

## To Kill A Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism

John Keane and Debasish Roy Chowdhury,  
with Kevin Clements and Olivia Stokes Dreier

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Kevin Clements 00:00

Good afternoon, two years ago, a really crucial book on India was published called *To Kill A Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism*. It was written by John Keane and Debasish Roy Chowdhury and we're very privileged to have both of them here today in this public conversation to talk about the book, and their views of India, currently under Modi, and the prospects for Indian democracy.

To begin and to have a framing question, I'd like to ask John, who's done lots of wonderful work on democracy, could you define what you mean by the term and what are the main prerequisites for and correlates of successful democratic systems?

John Keane 00:40

It's a most difficult and controversial question. Janatantra (democracy) is heavily contested. We live in an era where everybody is a democrat, including Putin, Xi, Modi. And so being clear about its meaning, with a sense of history, is important. I would say that in these years of the 21st century, democracy everywhere continues to mean self-government of a people who consider themselves to be each other's equals, but self-government of the people through a whole set of institutions and ways of living. So minimally, democracy requires free and fair elections and that means a multi-party system. And it means an elected set of representatives who sit in a parliament to make laws.

But it's much more than that. It's more than casting a ballot or pressing an electronic button. Democracy is also a set of institutions, watchdog institutions, that prevent the abuse of power. There has to be an independent court system that applies and backs up the rule of law so that nobody is above the law, not even the highest elected representatives, or business people for that matter. There has to be an independent media system with investigative journalism. There needs to be a civil service that keeps its distance from the government and advises the government.

But democracy is also, we say in our book, a whole way of life. It's a way of life ideally dedicated to realising on Earth the equality and dignity of people. And that means, minimally, that there must be a civil society. All democratic institutions rest upon a social foundation of households, of voluntary associations, of trade unions, of businesses, of networks of people who are committed to a greater equalization of power. So, democracy is a whole way of life.

And I would say finally, if this is not enough, it's a very demanding word, and it's a very demanding set of principles. Globally, democracy is increasingly becoming the respect for, the representation of, the care of environments, of the biomes in which citizens live. The destruction of environmental spaces undermines

gradually, slowly but irreversibly unless checked, democracy. So, yes, democracy is a form of self-government of the people. It's a very unusual way of handling power. It's on bad terms with monarchs, with despots, with autocrats, with tyrants, but it's a way of life, a way of handling power, that is more than elections. It's watchdogs, a civil society and its respect for the biomes in which democracies are embedded.

KC 04:38

Oh, thank you, John. That's a great way of framing the whole conversation. Over to you, Olivia.

Olivia Stokes Dreier 04:46

India was one of the first British colonies to achieve independence. Its founding constitutional document promised, and I quote, "social, economic and political justice for all its citizens, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and of opportunity, and paternity that would assure the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation." So, what have been the major successes and failures in implementing these very, very lofty aspirations? Now, we know this is largely what your book is about, but maybe for our listeners, you could give a bit of a summary there.

Debasish Roy Chowdhury 05:39

There are many different components in your question. But first off, it's important to acknowledge that India did not end up like most colonial states. It did not become a Zimbabwe or a Pakistan. Democracy is always a work in progress and India has by no means, as you know very well, ever been a perfect democracy. But it soldiered on with democracy, however imperfect. The survival of a democratic form of government in India, again, however imperfect, destroyed a lot of conventional wisdom about the possibility of democracy in India and about democracy itself. It was thought that India was too culturally diverse, too poor, too backward, and even too territorially indeterminate, to have democracy, or to have democracy working in a country like that. Even at Independence, its territorial borders were not a given; as you know, seven princely states, refused to join the union, even after independence. In fact, as we have mentioned in the book, Churchill once said that India is an abstraction. It's a geographical term, it is "no more a united nation than the equator". Indian democracy, again, with all its imperfections, survived despite all of this.

One of the first things that you mentioned in your question is unity and integrity of the nation. I would say that preserving the unity and integrity of the nation – you could consider it an achievement for 75 years. Now, as for the rest, we have had mixed results. Say, liberty of thought and freedom of expression. There have been periods when they have been threatened, as it is now. And there have been periods when they have advanced. Social injustices certainly abound, especially for marginalized sections. But there have been substantial advances too. If you ask me, are the Dalits—the Dalits, as you know, are the lowest caste, the untouchables in the society—today as marginalized as they were at Independence, I would say no. But they continue to be marginalized.

Overall, I would say that when it comes to equality of status and opportunity—that's one of the other things that you mentioned was the promise of Indian democracy—I would say the progress has been rather unsatisfactory. The Indian state has not been able to create life equalizing opportunities the way we feel is conducive for democracy.

JK 08:49

May I add that, in the book, we refer to “the India story”. We point out, as Deb has just explained, that India was exceptional in the way that as a post-colonial society and polity it actually avoided dictatorship. This was no small achievement. And part of the orthodox India story, which we acknowledge but which we say is now past its sell by date, is fed by these achievements. Deb has mentioned them. The first elections, the world largest in October 1951, took six months to complete. More than 170 million people voted in free and fair elections. It was a polity with a grand constitution. And that constitution is generating certain nostalgia in contemporary India. It's an extraordinary document, co-written by Ambedkar and others. This was also a polity in which there were, through time, important reforms, such as the *panchayat* local government reforms. I would say the political system is now in deep crisis. But, still, the really unusual thing about the Indian experiment with democracy was the way its leaders transformed the meaning of secularism, so that India came to be understood—this was an ideal, of course—as a polity in which there is a society of multiple faiths. Every major world religion is found in India. Its democracy was thus a peace compact. Secularism is an arrangement, Indian style, where different faiths, expressed in many different languages, can live together without civil war. Secularism means that government has an obligation to protect that diversity, to ensure nonviolence, to cultivate dignity and respect among Hindus, and Jains, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and others. This was the vision of the Indian transition to democracy. Its story is very different than that in China, very different than most African polities after empire. Our book suggests that this vision of a democratic India, these important achievements, are now deeply threatened by some deep-seated 21st century trends.

KC 11:57

That leads on to the next question, John. I mean, in the book, you make the case that since independence, India has really failed to meet the basic needs of its population. You document all of that very well. This sounds like a sort of a silly question in the light of your definition, but why are education, healthy, equality, work and dignity so crucial for a functioning democracy? And why, given the lofty aspirations of the Constitution, did Indian politicians fail to pay attention that was needed to education, health, equality, work and dignity?

JK 12:34

In *To Kill A Democracy* we come at that question, as it were, from the back door and ask the question: what happens when a civil society, a plurality of nonviolent association networks that are non-governmental in which people live their lives at arm's length from the state, becomes infected with malnutrition, with violence against women, when a third of children go to bed hungry at night? What are the political effects of the breakdown of the social foundations of a polity? What we say is that it produces all kinds of pathologies. In this sense, India is a warning to the rest of the democratic world, where in the last 40 years, with very few exceptions, democracy has come under increasing pressure by growing gaps of inequality social fragmentation and the degradation of social life. What happens? Well, when the social foundations of a democracy like India disintegrate, the high flying principles of the constitution begin to feel abstract to millions of people. This strengthens disrespect for the judiciary. It enables politicians and leaders to try to capture the judiciary. A certain lawlessness spreads. It's obvious that when a civil society disintegrates, when the social foundations are not protected by welfare mechanisms, that the ethical principles of dignity and equality equally become a mere illusion. And this can, of course, produce a kind of resignation among millions of people, a certain sense of powerlessness. When social fragmentation and breakdown happens, people can indeed strike back. There can be millions of mutinies against those trends.

But the degeneration of a civil society, its transformation into an uncivil society, is the breeding ground of demagogues, we point out. These redeemers acknowledge that many millions of people's lives are damaged by malnutrition, by poor life opportunities, by fear, by violence. They promise people the earth. That's the dynamic we analyse in our book. It's not just Modi who is the prime example of this. There's a history of demagoguery in India, including at the regional level. The breakdown of a civil society is the soil in which demagoguery comes into season. And when demagogues get their hands on government, there are feedback loops between a degraded society and a degraded politics. Demagogues get their hands on institutions, and begin to destroy the independence of the judiciary, politicize the bureaucracy, attack independent journalism, and so on. That's the anti-democratic dynamic in which India is currently trapped.

**DRC 16:34**

If I might add, just to stress the point that John was making earlier about democracy, it's about the self-government of people who see themselves as equals. If people do not have a dignified life, they do not see themselves as equals. So, dignity is key to fraternity, a word you will find in almost every constitution in the world. If you don't have a dignified life, you don't have fraternity, and if you don't have fraternity, people don't care for one another. If they don't see each other as equals, you cannot have self-government. So, any democracy which does not ensure a dignified life for its people, loses the right to be called a democracy and creates all kinds of conditions that John was just explaining about demagogues.

**OSD 17:34**

I was really struck by the statistic in the book, that the global slavery index estimates 8 million Indians are living in modern slavery, the highest in the world. More than 18 million it says have lived in modern slavery at some point in the last five years. I know that's not new. Bonded labour has been a feature of Indian society for a long time. But how does this impact the possibility even of being a democracy if you have that large a population living in modern slavery?

**DRC 18:14**

Exactly. You just can't call yourself a democracy and claim to have equal vote and have slavery at the same time. It doesn't work. It's logically inconsistent. And that figure that you mentioned, 18 million, is merely the tip of the iceberg. The number of Indians in bonded and semi-bonded labour is much more than that because 90% of the economy is informal, which allows capital to prey on human desperation. And this huge mass of desperate labour is created by weak social foundations and poor life equalizing opportunities that exist because of the absence of a meaningful welfare state. The state, I stress again, has failed to institutionalize decent universal primary education and health care, trapping millions of Indians in perpetual poverty. You saw how migrant workers started to walk on India's highways when the COVID lockdown started. That was a telling glimpse of the precarity of labour, which basically verges on slavery. It's what in our book we have called the New Slavery. We find it difficult to reconcile these conditions with democracy.

**JK 19:48**

It's perhaps worth adding, if I may, that in the history of democracy, slavery is a scandal, or at least it came to be seen so. Of course, Athenian democracy and other early Greek democracies typically rested on slavery. There was a civil war, as we know, fought in mid-19th century America, a rising democracy that became a global

empire. That Civil War was resolved in favour of the formal abolition of slavery. As Deb has just said, our book charts the return of slavery in 21st century forms. Slavery is enforced hysterectomies to increase the productivity of women. It's these dreadful jobs of clearing out night soil. It's working long hours without trade unions in tin shed factories. This slavery is a form of violence. If indignity, the loss of dignity, is social violence, then slavery is its extreme form. It has an impact on the overall health and life expectancy of the population. We cite at one point in the book figures about the length of maximum productivity of workers during their life span of working. The figures are approximately 6.5 years in India. It is a reflection of the rotten working conditions, the new style enslavement of peoples. In China, the period of maximum productivity is around 20 years. This is another indication of this creeping new slavery and, of course, life expectancy. Life expectancy in India is currently around just under 10 years less than it is in China, which now has an overall life expectancy higher than that of the United States. So, slavery is a pathology that is deeply structured into this so-named Indian democracy. It's incompatible with its ideals and highest institutional aspirations.

KC 22:33

I'm going to combine two questions here. One, given Nehru's connection with Fabians and socialism and so forth, and the directive principles of state policy of the Indian constitution, why didn't India post-independence move towards developing its own welfare state to ensure robust social relationships and an active civil society? And why didn't it emulate the East Asian economies which managed to combine strategic industrialization, private capital and social redistribution?

DRC 23:05

Now, first, the Directive Principles of state policy are that part of the Constitution which is a set of governing guidelines. They're not fundamental rights. And because they're not fundamental rights, they're not enforceable in courts of law. And because they're unactionable, these principles are reduced to lofty instructions to the state that exist only on paper. Unlike in the Atlantic and East Asia region, the Indian welfare state exists largely as a fine promise. Now, why hasn't India developed its own welfare state? Why didn't it? One possible reason why it could not be done at the very outset was the extreme poverty and low state capacity that existed at the time of independence. It was argued that it would be difficult for the state to take on that onerous responsibility given the resource constraint at the time. Bear in mind that India was probably the poorest country in the world by the time the British left. So that's one reason. But I think that the tradition of caste, the system of social hierarchy, also played a part in this failure. For, the primarily upper caste, political leadership may have been less alive to the necessity of a welfare state. BR Ambedkar, who headed the committee drafting the Constitution of India, and who was a Dalit himself, was very keen on universal education. He knew that only universal education could break India's millennia-long social boundaries and hierarchies. But the majority of his colleagues who were upper caste did not subscribe to this idea

Coming to the second question about East Asia, the comparison with East Asian economies or their strategy of industrialization, and why India didn't follow that pathway? One reason is that India followed a particular model of economic development at independence, and the second is again caste. I will come to that in a bit. India as you know, chased the policy of autarky combined with state-led industrialization, which it felt was the fastest way to accumulate capital. So, bureaucracy-driven industrial policy was combined with nepotistic local private capital into what became a highly corrupt and inefficient licence Raj that ensured that manufacturing was limited and sluggish. In the economic development model that the East Asian economies adopted, there was a

heavy synchronization between industrial and social policies. The economic success of countries like Japan and Korea was accompanied by land reforms, which boosted domestic internal demand and redistributed income to foster the political stability sought by domestic and foreign investments. And to encourage technology transfers from foreign investors, these economies made enormous investments in education, health, physical infrastructure, like roads and electricity. Policies ensuring universal literacy, increased productivity, and promoted social equality. So there were all these social aspects, these investments, that these countries made in order to pursue the path of economic development that they chose.

I think that if we were to ponder why these were absent in the Indian model, we cannot evade the problem of caste. The upper caste leadership, I think, has never been that interested in social flattening in India. I will give you just one example. That is the example of land. Land reforms, as I just mentioned, were a key foundation of all East Asian economies and their economic development. But in India, despite all the political rhetoric, there was never any meaningful land reforms. Land is still concentrated in the hands of a small gentry. Interestingly, the land holding patterns reflect our caste hierarchy. So, upper castes hold bigger lands, middle caste hold medium sized lands, and the lower castes hold no land at all, or maybe tiny parcels. They're mostly landless agricultural workers. Even after 75 years, about 500 million Indians are still landless, and 96% of the farmers who own land only own tiny parcels. So, we have largely failed in land reforms and we have in the book catalogued how we have failed in every other aspect like education, healthcare and all the other things which made these East Asian economies what they are today.

JK 29:11

May I add that this caste-ridden Soviet style pathway to capital accumulation that was applied after independence was replaced or began to be transformed, as we know, in the early 1990s, with a shift to a kind of neo-liberalization of economic policy. The headlines are quite deceptive on this point. There are champions of the view that India can now grow at 7 or 8% GDP per annum, etcetera, etcetera. Behind such headlines it's important to understand, as we document it in our book, that each year three quarters of added wealth goes to the top 1% of the population. And that top 1% owns the equivalent of four times more than 70% of the population, which is some 950 million people. So, the roots of unequal life chances, the roots of concentrated wealth, are deep, but they have been widened and deepened by the marketized reforms that have happened in the last 30 years. They show no signs of being reversed whatever is said by the Modi government about latrine scheme successes or cheaper or free cooking gas for the poor. India is a deeply unequal, unjust polity that stands against the principles of democratic equality.

OSD 31:11

You describe in the book how the west has tended to romanticize the resilience of India's democracy. And in part perhaps it has seemed robust because of the apparent success of its electoral processes compared to many parts of the world. Why is this a misperception? Can you tell us something about what you describe as this almost manic obsession with elections in India, and the more corrupt and violent side of Indian elections? And then how would you assess how it is in non-election years? Does it feel different?

JK 31:53

Perhaps I can tackle the first part of your question Olivia, and Deb can help with the second. Concerning the West's love affair with Indian democracy, the world's largest democracy it's called, there are lots of ironies, including the fact that in the 1970s, during the civil war in Pakistan, which led to the bloody birth of Bangladesh, the United States was on the side of Pakistan, because it was seen as a bulwark against the Soviet Empire. The changed narrative happened during the Clinton years, when Bill Clinton came to India and described India flatteringly as the world's largest democracy. Obama repeated this in his pivot to Asia strategy. This phrase has come to be a mantra in which the oldest democracy, the United States, is now said to be the best partner and good friends with the world's largest democracy. The high point, if that's the right phrase, is the February 2020 visit of Donald J. Trump, who celebrated the great friendship between India as a great democracy and said that the United States will forever be its loyal partner. This attempt to cultivate an alliance symbolically between the existing Atlantic region democracies and India is showing signs of becoming tattered and torn. It's very noticeable how so many ministers of democratically elected governments in the Atlantic region fell silent in the recent controversy generated by the BBC series on Modi. The Modi government didn't like it and banned it. Foreign ministers choose mostly not to comment on that controversy. I expect we're going to see continued contestation of that old image of India as a democracy, as the West's best partner. But I do think that the realisation is growing in some quarters, that all this talk of a grand alliance with India, a grand alliance of democracies, is actually part of an attempt to globalize NATO, and to contain China. It's a dangerous trend. And we should see through the illusions and frankly, the propaganda of this view.

DRC 35:10

I think you mentioned something about India, the state of democracy between elections. I think our book is largely about India between elections, because elections are a necessary element of democracy but it's not the only marker of democracy, as we have explained in the book. And the book is largely about that. Our social foundation chapter, for example, covers the state of education, the state of healthcare, the state of labour laws, or the precarity of labour, the state of transport, which is my favorite chapter in the book, and the right of mobility, and what that tells us about India. The state of air, water, land, their degradation, these are all about India between elections. These are the realities that do not change in election years. And these are very grim realities as we outline in the book.

KC 36:08

You coin some wonderful words in the book. And I just wonder if you could explain what you mean by chremacracy and why it was that important and understanding Indian party politics? And then could you elaborate on Milan Vaishnav's assertion that criminality is a valuable asset in Indian politics and why is that so and how does that affect the Indian body politic?

JK 36:35

I confess to the crime of introducing this neologism., I don't even know how to pronounce it, but let's call it chremacracy with a slight American accent, ironically. It's a word that comes from the Greek *chrēma*—money, riches, wealth, something needed—and *kratos*, meaning to rule. So it's a word to describe the way that Indian elections through time have come to be infected by dark money, and loads of it. More dark money than for example has colonized American elections. So, one of the dynamics that we speak about in the book is the way that elections that are considered to be so central to the operation of Indian democracy are dynamics in which

party membership is shrinking, in which big money is attracted by party leaders into the election fray. All kinds of pathological effects follow. We document them in our book. For instance, there is a sort of dynastic principle at work in political parties. In 2014, around a quarter of the members of Lower House, the Lok Sabha, came from political dynasties, from political families who have money. Electoral politics unsurprisingly becomes the site of doing business deals. It's certainly the site of a lot of organised corruption. Money is handed out by parties. The BJP is doing this on a large scale. There's a kind of welfare state function at work in elections. India has a very weak election spending rules, certainly in contrast to countries like Canada. The Election Commission is mainly toothless in its ability to rein in this dynamic. Things have gotten out of hand, we say. Money from "unknown sources", a commonly used phrase, is flooding into elections.

And more recently, under Modi, there's been the introduction of a procedure which has made things even worse. It's called electoral bonds. Basically, through the State Bank of India, you can buy bonds, and you can put money anonymously into political parties. It's estimated that around 95% of the money acquired through electoral bonds went to the BJP. The government is also a very big advertiser, on Facebook for instance, which means an incumbent government can win elections by disbursing huge amounts of money. In short, by using the word chremacracy we wanted to highlight a really scandalous dynamic that is the exact opposite of a free and fair election. Elections in India at all levels have come to be colonized by big money and dark money. When you think about when money speaks it is in effect a privatization of what should be a public dynamic. Democracy is the public ownership of the means of decision making. Private money ruins democracy.

#### OSD 40:42

You describe India as moving towards what you call elective despotism. Could you say a bit about what you mean by that term and how you distinguish it from an electoral autocracy, which seems to be the term being used more widely as we see this slide across the globe, decline of democracy?

#### DRC 41:10

India today is effectively what Thomas Jefferson once called an elective despotism. That's a condition where there is virtually no check on executive power. And you can see that in India, there is no internal democracy within the parties. India holds the biggest elections in the world, but no political party in India actually conducts free internal elections. Legislators are bought and sold like cattle. Bills are hardly ever debated in the house. All of this means that a ruling party with rock solid numbers like Modi's party at the federal level and some parties at the state level, can railroad any law they want with no need for debate or consensus. There are other pathologies here. Governing and oversight institutions such as the higher-level bureaucracy, the investigative agencies, Election Commission, or the Human Rights Commission, can hardly be called autonomous anymore. The mainstream media, a very important check on executive power, has for most part been domesticated. Self-censorship is rife, and most national television channels behave like state media. The Chinese channels look way more dignified compared to Indian television channels, frankly. And I know because I have lived and worked in China. Although the judiciary is supposedly independent, it has been forced to take the path of least resistance. So basically, all of this means that all countervailing institutions to executive power are compromised, which is exactly how elective despotism works. In our book, we have used the phrase elective despotism, which we borrowed from Jefferson, and we did not use electoral autocracy, which some democracy tracking institutions



are using these days. I do not much see particular difference between these two phraseologies. I don't know if there are any technical differences, maybe John would know.

JK 43:40

Yeah, the pedant in me just wants to point out that autocracy is the rule of a single person. When we use elective despotism—it is, as Deb says, Thomas Jefferson's 18th century phrase—we're referring to a whole system of patronage and connections that a ruling party, led by a demagogue, institutionalizes and uses to destroy the independence of the legislature. We have some shocking statistics in the book about the declining turnout in the Lok Sabha, where most bills go through without any debate. They're just passed on the nod. This is all part of clientelist patronage system. It has despotic qualities, in that it's a way governments rule by binding together coalitions of people to rule, but at the cost of destroying power sharing and the rule of law and watchdog institutions. That's a long-winded way of saying that we prefer the term despotism than autocracy, which happens, of course, also to be a word in the arsenal of the Biden administration. It is portraying global politics in terms of a grand Manichaeian struggle between democracy and autocracy.

DRC 45:21

And in this dynamic, if I may just add, chremacracy actually plays a big role, because when we are talking about legislators not debating bills in Parliament, it is also a reflection of the quality of representation. And what chremacracy does is that it sends to Parliament only the kind of people who may not be necessarily equipped for public life in the conventional sense. These are people who are rich or were ultra-rich or criminals who are backed by people who have pots of money. So, most of these people wouldn't be able to discuss a bill, many of them wouldn't be able to read a bill and understand it. So, chremacracy also has a role in this dynamic of elective despotism.

KC 46:31

You have a wonderful phrase in the book, where you describe despotism as, quote, “autoimmune disease of a sick democracy sucking life and what remains of its spirit and institutions”. I mean, it's a wonderful sentence, whoever crafted it.

JK 46:45

One of the paradoxes that has to be understood is that India has become something like a phantom democracy. I mean, everything is done electorally and in governing terms in the name of democracy. In the name of the people, in the name of democracy, there is a degradation and hollowing out of practically all democratic institutions. This is a really dangerous trend. It confirms the old 19th century classic warning of Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who came to the United States, who predicted that the greatest threat to modern representative democracy would be despotism. Governments would in the name of the people and democracy empty it of its content. We present in our book a very detailed account, reasoned, with statistics and personal stories, of exactly this process. The trend may be reversible. We're going to see.

KC 48:00

So that leaves the next question in a way. What are some of the countervailing pressures against Indian despotism? And what value do you place on India's plurality of languages, ethnicities, class as an antidote to political monotheism?

JK 48:15

We end our book by introducing some thoughts about the importance of hope. What is hope? Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is not rainbows in the head. Hope is the judgment that people make in their everyday lives that it is possible to reverse negative trends, destructively unjust trends, and to actually build and create something better for tomorrow. That's hope. I think Deb and I have fluctuated on the question of hope. We oscillated during both the writing of the book and in the aftermath of its publication about how hopeful we are. But I think we certainly say in the end section of the book that there are counter trends. Deb has lots to say about those counter trends.

DRC 49:14

I would say that India's hyper diversity is a natural hedge against any centralizing tendency, especially a culturally centralizing force such as Hindu supremacism. Indians have multiple identities, which are rooted in the religion, culture, language, caste. I am Bengali, I'm a Calcuttan, I'm an Indian, lots of different things. Now, it is impossible to shoehorn all of these identities into one composite Hindu identity without risking the perception of cultural imposition. And we are seeing that in many state elections these days. Regional parties have started portraying the BJP as an outsider, as a North Indian party, and they have been pretty successful with this strategy. So this diversity as a hedge to this political monotheism is something we are seeing in elections already. It's already playing out.

JK 50:38

What shouldn't be underestimated, if I may add to what Deb has said, is the possibility of millions of mutinies in an election. We don't know what the future of India is. Trends are flowing in favour, it seems, of the BJP, but elections, so long as they continue to exist in India, may deliver unwelcome news for the BJP and other incumbent governments. There's also the question of the dignification of women. It's interesting that a tampon tax was withdrawn because of protests by women just a few years ago. One question is whether *satyagraha*, the spirit of nonviolent resistance, can be eliminated from the everyday lives of millions of Indians. And the really big question which we haven't quite put our finger on, whether—I'll say it very provocatively—is whether this BJP RSS-backed government is able to transform Indian democracy into a polity where there are at least 200 million Muslims who become Palestinians, or Kurds let's say? Is it possible for this government to gradually destroy the rights of millions of people so that they live in fear of their lives? Is it possible—it's a question to do with hope—that this government can successfully pull that off? It's one of the biggest questions I think confronting the future of Indian politics.

OSD 52:53

You describe in the book, how the attempt of the Modi government—they speak so much about we're doing this all for the people—to redefine who the people are. And I guess a big question is to what extent can they redefine the people as Hindu?

JK 53:14

One of the odd things for outsiders and many Indian citizens is that, historically speaking, Hindu identity was a home for pluralism. There was and is no established church, no established priests and a plurality of interpretations of what it means to be a Hindu. What has been going on under pressure from the RSS, the extra-

parliamentary combat network that backs the BJP—remember Modi himself, from the time he was eight years old, was a member of the RSS—is that the government is trying to transform that understanding of being a Hindu into Hindutva. This resembles what Zionists do to the whole notion of being Jewish. What is at stake in contemporary Indian politics is this: if the Modi government is to succeed, then it will have to somehow marginalize several hundred million people, not only Muslims, but Christians and others who don't belong to the Hindutva illusion of India as a unified nation. This will require the destruction of democracy.

KC 54:53

We're nearing the end. How is India's slide towards despotism similar or different from current trends in other parts of the world? And what are some of the major lessons we learned from India as a case study if we're interested in protecting and promoting democracy, in that sort of full sense of the word, in other parts of the world as well?

JK 55:16

Running through our book is a warning that India is the world's largest failing democracy. It's not just an Indian problem. Our book documents and probes the pathologies we've been talking about. It does so as a kind of precautionary exercise, as a warning about what is happening to other polities and what can happen to any actually existing democracy. The whole idea that elections can give way to elective despotism and governments led by a demagogue that then destroy the power-sharing watchdog mechanism of democracy, is not just an Indian problem. If you think that we're just talking hot air at this point, take a look at little Hungary. Or take a look at Serbia, or what has been happening in Turkey before the recent terrible earthquake, with elections just around the corner. These are all cases where elections were used by a ruling party, basically in a decade, to destroy power-sharing constitutional democracy by developing a followership, so to say, of voters who are rewarded with money and other handouts. That process leads towards what we call despotism. It's underway in India. It has been happening in Hungary under Orbán. Erdoğan's Turkey is another instance. It's also happening under Vučić in Serbia. The list goes on. And we could add to it the example of Russia, which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, went through a period of disorder and out of this came a power group that began to win elections and get hold of the polity, transforming it into something that's well beyond democracy, even though it's described, as Putin does, as a higher form of "managed democracy". This dynamic analysed in our book is well advanced in India. India is a laboratory for the future of democracy. And it's a warning illustrated by these other examples, where we could say democracy is being destroyed in Indian ways.

KC 58:24

In following on from that, I think, is the moment when we should say thank you both for writing this wonderful book that documents the dynamics that are leading to despotism in India, and as you just said, John so eloquently, is also raising big questions as a warning to those of us in established democracies who are worried about what's happening to them in terms of backsliding, and all the other processes, which seems to be undermining checks and balances, accountability, and the whole notion of kind of principle and politics. So, I would just like to thank you both for the book. And thank you both for this wonderful conversation.

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