

# CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

## EDITORIAL

### India: The most fragile of democracies

#### MISMANAGED CHAOS

This special issue on India, the world's largest democracy, makes a fundamental point. For many Indians, India is not poised to become a full-ranked superpower. It does not even merit recognition as a rising power, instead it is trapped in a state between "manageable and unmanageable chaos," in the words of the eminent sociologist Ashis Nandy. What makes the current state untenable is that the subcontinent's political class has lost all interest in moderating India's razor-like inequalities and addressing the countrywide social conflicts. Tragically,

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Delhi has not developed a strategy for the fair and efficient governance of a country desperate for stability, progress, and social justice.

Manmohan Singh, India's beleaguered prime minister, has been a disappointment to those looking for democratic reform. No sector of public life has escaped the taint of corruption, which

cuts across political parties at the regional, national, and local levels; and no institution is exempt from the sheer scale, daring, and venality of these illegal practices.

Modern India faces an unprecedented number of corruption challenges that are as much moral as economic and political. These include the systematic looting of mineral resources in southern and eastern India by rapacious Indian corporations and deep-pocketed foreign multinationals that has driven thousands of tribal peoples off their traditional

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## CORRUPTION AND POVERTY: INDIA'S FEARSOME STRUCTURAL FAILURES

### The search for a moral compass: India after globalization

#### THE THROES OF CHAOTIC CHANGE

India is in the throes of a tumultuous transformation, arguably even more profound in its social impact than the transition, 64 years ago, from colonialism to independence and democracy. This shift has been mediated, in no small degree, by globalization—economic, technological, and cultural. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s unleashed economic energy and entrepreneurship on an unprecedented scale, translating very quickly into breathtaking economic growth rates that catapulted India to membership in the

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G20, and even the heady annual invitation to the G8 high table. It also heralded an unaccustomed sense of optimism in Indian society, as new economic opportunities held out the promise of making possible a better life for the vast majority of India's citizens.

Twenty years on, despite an extraordinary story of economic and social mobility for many, impressive levels of economic development coexist with

almost stagnant levels of human development. India's economy is ranked 11th in the world by GDP and 5th in terms of GDP in purchasing power parity. On the Human Development Index, however, India occupies a rank of 119 out of 169 countries. At no previous time has it been harder to come to terms with the

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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

registry system that protects the rural landowner from expropriation by the state and the private sector.

Indian public policy is clumsy and isolated from everyday reality. Middle-class Indians have every right to be cynical about the future. Some see a silver lining in the explosion of Western-style shopping malls that sell every global

brand possible; however, for the majority, the transition to a middle-income economy that respects individual rights and freedoms is a distant prospect. With all of its institutional and moral shortfalls, India has not been able to reinvent an equalitarian discourse capable of setting the country on another path. A country with a record of poor governance, an

archaic infrastructure, and a tired, aging leadership can barely be expected to deliver on jobs and social justice. 🍁

### Note

*Editorial correction: Paul Heinbecker's article in the Spring 2011 issue should have been titled "Canadian foreign policy: Lost in translation." — DD*

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contradictions of darkest poverty (in absolute numbers equivalent to the entire population of India at independence) coexisting with wealth of unimaginable proportions; with thousands of indebted farmers committing suicide even as India's wealthiest man spends \$2 billion on his new 27-storey home with a staff of 600 people waiting on a family of 6.

### THE INDIVIDUAL–COMMUNITY DUALITY

In recent times, corruption scandals have almost daily exposed the venality of politicians and bureaucrats, the powerful and wealthy have appeared to be placed comfortably beyond the pale of the law, and the integrity of every institution of governance lies in tatters. A startling rise in crime, from the pettiest to the most daring, signals a breakdown in norms. There is today a pervasive sense of crisis—moral, social, and institutional—as Indian society tries desperately to make sense of a rapidly changing social world that appears to be built on quicksand.

Colonialism insistently represented India as a political community made up of several social communities, and individuals chiefly as members of such communities. The Indian Constitution sought to redefine the relationship as one between the state and its individual citizens, but the impetus behind the project of making *individuals* out of members of this social world is globalization. In the economic context, these are consumer-citizens negotiating a marketplace of multiple choices; acquiring

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English language skills as an instrument of upward mobility; and chasing aspirations through employment in the business process outsourcing, technology, and services sectors. This energy is particularly palpable in the small towns of India, from which young people are breaking through meritocratic entry-level barriers into the diverse and intensely competitive worlds of industry, government, sport, and the media.

This new spirit of individualism is somewhat at odds with the customary forms of citizenship in the polity. With the politics of caste, region, and religion being dominant in the period before the economic reforms, community has long mediated the relationship between citizen and state. Community identity has not entirely lost legitimacy as a form of political intermediation, but there is now a possibly creative tension between the rival pulls of individualism—born of the market—and community as constructed in the sphere of politics. Civil society activism and the electronic media, which offer unusual opportunities for expressive citizenship, are now enabling new forms

of individuated citizenship, even if these are largely restricted to the educated middle-classes and may sometimes even teeter on the brink of vigilantism.

The affective bases of politics are however far from dead. Caste continues to have greater political purchase than social; it is a far more potent instrument in the political sphere than the social or ritual. The ties of family too remain strong and resilient, especially where power and/or money are involved. If the largest private corporations in India are family firms, so are the bulk of its political parties. The dynastic principle determines, with a few exceptions, succession in both. An astonishing one-third of all members of Parliament come from political families, and this trend is repeated all the way down the line to the institutions of local governance. A single individual tightly controls the leadership of most political parties, and—with the exception of three regional parties headed by single women—the principle of inheritance is beyond question. The commercial interests of many party

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*supremos*—from ownership of educational institutions to media companies—are well known. Economic power translates into political power with the same ease and fluidity as political power does into economic.

## A DEEPLY FELT CRISIS

The moral despair we encounter today is thus forcing Indian society to negotiate afresh the questions how and where to draw the line between the public and the private. The elite consensus on modern institutional norms that sanctified this boundary was first questioned, three decades ago, by a new democratic vernacular, in particular the language of the backward caste parties. Their impatience with, and even rejection of, these norms was initially valorized as a plebeian response to the norms of self-serving and hegemonic upper-class caste groups. Over time, however, the fungibility of norms has meant not the construction of an alternative moral universe, but the breakdown of the older normative consensus. The old norms, both personal and institutional, are under assault, and without a new set of values to replace them, society is adrift in a sea of apparent social normlessness. A series of recent scandals—involving government, corporate interests, and the media—have generated anxieties about the relentless and all-pervasive march of greed and graft as well as the “moral fibre” of Indian society. As is often the case, what is popularly apprehended as moral crisis is embedded in and symptomatic of a larger phenomenon.

What recent exposures of corruption have demonstrated, above all, are the enormous opportunities for profiteering afforded by the control that state personnel exercise over the licensing and allocation of hugely valuable land and natural resources such as oil and minerals, and now even spectrum bandwidth for wireless communication. Rampant cronyism between state personnel—politicians as well as bureaucrats—and private interests has rarely been as

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clearly marked as now. Not since slavery was legal has the marketization of human beings been so celebrated: recent newspaper headlines in India described particular cricketers to have been “auctioned” to premier leagues for obscene amounts of money, even as others were named as having remained “unsold.”

Much worse than these examples of commercial egregiousness, however, are the ecological crisis, and the cynical exploitation and marginalization of tribal people living in areas rich in mineral and forest resources. The colonial state had labelled these *adivasis* (original people) as backward and primitive; the constitutional regime of independent India sought to balance their autonomy, cultural distinctiveness, and customary laws and institutions of governance with developmental interventions for modernization and gradual assimilation. This separateness has fuelled powerlessness. The forest and mineral wealth in the regions inhabited by these populations was always attractive—to the colonial state as well as the post-colonial—but in recent times the collaborative efforts of the political class and corporate mining interests make all previous exercises appear amateurish. The unregulated expropriation of tribal land, the loss of tribal group livelihoods, their displace-

ment by precisely the development projects that were supposed to empower them—all these and a governance vacuum have triggered radical Maoist activism.

## SOCIAL INCLUSION WITHOUT SOLIDARITY

These moral and institutional deficits are arguably built on an older failure—that of an earlier tradition of what loosely may be called Indian “social democracy” to channel the affect of community into a more secular sense of social solidarity. The Constitution made the individual the fundamental political unit of the state, but it also provided for group identities to be recognized for guaranteeing cultural rights (for religious minorities) and for providing quotas in public employment and education (for historically disadvantaged caste and tribal groups). It was not long before other community identities came to be mobilized, and because this became the pre-eminent form for the expression of political demands, the quasi-socialist agenda remained rhetorical, failing to invent an egalitarian ideology that could address and transcend class and caste differences.


Because formal equality could not provide safeguards against caste oppression or religious majoritarianism, group-identity claims were increasingly presented as claims to substantive equality. The constitutional guarantee of quotas for members of historically disadvantaged groups such as the scheduled castes and tribes were intended to afford them opportunities that difference-blind policies, in the garb of liberal neutrality, simply would not provide. Holding out the promise of substantive equality, then, identity politics acquired a legitimacy of its own that became almost unchallengeable. The political accommodation of these claims swiftly became a proxy for the redress of inequality.

The controversial policies of affirmative action and quotas have indeed had

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There is also an important role for Western governments: follow the money. They have made it easy for the world's dictators and corrupt to steal

their nation's wealth. Western governments should use their tough regulators and superior surveillance capacity to monitor their own banks and take

shady banks and executives to court for parking ill-gotten gains in violation of anti-corruption laws and conventions. 

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some success in creating opportunities for members of disadvantaged groups. However, studies have shown that forms of discrimination and disadvantage (including, for example, labour market discrimination) persist, suggesting that quotas may not offer the complete solution to the problem of inequality.

Quotas themselves have not always been able to preclude the creation of elites among such groups. The benefits of quotas have a tendency to be reproduced across generations, so that a few members of these groups are better placed to build on the privileges afforded to earlier generations, sometimes at the cost of those who have never had similar opportunities. With some groups, this has led to demands for the exclusion of the euphemistically named “creamy layer”—those who either hold positions or earn incomes that should render them ineligible for the quotas.

**India's affirmative action policies have successfully advanced the project of social inclusion in a diverse democracy.**

On the whole, India's affirmative action policies have successfully advanced the project of social inclusion in a diverse democracy, as disadvantaged groups now have a greater presence in legislatures, the bureaucracy, and universities, though admittedly less in industry and the media. They have also been effective instruments of managing diversity and therefore containing

its potential for social conflict. While social conflict has been kept at bay, however, social fragmentation has not, with less than optimal implications for forging solidarity among citizens. This is, of course, a common concern with redistributive policies that undermine civilities; affirmative action policies tend to be similarly divisive as they generate a politics of resentment. The task of reconstructing a social democracy in India is likely to be encumbered by the lack of social solidarity and the mutuality and fraternal sentiments that should underpin it. 

### Note

*This article is adapted from an article written for the Foresight Brazil reader called “Charting New Directions: Brazil's Role in a Multipolar World” (March 2011).*

# The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies

[www.yorku.ca/robarts](http://www.yorku.ca/robarts)

York University has one of the largest concentrations of Canadian specialists in the world. In recognition of this fact, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies was established in 1984 with support from the private sector and matching grants from the Secretary of State and the Province of Ontario. It was named in memory of the Honourable John P. Robarts (1917–1982), seventeenth Premier of Ontario (1961–1971) and seventh Chancellor of York University (1977–1982).

The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies supports interdisciplinary and discipline-specific research pertinent to the study of Canada and “Canada in the World.” Faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate student associates of the Robarts Centre offer a wide range of expertise related to the study of Canada. As a designated Organized Research Unit of York University, the Robarts Centre also provides opportunities for postdoctoral researchers and graduate students from a wide range of York graduate programs. It hosts high-level seminars and aims to support the activities of Canadian specialists at York University across a broad spectrum of topics. Academic visitors are invited to apply to participate in the activities of the Centre.

Current research projects at the Centre cover diverse areas, including Canadian environment and culture, the politics of French Canada, and histories of commodity trade. ■