

# I

## A New India?

‘O, how this spring of love resembleth/The uncertain glory of an April day,’ says Proteus in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The recent achievements of modern, democratic India are not inconsiderable, and have been widely recognized across the globe over the last decade or more. India’s record in pioneering democratic governance in the non-Western world is a widely acknowledged accomplishment, as is its basic success in maintaining a secular state, despite the challenges arising from its thoroughly multi-religious population and the hugely problematic history of violence around the ending days of the Raj. To this can be added the achievement of rapid economic growth in the last decade, when India became the second fastest-growing large economy in the world.

And yet – despite these great achievements – if the much talked-about glory of today’s India is deeply uncertain, it is not because an unblemished sunny day stands in danger of being ruined by a freshly arriving shower, as was feared by Proteus of Verona. The uncertainty arises, rather, from the fact that together with the sunshine, there are dark clouds and drenching showers already on the scene. It is important and urgent that we try to evaluate both the achievements and the failures that characterize India today. To what extent have India’s old problems been eradicated? What remains to be done? And are there new problems that India has to address?

In historical perspective, the accomplishments are large indeed, especially in light of what the country was at the time of independence in 1947. India emerged then from an oppressive colonial rule, enforced by dogged imperial rulers; there was little devolution of real power until the British actually left, and it was not unnatural at that

time to doubt India's capacity to run a functioning democracy. A second challenge was to avoid the danger of chaos and conflict, or even a violent break-up of the country. There is a long history – stretching over thousands of years – of cultural affinities across India, and the struggle for independence generated a great deal of popular unity. And yet the diversities and divisions within India – of many languages, religions, ethnicities – gave sceptics good reason to worry about the possible break-up of the country in the absence of authoritarian rule. More immediately, the chaotic partitioning of pre-independent India into two countries – India and Pakistan – gave justified cause for anxiety about whether further violent splintering might occur.

Supplementing and in some ways overshadowing all these concerns, the poverty of India was perhaps the most well-known fact about the country – with little children in Europe and America being asked by their parents not to leave food on their plates because of the moral necessity to 'think of the starving Indians'. And indeed, in 1943, just four years before colonial rule ended, India did actually have a gigantic famine in which between 2 and 3 million people died.

India had not always been a symbol of poverty and hunger – far from it – and we shall turn, in the next chapter, to the question of how the country became so poor. What is not in doubt is that the economy of British India was remarkably stagnant, and that living conditions around the time of independence were appalling for a large proportion of the Indian population, and not just in famine years.\*

\* An investigation of world-wide health and anthropometric data, recently completed, brings out just how appalling the nutritional and physical conditions were in India at the time the colonial Raj came to an end in 1947: 'It is possible that the deprivation in childhood of Indians born around mid-century was as severe as any large group in history, all the way back to the Neolithic Revolution and the hunter-gatherers that preceded them. Life expectancy in India in 1931 was 27, also reflecting extreme deprivation . . . death and deprivation kept the population in check, but even for the survivors, the conditions of life were terrible.' See Angus Deaton (forthcoming), *The Great Escape and the Origins of Inequality*, Chapter 4.

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite that grim beginning, newly independent India rapidly went on to have a cluster of significant political and economic successes. Its bold decision to go straight from centuries of colonial rule to resolutely democratic government, without a pause, has proved to be sound and sustainable. In India as in other democratic countries around the world, democracy in the full sense of the term (that of ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’) has not been achieved, and there remain many gaps to fill in Indian democracy.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, after more than sixty years of largely successful democratic governance, India has earned its status as a leading democratic country. The army has not moved to take over civilian affairs as has happened in many newly independent countries in the world – not least in South Asia. The country has also shown quite powerfully how democracy can flourish despite a multitude of languages, religions and ethnicities. There are, it must be noted, confined departures from democratic norms, for example in the use of military power ordered by the civilian government at the centre to quell discontent at the periphery (on which more later), and there is need for change there – and not just on the periphery. But taking everything together, there are good reasons for seeing a major accomplishment in the broad success of secular democracy in India. Also, the relatively healthy state – overall – of democratic institutions in the country provides significant opportunities for reasoned solutions to the problems that remain as well as for further extending the reach and quality of democratic practice.

On the economic front, even though the growth of the Indian economy was quite slow – about 3.5 per cent annually – for several decades after independence, this slow growth was nevertheless a very large step forward compared with the near-zero growth (and at times even economic decline) that occurred in the colonial days. This prolonged economic stagnation ended as soon as the country became independent. However, to reverse a zero-growth performance can hardly be adequate, and there is much to discuss about the real as well as imagined reasons for the forces that held India back for decades after

independence. Happily, things have changed in that respect as well over the recent decades, and India has now been able to establish a new position as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Table 1.1 presents a summary picture of the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP), from the colonial time to now.

**Table 1.1**  
**Growth Rates of India's GDP at Constant Prices**  
**(% per year)**

	GDP	Per capita GDP
<i>Colonial period</i>		
1900-1 to 1946-7	0.9	0.1
<i>Early post-independence period</i>		
1950-1 to 1960-1	3.7	1.8
1960-1 to 1970-1	3.4	1.2
1970-1 to 1980-1	3.4	1.2
<i>Recent decades</i>		
1980-1 to 1990-1	5.2	3.0
1990-1 to 2000-1	5.9	4.0
2000-1 to 2010-11	7.6	6.0

Sources: Sivasubramonian (2000) and Government of India (2012a); for details, see Chapter 2, Table 2.1.

There has been some slackening of the growth rate of the Indian economy very recently – partly related to the global slump (there has been a similar slowing in China as well, though from a higher base). India is still – even with its diminished growth rate below 6 per cent per year – one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. While that bit of reality check is useful, it is also important to consider the policy changes that could make India's growth performance perk up more. The country's growth potential remains strong and robust and it can be a major source of strength for India – particularly if the fruits of economic growth are well utilized for the advancement of human lives and the development of human freedom and capabilities (a subject on which there will be much to say as the book proceeds). We shall take up the 'growth story of India' more fully in the next chapter.

After two hundred years of colonial domination, combined with almost total economic stagnation, the economy seems well set to remedy the country's notorious and unenviable condition of poverty. The fact that there has also been, at the same time, maintenance and consolidation of democracy in one of the poorest countries in the world, makes India's achievements particularly noteworthy. India has also established itself as an innovative centre of some significant departures in the world economy, not just in the application of information technology and related activities, but also – no less significantly – as the great supplier of inexpensive but reliable modern medicine for the poor of the world. As the *New York Times* put it in a recent editorial, since 'India is the world's largest supplier of generic medicines', in the pharmaceutical field, 'its policies potentially affect billions of people around the world'.<sup>2</sup>

Along with economic progress, there has also been significant social change. Life expectancy in India today (about 66 years) is more than twice what it was in 1951 (32 years); infant mortality is about one fourth of what it used to be (44 per thousand live births today as opposed to 180 or so in 1951); and the female literacy rate has gone up from 9 per cent to 65 per cent. There have certainly been major improvements in the miserable levels of social indicators that prevailed at the time of India's independence (see Table 1.2).<sup>3</sup> All this is in contrast with the predictions of doom, gloom and famine that were often made about India in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also a substantial political achievement that many of the leaders of democratic politics have tended to come from neglected groups – women, minorities and disadvantaged castes. As we will discuss, enormous inequalities remain, and many divisions have not diminished at all, but the fact that some significant changes have occurred even in the political arena of hierarchy must be a reason to believe that more – *much* more – should be possible. B. R. Ambedkar, the champion of the socially and economically discriminated (who did not shy away from challenging the Indian nationalist leaders for their absence of engagement with 'economic and social democracy'), insisted that we have reason to pursue, rather than lose faith in, the power to 'educate, agitate and organize'.<sup>4</sup> Since India's political democracy allows plenty of room for that engagement, its absence or its timidity cannot be blamed on any prohibition imposed by 'the system'.

**Table 1.2**  
**India: Then and Now**

	1951	2011
Gross domestic product (GDP) at constant prices (1951=100)	100	1,766
Per capita net national product at constant prices (1950=1=100)	100	511
Estimated life expectancy at birth (years)	32	66
Estimated infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	≈ 180	44
Total fertility rate (children per woman)	5.9	2.4
Literacy rate <sup>a</sup> (%)		
Female	9	65
Male	27	82
Estimated proportion (%) of the population below the poverty line <sup>b</sup>		
Rural	47	22 <sup>c</sup>
Urban	35	20 <sup>c</sup>
Proportion (%) of households owning:		
Bicycle	≈ 0.4	46 <sup>d</sup>
Radio	≈ 0.9	27 <sup>d</sup>
Sewing machine	≈ 0.1	19 <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Age 5 years and above for 1951, 7 years and above for 2011.

<sup>b</sup> Based on national poverty lines applicable prior to Tendulkar Committee Report (Rs 49 and Rs 57 per person per month at 1973–4 prices in rural and urban areas, respectively).

<sup>c</sup> 2004–5.

<sup>d</sup> 2007–8.

Source: See Statistical Appendix, Table A.5. The fertility rate estimate for 1951 (strictly speaking, 1950–5) is from the United Nations Population Division (2011). In the last row, the 2007–8 figures are from the International Institute for Population Sciences (2010a), Table 2.8, and the 1951 figures are estimated from census data presented in Vaidyanathan (1983), Table 13.3.

In this context we have reason to rejoice in the massive expansion of a free media that has taken place since independence. We shall argue, as the book progresses, that there are nevertheless huge failings of the Indian media, but these limitations do not arise from governmental censorship nor from the absence of a sufficiently large network of print or oral or visual journalism. India can be proud of its huge circulation of newspapers (the largest in the world), and a vast and lively stream of radio and television coverage, presenting – among other things – many different analyses of ongoing politics (many of them round the clock). This is surely something of a triumph of democratic opportunity – at one level – that adds much force to the working of other democratic institutions, including free, multi-party elections.

The failings of the media, which we will discuss presently, concern a lack of serious involvement in the diagnosis of significant injustices and inefficiencies in the economic and social lives of people; and also the absence of high-quality journalism, with some honourable exceptions, about what could enhance the deprived and constrained lives of many – often most – people in the country, even as the media presents a glittering picture of the privileged and the successful. There is surely a need for political and social change here, which we will discuss (particularly in Chapters 7–9). By enriching the content of the coverage and analyses of news, the Indian media could certainly be turned into a major asset in the pursuit of justice, equity, and efficiency in democratic India.

## AN UNFINISHED AGENDA

The record of India's achievements is not easy to dismiss, but is that the whole story? An agreeable picture of a country in a rapid march forward towards development with justice would definitely not be a comprehensive, or even a balanced, account of what has been actually happening: indeed far from it. There are many major shortcomings and breakdowns – some of them gigantic – even though privileged groups, and especially the celebratory media, are often inclined to overlook them. We also have to recognize with clarity that the neglect – or minimizing – of these problems in public reasoning is

tremendously costly, since democratic rectification depends crucially on public understanding and widespread discussion of the serious problems that have to be addressed.

Since India's recent record of fast economic growth is often celebrated, with good reason, it is extremely important to point to the fact that the societal reach of economic progress in India has been remarkably limited. It is not only that the income distribution has been getting more unequal in recent years (a characteristic that India shares with China), but also that the rapid rise in real wages in China from which the working classes have benefited greatly is not matched at all by India's relatively stagnant real wages. No less importantly, the public revenue generated by rapid economic growth has not been used to expand the social and physical infrastructure in a determined and well-planned way (in this India is left far behind by China). There is also a continued lack of essential social services (from schooling and health care to the provision of safe water and drainage) for a huge part of the population. As we will presently discuss, while India has been overtaking other countries in the progress of its real income, it has been overtaken in terms of social indicators by many of these countries, even within the region of South Asia itself (we go into this question more fully in Chapter 3, 'India in Comparative Perspective').

To point to just one contrast, even though India has significantly caught up with China in terms of GDP growth, its progress has been very much slower than China's in indicators such as longevity, literacy, child undernourishment and maternal mortality. In South Asia itself, the much poorer economy of Bangladesh has caught up with and overtaken India in terms of many social indicators (including life expectancy, immunization of children, infant mortality, child undernourishment and girls' schooling). Even Nepal has been catching up, to the extent that it now has many social indicators similar to India's, in spite of its per capita GDP being just about one third. Whereas twenty years ago India generally had the second-best social indicators among the six South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan), it now looks second worst (ahead only of problem-ridden Pakistan). India has been climbing up the ladder of per capita income while slipping down the slope of social indicators.



Given the objectives of development and equity that India championed as it fought for independence, there is surely a huge failure here. It is not only that the new income generated by economic growth has been very unequally shared, but also that the resources newly created have not been utilized adequately to relieve the gigantic social deprivations of the underdogs of society. Democratic pressures, as we will discuss in later chapters, have gone in other directions rather than rectifying the major injustices that characterize contemporary India. There is work to be done both in making good use of the fruits of economic growth to enhance the living conditions of the people and in reducing the massive inequalities that characterize India's economy and society. Maintaining – and if possible increasing – the pace of economic growth will have to be only one part of a larger – much larger – commitment.

## POWER AND INFRASTRUCTURE

If the continuation of huge disparities in the lives of Indians from different backgrounds is one large problem on which much more public discussion – and political engagement – are needed, a far-reaching failure in governance and organization is surely another. Indians face this problem, in one form or another, every day, even if global awareness of the extent of this systemic failure comes only intermittently, as when on 30–31 July 2012 a power blackout temporarily obliterated electricity from half of the country, wreaking havoc with the lives of 600 million people. Intolerable organizational chaos joined hands with terrible inequality: a third of those 600 million never have any electricity anyway (an illustration of the inequality that characterizes modern India), whereas two-thirds lost power without any warning (an example of the country's disorganization).

There is a gigantic inadequacy in the running of the power sector in India, of which the blackout was an obvious manifestation. Persistent power failures (or 'load shedding', the name given to 'organizing' the failures rather than curing them) occur day in, day out, in a great many places across the country, without getting much notice outside the community of sufferers, for whom they are not any less important

than the gigantic blackout of 2012 that drew the attention of the world. And, as noted, nearly a third of the population of India is not connected with electricity at all – compared with a mere 1 per cent in China.<sup>5</sup>

The dismal state of the power sector is only one part of the serious failure in India to address the need for good physical infrastructure. Similar deficiencies can be seen in water supply, drainage, garbage disposal, public transport, and in a number of other fields. In general, the physical as well as social infrastructure of the country is in a mess, and no great solution seems to be waiting to be implemented (we take up this question more fully in Chapter 4, ‘Accountability and Corruption’). The contrast with China in this respect too could not be sharper. These days India seems to be full of invocations that the country should follow China and get rid of the problems associated with poor infrastructure (and there is indeed so much to learn from China), but while this advice rings everywhere, the advisors often imagine and portray a China that does not, in fact, exist. For example, it is often argued that the Indian government should get out of the power sector altogether, allegedly as the Chinese government has done, and then India too can ‘privatize and flourish!’ Private enterprise can, in fact, play a useful role in the generation, transmission and distribution of power (especially when competition exists), but that does require coordination and involvement by the state, taking into account the fact that there may be little – or no – money to be made from some of the tasks that the power sector has to perform (such as establishing connections in remote areas at heavy cost).

More immediately, leaving the power sector to private enterprise is not in fact what has been done in China. Both in China and in India the power sector is state-controlled, and both countries make use of the private sector to get part of the job done. The difference lies elsewhere – in the way state enterprises and planning operate in China, and in the fact that China has long been investing much more in the power sector than India, both in absolute terms and (more than twice as much) as a percentage of GDP. A similar point applies to many other infrastructural activities: the main contrast between China and India lies more in the effectiveness and accountability of public management than in the extent of privatization.

At the risk of oversimplification, it can be argued that the main respects in which the agenda for ‘political, economic and social democracy’ (much emphasized when India became independent) remains unfinished relate to two areas: (1) continued *disparity* between the lives of the privileged and the rest, and (2) persistent *ineptitude and unaccountability* in the way the Indian economy and society are organized. Depending on our fuller political vision, we may, of course, have other concerns too, and believe much more to be possible today and in the future.\* But the urgent need to address these huge disparities and deficiencies would be hard to deny no matter how a commentator defines his or her exact political position.† We shall be much concerned with the identified deficiencies in the chapters to follow.

## THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

The India-China comparison is particularly important to study in the context of China’s lead over India in many of the central areas of development – including its much greater success in developing a social and physical infrastructure that contributes tremendously to economic and social development. There is surely much to interest Indians in what is happening in China. In fact, comparisons of standard social indicators that are widely used for international comparisons, such as those that are covered in the *Human Development Reports* of

\* For a helpful discussion of the relation between one’s ‘goals’ and ‘visions’, see Noam Chomsky (1999), Chapter 4.

† The pursuit of justice as a practical exercise has to be distinguished from a more theoretical search for a perfectly just world here and now (on this see *The Idea of Justice*, Sen 2009). Agreements on the need for the ‘abolition of slavery’ emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in line with arguments presented by Condorcet, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others, though all the advocates accepted that even after that big step the world would still be far from ideally just. The feasibility of some changes that are seen to be justice-enhancing provide a strong argument for making those changes, without blocking off further changes that may be needed in pursuit of greater justice and which may become feasible in the near future or in the long run. Further, we can agree on the correctness of some changes as being justice-enhancing, even when different people have rather different visions of an ideally just society that they respectively seek.

the United Nations, or in the list of Millennium Development Goals, tend to be almost entirely in favour of China rather than India, and this contrast – and not merely China’s lead over India in the growth of GDP per capita – does tell us something of considerable importance for development efforts in India.

However, there is a need for some caution here as well, since many concerns that Indians do have – and the Chinese too – are not included in the comparative tables of social indicators or growth rates. Most Indians seem to value the democratic structure of the country, including multi-party politics, systematic free elections, a largely uncensored media, a substantial guarantee of free speech, and the independent standing of the judiciary, among other characteristics of a lively democracy.<sup>6</sup> Those who are still critical of the functioning of India’s democratic institutions (and we are certainly among them) cannot deny that there is a big contrast between what India has already been able to achieve and what many countries, including China, have accomplished so far in the practice of democracy.

Not only is access to the Internet and world opinion uncensored and unrestricted in India, there is a vast multitude of media presenting widely different points of view, often very critical of the government in office.<sup>7</sup> As already mentioned, India’s newspapers also reflect enormously contrasting political perspectives, even though there are important gaps that still need addressing. Economic growth has greatly helped to expand people’s access to mass communication (including radio, television and the Internet) across the country, in rural as well as urban areas, nicely complementing the availability of uncensored news and unrestrained critical discussion.

Freedom of expression has its own value, and it is something that most people enjoy. But it is also an important instrument for democratic politics, which strengthens people’s potential – and actual – participation. The interest in political and social participation now seems to stretch even to the poorest parts of the Indian population.<sup>8</sup> There are other issues too around political and legal differences between India and China, such as the use of trial and punishment, including capital punishment, sanctified by law. China has often executed more people in just one week than India has since independence in 1947.<sup>9</sup> If our focus is on comprehensive comparisons between the

quality of life in India and China, we have to look beyond the traditional social indicators. And here there are reasons to be appreciative of what India has been able to achieve, even as we demand more from the practice of democracy in the country.

We must, however, look also at what India has not achieved, and ask whether democratic freedoms are compatible with extending the achievements to cover those gaps. For instance, there has been a good deal of discussion and agitation recently about the widespread prevalence of corruption in India. This is certainly a big failure, but it would be silly to attribute the defect to democracy – indeed many non-democratic countries (including China) suffer from massive corruption. Nor can the problem be eradicated by the pursuit of undemocratic means of summary justice (such as hastily arranged severe punishment for the corrupt), as is sometimes proposed. We do not have to abandon due process in order to meet the demands of most Indians for democratic accountability to be extended in a more comprehensive way to those guilty of corruption (more on that in Chapter 4).

The media can contribute hugely to this important challenge, by helping to highlight the genuine complaints of the people, rather than largely neglecting the violations of rules and norms, as used to be the case until quite recently (and still very often happens when the transgressions occur far from the limelight). There is also the important issue of the susceptibility to corruption of particular systems of administration, by which government officers and business bosses have the power to offer favours for some reward, without being exposed or penalized for their infractions. In this respect, the so-called ‘licence Raj’ was a huge promoter of a culture of corruption. Many of these problems can be dealt with by institutional reforms, but there is a need also for some change in behavioural norms to eliminate the acceptability – to oneself and to others – of corrupt practice. And that too is a matter in which a socially conscious media has a role to play. We shall have more to say on these issues later on in this book: the point here is to draw attention to the problem of corruption that makes the delivery of public services as well as the operation of markets – and of course the exercise of democratic rights – more vulnerable than they need be.

The India-China comparison also raises another question, on which we should briefly comment, before ending this introductory chapter. Since China has done much better than India, by and large, in using economic growth for the advancement of public services and social infrastructure, it could be asked whether India's democratic system is actually a barrier to using the fruits of economic growth for the purpose of enhancing health, education and other features of 'social development'. In answering this question, it is hard to avoid a sense of nostalgia. When India had very low rates of economic growth, as was the case until the 1980s, a common argument used by the critics of democracy was that it was hostile to fast economic growth. It was hard to convince those critics that fast economic growth depends on the support of the economic climate, rather than on the fierceness of political systems. That debate on the opposition between democracy and economic growth has now ended (not least due to the high growth rates of democratic India), but how should we assess the alleged conflict between democracy and the *use* of the fruits of economic growth for social advancement?

What a democratic system achieves depends largely on what issues are brought into political engagement. Some issues are extremely easy to politicize, such as the calamity of a famine (recurrence of which tends to stop abruptly with the institution of a functioning democratic political system), whereas other issues – less spectacular and less immediate – provide a much harder challenge. Using democratic means to remedy non-extreme undernourishment, or persistent gender and caste inequalities, or the absence of regular medical care for all, is much more difficult, and success or failure here depends significantly on the range and vigour of democratic practice.<sup>10</sup> There has, however, been considerable progress in dealing with some of these issues, such as particular features of gender inequality, through somewhat improved practice of democracy in recent years. But there is still a long way to go to take on all the social disadvantages and injustices from which many Indians persistently suffer.

In China, the process of decision-making depends largely on decisions at the top, taken by political leaders, with relatively little scope for democratic pressure from below. The fact that the Chinese leaders, despite their scepticism of the values of democracy and liberty, have

been strongly committed to eliminating hunger and illiteracy, has certainly helped China's economic and social advancement. There exists, however, a serious fragility in this process, since there is little remedy when the government leaders change their priority in a counter-productive direction. The reality of that danger revealed itself in catastrophic form in the Chinese famine of 1959–62, which killed at least 30 million people, when the regime failed to understand what was going on and there was no public pressure against its policies, as would have arisen in a functioning democracy. The policy mistakes continued throughout these three years of devastating famine. The fragility was seen again with the economic reforms of 1979, which greatly improved the efficiency of Chinese agriculture and industry, but also involved a huge retreat from the principle of universal health care coverage, especially in rural areas. As the axe fell on the 'rural cooperative medical system', the proportion of the rural population covered by free or heavily subsidized health care crashed to 10 per cent or so within a few years.

Such fragilities are inescapable in an authoritarian system where supportive and protective policies can suddenly change, depending on power politics at the top. An established right to health care could not have been so easily – and so swiftly – withdrawn in a functioning democracy. The withdrawal of universal entitlement to health care sharply reduced the progress of longevity in China, and China's large lead over India in life expectancy dwindled over the following two decades – falling from a 14-year lead to one of just 7 years. However, the Chinese authorities did eventually come to recognize the value of what had been lost, and reintroduced social health insurance on a large scale (under new arrangements, including the 'new cooperative medical scheme') from around 2004.<sup>11</sup> China now has a much higher proportion of people with guaranteed health care (more than 90 per cent) than does India. The gap in life expectancy in China's favour has been rising again, and the reach of health coverage is clearly central to the difference.

Given its political system, India has to cultivate democratic engagement in demanding universal health care and addressing this long-standing neglect. This means putting pressure on the government in office, but also making these priorities a part of the demands

of the opposition, since governments, especially one made up of a coalition such as the present government in New Delhi, have to respond to the priorities set by political pressures and public demands, which can take widely diverse forms and which all compete for governmental attention and resources. Cultivating democratic engagement can be a harder task than convincing a handful of political leaders of the need for a policy change. On the other hand, if a norm of this kind is democratically established, it is less subject to the fragility to which all authoritarian decisions remain vulnerable. In order to match China in health coverage and surpass it in resilience, India has to make much greater use of the democratic system than it already has. The same can be said for the priority of basic education for all.

In dealing with India's multitude of problems, there may well be a temptation – but not a serious reason – for India to give up or reduce its long commitment to democracy, for which so many people have fought and out of which so much good has already come to the country. It is deeply disappointing that more use has not been made of the opportunities offered by a political democracy and a free society to solve the problems that so many Indians continue to face. What is important to recognize is that the success of a democracy depends ultimately on the vigour of its practice, and that will be one of the main points of focus in this book.

Ambedkar's invitation to 'educate, agitate and organize' (which we quoted earlier) is possible in a democracy in a way that is not in the absence of one. But, as Ambedkar also argued, organization and agitation have to be based on good and informed reasoning. The first item in his call – 'educate' – is important here. As will be clear as the book proceeds, we are much inspired by Ambedkar's vision of informed and reasoned public engagement. The important task is not so much to find a 'new India', but to contribute to making one.