

discredited politicians with no vision of the future. To many leaders of opinion, the event offered an opportunity to give vent to their utter frustration by expressing a sense of national failure. One thing, however, stood out and was duly noted with pride and some wonderment by most of them : the maintenance of a democratic State. As Sunil Khilnani puts it: “After almost fifty years of self-rule, the old certitudes of Indian politics had crumbled. Yet one powerful continuity stretched across this half-century of spectacular and often turbulent events : the presence of a democratic state.” And Khilnani expressed a general opinion when he went on :

Huge, impoverished, crowded with cultural and religious distinctions, with a hierarchical social order almost deliberately designed to resist the idea of political equality, India had little prospective reason to expect it could operate as a democracy. Yet fifty years later India continues to have parliaments and courts of law, political parties and a free press, and elections for which hundreds of millions of voters turn out, as a result of which governments fall and are formed.⁴

The role played by the relatively large British-educated elite, by a few charismatic leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi or Pandit Nehru, or by the remarkable ability of Indians to adapt to Western customs goes part of the way to explain the paradox, but not the whole way. As an argument for democratic compromise, the very diversity of the country, with its amazing patchwork of ethnic groups, languages and religions, begs the question. Appealing, as many Indian authors do, to the so-called democratic tradition of ancient India, as demonstrated by early republics depicted in old texts, is rather far-fetched and indeed preposterous.

A comparative approach struck me as offering the best way out of the dilemma. It would help to bring out what Tocqueville called “the original facts” (see p. 9) and measure more exactly how close and how different India was from other countries with similar regimes or comparable social structures. To compare India with its South Asian neighbours, as Ayesha Jalal did, might be useful but also misleading, as India is such a large object that it bears heavily on the much smaller countries so close to it. No one has ever been more successful as a comparatist than Tocqueville was. But the most compelling reason for bringing his ideas and methods to bear on India was his famous prophecy

⁴ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 16.

concerning the universal, irresistible progress of democracy contained in the preface added to the Twelfth Edition (1848) of *Democracy in America*: “This book was written fifteen years ago with but a single thought as the author’s constant preoccupation: the impending, irresistible, universal advent of democracy in the world.” Then, a paragraph further down, comes the famous remark: “The gradual development of equality is a providential fact. It has the essential characteristics of one: it is universal, durable, and daily proves itself to be beyond the reach of man’s powers. Not a single event, not a single individual, fails to contribute to its development.”⁵ It remained for us to check Tocqueville’s relevance to Indian politics on more specific criteria. Could he give us a method by which we might resolve the contradictions and elucidate the Indian paradox? Could he help us understand a regime that is profoundly idiosyncratic, that progresses in spite of enormous odds, that is prone to shocking abuses yet remains capable of unseating the many tyrants, big and small, spawned in rapid succession by its poor and little-schooled populace? Many scholars (historians, anthropologists, economists, political scientists) have tried their hands at understanding India. Each discipline in the human sciences has brought along its particular tools and methods to attempt to catch India in its net and bring us closer to understanding its wonder and diversity.

Anthropology came first with the disadvantage of appearing to be an adjunct and even a servant of the British East India Company. To describe and classify races, tribes and castes was supposed to help the Raj rule the country, levy taxes and administer justice. By the second half of the nineteenth century, anthropological findings based on the physical measurement of skulls and noses amounted to little more than illustrations of the decennial census. Nevertheless, Indian anthropology developed into a monumental series designated under the general title of *The Gazetteer of India*. Meanwhile, some administrators with a scholarly bent wrote valuable monographs on the populations in the areas they were familiar with. Among them one may cite:

William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta, 1896)

Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872)

Denzil Ibbetson, *Outlines of Panjab Ethnography* (Calcutta, 1883)

5 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 909 [Preface to 12th edition].