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Asia in 2021:
In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
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REVIEWS

The unhappy ending of the «India story»

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Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, *To Kill a Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 320 pp.

1. *Introduction*

In their book, Debasish Roy Chowdhury (a journalist) and John Keane (a political scientist) question the widespread conviction that India is the «largest democracy in the world». They argue that this conviction is not supported by the evidence of independent India and that the «India story» – i.e., the story of a complex and heterogeneous country that has been able to become a unified nation-state[1] – did not have a happy ending.

Their analysis is organized in 4 parts. The first part – *Tryst with Democracy* – presents a theoretical discussion of the conditions prevailing when the country became independent. The second part – *Social Emergencies* – reviews the failures of Indian democracy in pursuing the basic needs of the population. The third part – *Democide* – deals with the processes that have led to the death of Indian democracy. Finally, the fourth part – *Towards Despotism* – assesses the fate of the country in between democracy and despotism.

2. *The building of democracy in India*

As the authors argue, when India became independent, social order was the result of power relations that had their roots in religion and in several modes of social stratification. Social differences and the existence of a plurality of religions were combined with widespread illiteracy and pervasive underdevelopment.

1. Ramachandra Guha, 'Two anniversaries. Politics and Play: How the «India story» ended', *The Telegraph*, 15 August 2020.

The decision to hold free elections was risky in a country that was very backward in economic and social terms. Yet, the prejudice of a close link between economic development and democracy was strongly rejected by millions of poor and illiterate people that saw democracy as the most suitable tool to ensure the peaceful co-existence of individuals from different backgrounds. So, the India story started with the first parliamentary general election: the «greatest achievement of Indian democracy» and the major means for the empowerment of the powerless.

The election began in October 1951 and took six months to conduct: 176 million Indians (aged 21) voted, 85% was illiterate. 2 million steel ballot boxes were manufactured; 56,000 presiding officers and 280,000 support staff supervised the voting; and 224,000 police officers were assigned to polling stations. 75 political parties were involved for 489 seats in the federal Parliament and 3,375 seats in the state Assemblies.

The large participation of the lower classes was taken as the proof that India's citizens believed the elections to be the main instrument to «display their dignity as equals and express their differences as members of particular communities». It showed that democracy had irreversibly «entered the Indian political imagination» and that a «return to the old order of castes … was inconceivable» (p. 13). This achievement in terms of domestic democracy combined with the vision of India as a «non-aligned» emerging country and with the principles of secularism supported by Jawaharlal Nehru, highlighting political equality for all religions and promoting government policies to fight «religious fanaticism».

The widespread conviction was that, as an established democracy, India could express a political class capable of great political ideas. However, while the building of democracy provided a major example of a powerful political «vision», in the following decades a process of erosion of democracy took place questioning the credibility of the India story. The country progressively lost her democratic status, increasingly resembling an «electoral autocracy»: India is now the world's largest case of «endangered democracy» (p. 29).

The erosion of India's democracy is well documented. Several well-known public intellectuals – such as Ramachandra Guha and Yogendra Yadav – are «sounding the alarm», while democracy reports and rankings describe and measure India's declining democratic position vis-à-vis other countries. So, India has been classified as a «flawed democracy» by the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, has lost the status of a democracy for the *Swedish V-Dem Institute*, and the *Freedom in the World 2020* has ranked her among the «least free democracies».

The authors argue that to assess nature, contribution, and evolution of a democracy, the focus on governmental dynamics is not enough. Social foundations also matter. Democracy is much more than high-level dynamics centred on political institutions and civil society organization, much more than periodic elections and public control on individuals and groups. Democ-

racy must be assessed in relation to the way in which people from different social groups live together and cooperate with «respect and dignity» (p. 30).

Democracy implies fair and decent conditions in the health system, housing, transport, working life. It is respect for women and children, humility, sharing and caring for others, freedom from fear and the right not to be killed, equal access to decent medical care.

3. *Assessing the state of Indian democracy*

Focusing on public health, the authors argue that the Covid pandemic has made evident that healthcare is not a fundamental right in India. This situation contrasts with: (a) the Indian Constitution, according to which human dignity needs to be respected; (b) the Supreme Court that has declared «the right to health» to be integral to «the right to life»; and (c) the «constitutional obligation» of the state to provide health facilities.

No universal healthcare system exists in India: the poorest are assisted by public (decaying) hospitals; the super-rich and upper middle classes access to private (luxury) hospitals with suitable equipment; the remaining part of the society – the middle classes – are assisted in low level private nursing homes, according to their income and resources. The pandemic behaved like «a killer of equal opportunities»: it did not discriminate between castes and classes. Owing to the widespread fear of the virus and its uncertain consequences, the fight against Covid was directly managed by state-run hospitals that were inadequately equipped and that have been responsible for the country's low performance. As the authors remind, India has been placed among the eight countries that either did not report Covid data or were reporting highly suspicious data (the others being Vietnam, Venezuela, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Turkey, and China).

Other indicators highlight the bad state of the health system in the world's largest democracy (pp. 52 et seq.): 2.4 million people die of treatable diseases every year. The death rate from poor care is the worst among a list of 136 nations. According to a Lancet report (2020), life expectancy has increased to 70.8 years, but Indians are living more years with illness and disability. Healthy life expectancy is 60.5, like in Ethiopia (60.1) and Rwanda (59.8), but India lags behind Nepal (61.5), Iraq (63.3), Bangladesh (64.4), Palestine (64.4), Brazil (65), Vietnam (65.7), Sri Lanka (66.8), and China (68.4). India reduced its infant mortality rate by over 40% in a decade from 57 per 1,000 live births in 2006 to 32 in 2017, but still lags behind Cambodia (25), Vietnam (17), Brazil (13), and Sri Lanka (8). India's immunization rates (except for tuberculosis) are lower than the poorest regions in the world (Sub-Saharan Africa). With more than half a million pneumonia deaths every year, India accounts for a fifth of the (world) total and leads the five countries with the largest numbers of child pneumonia

deaths, followed by Nigeria, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia. Moreover, the country bears a third of the global mortality for tuberculosis.

The authors' conclusion is that these figures should not be surprising as India spends around 1% of the GDP on health, comparing with 2.9% in China, 4% in Latin America, 2.1% in South-East Asia, and 4.9% (p. 56).

The next aspect the book deals with is nutrition. The authors move from the assumption that «hunger is democracy's opposite» and cannot be tolerated in a democratic country (p. 62).

Since independence, India has registered several episodes of extreme hunger and famines: in Bihar (1966–67) 13.4 million people were trapped in destitution and thousands of citizens starved to death; in Maharashtra (1973) 130,000 deaths were reported; in the 1990s serious starvation was denounced in Orissa. Moreover, recently, the country has been facing a form of hunger that kills in silence getting less media attention than famines. As death by starvation is not a «good look» for a «democracy», an attempt has been made to hide this situation. In the authors' words: «Avoiding words like starvation – using malnutrition instead – and hiding hunger under the garb of other diseases allow India's million famines to go untreated, debilitating the social foundations of democracy» (p. 68).

The available data provides an impressive picture of the state of hunger in India. According to the 2020 Global Hunger Index, India is 94th (out of 107 nations). Based on the extent of undernourishment, underweight children, child stunting, and child mortality, India's level of hunger is classified as «serious», sharing the rank with Sudan, beating North Korea (96), faring worse than Congo (91), Nepal (73), Iraq (65), and Sri Lanka (64), and being miles behind China and Brazil. Even though India produces a much greater quantity of food than necessary for her domestic needs, 190 million Indians are undernourished (FAO estimates). The lack of suitable food affects the lives of children. 880,000 children under 5 died from hunger in 2018 (UNICEF estimates). Children's physical and mental development is seriously affected by nutrient deficiencies with a consequence that one third of Indian children are stunted.

Living conditions in India are also influenced by the environmental abuse that causes the death of 2.3 million people every year for pollution (Global Alliance on Health and Pollution). Deforestation, over-cultivation, soil erosion, and depletion of wetlands led to the degradation of a third of land in the country. Industrialization, mining, and urbanization have increased deprivation and dispossession in rural areas, increasing inequality in land distribution. India's indigenous people, 8% of population, have lost their sources of income in agriculture and forestry and have been reduced to semi-bonded labourers. Landlessness has trapped millions of Indians in poverty and damaged social lives in a country where 60 % of the population works in agriculture.

About 10% of the population controls over 55% of the land; 60% has rights over only 5% of the land. The 2011 Census estimated that 56% of rural households – about 500 million people – were landless. According to a government study (1997) 77% of the Dalits (untouchables) and 90% cent of the Adivasis (tribals) were landless (p. 81).

Another democracy failure is the reduction in water availability per capita since 1951 (about -70%). The World Resources Institute ranks India 13th of 17% countries facing «extremely high» levels of water stress (p. 84). Moreover, a quarter of India is undergoing desertification for excessive extraction of water: three-quarters of Indian households lack direct water supply, while villages are far worse served than cities. Finally, 70% of India's water supply is contaminated and, according to government tests, water is safe for drinking only in Mumbai (pp. 91-92).

Yet, the main social emergency refers to air quality. The data on India's air pollution is particularly gloomy (see pp. 94 ff.). Air pollution kills a new-born every five minutes. Lower respiratory tract infection by air pollutants is the second most significant reason for child mortality, killing 1.2 million children every year. The incidence of lung cancer in non-smokers is increasing very rapidly: less than 1% of Indians enjoy air quality that meets the WHO benchmark. India accounts for 26% of the world's premature mortality and health loss attributable to air pollution.

The possibility to move in space using public infrastructure (accessible to the rich and to the poor) is another basic ingredient of a democracy. Yet, the state of Indian trains in large metropolises is a «nightmare». In 2017, eight people died every day on Mumbai's train tracks. Of the 3,014 casualties that year, more than 650 people fell to their death from running trains. Many of them died when hitting an electric pole while hanging from the door of an overcrowded train.

There is a serious lack of buses. Delhi has 270 buses per million people and Mumbai 180. The comparison with world large metropolises is shocking: Beijing has 1,710 buses per million people; Shanghai 1,240; Seoul, 730; and São Paulo, 1,040. Overall, India has just 1.2 buses per 1,000 people. The corresponding number is 8.6 in Thailand and 6.5 in South Africa. Only 63 of 458 Indian cities with a population of more than 100,000 have a formal bus system. In smaller cities, towns, and villages, there are no mass transit systems and very little or no state-run buses.

Another social emergency is found in the way the education system is organized and works. When India became independent, schooling was very limited: the adult literacy rate was 12%. Yet, as the authors point out, the declared aim of the government was to achieve universal education for the 6–11 age group by 1960 and for the 11–14 age group by 1965, as recommended by the Constitution. But the efforts to universalize school education were very limited. Also, the attempt to increase education spending at least at 6% of GDP failed and spending continued to be around 3% of GDP.

A major consequence is that there are 313 million illiterate people (40% of the world unlettered population) (p. 119). Illiteracy shows wide regional disparity and a gender gap. Many progresses have been made since Independence: the adult literacy rate increased to 74% in 2011 (Census data) from the 12% in 1947, and the enrolment ratio for children in the age group 6-11 was 43% in 1951 and is now more than 97%. However, the quality of education has been dropping causing learning deficits. This largely depends on the shortage of teachers in state schools, on caste discrimination and caste-related poverty that make access to school difficult for Dalit, Muslim, and tribal children. This situation also arises for higher educational levels: Dalits are 12% of India's college-going population and Adivasis 4% (p. 130).

India's education system reproduces the country's rigid social structure. The difficult access reduces the potential of education as a social elevator capable of promoting social mobility. As the authors recall, a survey by the World Bank reveals that India shows the least mobility among six large developing countries (Brazil, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria) while the World Economic Forum estimates that in India it takes seven generations for an individual from a poor family to get out of poverty (p. 130).

Indeed, India's major social emergency is the «new slavery» produced by the increasing informalization of the economy. India's informal economy is a form of production organization characterized by widespread employment arrangements, such as casual labour, child labour, and bonded labour, through which many poorly paid unskilled workers are employed in «indecent» working conditions. Largely due to administrative corruption and to the possibility of escaping legal controls, the spread of informality leads to the erosion of workers' rights, enhanced by the progressive decline of trade unionism and by the need to make the labour market flexible. These processes contribute to generating a large mass of «wage slaves», in strong contrast with the Constitution that recognizes the right to a living wage (p. 140).

4. *Exploring India's democide*

Having reviewed India's social emergencies, the authors turn to the analysis of the processes that have contributed to the death of democracy in the country. Their argument is that, after independence, successive governments failed to build the social foundations of Indian democracy, while despotic and corrupt political elites undermined democratic institutions.

4.1. *The many functions of elections*

As the authors point out, because elections play several functions, they are possible also without democracy. Elections lend a «democratic feel» to the

political system, help to manipulate dissent, and grant authority to the rulers. Moreover, the rulers select the candidates, buy votes, intimidate opponents, manipulate the results.

As India's case shows, elections are often distorted by money and violence (p. 165-166). Black money, corruption and clientelism thrive in elections. Candidates who can access to large amounts of money are particularly active and, once elected, exchange favours for money. There is also a significant correlation between money and political strength: candidates who have a significant advantage in terms of wealth are much more likely to win as they pay for votes. This phenomenon has two different potential meanings: it is clientelism when votes are sold in the electoral market; or it is a transaction that confirms the link between the local community and the candidate. In both cases, it weakens the idea of free and fair elections.

4.2. *Elections as a chremacracy*

Using a term derived from Greek, the authors argue that elections in India have become a «chremacracy» («chrema», money; «kratos», to rule): i.e., is elected who has the money (p. 188).

While every democracy needs to fund elections, India has no state funding. The major step towards chremacracy was taken in 2018, when the Modi government introduced electoral bonds: individuals, corporations and other legal entities could anonymously channel unlimited amounts of money to political parties. Donors are not required to inform about transfers, nor are recipients required to report the transfers and the identity of donors. As the authors point out, more than 90% of the money raised through electoral bonds comes from coupons with denominations of INR 1 crore, or INR 10 million ($140,000).

4.3. *Implications of elective despotism*

As the case of India shows, elective despotism – i.e., when elected governments concentrate power in a few hands – is the death of representative democracy.

Indian parties are run in oligarchic form. The leadership consists of a group of people close to the leader who takes all decisions. Internal democracy is not practiced. Parties do not hold elections to choose their leaders and often are dynastic. In 2014, one-fifth of the directly elected MPs in the Lok Sabha came from political families. This increased to almost a third in the 2019 elections.

The BJP is run by two men: Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Ministers in the Modi's government owe their position to Modi, and all initiatives are either Modi's or approved by him. In India, elective despotism has old roots. Other prime ministers, such as Jawaharlal Nehru,

Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, had a strong control of the government and of the party and, by extension, of the Parliament.

The main implication of elective despotism is that the principle of the separation of powers does not work and there is nothing to prevent successful electoral leaders from seizing absolute domination over their executive, their party, and the legislature. Another significant implication is the speed of action. On a single day in 2018 (March 13), the Indian Parliament approved requests for funding from 99 ministries and government departments, along with two bills containing 218 amendments, all in 30 minutes. The annual budget plan for the country was passed in half an hour. The legislative process in India is now the monopoly of the premier and a very restricted number of ministers who have his confidence; this means that the governments has ceased to be accountable to the Parliament.

4.4. *The violation of the judicial system*

The authors show that the social foundations of Indian democracy have been undermined also by the political contamination of the judicial system. On the year of the book publication (2021), nearly 38 million cases were pending in Indian courts, 3.7 million of them for more than a decade. A High Court judge once estimated that it would take 320 years to clear the backlog of cases. In general, cases are pending for an average of 3.5 years and nearly 70% of Indian prisoners are undertrials, more than twice the number of convicted prisoners.

The Indian judiciary system infringes the spirit and substance of the rule of law: the principle that legal institutions and written laws should hinder the ambitions of those seeking power. In principle, the rule of law is the cure for despotism. Yet, in India, the principle is rarely applied: the government enacts and arranges the enforcement of laws (p. 226).

4.5. *Media complicity*

In the killing of Indian democracy, the press and other media play a key role. Journalists have a subordinate and deferential behaviour towards the government that emerges when they report situations that could shed a bad light on government. They brutally distort reality, inventing «narratives» that are necessary to support the action of politicians. Since Modi's arrival in Delhi, this has led to a restructuring of newsrooms with the marginalization of the journalists not ready to provide misinterpretations of reality. A similar treatment has been reserved to top publishers with well-known «liberal» values.

Senior editors no longer accompany the Prime Minister on trips abroad and there are no press conferences by the Prime Minister. Interviews are given to selected journalists, and both questions and answers are defined in advance. The new editors have access if they are deferential to

power. In a media environment in which independent journalism is almost dead, self-censorship is widespread.

5. *Toward Despotism*

The last part of the volume explores the fate of democracy in a country in which social emergencies prevent a dignified life for the population, and the population is victim of a government that redefines institutions with the help of compliant justice, violent police and electoral victories obtained through manipulated media and black money. The authors suggest that, while, in history, similar situations have been resolved by *coups d'état*, in the case of contemporary India the solution is a despotic regime.

To make a despotic regime, demagogues are required: they promise solutions to social emergencies, try to win loyal followers by offering material gifts, contribute to the building of the despot.

Modi is celebrated by his supporters as the one who saved India from the failures of the Congress Party. Modi's popularity seems immune to the major crises of his government, such as demonetization and the ruinous management of the COVID pandemic. As chief minister of Gujarat, Modi presided over the 2002 pogroms that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Muslim citizens and the displacement and homelessness of many others. Several national and international observers denounced his behaviour as a dangerous threat to Indian secularism. Yet, he earned the loyalty of the Hindus.

Modi is widely seen as a charismatic redeemer supported by a well-funded party machinery: someone who has proven that his government can build roads, homes, toilets, and supply electricity and cooking gas. His popularity has also been fuelled by his reputation as an outsider who neither comes from a dynasty nor is building one. Modi's closest allies regard him as a leader who never loses: defeat is not a word in their dictionary. He demands unconditional personal loyalty from his confidantes, advisers, and party functionaries.

As a champion of Hindutva, his enemies are the 200 million Muslim citizens. They are also the intended victims of new citizenship laws designed to remake «the people». For the first time in secular India, the Modi government, emboldened by its re-election in 2019, linked citizenship to religion. The new citizenship law helps Hindus and other non-Muslims to retain citizenship if they can't produce the necessary documentary evidence of citizenship. Yet, Muslims without documents have no such rights.

Concluding their overview of India's prospects, the authors argue that – from Hungary and Poland to Turkey and Russia – despotism in the 21st century is a global problem for democracy. Yet, despite this pessimistic conclusion, they also point out few substantial counter currents to despotic

power that leave hope for the future of Indian democracy. The pluralism inherent to India – of languages, ethnicities, religions, classes – is a factor that makes it impossible to reduce India's intrinsic diversity to one language, one culture, one country. Moreover, while the BJP won more than 50% of the elected seats in the Parliament, it had the support of only a third of the voters in 2014 and slightly more than a third in 2019, which do not represent the majority of the voters in the country. Important signals exist that the spirit of democracy in India is still alive: from the increasing participation of women to social life, to civil society campaigns against child labour and for the Right to Information.

6. *On the deep causes for the agony of Indian democracy*

To Kill a Democracy provides an important contribution to the understanding of contemporary India. Relying on the sound idea that democracy is much more than elections, the book shows that, although elections are regularly held, India cannot be seen as a democratic country since large segments of the population are deprived of decent living conditions. It provides solid evidence that elections by themselves are not a sufficient condition to ensure that a government is democratic.

The book contributes to the knowledge of the country from two complementary points of view: i) providing a rich informative material on various aspects of India's economy and society – from social emergencies to the nature and working of social and political institutions; and ii) proposing an interpretation of India's socio-economic development in which the discourse on democracy is contextualized within the political evolution of the country. No doubts are left about the oligarchic nature of the current political regime.

The book also allows the reader to reconstruct the historical passages leading to the contemporary situation. It shows the strong contrast between the political process that led to the end of the British rule – in which the aspiration to independence was joint to the willingness to «design» the economic and social organization of the «free» country – and the contemporary reality of a country that has been built by the political action of successive leaders who largely disregarded the promises made at the time of independence, as expressed in the Constitution. From this point of view, the reading of *To Kill a Democracy* shows how the ideals of the struggle for independence have been progressively impoverished and debased as the economic interests of the ruling elites have systematically prevailed over the interests of the marginalized classes.

For its ability to contextualize the evolution of Indian society and polity in a historical perspective, the book contributes to fully understand «India's passage to despotism» and every person interested in the country is

strongly recommended to read it. Yet, the analysis presented by Roy Chowdhury and Keane leaves unanswered a major question on India's contradictory process of socio-economic development and political change: how the authoritarian drift has been possible? Why India's citizens have allowed the death of democracy to happen?

In reading *To Kill a Democracy* we learn – with many details – that large segments of Indian society live in deprivation and marginalization, and that this situation is the outcome of the progressive erosion of democratic institutions. But how a country with a secular Constitution and many religious faiths has ended up under the domination of a single religion? For what reasons a country that has strongly fought for democracy and independence has expressed and express a strong consensus to governments that do not respect the rule of law and the principle of the separation of powers? Why a country built on the example of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru's political leadership has accepted the enslavement of the judiciary power to political power? Why India's citizens in free elections continue to give the majority of votes to corrupt governments in which power is in the hands of those who have the money? The answer to these questions is crucial to understanding the deep reasons behind the transformation – through free elections and in about 70 years only – of a country that produced a constitution inspired by the ideals of secularism and democracy into a country that privileges a single religious belief and accepts an authoritarian (despotic) regime.

It seems to me that India's passage to despotism has been facilitated by two processes that have had a strong impact on Indian society since Independence: the choices on education and the ideological use of religion to legitimate inequality.

As the authors of *To Kill a Democracy* point out, though the goal of universal education was ratified in the Constitution, the efforts to pursue it were low and higher education was fostered instead. This political choice was supported by Nehru, who had internalized the elitist British model of higher education, possibly with the expectation that it would have supported economic growth. The same model was *de facto* accepted by Gandhi, who believed that children should learn through small productive activities in the social and productive organization of villages and communities. By contrast, for Ambedkar – the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution – free and compulsory primary education for all should have been the main aim of the new-born country, in the effort to reach universal literacy as soon as possible. Ambedkar was deeply influenced by the evolutionist philosopher and pedagogist John Dewey, who was Ambedkar's teacher for three years at Columbia University. In his book *Education and Democracy* (1916),[2] Dewey stressed the importance of universal literacy, which he saw

2. John Dewey, *Education and Democracy. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Garsington: Benediction Classics, 2011 (1st ed. 1916), pp. 456.

as a necessary condition for democracy, allowing the less well-off classes to participate in public life.

The development of India's education system was strongly influenced by the initial choice, which largely determined the cultural backwardness of the country. Universal literacy is still far away in contemporary India, which has 40% of world illiterates and a high proportion of the population functionally illiterate (i.e., unable to adequately understand a simple written text or do simple sums).

Indeed, cultural inequality is only one of the several modes of inequality that crisscross India and that are related to religion and caste, class, ethnicity, and gender, giving birth to multiple inequalities. Yet, among these inequalities, which India shares with other countries, caste inequality is specific to the country. Historically, caste represents one of the main organizing principles of India's society. It relies on a set of beliefs and rituals that have their roots in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, which strongly enshrine the concept of inequality. It is no coincidence that, at the time of independence, many thought that the Hindu-based culture prevalent in India would prevent or make democracy difficult.

The caste system was formally abolished in the Indian Constitution, but at the same time the Constitution decided to adopt preferential measures (reserved quotas) in favour of the most disadvantaged groups of Indian society (Dalits and Adivasis). The reservation policy – which in the 1980s and 1990s was extended to the so-called Other Backward Classes (namely a set of lower castes) – triggered a strong competition between caste groups that in a few years determined a profound re-invention of the caste system in economic and political terms. Castes acquired new roles, undergoing a process of secularization that increased their influence on Indian society. These changes opened the way for caste participation in political life, giving birth to the politicization of caste identity and the use of castes as vehicles for the representation and the organization of interests in the political arena. [3] Transformed into pressure groups by means of caste associations, political associations, and caste-based parties, castes have become a major tool to support the ideological construction that legitimizes a social and economic order which is deeply unequal. By contrast with the Marxist view that economic growth would have destroyed it, the caste system still plays a major role as Hindu-based institutions and ideology that supports the organization of Indian society. [4]

While religious ideology in contemporary India is a complex construction that would require a specific attention; in this review it is sufficient to stress that caste is a Hindu-based institution with a strong ideological sig-

3. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Inde : La démocratie par la caste. Histoire d'une mutation socio-politique. 1885-2005*, Paris: Fayard, 2005.

4. E.g., Elisabetta Basile, *Capitalist development in India's informal economy*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 238.

nificance, which plays a key role in spreading and supporting a strongly hierarchical sentiments greatly contributing to the acceptance of despotic and corrupt power in contemporary India. Thanks to the influence of caste and of the Hindu-based structures connected to it, vast masses of illiterate individuals are convinced to accept and make their own the political and social demands of a government that carries out interests distant from the people and does so without respecting the laws and the dictates of the Constitution.

Here it is worth stressing the doubts expressed by Ambedkar – as noted one of the architects of the Indian Constitution – on the vitality of Indian democracy. He was right when he said in his last speech to India's Constituent Assembly (25 November 1949): «It is quite possible for this new-born democracy to retain its form but give place to dictatorship». And he was right once again when he argued: «We must make our democracy a social democracy as well» as it is necessary for India to overcome «inequality». He was right also when, presenting the Draft Constitution to the Constituent Assembly (4 November 1949), he pointed out that democracy in India was only a «top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic». Finally, he was right when in a BBC interview in 1953, he said that democracy would not work in India as the country had a social structure «totally incompatible with parliamentary democracy».

It is hardly a surprise that large masses of illiterate people, prisoners of a strong religious ideology, did not listen to one of the fathers of India's Constitution.