Authoritarian Shadows:
Indian Independence and the Problem of Democratisation[1]

RAVI AHUJA
RAVI.AHUJA@SOWI.UNI-GOETTINGEN.DE

KEYWORDS: INDIA, CONGRESS, POST-COLONIAL, HISTORY, EXTREME RIGHT

I.

On 15 August 1947, nearly two hundred years of British colonial rule came to an end in the Indian sub-continent. The anti-colonial move-ment reaped its political harvest, after decades of political mobilisation. Great Britain, weakened by the World War, lost its most precious colony. In place of the colonial Indian Empire, two new nation states—India and Pakistan—emerged through a sanguinary partition. Indian independence, stood out as a beacon for the global process of decolonisation. Barely two decades later, almost everywhere nation states emerged from erstwhile colonial empires, which sought their legitimate place amongst the fronts and hierarchies generated by the world order of the Cold War. All of us are aware of the magnitude of this major moment of the twentieth Century. In hindsight, now after a gap of seven decades, it becomes clearer that many histories lie buried under this history—not merely in the sense of a plurality of perceptions and experiences, but also in terms of a multi-layeredness of the his-torical process itself. Deeper layers and undercurrents of Indian deco-lonisation are unravelled only gradually as the present confronts us with new questions.

One of the most urgent questions we face today concerns the roots of the global re-emergence of a political authoritarianism that was considered obsolete up till recently. It is the seemingly irresistible rise of political forces, which strive to hollow out, diminish or remove democratic fundamental rights in response to often self-created emergencies. This certainly is neither a specifically Indian problem nor can it be reduced to the development deficit of the so-called 'less developed' regions of the world. Those who speak on Indian history in Euro-America, are either expected to celebrate a pre-assumed 'oriental' otherness or scramble up the familiar rope-ladder of civilizational or development theories. This is something I do not wish to do. These nineteenth century ideas are no doubt convenient: they always find an audience grateful to have their preconceptions confirmed. Yet they do not help to solve the puzzle of the return of political authoritarianism. The call for 'strong men', for cultural conformity, for nationalist self-censorship and subsequently for a political "renewal" that refuses to be bogged down by democratic "formalities" can be heard in one or the other form not only at the Bosporus and the Nile but also at the Danube and the Isar, on the Baltic's shores and the Côte d'Azur as well as on the other side of the Atlantic.

180

In India too, worrisome restrictions are imposed on freedom and rights by the present government that are seldom recognised by a German public primarily interested in export markets. Many of the current restrictions have a long history—in colonial as well as in post-colonial India. They merely assume a greater intensity in the current situation marked by global economic and social instability. In this context I refer to the excessive use of Section 124a of the Indian Penal Code on 'revolt' and 'sedition' against students, intellectuals, journalists, artists and NGO-activists branded as anti-nationals. According to official estimates it was used 47 times in 2014, during the current prime minister Modi's first year in office.

This law on sedition, which goes back to 1870, was a British creation directed against anti-colonial dissidents. The incitement of hatred, contempt and disaffection against the lawful government was an offence punishable by incarceration, cash fines and, under the colonial government, life-long deportation. In 1922 when confronted with a 'sedition charge', Gandhi declared the sedition clause as 'the prince among the Sections of the Indian Penal Code designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen'. In independent India, this section was repeatedly applied despite extensive criticism in the Constituent Assembly as well as by Prime Minister Nehru. Although in 1962 the use of Section

124 A was legally restricted to cases involving violence or the incitement of violence in actual judicial practice post-colonial governments applied it extensively and often misused it politically. A few weeks ago, Ramya, the actress and former parliamentarian was sued by the courts for violating this sedition section and prominent members of the ruling party demanded she leave the country. Her crime was, that when the defence minister Parrikar described Pakistan as 'hell', she contradicted him by saying that people were the same in both the countries. Matters came to such a pass, that the highest court in India was compelled to clarify that criticism of the government did not amount to sedition!

The case of section 126A leads us to the questions this lecture deals with: to what extent could India, with the attainment of Independence and one of the biggest moves towards democratisation in the twentieth century, step out of the authoritarian shadows of its past? Why was a state that had emerged through a process of democratic mobilisation and introduced universal suffrage in 1951 (increasing the electorate from 30 to 173 million men and women) unwilling or unable to do away altogether with laws that would infringe on hard won democratic rights? How could authoritarian potentials be regenerated and ingrained in a country where large sections of the people hold democratic rights in high regard? A change of our historical perspective is required to answer these questions. We need to approach the mid-twentieth century in new ways to better comprehend the resilience of authoritarian tendencies within post-colonial India's polity and society.

II.

Let us start our discussion with an obscure pseudo-historical text. It can be found in the private papers of Sir Edward Charles Benthall (1893-1961), a powerful banker and spokesman of British capital in India in the inter-war period. During the war years 1942-45, he was a member of the Executive Council of the Viceroy of India and after his return to Britain he became the Governor of the BBC. The seven-page typed text carries the title: "A history of India. 1942-1957. Chapter 39". The author or authoress is not named; the arguments however, point towards Benthall's environment or even himself. Further chapters are not traceable and were perhaps never written. This text can be dated, in all probability, to the period of accession to power by the Labour Party under Clement Atlee in July 1945 and the Indian elections to provincial legislatures in January 1946. Thus, we are not dealing

here with a historical text but with a narrative that assumes a historical form to function as a forecast by a British Conservative of the results of India's first decade of independence—a prognosis formulated when the end of British rule appeared imminent already.

The text conjures up a scenario where political fragmentation, economic decline and military weakness turn India, by 1957, into the theatre from which a Third World War is started, triggered by a Soviet invasion across the Khyber Pass. The descent to disaster is described in the following manner: in the first five years of independence, a conservative government led by the National Congress would find itself susceptible to the destabilising machinations of a dissatisfied Muslim minority causing communal disturbances. In addition, serious social upheaval would be fomented by the Communists and the Congress Socialists. The democratic form of government would fail accordingly. Hundreds of thousands would be killed for their allegiance to one or the other religion or for being part of the propertied classes. Without the 'British cement' separatist tendencies would inevitably prevail. The south of India, Bengal, and the north-west border provinces would again attach themselves as 'dominions' to the British Empire. The Indian Princes, who before 1947 controlled a third of the territory, would be able to consolidate their power and defend their states as 'islands of stability'. Moreover, warlords would revive or create feudal states assuming power in the north and some of the western regions of India. The republican rump of India controlled by the National Congress would be reduced to loosely associated territories in western and central India with Bombay as their oversized capital.

Despite all this diversity and fragmentation, the text did insist on a fundamental pattern applicable to the whole subcontinent: whatever the *Zeitgeist* might pronounce, democracy was ordained to fail in India: 'when it came to the pinch Indians preferred the rule of a strong autocratic ruler […] to the charms of democratic institutions.' Only South India, enframed to the North by the despotic princely state of Hyderabad and to the South by a Ceylon firmly under British rule, would enjoy an enlightened democracy while only a strong British military presence could secure stability in the dominion of Bengal. Such was the prognosis, in conservative government circles of the British empire, for India's future.

III.

Of course, history took a different route. The political fragmentation of the subcontinent predicted by the British Viceroy at the beginning of the 1947 as part of the widely touted Balkan Plan, failed to materialise. Instead, a result of the Partition, which in its brutality fully measured up to the global standards of twentieth-century barbarianism, was the emergence of the two nation states of India and Pakistan. Moreover, the numerous princely states were integrated into the new republics, only in a few cases with coercion. In Pakistan, democratic structures remained fragile, with the military time and again capturing power and centrifugal regional movements becoming so strong, that in 1971 its eastern part established itself as Bangladesh. In India, territorial integrity and the democratic constitution proved to be remarkably stable. At the level of the centre, the suspension of parliamentary-democratic forms of governance has remained restricted so far to the period of 'National Emergency' proclaimed by Indira Gandhi between 1975-77. However, emergency laws and military rule have been used repeatedly in contested border states like Jammu and Kashmir, in the North-East, when suppressing separatist movements or in cases of severe social unrest in particularly poor regions. In a moment we shall discuss further restrictions on democracy, which are, however, not exceptional to India.

183

Even so, we should not undervalue the depth and meaning of the democratic process in independent India. The introduction of universal suffrage—not for the election of the members of the Constituent Assembly, but from the elections of 1951/52 onwards—is undoubtedly a fundamental achievement that expanded the possibilities for partici-patory politics. This proposition holds even when we take into account that the agrarian ruling classes succeeded initially to reserve a large part of the new local power resources for themselves. For the intro-duction of universal suffrage did not mark the end of the demo-cratisation process but provided it with a continuous dynamism. Since the end of the 1970's, new, often lower caste actors forced their way into the political arena and appropriated the tools of electoral politics. This undermined the power of the Congress party, which had remained largely unchallenged since 1947 and propped up by socially powerful and correspondingly conservative groups.

This also led to the emergence of regional, often caste based new political parties and provided impulses for social reform. The social base of Indian democracy thus expanded and did not shrink as in other parts of the world. Christophe Jaffrelot has therefore spoken of a 'silent

revolution' in the 1970's when a second phase set in of the democrat-isation process that had started with Indian independence. This change was not brought about without resistance and counter mobilisation as evidenced by the parallel political rise of the now-ruling Hindu Right. If the process of democratisation that was initiated after Indian independence proved substantial and robust for seven decades despite of its undeniable limitations, the danger of a severe reversal has clearly emerged in the past years.

Hence Indian history evolved very differently from the dystopia predicted by Sir Benthall. Naturally, contemporaries, including self-proclaimed political and intellectual 'elites', then as now, cannot cut through the thicket of their own reality as a rule. The self-legitimation of the colonial establishment was based on proclaiming itself as the indispensable 'cement' of an India incapable of democratic self-governance. This analysis was proved wrong. However, the danger of an authoritarian and even fascist development can be gleaned in the late 1940's in the letters and speeches of Indian politicians, too— protagonists not only of the radical Left but also of the moderate, liberal spectrum. They include the Gandhian social reformer and several-times Congress President J. B. Kripalani, the socialist leader of the nationalist mobilisation of 1942, Jayprakash Narain and even the social-democratic Prime Minister Nehru. At the same time, a call was given not only from the extreme Right but also from the respectable conservative press for a 'stronger', more *dirigiste* state with regard to domestic and foreign affairs. When confronted by massive strikes in the public and private sectors, even corporatism of the Italian fascist variety was propagated at times as a remedy. An authoritarian govern-ment in India was expected, feared or even desired by contempora-ries: diverse historical actors, locked up in serious conflict and diverging fundamentally in their views, shared the perception of autho-ritarianism *as a historical possibility*, which therefore informed their actions.

The historian Sumit Sarkar has underlined the need for 'elements of defamiliarisation' to enable a critique of the implicit assumption that democratisation was without alternative as India's developmental path—as if it was a quasi natural trajectory. Instead, the question has to be raised as to why India took to the path of parliamentary demo-cracy at all. Let us, therefore, not discard too quickly as counter-factual fantasy the pseudo-history of a fragmented authoritarian India, which I have introduced to you. Benthall's conservative prediction can perhaps create a useful 'defamiliarisation effect': it helps us to raise

184

questions not only regarding the reasons for democracy in India but also demonstrates the need for a reconstruction of the potentials for authoritarianism—potentials which could not be realised in full and emerged, after the consolidation of the postcolonial polity, from hibernation only temporarily or regionally. At the same time, these potentials are not historically exhausted as possibilities and alternatives: they continue to cast their shadow on the present and the future.

In the remainder of this lecture I will refer briefly to some of these authoritarian potentials: the plural has been chosen deliberately and indicates my main hypothesis. I argue that we are not confronted with a uniform, homogenous or even a coherent authoritarian political current, but with diverse, heterogeneous potentials which under particular circumstances can either reinforce or sharply conflict with one another. The analysis of this heterogeneity of Indian (and I think not just the Indian) authoritarianism can help us to understand which sources feed the global tendency towards an erosion of democratic achievements. This analysis can also help us to understand the limitations of this antidemocratic tendency. From a historical perspective, the intersections as well as the contradictions of authoritarian potentials seldom emerged as clearly as in the years of the transfer of power from the colonial to the first post-colonial government in India, that is between the years 1946 and 1952. Therefore, we choose the early years of Indian democracy as our point of departure for a discussion that identifies altogether "three" heterogeneous potentials of authoritarianism—potentials that were usually in conflict, but occasionally also in coalition with each other: first, a religio-nativist[2] right-wing extremism, secondly a 'law-and-order' conservatism and thirdly the technocratic dirigisme of social engineers and planners.

IV.

The first potential of authoritarianism we have to talk about is India's extreme Right, whose organisations took shape in the mid-1920's. The very timing of this development indicates already that this development did not take place in isolation from the rise of European Fascism and lot more has to be said about this. However, I must quickly clarify that India's own strained social structures as well as its colonial political context facilitated the rise of its own brand of right-wing extremism. The ideological base was formed by a particularly malicious and aggressive variant of nationalism, where nationality was defined

185

not only by "blood and soil" (origin and territory) but also by religious denomination. Religious reform movements, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, confronted the challenges of colonial modernity with identity affirmation and had formed, thereby, an important reference point for the Indian Right.

In Hinduism as well as in Indian Islam, these movements propagated modernisation through 'self-purification' and 'return' to a supposedly lost authenticity. They strived for an inner homogeneity overcoming the differences of region, caste, and sect while at the same time making sharp demarcations between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians who had shared the same religious landscape for centuries. This most modern carving out of identitarian 'blocks', as the historian P. K. Datta pertinently put it, impacted the shape of the simultaneously emerging Indian nationalism and was not exclusively appropriated by its extreme right wing. Vinayak Sarvarkar, the most influential ideologue of the extreme Hindu Right, accordingly considered Hindu nationality to be based on allegiance to a religion that had emerged from the Indian soil, thereby excluding Muslims and Christians and placing their loyalty to the nation under general suspicion.

The enormous political blasting power of this ideological construct will become evident to you immediately: it has an unmistakable family resemblance to anti-semitism and contemporary 'identitarian' discourses on Islam in Europe. Thus, national identity now was to be created through exclusion within, i. e. by stigmatising other religious communities as 'alien bodies' and leaving them only with the option of complete assimilation. This form of cultural nationalism allowed to delegitimise social conflicts or reinterpret them ideologically as struggles for saving Indian national identity while simultaneously avoiding direct confrontation with the colonial state. In parallel to this, based on similar premises and opening similar strategic options, the "two nation theory" emerged from politicised Islam claiming that Indian Muslims constituted a nation of their own.

On this background, the Indian Right discovered as early as in the 1920's the attractions of burgeoning European fascism, first of its Italian and subsequently of its German manifestation. The resonances between the Indian and the European Right were based on a shared organicist conception of the nation: the nation as a spiritually saturated racial "body", that had to achieve inner homogeneity by cleansing itself from within in order to maintain its youthful vigour and escape degenerative decline. This idea could be reproduced in series

globally while permitting slight modification to back up the claim of cultural authenticity. The obligation of individuals and social groups to submit to the State as the embodiment of the nation—this doctrine of corporatism, which Italian fascists had developed to attack liberalism and socialism at one go, found remarkable resonance in India, as is evidenced from a series of new studies: in a period of massive social movements, which questioned India's established social hierarchies, the order promised by Fascism attracted a wide spectrum of socially conservative and politically right-wing movements. Moreover, Fascism appeared attractive to India's extreme Right due to its warrior-like, militaristic demeanour and its celebration of organised violence and blood-letting as a pre-condition of national self-purification.

The older notion, still widely prevalent in the West, that a culture of non-violence largely shaped the political mobilisation of the Indian "masses" in the period between the World Wars, is, as we know today, a half-truth at best. Violent precipitation of political and social conflict was possible any time and often a reality both in cities and in the countryside. Gandhi's insistence on 'Ahimsa' or non-violence can also be seen as an answer to the enormous potential for violence, and also as a project for political and moral reorientation. This project, how-ever, was never uncontested or all-encompassing. This is also reflected in the emergence of numerous paramilitary formations from the 1920s onwards. Obviously, this was not a uniquely fascist tendency but an expression of a worldwide trend towards a militarisation of politics, which also extended to India, Great Britain's most important military treasure, after the end of the First World War. Here, the militarisation of politics was appropriated by all important political and social forces including the National Congress, the Muslim League, the Communists and the movements of so-called 'untouchables'.

However, paramilitary forms could be combined most organically with the religio-nativist postulate of a militaristic self-purification of the nation. Therefore, the *Balillas* and other paramilitary structures of Itali-an fascism exercised a particular attraction on India's extreme Right. In the 1920s, Italy was elevated to the preferred destination of diverse study trips of the Indian right-wingers, a private audience with the *Duce* sometimes inclusive. In 1926, the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) was established as a paramilitary organisation and rose in the 1940s to become the most powerful organisation of the Hindu Right—a position it maintains until today. However, European fascism and its paramilitary formations also fascinated the Muslim Right, which

187

was reflected in the establishment of the *Khaksar* movement in the 1930s.

The call given by Vinayak Savarkar for a 'militarization of Hindudom' did not pertain to mere political mobilisation and symbolic parades but was also directed towards a militaristic defence of Hindu-India against its putative external and internal enemies. B. S. Moonje, Savarkar's fellow ideologue in 1937 obtained from the British a license to establish a military school, which still exists. Here Hindus were trained in military drill and the use of weapons for 'fitting our boys for the game of killing masses of men', as he remarked in a memorandum with explicit references to Italian and German role models. The colonial bureaucracy did not appear to be bothered by this, as the Central Intelligence Department saw the organisation as aiming to fight the Muslim minority but not British rule. During the Second World War the Indian National Congress decided to boycott the British war efforts and accept the imprisonment of large parts of its leadership—a decision not acceptable to most of their Indian political competitors at that time. This also applied to the extreme Right, which saw in the weakening of the National Congress an opportunity to strengthen its own organisational base.

188

The Hindu nationalist RSS, the Muslim League with its demand for a separate state, the Khaksar propagating a national dictatorship as well as the Akali Dal, a Sikh political party, built up combat-ready private armies in these years, which played a devastating role during the Partition. In 1946 and 1947 when the tide of the politically organised pogroms among Hindus and Muslims rose from Bengal to spread towards the West, it came upon a highly militarised society in Punjab where about a third of all soldiers had been recruited when the British Indian army was rigorously expanded during the World War. Demobilised, combat experienced but not always disarmed soldiers teamed up with the mentioned private armies to transform the earlier no doubt brutal, but more loosely coordinated pogroms into systematic mass killings and 'cleansing' of entire territories. Within a few weeks the casualty figures rose to hundreds of thousands. The leadership of the Indian National Congress under Prime Minister Nehru was shocked by the vast scope of violence, and he had to admit that parts of their own base sympathised with the Hindu nationalist RSS, especially in northern India, where pogroms and mass displacements were most severe.

According to official calculations in this region alone, this extreme right-wing organisation could raise an armed force of 50,000 men. In the meanwhile, the first government of independent India was not only confronted with the massacres of the Partition but also had to deal with an exchange of population to the extent of 15 to 18 million human beings with its neighbour Pakistan. At the end of the war an economic crisis too had set in that caused serious social unrest. Along with regional agrarian uprisings, a strike movement unfolded in the whole country, the largest so far in Indian history. It extended to the public services, which had grown exponentially during the war, and the government was particularly concerned as it included the police and other armed forces. The conservatives in the Congress-led government searched in this situation for allies who would support them in their efforts to stabilise the social edifice. The second man in charge and Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, started negotiations with the RSS towards the end of 1947 while making efforts to keep it in check. Golwarkar, the leader of the RSS, conversely offered the support of his organisation as an auxiliary force in the fight against communism.

189

The negotiations failed when a particularly rabid right-wing Hindu killed Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 30 January 1948. In the previous months Gandhi had thrown his charisma on the scales to stop the massacre and stabilise relations between India and Pakistan. His approach was seen by the extreme Hindu Right as a betrayal of the idea of *akhand Bharat*, of an undivided India. The assassination led to a temporary ban of the RSS, which was lifted, however, in July 1949 when the negotiations were taken up again. The conservative wing of the National Congress even succeeded in pushing through a formal decision to allow dual memberships in the RSS and the National Congress—a decision that could not be upheld, however, in the face of the opposition exerted by the social-reformist and democratic current around Nehru.

V.

Here we encounter the second potential of Indian authoritarianism, namely the Law-and-order-conservatism, which was deeply anchored in the National Congress, but reached out much beyond that party and can thus, as a cross-party current, be characterised as the 'Party of Order'. This 'Party of Order' differed from the extreme Right in that it insisted on the State's monopoly of coercion as well as on other issues, but was open to more moderate variants of Hindu nationalism and did

not rule out in periods of social crisis, as in the late 1940s, tactical alliances with the extreme Right. We shall now turn our attention to this 'Party of Order'.

Since the end of the First World War, India witnessed an enormous rise and diversification of political and social movements. Wide sections of society responded to the socio-political post-war crisis with massive and new forms of protests, which the colonial regime countered with emergency rule, armed force and narrowly restricted constitutional reforms. If the association of local dignitaries had been the most modern form of Indian political organisation at the end of the nine-teenth century, the period between the World Wars saw the sprouting of a wide array of political parties and civil voluntary organisations, of trade unions and farmers' organisations, of *dalit* movements and forms of organisation against the autocracy of Indian princes, of increasingly autonomous women's groups and, as mentioned before, paramilitary organisations of varied political colours.

The local isolation of the earlier movements was overcome in a national public space, condensed by the acceleration of communication and the increasing spread of print media. Besides, the street emerged as the major stage of a new political culture. Anti-colonial nationalism gained in attraction first among the urban population to spread out subsequently in rural areas. It was not only Gandhi who experimented with the new possibilities of nationalistic mobilisation; he was merely capable of using them with particular efficiency and also clearly recog-nised the risks they entailed. The spirits released by the call for mass-scale mobilisation would be controlled if at all with great difficulty. Peaceful forms of protest easily turned into uncontrollable violence under a colonial regime that possessed limited legitimacy among its subjects, tended to revert quickly to means of repression and was hardly able to enforce a monopoly of coercion beyond the commanding heights.

In addition, the political hegemony of anti-colonial nationalism over Indian society was never complete or unanimous although none of the social movements could escape its attraction. As a historical figure, Gandhi cannot be reduced to a skilful politician, yet he was that too. The parameters he set out for political mass mobilisation can thus be understood, too, as an attempt to solve the problems of so-called 'mass politics': non-violence as an imperative put moral constraints on the forms of resistance, which were enforced by a trained cadre of *satyagrahis*; focusing on conflicts between Indians and colonial forces

limited the legitimate political field; the notion of a 'trusteeship' to be exercised by the propertied for the benefit of the poor defined the permissible route towards a reconciliation of interests; middle-class mobilisation for voluntary social service (*seva*) was offered accordingly as an alternative to autonomous self-organisation from below, for instance by dalits; the charisma of the "Mahatma" enforced submission to these parameters, if necessary with the dramatic means of public fasting. For the development of the anti-colonial movement this concoction was remarkably successful: here authority did not require state-sponsored authoritarianism.

However, as soon as the Indian National Congress transformed itself from a political movement into a ruling party, other mechanisms were required to check and control the dynamism of social movements. When from 1937 to 1939 the Indian National Congress took over government in eight to eleven provinces of British India, the 'Party of Order' moved to the centre stage of action for the first time. The Congress's electoral victory had generated hope for social change among wide sections of the population and invigorated the social movements. While the membership of the National Congress rose tenfold to 4.5 million within two years, its conservative wing took over government in the Provinces. The social movements that had brought the National Congress to power, were now confronted with the imposition of curfews, police action, detentions, restrictions on the right to strike and, shortly before the revocation of the Congress governments in October 1939, with the implementation of the emergency ordinances the British colonial government had passed soon after the beginning of the World War. According to the patronising judgement of the pro-imperial historian Reginald Copland in 1944, the Congress governments had established themselves as a force of stability: they 'have stood the test imposed on them in the field of law and order'.

191

This 'period of probation' proved to be a test run for the Congress-led governments of the late 1940's: the Interim Government from September 1946 and, from August 1947 to 1952, the first government of independent India. This period was, as already mentioned, not exclusively defined by the transfer of power, the partition of the country, the integration of the princely states and by the making of the constitution. It was also a period of unemployment and inflation, of widespread social unrest in the cities and in the countryside and simultaneously a period of great hopes: that independence would benefit the Indian people at large, herald social change and improve their living conditions. Within the ruling National Congress, a variety of

forces were at play. The socially and politically conservative section was represented by Vallabhbhai Patel, the powerful Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, who also controlled the party organisation. While earlier the conservative nationalists had supported along with Gandhi political decentralisation and the strengthening of supposedly organic village communities, now in the crisis period of the 1940s they swung in favour of greater political centralisation and a law-and-order authoritarianism. This policy had three major components.

First of all, the conservatives aimed at a far-reaching centralisation of political and military force. Initially, they could not bank on the loyalty of the colonial state apparatus that had been expanded massively during the World War, particularly on the higher-up sections of the bureaucracy, the police and the military. Furthermore, the political sympathies of the princely courts were with their earlier British sponsors or with the extreme Right rather than with the National Congress. *Zamindars*, the big landlords wielded economic as well as great political power in important regions and private armies, often controlled by the extreme Right, had grown menacingly. The conservative law-and-order faction within the National Congress was not prepared to tolerate the existence of such parallel powers, yet recognised, at the same time, the common ground they shared with the bureaucracy and the princes, with zamindars and right-wing paramilitaries: all of these forces agreed on the rejection of any fundamental social transformation and redistribution of resources such as radical land reforms.

The assertion of political authority by the organs of government thus went along with the establishment of an informal cross-party alliance, of a 'Party of Order', which included these former "parallel powers" and sought to block any transformation of existing social hierarchies. The bureaucracy soon submitted to the new masters, whose law-and-order discourse did not require much reorientation. The princes lost their hereditary political status but were generously compensated and often retained great political power in their erstwhile territories. Hence erstwhile princely states could be fortified often into strongholds of the extreme Right and of conservatism. Zamindars, too, got a good deal while hesitant efforts at land reforms hardly infringed on their local status. The earlier-mentioned negotiations between the conservative wing of the National Congress and the violently right-wing RSS must also be understood in this context.

192

At the same time, the National Congress transformed itself from an anti-colonial movement into a party closely entangled with the state apparatus and accordingly with very great powers to distribute resources. In the five years after the end of the Second World War, its membership rose from 4.5 to 17 million. Urban activists lost out to agrarian magnates in setting the tenor of Congress policy, which further strengthened the 'Party of Order'. It was now able to consolidate those forces that strove to restrict the process of democratisation by preventing its spread to a rural society marked by extremely hierarchical and authoritarian structures—just think of the widespread practice of bonded labour and of the endemic violence against the lower castes.

The second element of conservative authoritarianism consisted in its insistence on a political demobilisation of Indian society. The renewed upsurge of social movements in the late 1940s confronted them with the task of forcing back into the bottle the persistent spirit, the genie, which had served Indian nationalism so well. The conservative forces in the Indian National Congress perceived the wave of social unrest not just as a political firestorm outside their own organisation that was stoked by the politically vacillating and increasingly insurrectionist Communist Party. The movements had a politically varied character, while the National Congress itself was still to a large extent a party of movements and not just of order: in 1942, young Congress activists, often with a socialist orientation, had organised a massive uprising against the British with the Quit-India movement when the older nationalist leadership was incarcerated in British jails. To them, the attainment of Indian independence was inseparable from a comprehensive social reform programme to be carried forward by social mobilisation.

By the early months of 1946, when a massive all-India strike movement involved parts of the navy and the police, the retreating colonial power did consider itself capable of keeping the situation under control for much longer. The succeeding governments led by the National Congress possessed a greater legitimacy, which was used to extend the Defence of India Rules and other repressive means created by the colonial regime to the post-war period to break regional peasant uprisings and widespread movements against continuous inflation. As early as in 1946, a new Industrial Disputes Act severely curtailed the right to strike and armed the state with more far-reaching arbitrary powers than was common in most parliamentary democracies. While the conservatives around Patel carried out negotiations with the RSS for the latter's integration, they also successfully sidelined the social-

193

ists within the National Congress until the latter decided, in 1948, to form their own party. A hysterical anti-communist campaign accompanied by mass-imprisonment contributed to the breakdown of the post-war strike movements. The Indian left, which relied on the power of social movements to usher social change, was marginalised. Representatives of social movements who put their whole trust in the institutions of parliamentary democracy but were not prepared to submit to the dominance of the National Congress similarly ended up in the political wilderness. B. R. Ambedkar, the towering leader of the dalit movement, was the most prominent case.

The third element of conservative authoritarianism has already been broached: it concerns its means and would have long-term implications. The British colonial regime had promulgated a corpus of laws, which infringed on the freedom of expression such as the already mentioned sedition paragraph of the penal code. In addition to this it had passed far-reaching emergency laws (namely the *Defence of India Act* of 1939) had incorporated mechanisms already in the Constitution of 1935, which permitted in cases of 'emergency' to curtail hard-won rights of political participation in the provinces. The fact that many of these colonial legal regulations found their way into post-colonial law including the Constitution, cannot be explained as a mere oversight on the part of highly pre-occupied founders of the nation or as the sheer unauthored resilience of judicial structures. The 'threshold or zone of uncertainty' between the rule of law and the state of emergency, which was diagnosed by Giorgio Agamben for western democracies since the First World War, was established in India from colonial material in the late 1940s. This was pushed through against public criticism in a conservative effort to enforce the political demobilisation of society. Thus, the first post-colonial law permitting preventive detention was passed in 1950 despite protests: it rendered an emergency law passed in the crisis year of 1918 compatible with the Constitution that was to be promulgated a few days later. The authoritarian legacy of colonialism was, therefore, accepted with open eyes.

VI.

The technocratic dirigisme of 'social engineers' and planners is the third potential of Indian authoritarianism, about which we must speak—a potential, which, in political terms, if far more ambivalent and changeable than the two introduced previously. Technocratic dirigisme and conservative law-and-order authoritarianism disagreed

194

on many issues but concurred that after the end of colonial rule a political demobilisation of Indian society and the erection of a strong centralised state were imperative tasks. If we have characterised the other two potentials schematically as (1) religio-nativist right-wing extremism and (2) the 'Party of Order', we can here distinguish a 'Party of Planning', which also extended across party lines. The inception of this third potential of authoritarianism is closely connected to the world economic crisis of the 1930s whose importance has been highlighted by Dietmar Rothermund for the Indian and non-European world. The socially destructive force of the 'free market' had become fully apparent and a new assessment of the state's role in the regulation of economy and society seemed inevitable. Yet the political and institutional forms in which this new assessment was to take place could be imagined in the most varied manner. Wolfgang Schivelbusch spoke of a 'distant relationship', when he compared economic *dirigisme* and social planning under Italian fascism, German 'national socialism' and the US 'New Deal' in the 1930s. A global perspective reveals both the vast extent of this network of relationships and the deep political divergences within.

195

India's Five-Year Plans of the 1950's and 1960's are even now interpreted particularly by the advocates of free trade and de-regularisation as an expression of dogmatic-socialist politics, for which Prime Minister Nehru is identified as the main culprit. From a historical perspective a different picture emerges, however. India's intelligentsia, economic magnates and political elites took up the global debate on the redefinition of the state's role of the state without delay in the 1930s. Italian, German, U.S-American and Soviet approaches were compared in total disregard of the political differences between the respective regimes and with an exclusive focus on their viability in terms of 'social engineering'. To plan the economic future of independent India, social reformist nationalists like Nehru and technocrats like the erstwhile *diwan* (chief minister) of the princely state of Mysore, Sir Visvesvaraya, contributed alongside India's most powerful captains of industry J. R. D. Tata and J. D. Birla. Despite conservative reservations, the National Congress formed a National Planning Committee as early as in 1938.

Six years later India's leading industrialists presented a document to the public that became known as the 'Bombay Plan'. Equally important was the fast development of the bureaucratic apparatus and of public sector industries, which after the beginning of the World War was propelled by the colonial government. The war economy generated

instruments of centralised accountancy, taxation and distribution, which created crucial preconditions for the later economic dirigisme. Behind the planning impulse was a diffuse constellation of interests and projects: the transformation of the rural economy through cooperatives; the formation of a welfare state; the attainment of national independence from the imperial economy; state protection and subsidisation for Indian large-scale industry; the fast expansion of the production of war-important goods; stabilisation of the British empire— the most contradictory and incompatible objectives all seemed to demand economic dirigisme, though each of them implied different priorities and approaches to planning.

Many of these approaches resembled each other, however, in that they perceived planning as a bureaucratic and not as a democratic process. A specialised administrative elite had to plan actively according to 'scientific criteria' while disposability or, in the military language of the time, 'national discipline', was expected from the population. During the crisis of the late 1940's the 'Party of Planning' and the 'Party of Order' were in full agreement that the demobilisation of social movements and a strong central state were the precondition for building an independent India. This policy consensus provided a common platform for both wings of the National Congress, the social reformist planners led by Nehru and the conservatives with their strongman Patel. In regard of economic policy, however, the conservatives (as well as the right-extremists) favoured free trade, less control on entrepreneurial activities and a removal of the price controls of essential goods that had been introduced during the War. Between 1947 and 1950, conservatism dominated government policies, which failed, however, to grapple with the realities of the post-war period: neither could the crisis of the Indian economy be overcome in this way nor could social stability be ensured.

New developmental impulses became evident only in the 1950s after the social reformers around Nehru reined in the conservatives at least at the central level and began to implement an economic strategy aiming at import substitution. Whether the Five-Year Plans can be regarded as 'socialist' is rather questionable: the historian Pulapre Balakrishnan found an 'uncanny similarity' between the official policies of the Nehru period and the 1944 'Bombay Plan' of Indian big business. Certain welfare impulses are, however, undeniable and became evident, for instance, in a ten-year increase in life expectancy between the 1940s and the 1960s.

The authoritarian potential of economic dirigisme and social engineering emerged from the political conditions of its realisation in India: while democratic social reformers around Nehru could fortify their control over the central levels of the National Congress and the state in the 1950s, conservative forces remained in control of most States and at the local level, in alliance with the power cartels of rural society. The dominance at the centre concealed a weakness in regions and localities, which had been exacerbated by the exodus of the socialists from the National Congress. Programmes of social reform relied, therefore, as the political scientist Sudipto Kaviraj has shown, more on bureaucratic impetus than on social mobilisation. As Nehru's backing in the party organisation declined and opposition against reform programmes stiffened at the level of the States, he was increasingly forced, as Kaviraj writes, 'into the logic of bureaucratisation where people did not appear as subjects but as mere objects in the process of development'. These authoritarian potentials were perceivable already in the Nehru era—the famous large-scale hydroelectric projects are a case in point. Under Indira Gandhi's emergency regime of 1975-77, draconic measures like the forced relocation of slum-dwellers for the 'beautification' of Delhi or the coercive sterilisation of the urban poor demonstrated the dangers of an authoritarianism of social engineering to a wider public.

197

VII.

At the beginning of this lecture we set out to identify three heterogeneous, often competing but sometimes allying potential sources of authoritarianism in India. The religio-nativist Right, law-and-order conservatism and the technocratic dirigisme of "social engineers" and planners differed from each other fundamentally in several aspects. In the early years of Indian parliamentary democracy all of them underwent crucial transformations. They were thus not simply vestiges of an authoritarian colonial past or mere imports of splendid "achievements" of European civilisation. In their renewed form they were the paradoxical product of the very process of democratisation that decolonisation had made possible. However, authoritarianism did not become the defining feature of the post-colonial state, where an uneven yet developable parliamentary democracy could strike deep roots. The full potential of the extreme Right could be successfully isolated from the late 1940s until the middle of the 1970's. It regained some political respectability only with the descent of the National Congress into authoritarianism during the 'National Emergency' of 1975-77. A

complete demobilisation of the social movements who had been instrumental in securing India's independence could not be achieved by the 'Party of Order' and the 'Party of Planning', despite their con-joined efforts.

At the same time, all three potentials of authoritarianism have cast long shadows on contemporary India. The pogroms the religio-nativist extreme Right has been celebrating as national purification rituals are, unfortunately, not only part of the political repertoire of this form of authoritarianism. From the massacres of 1947 a bloody line can be drawn to the pogroms carried out by Congress activists in 1984 against Sikhs to the anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 in Gujarat where the Hindu Right led by the current Prime Minister had more than a hand in the matter. A shadow is also cast by legal instruments, preserved and adapted to post-colonial conditions by a conservative law and order authoritarianism, which have created a grey zone between the rule of law and the state of emergency. Even though economic planning has been discredited, the dirigisme of social engineering survives in other forms: it throws its shadow on the present when Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are established, when industries are relocated or when programmes of urban beautification are implemented. As long as these shadows remain apart, democratic counterforces can measure up to them. When they merge and reinforce each other, especially when coalitions of right extremism and conservative authoritarianism are formed, the danger is considerable. The recent past has seen the emergence of such a coalition, but also tensions that may undermine its sustainability.

In the last one hour you have perhaps heard more about the history of Indian authoritarianism than you wanted to. I request you to direct your complaints to the presidium of the German Historical Association, which decided to have India as a partner country at its 2016 Congress. Yet if you left this room with the reassuring feeling that the shadows of Indian authoritarianism luckily do not reach Europe, then I had done something wrong indeed. For the aim of my lecture was to create concern, even disturbance: I wanted to show that India's history while taking its own course between democratisation and authoritarianism has remained entangled globally. This holds true till now. Therefore, at the end of this lecture I return to Giorgio Agamben and his studies on the increasingly uncertain zone between the rule of law and the state of emergency. 'At the very moment,' he wrote, 'when it would like to give lessons in democracy to different traditions and cultures, the political culture of the West does not realise that it has entirely lost its

canon'. Europe and particularly this country, as we know, have their own authoritarian shadows. We cannot allow them to reinforce each other.

Endnotes

[1] I am thankful to Nicole Mayer Ahuja, Franziska Roy, Aditya Sarkar and Jana Tschurenev for their very helpful suggestions and to Naima Tiné for providing me the necessary literature. Without this help given to me at lightning speed I would have not been able to write this lecture at very short notice. I also thank Jyoti Sabharwal for taking up the laborious task of preparing an English translation.

[2] The German original of the lecture uses the term 'religiös-völkisch'. 'Völkisch' refers, in the German context, to an ideological current closely but not exclusively connected to twentieth-century 'national socialism'—a nativist movement rooted in nineteenth-century romanticism that propagated the resurrection of a presumably suppressed 'folkish' identity in a struggle of purification against presumably alien elements. The proximity of this variety of nativist ideology to Hindutva has been pointed out in recent historiography.

Select Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ahuja, Ravi. "Produce or perish": the crisis of the late 1940s and the place of labour in postcolonial India (forthcoming in *Modern Asian Studies*).

Banaji, Jairus, ed. 2013. *Fascism: essays on Europe and India*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective.

Casolari, Marzia. 2000. Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: archival evidence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35 (4), pp. 218-28.

Copland, Ian. 2007. The imprint of the past: reflections on regime change with particular reference to "Middle India", c. 1947 – 50. In: D. Chakrabarty et. al., eds. *From the colonial to the postcolonial: India and Pakistan in transition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 287-306.

Framke, Maria. 2013. *Delhi – Rom – Berlin: Die indische Wahrnehmung von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus, 1922 – 1939*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Frankel, Francine. 2006. *India's political economy, 1947–2004: the gradual revolution*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed. 2012. *India since 1950: society, politics, economy and culture.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press India Private Limited.

_____. 2003. *India's silent revolution: the rise of the lower castes in North India*. London: Columbia University Press.

Kamtekar, Indivar. 1988. *The end of the colonial state in India, 1942 – 1947*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Cambridge University 1988, Cambridge.

Kaviraj, Sudipto. 2012. *The trajectories of the Indian state*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Rothermund, Dietmar. 1996. *India in the Great Depression, 1929 – 1939*. London: South Asia Books.

Roy, Franziska. 2015. International utopia and national discipline: youth and volunteer movements in interwar South Asia. In: A. Raza et al., eds. *The internationalist moment. South Asia, worlds, and world views 1917 – 39*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications, pp. 150–87.

Sarkar, Sumit. 2001. Indian democracy: the historical inheritance. In: Atul Kohli, ed., *The success of India's democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 23-46.

_____. 1988. *Modern India, 1885 – 1947*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Children's Books.

Sen, Suhit. 1998. *The transitional state: congress and government in UP, 1946 – 1957* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London).

Zachariah, Benjamin. 2015. At the fuzzy edges of fascism: framing the Volk in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38 (4), pp. 639–55.

_____. 2005. *Developing India: an intellectual and social history, c. 1930 – 1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.