

# Reviewing Ashutosh Varshney's Battles India's Half-Improbable Won Democracy

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## Abstract

This review summarises Ashutosh Varshney's analysis of India's "half-improbable won democracy," arguing that its survival is unique and counterintuitive to Western theories. Varshney attributes its resilience to factors such as early political leadership commitment, a stabilising economic structure, a deeply rooted democratic culture from the freedom struggle, and cross-cutting ethnic identities. The book challenges Western notions that tied democracy to affluence or cultural homogeneity. However, the review highlights Varshney's identified "unfinished missions": national unity, dignity and social justice, and the failure to eradicate mass poverty. Ultimately, the work portrays Indian democracy as a successful, enduring constitutional framework, still navigating critical socio-economic struggle

**Keywords:** Improbable Democracy, Democratic Survivability, Procedural Democracy, Emergency (1975-77), Class Cleavages and Ethnic Identities

## INTRODUCTION / OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

I will be reviewing a few chapters of Ashutosh Varshney's book. The chapters are:

1. "The Odyssey: An Improbable Democracy"
2. "Why Democracy Survives"
3. "Is India Becoming More Democratic?"
4. "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety in the 1980s and 1990s"
5. "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond"

This book is a collection of essays written by Ashutosh Varshney, a political scientist, that try to explore India's democratic nature, a comparative perspective on both the successes and the persistent challenges of India's democratic experiment after all odds, as well as why Indian democracy has survived and deepened despite conditions often considered inconducive to democratic stability. The author provides critical insights, including challenges to India's nationhood, a definition of India's experience of democracy, and how it differs from the rest. Many Western scholars' predictions on India as a single nation and the impossibility of democracy in India are also addressed. What was the wrong Western notion of understanding India's experience of democracy and nationhood from their perspective?

Democracy has become an institutionalised common sense of Indian politics. India experiences a unique practice of democracy, which is not according to the Western notion of democracy. For the first time in human history poor nation practised adult franchise for so long for over seven decades. According to Varshney, India's democracy was highly improbable—both as a democracy and as a nation. “Improbable” here means unlikely to occur, but not impossible. India's democratic success is remarkable because it developed under extremely adverse social, economic, and historical conditions.

### Key themes of the book highlight

Firstly, India, as an exception, experiences democracy for its unique survivability despites all odds except the Emergency (1975-77). For nineteen months, India had maintained its democratic institution since 1947. India still practicing democracy is, and of itself, a unique and theoretical counter intuitive India's experience of democracy can be characterised as given below

1. India often follows a procedure, not a substantive democracy
2. Lesser of the Deepening of democracy and more of presence of democracy
3. Class cleavages, class coalitions, class conflicts, and India's dispersed and cross-cutting ethnic identities have collectively contributed to the long-term survival of Indian democracy. Or Class divisions, class alliances, class conflicts, and India's mixed and cross-cutting ethnic identities have helped Indian democracy survive for such a long time.
4. India's long history continuous history of pluralism, accommodation, and social diversity is a major reason for the survivability and uniqueness of its democracy.
5. Political leadership: According to Ashutosh Varshney, India's democracy endured because its early leaders and founding fathers, particularly Nehru, had a strong commitment to democratic principles. Despite the challenges, they opted for elections, free speech, and federalism. Strong institutions like the Election Commission and an independent judiciary were also established by these leaders. Their democratic outlook laid a foundation that was difficult for succeeding leaders to erase.
6. Economic factor: Ashutosh Varshney says that India's democracy has survived because the country has never had a really bad economic crisis that could have broken it. India's economy was stable because it was growing slowly but steadily and had a mix of businesses. Government welfare programs also helped people who were very poor and stopped people from getting very angry. All of these economic factors worked together to keep democracy safe for a long time.
7. Ashutosh Varshney says that India's long fight for freedom made a strong democratic culture before the country became independent. The Congress-led movement taught people how to peacefully organise, debate, protest, and negotiate. This large number of people taught millions how to act in a democratic way. Democracy had strong social roots even before 1947, which helped it stay alive after independence.

Secondly, according to Ashutosh Varshney, India's long history of stability as a democracy cannot be explained by Western conceptions of democracy and nationhood. Many academics from the West thought that democracy was inappropriate for India. Because high income and industrialisation were associated with democratic success in Western Europe, they believed that democracy could only endure in affluent societies.

Poor nations like India were supposed to fail based on this reasoning. However, India started to stand out. India's democracy endured after independence, despite the country's continued poverty. On the other hand, nations that are far wealthier than India, like South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, and Portugal, have long been

non-democratic. This demonstrates that Lipset's claim that wealth and democracy are related works best in Western nations but is inapplicable to India.

The ability of India to become a nation was also questioned by Western intellectuals. Major liberal theorist J.S. Mill thought that India's extreme linguistic and cultural diversity precluded nationhood. He came to the conclusion that India could never be a democratic country because he believed that nationhood was essential to democracy. In a similar vein, John Strachey claimed that India was merely a civilisation rather than a country. Even Mark Twain believed that Indian unity was unattainable, despite his admiration for India. As a result, many Western intellectuals thought that India could not achieve democracy or a single nation, but India's experience has shown them to be mistaken.

Thirdly, issues and challenges or unfinished:; Varshney explore and identifies that after independence, India has three missions or major challenges for India, these are :

**National unity:** after independence, problems of national unity have been at the forefront, and this has always been an issue

**Dignity and social justice:** ending and deep inequalities of the caste system and the problems of the dignity and social justice to all sections have been major challenges again

**Poverty:** the inability to conquer mass poverty remains the single greatest failure of Indian democracy

## RESEARCH GAP

The ongoing challenges and unfinished missions identified by Varshney—which could be interpreted as areas where complete success is still lacking—are:

1. **National unity:** Problems related to national unity have remained at the forefront since independence.
2. **Dignity and social justice:** The struggle to end deep inequalities of the caste system and ensure dignity and social justice for all sections remains a major challenge.
3. **Poverty:** The inability to conquer mass poverty is considered the single greatest failure of Indian democracy.
- 4.

## KEY THEME

Ashutosh Varshney highlights several key themes to explain why India's democracy is "improbable" yet enduring.

### 1. India's exceptional democratic survivability

India is an exceptional case of democratic survivability despite extremely adverse conditions. Except for the Emergency (1975–77), when democratic institutions were formally suspended for nineteen months, India has maintained an elected government and constitutional framework since 1947. That India is still practising democracy is, in itself, a theoretically counterintuitive outcome. India's experience of democracy can be characterised in the following ways:

1. India has largely followed a **procedural** rather than a fully **substantive** democracy.
2. There has been less **deepening** of democracy and more a continuous **presence** of democracy.
3. Class cleavages, class coalitions, class conflicts, and India's dispersed and cross-cutting ethnic identities have collectively contributed to the long-term survival of Indian democracy; put differently,

class divisions and alliances, together with mixed and overlapping ethnic identities, have helped prevent a complete democratic breakdown.

4. India's long and continuous history of pluralism, accommodation, and social diversity is a major reason for the survivability and uniqueness of its democracy.

5. **Political leadership:** According to Varshney, India's democracy endured because its early leaders and founding fathers, particularly Nehru, were strongly committed to democratic principles. Despite enormous challenges, they chose elections, free speech, and federalism. They also created strong institutions such as the Election Commission and an independent judiciary. This democratic outlook laid a foundation that later leaders found difficult to overturn.

6. **Economic factors:** Varshney argues that India's democracy has survived partly because the country has never experienced an economic collapse severe enough to destroy the system. The economy grew slowly but steadily, with a mixed structure and welfare programmes that cushioned the very poor and reduced the likelihood of explosive unrest. Together, these factors helped to protect democracy over time.

7. **Freedom struggle and democratic culture:** Varshney also contends that India's long struggle for freedom created a strong democratic culture even before independence. The Congress-led movement taught people how to organise, debate, protest, and negotiate peacefully. This mass mobilisation taught millions to act in democratic ways, giving democracy deep social roots before 1947 and helping it survive after independence.

## 2. Why Western theories failed to predict India's democracy

Varshney argues that India's long democratic stability cannot be adequately explained by standard Western theories of democracy and nationhood. Many Western scholars believed democracy was inappropriate for India. Because high income and industrialisation were associated with democratic success in Western Europe, they assumed that democracy could only endure in affluent societies.

On this reasoning, poor countries like India were expected to fail. Yet India defied this prediction: democracy survived after independence despite persistent poverty. Meanwhile, countries far richer than India—such as South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, and Portugal—remained non-democratic for long periods. This pattern suggests that Lipset's claim about the close link between wealth and democracy works best for Western cases but does not fit India.

Western intellectuals also doubted whether India could become a nation at all. The liberal theorist J. S. Mill argued that India's extreme linguistic and cultural diversity made nationhood impossible, and therefore India could never sustain democracy, since he believed nationhood was a precondition for democratic government. Similarly, John Strachey described India as a civilisation rather than a nation. Even Mark Twain, though deeply admiring of India, doubted the possibility of Indian unity. Many Western thinkers thus believed that India could neither become a single nation nor maintain democracy. India's post-1947 experience has proved these assumptions wrong.

## 3. Unfinished missions and continuing challenges

Varshney identifies three major "missions" or long-term challenges that independent India set for itself, which remain only partially achieved:

1. **National unity:** Problems related to national unity have remained at the forefront since independence. Managing secessionist movements, regional aspirations, and communal tensions has been a continuous task.
  2. **Dignity and social justice:** Ending the deep inequalities of the caste system and ensuring dignity and social justice for all sections of society remain major, unfinished challenges.
  3. **Poverty:** The inability to eradicate mass poverty is, for Varshney, the single greatest failure of Indian democracy.
- These three missions—national unity, social justice, and the elimination of mass poverty—constitute the core “research gaps” or unfinished agenda of Indian democracy.

### **Nation, nationalism, and the “Union of States” debate**

Opposition party leader of the INC, Shri Rahul Gandhi, in February 2022 made an interesting and controversial remark at the “Ideas For India” conclave at Cambridge University, London. He said, “India is described in the Constitution as a Union of States and not as a union. One cannot rule over the people of a state in India; different languages and cultures cannot be suppressed. It is a partnership, not a kingdom.” What he effectively suggested was that India is not a conventional nation, but a Union of States. This remark provoked strong reactions among intellectuals and particularly among BJP leaders. In response, BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya argued that “Rahul Gandhi’s claim is deeply problematic and dangerous. It not only betrays his lack of understanding of our Constitution but also strikes at the core of the idea of independent India. It sows the seeds of India’s Balkanization.”

Whose claim is right? In a sense, both positions can be seen as partially valid, because they rest on different interpretations of the concepts of nation and nationalism—concepts that are deeply contested.

A key reference point here is **Article 1** of the Constitution of India. It describes India as a “Union of States” and not as a “federation of states” or explicitly as “one nation, one state”. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a member of the Drafting Committee, clarified that “Union of States” was deliberately chosen. The Indian federation was not the result of an agreement among pre-existing sovereign states; therefore no state has a constitutional right to secede. Importantly, nowhere does the Constitution explicitly declare that “India is a nation”.

This opens broader theoretical questions: Is India a **nation-state** in the classic European sense, or a **state-nation** that accommodates multiple nationalities within a single constitutional framework? To address this, we need to revisit basic concepts of nation, nationality, and nationalism, and then return to the Indian context.

### **Conceptual framework: Nation, nationality, and nationalism**

Uses and interpretations of “nation” and “nationalism”

Most scholars trace the modern idea of the nation to a Western genealogy, especially the French Revolution. The term “nation”, from Latin nasci (“to be born”), originally meant a group united by birth or birthplace and implied a “breed” or racial group, with little political meaning. Only in the late 18th century did it acquire strong political significance. The term “nationalism” was first used in 1789 by the anti-Jacobin French priest Augustin Barruel.

## Key concepts

### 1. Nation

A nation is a group of people bound together by common bonds such as language, religion, ethnicity, race, common history, shared civilisation, or a common political ideology. In everyday language, “nation” is often treated as a cultural category; in political science, it is inseparable from political power and cannot be defined purely in cultural terms, as Ernest Gellner argues.

### 2. Nationality

Nationality refers to membership of a nation and the subjective sense of belonging to it.

### 3. Nationalism

Nationalism is a process and a movement: a kind of social glue that binds people into a single, self-identified population. It provides the ideological framework for mobilisation and creates a sense of collective identity.

### 4. National integration

National integration refers to a sense of “we-feeling” that counters regionalism and other centrifugal forces. In India, regional or linguistic assertions were long treated as “fissiparous tendencies”, seen as challenges to unity rather than as demands for recognition and power-sharing.

### 5. State

A state is a political community occupying a definite territory, with an organised government and ultimate authority to make and enforce laws. It is often used interchangeably with “country” or “nation-state”, but it should not be confused with “nation”, which refers to a people held together by common cultural, historical, or ideological ties.

## European versus Indian nationalism

### European / Western nationalism

- Generally **exclusive** in character.
- Most European nation-states formed around the principle of “one nation, one state” (e.g., Polish–Poland, German–Germany, Irish–Ireland), with Switzerland as a notable exception.
- Historically **imperialistic**, projecting power and dominance abroad.
- Shaped by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.
- Characterised, in ideal-type form, by a relatively high degree of linguistic and cultural homogeneity.

### Indian nationalism

- Fundamentally **inclusive** in orientation.
- India did not emerge on the basis of “one nation, one state”; instead, multiple communities, regions, and proto-nations came together to form one state.
- Developed in opposition to colonial rule, as part of a broad anti-imperialist movement.
- Marked by immense diversity—religious, linguistic, ethnic, and regional—and by complex internal hierarchies such as caste.

### Types of Nationalism

1. **Ethnically defined nationalism** – Rooted in ethnic unity and strong cultural belonging; evident in many movements in Northeast India.
2. **Linguistically defined nationalism** – Common in Europe (French–France, Polish–Poland, etc.), with Switzerland as a multi-lingual exception; also visible in Bangladesh and in the creation of linguistic states such as Andhra Pradesh.
3. **Religiously defined nationalism** – For example, Pakistan; Israel and Iran are often cited, though in contested ways.
4. **Racially defined nationalism** – As in Nazi Germany’s blood-based citizenship; historically invoked for Japan and Korea.
5. **Ideologically defined nationalism** – The Soviet Union (communism), the United States (ideals of the American Revolution), and France (principles of the French Revolution).
6. **Civic nationalism** – Emphasising shared citizenship and constitutional values, e.g., in the USA and other liberal democracies.
7. **Civilizational nationalism** – Hindu nationalist views of India (Bharat) as an ancient civilizational nation, which many scholars question, arguing that the nation is a modern political form.
8. **Patterns of nation-state formation** – ranging from “one nation, one state” (Japan) to multi-national states (India, UK, former USSR) and migrant-based states (USA).

### Trending forms of nationalism in India

Following Varshney, three broad forms of nationalism are especially salient in contemporary India:

1. **Secular nationalism** – Grounded in constitutionalism and pluralism; associated with leaders like Nehru, Patel, and Gandhi.
2. **Hindu nationalism** – A religious-cultural understanding of the nation, associated with V. D. Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar, Deendayal Upadhyaya and later political forces.
3. **Separatist nationalism** – Seeking separate states or political units outside the Indian Union on ethnic, linguistic, or regional grounds.

These competing projects shape how India is imagined: as a secular, multinational union; as a Hindu civilisational state; or as a set of distinct nations seeking self-determination.

### Commentary and the “idea of India”

The question of nationality and nationalism in India has attracted commentary from many foreign and Indian thinkers: John Strachey, Mark Twain, J. S. Mill, Yuval Noah Harari, M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, V. D. Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar, Deendayal Upadhyaya, Aurobindo Ghosh, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ashutosh Varshney, Rasheeduddin Khan, Irfan Habib, Rajeev Bhargava, Ramachandra Guha, Ashis Nandy, Yogendra Yadav, among others.

For many, the **idea of India** is best captured by M. K. Gandhi, who envisioned a nation that encompasses all communities and sections of people. Unlike European models, Gandhi delinked language and religion from the definition of the nation and opposed the formula of “one nation, one language”. He argued that multiple languages were an inevitable part of nation-building in India and even accepted English as an Indian language.

**Gandhi famously declared:**

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people’s houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.”

He also insisted:

“If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their home are fellow countrymen.”

For Gandhi, Indians would be Gujarati Indians, Bengali Indians, Hindu Indians, South Indians, Muslim Indians, Christian Indians, and so on—multiple identities nested within a larger political community. His idea of the nation and nationalism remains widely influential among scholars and citizens, and it underpins the view of India as an inclusive, plural **Union of States** rather than a monolithic nation-state.

**CONCLUSION**

The review concludes that Ashutosh Varshney's *Battles India's Half-Improbable Won Democracy* significantly contributes to understanding comparative politics and India's political economy. Varshney successfully depicts India's democracy as an exceptional case, defying Western predictions based on poverty and diversity, primarily due to committed leadership, institutional strength, and a unique socio-political structure. The book's central contribution is its persuasive argument that India has secured nationhood and upheld democratic norms. Crucially, it identifies ongoing challenges—national unity, social justice, and poverty—as "battles half won," positioning Indian democracy as a continuous work in progress. This makes the book essential reading for those seeking to understand democracies in diverse, developing societies.

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