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Decoding Democracy: Evaluating India @75

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ABSTRACT

This article critically assesses India's democratic trajectory, tracing its roots to the colonial era and the subsequent establishment of procedural democracy, marked by seventeen Lok Sabha elections. Despite initial scepticism, India's democratic foundations faced challenges in the form of deviations from the principles of its founding fathers. The leadership was criticised for pursuing power, displaying insatiable greed, and neglecting ethical conduct. The article acknowledges the positive aspects of the Indian polity. Some highlights of the recent downgrade to a hybrid regime, indicative of a global democratic recession, are also discussed. The narrative underscores concerns such as legal harassment of the opposition, media intimidation, and the centralisation of executive power under the leadership of Narendra Modi. These dynamics challenge India's identity as the world's largest democracy and raise questions about the legitimacy of opposition, portraying a departure from democratic norms. The article concludes with a call for a transformative process to revive the efficacy and vibrancy of Indian democracy.

Keywords: India, Democracy, Election, Development, Challenges, Development

Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, has had limited historical exposure to democratic principles. Its democratic journey resulted from its prolonged association with the British during the British Raj, undergoing various adaptations. Social intricacies such as caste divisions, regionalism, linguistic diversity, and religious pluralism played a pivotal role. Social conflicts, ranging from intermittent violence to dormancy, were fundamental to the evolution of democratic institutions. This transitional phase, marked by turmoil, primarily resulted from attempts at modernisation. Adopting democracy as a way of life in India remains an ongoing process, requiring generational development.

Despite trials, India is a notable example of democracy (Shukla, 1994). Early post-independence predictions of a collapse due to diverse demographics and low per capita income proved wrong. India not only sustained democracy but also deepened its roots, completing the seventeenth Lok Sabha elections in 2019 without impediment. However, while procedural democracy has been established, substantive democracy and the trajectory of human development have seen mixed results. Some aspirations have been partially realised, while others have been dashed, with indicators showing underperformance in governance, political participation, and political culture (Nayak, 2014).

There are growing worries about India potentially joining the global trend of democratic decline, as reflected in its recent shift to a hybrid regime that contributes to the spread of autocratic tendencies worldwide. The deterioration of India's democratic system aligns with a recurring pattern characterised by the persecution of the opposition through legal means, intimidation of the media, and the concentration of executive power, all of which erode fundamental democratic principles. Criticism of the government is now synonymous with disloyalty, undermining the legitimacy of the opposition. As a result, India has lost its status as the world's largest democracy. (Tudor, 2023).

This article offers an honest assessment of India's democratic functioning, encapsulating significant historical events in its emergence. It acknowledges the sacrifices of the founding fathers and their choice of parliamentary democracy. However, it laments the failure of their successors, accusing them of power lust, insatiable greed, and personal aggrandisement. These behaviours have unleashed divisive forces, making India one of the most corrupt nations globally (Sharma, 2006).

Despite the grim picture painted, the article identifies some positive aspects of the Indian polity and suggests transformative measures to turn the ailing democracy into a practical, vibrant governance instrument. It hopes that these suggestions will be objectively examined.

Democratic Foundations

India's dedication to democracy was codified in its Constitution, which took effect on January 26, 1950. This foundational document established the framework for a democratic republic, emphasising the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The democratic structure of India rests on pillars such as the parliamentary system, multi-party politics, and regular elections, empowering citizens to shape their governance. Over the years, India has become a nation-state with a maturing democracy. The successful completion of the fourteenth Lok Sabha elections in 2014 demonstrated India's

ability to sustain and strengthen a functional democracy despite its challenges, including significant cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. While this accomplishment is remarkable in political history, it has flaws.

During post-independence development, certain expectations and ambitions outlined by Nayak (2014) have seen partial fulfilment, while others have been disappointed. The deepening of India's democracy took formal shape through the establishment of civilian control over the military, sustained multiparty competition spanning decades, and informal measures such as strengthening norms associated with the independence of the Election Commission and enhancing the involvement of women and various social groups in formal political activities, as highlighted by Tudor (2023).

In political theory, two contrasting models of democracy exist—procedural (or formal) and substantive. The procedural view narrowly defines democracy, focusing solely on election data, often falling into the electoral fallacy. Proponents of the substantive definition argue that true democracy requires guaranteeing equal citizenship rights to all, going beyond legal and political equality. They emphasise addressing power, social status, and wealth inequalities, which can undermine democracy. Democracy, in this view, should extend beyond government and state to govern collective life in society (Jayal, 2007).

While perfect substantive democracy may be elusive, it is crucial to consider class, gender, and race inequalities in the functioning of democracy. Substantive democracy is seen as necessary to address the shortcomings of the procedural definition, especially in recognising that socioeconomic inequalities can seriously undermine democracy. Representative democracy, based on majority rule and one person–one vote, presents challenges in multicultural societies, where minorities based on caste, race, and religion may be systematically neglected.

The actual test of democracy lies in its ability to represent various groups, particularly historically disadvantaged and excluded ones. Success is measured by the extent to which political mobilisation and electoral processes create a representative microcosm of diverse societal groups. Representation serves as a mechanism for facilitating participation and influencing policymaking. However, assuming these tasks of democracy can be risky and may exert pressure on policy and actual outcomes (Jayal, 2007).

Despite debates on the compatibility of democracy and economic growth, democracy's universal appeal lies in its ability to bestow legitimacy on modern life. Nearly all political regimes worldwide label themselves as democracies and claim adherence to democratic principles, underscoring the fundamental appeal of democracy. It offers respect and dignity to human beings, providing individuals with opportunities to realise personal, social, and political aims in a democratic culture (Shukla, 1994).

Electoral Vibrancy

Since gaining independence in 1947, every eligible Indian, regardless of gender, religion, caste, language, or social status, has the right to vote. A striking feature of India's democracy lies in its robust electoral activity. Over the years, the nation has conducted numerous national, state, and local elections. Shahabuddin Yaqoob Quraishi, the former Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), emphasised the credibility of India's electoral process, stating, "We have been conducting the largest elections in the world every time with great credibility" (Chughtai & Khalid, 2019). The immense scale of these elections, involving millions of voters and a myriad of political parties, underscores the strength of India's democratic institutions. The periodic and peaceful transitions of power highlight the maturity and resilience of the democratic system.

Electronic voting machines (EVMs) have been a pivotal aspect of the Indian electoral process since its introduction in 1982. The number of EVMs used in elections has steadily increased, with over 2.3 million deployed in the 2019 elections compared to 1.8 million in 2014. In the latest elections, Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machines accompanied EVMs at all polling stations, addressing concerns raised by opposition parties about the accuracy of EVMs (Chughtai & Khalid, 2019). The 2019 general election marked a significant shift in Indian democratic proceedings, with a record-breaking total voter turnout of approximately 67.11% across 542 constituencies (Jain, 2019). India, recognising about half a million transgender individuals since the Supreme Court's 2014 acknowledgement, has identified approximately 39,000 voters as "third gender" (Chughtai & Khalid, 2019).

Despite the success of the electoral process, there are concerns and occasional questions about the credibility of EVMs. The current administration is contemplating the idea of "One Nation, One Election," aiming for simultaneous elections at the state and central levels. The feasibility of this concept is yet to be confirmed, but discussions on combining as many Assembly elections as possible with Lok Sabha elections are underway. Such a move would require extensive consultation across political parties and constituent states to ensure the formation of a stable government (Kumar, 2023).

Inclusive Growth and Development

The primary focus of a modern state lies in development, encompassing both political and economic dimensions. A prevalent argument asserts that developing nations, already behind in commencing development processes, need more time to afford further delays. Nevertheless, achieving rapid growth necessitates a satisfactory political order. Amid various pressures and the influence of political parties engaging in populist politics, long-term perspectives often take a back seat. The democratic imperative, rooted in the adult franchise, must navigate considerations of political mobilisation. Economic development requires an open competitive setting, even at a lower level. The sole alternative to democracy is authoritarianism, which, if implemented, eradicates popular initiative and freedom, subjecting people perpetually to the rule of a select few or a single individual (Shukla, 1994).

Since gaining independence, India has demonstrated notable progress in economic development and poverty alleviation. The democratic framework has played a crucial role in ensuring a more equitable distribution of the benefits of growth across various societal segments. However, challenges such as

regional disparities, unemployment, and access to quality education and healthcare persist, necessitating sustained efforts for comprehensive and inclusive development.

During the early years following its independence, India grappled with challenges such as a low life expectancy, high infant mortality rates and a scarcity of basic amenities like metalled roads and electricity. Despite being the second-most populous country globally, India has achieved significant progress in critical areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, and technology.

These advancements have become increasingly accessible to a substantial portion of the Indian population, marking a transformative shift in the country's developmental landscape. A notable achievement is the substantial reduction in the infant mortality rate, which plummeted from 161.8 in 1960 to a remarkably lower figure of 27 in 2020, indicating substantial improvements in healthcare and child well-being.

Furthermore, electricity accessibility has undergone a remarkable transformation since the 1990s, with a significant reduction in the gap in access. The strides made in electrification have improved the overall quality of life for many in India. Additionally, the widespread adoption of technology is evident, with over 40% of the Indian population having internet access in 2020, reflecting a growing digital presence and connectivity.

A noteworthy indicator of India's overall development is its Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure encompassing life expectancy, education, and income. Over the years, India has seen a substantial increase in its HDI, rising from 0.11 points in 1950 to 0.65 in 2019, underscoring the nation's progress in enhancing its populace's well-being and living standards (Loganathan, 2022). This multifaceted growth reflects India's ongoing commitment to addressing the socio-economic challenges it faced in its early post-independence years. It signals a promising trajectory toward a more prosperous and inclusive future.

Nevertheless, gender-based inequality stands out as a considerable obstacle. Women in India, spanning various social groups, face disparities in nutrition, education, and representation within governance structures. Despite equal involvement in electoral processes, they frequently need help

securing a role in decision-making forums. The official statistics may only partially convey the breadth of women's autonomy, as evidenced by the comparatively low female labour force participation compared to the global average. This observation underscores the subordinate position of women by introducing economic deprivation to the social constraints that dissuade them from participating in work beyond the household (Balakrishnan, 2022).

Challenges to Democracy

India's democratic fabric, despite its commendable achievements, is entangled in a web of intricate challenges. The discourse surrounding civil liberties is rife with contention, with some fearing the imminent closure of this chapter in India's democratic narrative. In contrast, others staunchly contend that the country steadfastly upholds the tenets of electoral democracy.

In the annals of international scrutiny, 2021 marked a pivotal moment for India. Freedom House, a renowned advocate for democracy, downgraded India from "Free" to "Partly Free." Simultaneously, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project branded India as an "electoral autocracy," a classification that resonated with the Economist Intelligence Unit's designation of India as a "flawed democracy." This reevaluation had far-reaching consequences, enveloping 1.4 billion individuals in the autocratizing category and diminishing the global share of those residing in Free countries (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022).

The backdrop against which this reassessment occurred reveals a landscape where the principles of democracy are under strain. Previous elections, heralded as expressions of the democratic spirit, are now viewed through a different lens. While they underscore a dedication to civil liberties, there is an undertone of concern regarding the potential erosion of these very liberties. The significance of having representatives untainted by corruption is emphasised, echoing the foundational principles of democratic governance. Despite this, India projects itself as a global advocate for democracy, a sentiment echoed by Prime Minister Modi during the Summit for Democracy organised by the United States in December 2022 (Saaliq, 2022).

India's religious mosaic, diverse and intricate, adds another layer of complexity to its democratic tapestry. With over 200 million Muslims and 30 million Christians, the nation is a melting pot of religious communities, including Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Atheists (Mehta, 2022). This diversity, a source of strength, becomes a cause for concern as Hindu nationalists target religious minorities. The suppression of peaceful protests through internet clampdowns and the imprisonment of activists further underscores the challenges to democratic values (Saaliq, 2022). India's unity is in its plurality, emphasising the imperative for political parties to respect and safeguard this diversity (Bhattacharya, 2022).

The signs of democratic erosion manifest in various dimensions. Elected leaders are increasingly questioning the legitimacy of the opposition and employing legal tools to undermine it, contributing to a gradual decay of democratic norms. Executive accountability to Parliament is diminishing, exacerbated by a less assertive judiciary. The Supreme Court, once revered as a global exemplar, now grapples with controversies, including the reassignment of justices known for their independence and the erosion of norms that act as checks on executive authority. Detractors go further, claiming an "undeclared" state of emergency reminiscent of historical periods of crisis (Tudor, 2023).

The labyrinth of India's federalism presents another set of challenges, demanding harmony among states with diverse preferences (Bhattacharya, 2022). Corruption, political polarisation, and the surge of identity politics further intensify the threats to democratic values such as transparency, accountability, and secularism, rendering the democratic landscape more intricate.

Socio-economic challenges form yet another facet of India's complex democratic narrative. A restive and largely unemployed youth population, with only 36% of the working-age population employed, adds a layer of urgency to the socio-economic dimension (Mehta, 2022). Unity becomes a crucial focal point to address these challenges, emphasising the necessity of building a brighter future rather than dwelling on historical invasions.

Balakrishnan (2016) offers a perspective on India's development challenge despite its status as the world's third-largest economy in terms of purchasing power. He highlights a significant segment of the population grappling with poor education and health, proposing a shift from the economic reforms of the past quarter-century to addressing human deprivation, particularly among women and Dalits. A comprehensive approach is advocated—one that empowers individuals and fosters participatory parity through widespread public services. Balakrishnan (2016) argues that this is instrumental in tackling the multifaceted issues plaguing Indian society.

The rising social issues, including assaults on Dalits, rape cases, and intimidation of minorities, underscore a failure in India's democracy to contain these forces (Balakrishnan, 2016) effectively. Recognition of our common humanity becomes imperative, necessitating collective efforts to address these challenges and ensure the genuine success of democracy. The intricate interplay of these multifaceted challenges forms the complex mosaic that defines India's democratic trajectory, where the journey towards a more resilient and inclusive democracy is both a shared responsibility and a formidable undertaking.

Technology and Democratic Engagement

In the 21st century, technology has become a formidable influence in shaping political discourse and citizen engagement. Social media platforms, in particular, have emerged as spaces for diverse voices, empowering citizens to participate actively in public debates and hold leaders accountable. However, this technological advancement has also raised concerns regarding misinformation, privacy issues, and the potential manipulation of public opinion. In contemporary India, information technology has allowed citizens to shape their identity by self-assessing their living conditions amid ongoing events. It is no longer just a source of entertainment but an essential tool for citizens to align with the government. Modern governments are increasingly becoming digital-oriented, with e-governance taking a prominent role in the public sector. While aiming to minimise corruption, e-governance also ensures universal accessibility. It benefits the economically disadvantaged by reducing transport costs, time, and labour, significantly impacting the grassroots.

Additionally, it facilitates continuous governance without interruptions common in manually providing utility services. In the era of globalisation, where the public sector competes with private entities, digitisation becomes a fundamental tool, empowering the public sector accordingly. The internet has presented privileges and challenges to India, marking a new phase in its economic and socio-political landscape. Overcoming these challenges should be a shared goal for the State and its citizens, including the emerging population adept at using the Internet at will (Mallick, 2019).

Despite these progressions, the government has often blocked internet access, a vital method for organising protests. In 2022, India topped the global list for government-imposed internet shutdowns, with 84 occurrences. These shutdowns usually occur before and during protests, impeding efficient public coordination and frequently lacking transparent criteria for suspension (Krishnan, 2023). The report notes that while formal safeguards for speech and assembly have experienced minimal erosion, practical protections have substantially diminished.

Future Prospects

India is currently experiencing a concerning trend in its democratic landscape, marked by challenges that, while significant, are not insurmountable. The stability of hybrid regimes and the genuine accountability offered by elections, assuming secrecy and fair monitoring, present avenues for democratic resilience. Even fully autocratic regimes, with their robust surveillance systems, are susceptible to effective protests due to inherent limitations in understanding citizens' concerns—something democracies excel at. Recent protests worldwide against policies in China, Iran, and India underscore the enduring potential of mass dissent.

The revival of India's democracy hinges on the rise of a bona fide opposition party with firmly established organisational foundations. Historical success stories, such as the Indian National Congress, which lost its grassroots linkages in 1969 during Indira Gandhi's centralisation of power, provide valuable lessons. Recent state assembly elections in Karnataka, where Congress displayed electoral strength, indicate the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) vulnerability. The Aam Aadmi Party, though promising, faces the challenge of expanding beyond its Delhi stronghold. The crucial factor remains the development of power structures beyond charismatic leaders, a task complicated by the BJP's century-long organisational growth.

Looking into the future, a critical examination of India's democratic path is essential. Strengthening institutions, promoting civic involvement, and tackling socioeconomic inequalities are crucial for a resilient and inclusive democracy. To navigate contemporary challenges, embracing innovation, responsibly using technology, and fostering unity in diversity are imperative. Valid concerns have been raised by the liberal elite regarding the autonomy of critical political institutions like the Supreme Court, the Election Commission of India, and the Central Bureau of Investigation, potentially compromising their independence.

A significant apprehension centers on the perceived threat to the "idea of India" as a diverse and inclusive nation due to the rise of Hindutva and its political arm, the BJP. The Congress party's adoption of a "soft" Hindutva stance, contrasting with the BJP's "hard" approach, heightens these concerns. Additionally, the noticeable increase in populist and authoritarian tendencies, reminiscent of the Emergency during Indira Gandhi's era, poses the risk of India becoming a procedural democracy focused on endorsing populist leaders.

While the liberal elite concentrates on institutional decay, majoritarianism, and populist trends, the average voter is more preoccupied with issues such as employment, livelihood, caste, communal considerations, and India's standing against Pakistan. Economic vulnerabilities, job insecurity, and debates over reservations in the public sector are central concerns, particularly for those just above the poverty line. Caste and community dynamics continue to play a significant role in politics, with right-wing parties exploiting religious differences for communal consolidation.

A common thread across divisions is the allure of hyper-nationalism, often verging on jingoism. Populist leaders strategically employ this sentiment to gain or retain power. Recent events like the Pulwama terrorist attack and the Balakot airstrike have fueled hyper-nationalist sentiments. The ruling party's adept use of this phenomenon, projecting the Prime Minister as a resolute and decisive leader, contributes to the propagation of hyper-nationalism.

The amalgamation of factors—disregard for institutions focus on livelihood issues, emphasis on caste and community benefits, and the promotion of hyper-nationalism—creates an environment conducive to populism, which could potentially evolve into authoritarianism. Many Indians desire a "strong leader" who can address daily concerns without the complexities of institutional decision-making. This constellation of factors, especially leading up to elections, paints a pessimistic picture of the future of democracy in India. While procedural democracy may persist through periodic elections, the cherished liberal ethos embedded in the Constitution faces a genuine risk of extinction (Ayoob, 2019).

Conclusion

As India celebrates 75 years of independence, evaluating its democratic experiment is not just a historical exercise but a forward-looking endeavour. Democracy, as the bedrock of India's governance, has demonstrated its resilience, adaptability, and transformative power. By addressing challenges and building on its strengths, India can continue to evolve as a vibrant and inclusive democracy, setting an example for the world. Decoding democracy at 75 is an ongoing process, and the journey holds immense promise for the nation and its people.

Akhilesh Pillalamarri writes that "cultural and social trends [in India today] are not necessarily evidence of democratic backsliding, but are rather an evidence of social norms in India that are illiberal toward speech, individual expression, and criticism" (Pillalamarri, 2021).

India's democratic trajectory, while facing challenges, remains a dynamic interplay of successes and concerns. The electoral vibrancy, a hallmark since independence in 1947, underscores the strength of India's democratic institutions. The scale and peaceful transitions of power, evident in the 2019 elections with a record turnout, showcase the maturity and resilience of the democratic system. However, the credibility of electronic voting machines (EVMs) has been questioned, and there are ongoing debates about the feasibility of the proposed One Nation, One Election concept.

Significant strides in economic development and poverty alleviation have been made since independence. Access to healthcare, technology, and infrastructure has improved, contributing to positive indicators like the decline in infant mortality rates and increased Human Development Index (HDI). However, gender-based inequality remains a glaring flaw, with women facing disparities in nutrition, education, and representation in governance.

The 21st century introduces new dimensions to Indian democracy, heavily influenced by technology. Social media platforms empower citizens in political discourse, enabling diverse voices and fostering accountability. However, this technological advancement raises concerns about misinformation and privacy. E-governance emerges as a crucial orientation, aiming to reduce corruption, make governance universally accessible, and uplift the economically disadvantaged.

In the realm of politics, India grapples with challenges threatening democratic ideals. Corruption, political polarisation, and identity politics threaten transparency, accountability, and secularism. Confidence in the judiciary's role as a safeguard against executive power diminishes while attacks on the freedom of the press increase. Religious minorities face increasing attacks, and concerns about the country's democratic downgrading are reflected in global assessments categorising India as a "Partly Free" state.

As India strives for comprehensive development, socio-economic issues persist, including regional disparities, unemployment, and access to quality education and healthcare. A large, youthful population's demographic dividend brings opportunities and challenges, necessitating inclusive policies and strategic planning.

The complex dynamics of India's democracy involve internal factors and geopolitical considerations. Tensions with neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, and the role of hyper-nationalism in electoral politics further complicate the democratic landscape. The recent emphasis on national strength in elections, particularly after events like the Pulwama attack, underscores the intertwining of political narratives with security concerns.

While liberal elites express valid concerns about the erosion of institutions, majoritarianism, and populist tendencies, the broader electorate often prioritises more immediate issues. Jobs, caste dynamics, and perceptions of national strength are dominant electoral considerations. The emergence of a genuine opposition party becomes crucial for a vibrant democracy, with grassroots linkages playing a pivotal role.

In conclusion, India's democratic journey embodies a multifaceted narrative, balancing achievements and ongoing challenges. The nation is at a critical juncture where fostering civic engagement, addressing socio-economic disparities, and upholding the pluralistic ethos is essential for ensuring a robust and inclusive democracy. As India navigates the 21st century, it faces the task of reconciling technological advancements with democratic values, overcoming internal disparities, and charting a course that aligns with the vision of its founders. The resilience of India's democracy lies in its ability to adapt, evolve, and maintain a delicate equilibrium amid the complexities of a diverse and dynamic nation.

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