, in the building of India as a nation. It was established in 1885 and thus stands as one of the oldest parties in the world, older than the Labour Party in Britain and older also than the communist parties in Russia and China. Before independence, it had stood for the unity of India as against its main adversary, the Muslim League, which wanted the partition of India. After independence, many of its dedicated adherents came to believe that the destiny of India was inseparably linked with the fortunes of the Congress

Party. They persuaded themselves that neither the security nor the integrity of India would be safe in the hands of any other party.

Although the Congress has always prided itself as the party of national unity, it has never been very successful in maintaining its own internal unity. It has split more than once, and it has encouraged or engineered splits in other political parties. Even the Communist Party of India has survived after being split. Fission and fusion have become endemic features of political parties in India. They have been both a cause and a consequence of coalition politics, and have made the relationship between the party and the government unstable and uncertain since the government has to be constantly on guard against one or another of its coalition partners being lured away by the opposition.

Uncertainties in the relationship between the parties in office and those in the opposition have led to the proliferation of factions. The interpenetration of party and faction has become a pervasive feature of politics in India, and it naturally colours the relationship between government and opposition. The party is a different form of social association from the faction. The life of a party continues independently of the lives of its individual members. None of the individuals who sustained the Congress Party in India or the Labour Party in Britain at the time of India's independence are active in politics today, but the parties continue in existence, if not exactly in the same form, at least recognisably as the same parties. Factions emerge and dissolve as their individual members move in and out of the political arena.

The Congress Party has undergone decline and decay over time. At the time of independence it enjoyed wide public esteem, and some even viewed it as a national asset. Esteem and respect have been replaced by disdain and contempt. In the eyes of many, it has become the epitome of venality and corruption. It is not as if the other parties have fared much better in India. No party has escaped hostile public scrutiny during its tenure of office, and many parties have by now enjoyed a spell in government. To some extent, this is a worldwide phenomenon, and political parties have fallen in

the public esteem almost everywhere. Despite all this, the political party is likely to continue as a vehicle for the articulation of dissent and opposition. But, at least in India, it will have to vie with other vehicles directed towards the same ends but organised differently from the political party.

* * *

The disenchantment with political parties in general turns the minds of many reflective Indians towards an idea that has deep roots in India's moral consciousness, and that is the idea of 'party-less democracy'.

It is well known that Mahatma Gandhi, whom Indians regard as 'the father of the nation', had at best mixed feelings about the blessings of party politics. He wanted the Congress Party to be disbanded after the independence of India and its members to go out to the villages and work there as volunteers in the service of the poor and the hapless. No doubt he was a supporter of democracy, but his ideal of democracy was a communitarian one exemplified by the village republics of the past. It may be well to remember that it was the same village republics towards which Dr Ambedkar had expressed his scorn in the Constituent Assembly. 'What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?' He had declared in no uncertain terms that the village republics had been 'the ruination of India' (Government of India 1989: 39).

Gandhi had witnessed the poverty and misery prevalent in India, and particularly in its villages where the overwhelming majority of its people lived. What had troubled him most was the lack of will among the common people to resist the abuse of authority. He believed that this was due to the exploitation and oppression they had endured for long periods of time and had nothing to do with any fatalism inherent in their way of life. The task he set himself was to restore the will to resist among the people, and this could be effective only if they acted unitedly as communities and not as individuals competing for profit and power. The regeneration of the

community was for him, first and foremost, a moral rather than a political act. It is towards this end that he sought to develop non-violent movements based on *satyagraha*.

It is ironical that Gandhi, who had played the leading part in infusing the Congress party with new life after his return from South Africa, should become so disenchanted with it as to recommend its dissolution. He did not live for very long after the country's independence, but had he done so, he would have found his worst fears confirmed by the conduct of the Congress party and its competitors and rivals.

Gandhi's bias against political parties and in favour of social movements resonates among increasing sections of the population. For many, democracy is now less a matter of opposition to the government in parliament than resistance to its abuse of authority through protests, demonstrations and rallies on the streets and in the fair grounds. Naturally, the immediate target of such rallies is the party in government and hence the party in opposition provides tacit, if not open, support to it without paying any heed to the hostility and contempt in which many of the leaders of such movements hold political parties in general.

In countries such as India, social movements have acquired an important symbolic value. They serve to sustain the romance of democracy. They provide opportunities to the lawyer, the accountant, the scholar, the scientist and the ordinary office goer to reach out to something beyond the routines of their everyday lives and to experience vicariously a larger sense of fellow-feeling. They create the illusion of living at peace and in harmony with one's fellow citizens. After all, fraternity is as much an ideal of democracy as liberty and equality. It is easy to be lured by the ideal of fraternity in a society which is deeply divided by caste and class.

Gandhi based his social movements, including those directed towards civil disobedience, on the principle of non-violent *satyagraha*. Non-violence was an absolute on which he allowed no compromise. He alone had the magical touch that kept violence at bay. But even his magical touch did not always work. In retrospect, his success

appears spectacular if only because he was never afraid to admit failure in a particular project and to withdraw it when he was unable to keep it on the right course.

There have been many followers of Gandhi who have conducted social movements in his name since his time. Their successes have been at best mixed and it is doubtful that even their intention to keep the movement absolutely free from violence has always been pure. Gandhi's most outstanding follower after independence was Jayaprakash Narayan. But he was not a man of god like Gandhi, and his magic touch often faltered. In the period immediately preceding the Emergency of 1975-77, the social movements that were organised by Jayaprakash, or in his name, often led to disorder and violence. He appeared helpless, and other leaders with fewer scruples took over the movement and used it for narrow partisan or sectional gains.

While social movements keep alive the romance of democracy, they exact their toll in terms of dislocation and disorder. Large rallies disrupt city life – choking the flow of traffic and causing poor attendance at schools, colleges and offices, and sometimes to their closure for short or long periods of time. And the faint-hearted are always anxious about the outbreak of violence. Crowd management has never been easy in India where crowds run into tens and even hundreds of thousands.

More than anybody else, Gandhi succeeded in keeping the nation united, or at least keeping in view the unity of the nation as a primary objective. This cannot be said of all or even most leaders of social movements since his time. The social movements of today are as likely to promote sectional interests, including the interests of particular castes and communities, as the national interest, and, increasingly, more the former than the latter.

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I would like to return in the end to the institutions with which I started in order to bring the two aspects of democracy face to face with each other. Social movements are diverse, diffuse and discontinuous. Their emergence and dissolution follows a different pattern from the

growth and decay of political parties. Social movements depend far more on the personal qualities of their leaders and their capacity to sustain the enthusiasm of their followers than on the traditions and conventions created over time by an institution, or on the pattern of rights and duties established by it.

The membership of a social movement is difficult to ascertain at any point of time because support for a movement does not entail the kind of obligation that any institution imposes on its members. Its membership waxes and wanes with the capacity of its leader to hold his followers together. Many leaders of popular movements have a mistrustful attitude towards any kind of organisation because of the discipline it imposes on its members. One is likely to find at any point of time, a large number of movements varying in size and vitality, but they are unlikely to be the same ones that were present ten years, or even one year, ago. As old movements fade away, new ones arise to take their place.

Sometimes a social movement or, at least, its core membership might achieve stability over time. It might then acquire a distinct identity and continue to operate beyond the lives of its individual members. In such a case the movement is gradually transformed into an institution. That institution does not have to take the form of a political party. It can play a significant role in articulating dissent and opposition by sustaining a certain civic consciousness among its members and the general population. But, a negative, not to say hostile, attitude towards the political party as an institution does not augur well for democracy.

The negative attitude towards the institutions of democracy of many of the leaders of what are called 'civil society movements' is not confined to the conduct of political parties in parliament. It extends to the electoral system as well. Their professed regard for the common people does not extend to the representatives whom those very people elect.

The principle of election is a very important one in all modern democracies. The growth of democracy from the nineteenth century onwards has been inseparable from the extension of the franchise to

ever-widening circles of citizenship. In India, the conduct of elections is the responsibility of an Election Commission whose powers and functions as an institution are laid down in the Constitution. It is interesting that political parties find no mention in the Constitution, but the Election Commission does. The Election Commission is directly responsible for the conduct of elections to the parliament and the state legislatures as well as to the offices of the President and the Vice-President.

The conduct of the Election Commission is not above criticism, but, on the whole, it has retained the respect and esteem of the wider public. The first Commissioner, Sukumar Sen, set an example by his probity, his intelligence and his dedication (Guha 2007: 133-7). Several of his successors, such as T.N. Seshan and J.R. Lyngdoh, have acted with exceptional courage and independence of spirit. What does it say of popular leaders when they turn their backs on the electoral process on the ground that it is inherently corrupt and undependable?

Election is not the only method of selection. The selection of a leader may be by election or by acclamation. It appears that the leaders of civil society movements prefer acclamation to election. Preference for acclamation over election goes with populist as against constitutional democracy. Despite its immediate appeal, it has risks and hazards that must not be lost to sight. Leaders chosen by acclamation generally, if not invariably, show strongly authoritarian tendencies once their power becomes secure.

It is not enough to say that democracy calls for respect for the opposition. Opposition may be organised and articulated in several ways, and these different ways are not always easy to harmonise with each other. The political party assumed predominance in certain democracies in certain phases of their development. Political parties in both government and opposition have lost much of their shine in the decades since independence. They were created in the western countries in the nineteenth century, partly in response to the extension of the franchise. But this very extension of the franchise has altered the role of the party with the emergence of mass democracies

everywhere in the twentieth century. The decline in the public esteem accorded to the political party is not confined to India, but may be found in the countries of Europe and America as well. But alternative modes of articulating and expressing dissent are perhaps more active in India than in those countries.

Because a political party maintains a recognisable identity, it has to answer for its real or alleged misdeeds. It is kept under continuous observation by its opponents and, in a regime of coalition politics, by its allies as well. It is the same party that seeks re-election when the time comes due and it has to work with some unity to secure victory over its opponents at the polls. It cannot take a holiday from its obligations in and outside the legislature. The leaders of a political party are deterred from acting recklessly because they have to safeguard the interests of its present as well as its future members. Such sanctions against reckless conduct do not operate in the case of social movements.

The tactics of a social movement cannot be the same as those of a political party. Even when they have the same immediate objectives, the party has to engage in strategic thinking to a far greater extent than the movement. If we regard the acknowledgement of the value of dissent and opposition as the defining feature of a democracy rather than any particular form of their organisation, we will have a better appreciation of the varieties of democracy. The preoccupation with a standard model of democracy can act as a distraction from the understanding of democracy as a living and dynamic system of social and political relations.

It is often said that democracy in India moves from one stage of disorder to another. A successful democracy does not turn its back on disorder but learns to cope with it. The accommodation of diverse, even mutually antagonistic, forms of opposition is a way of recognising disorder and learning to cope with it. It is through this process that democracy has acquired its distinctive form in India.

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- 2003 Harka Gurung – **Trident and Thunderbolt: Cultural Dynamics in Nepalese Politics**



Mahesh Chandra Regmi
(1929-2003)

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was instituted by the Social Science Baha in 2003 to acknowledge and honour historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi's contribution to the social sciences in Nepal. The 2012 Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was delivered by **André Béteille**, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Sociology at Delhi University.

Professor Béteille was formerly the Chair of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and was made National Research Professor in 2006 and Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1992. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. His research and writings have focused on social inequality, especially the relationship between caste, class, and power, and also explored the theme of inequality in agrarian social structures arising from the ownership, control, and use of land. His later writings have focused on institutions and processes.

He is one of India's leading sociologists and writers. He has authored many books, including *Democracy and Its Institutions* (2012); *Marxism and Class Analysis* (2007); *Ideology and Social Science* (2006); *Equality and Universality: Essays in Social and Political Theory* (2002); *Antinomies of Society: Essays on Ideologies and Institutions* (2000); *Inequality among Men* (1977); *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* (1974); and *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (1965).

