

# Illiberal Democracy and India: Some Reflections

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## Abstract

The rise of illiberal democracies across the globe since the late 1990s has caught scholarly attention in western academia. This trend has further gained momentum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as more states in parts of Europe, Middle East and Asia are experiencing the emergence of far-right populist governments that can best be characterized as some form of authoritarian democracy. Indian polity has also witnessed a similar movement in that direction in recent years. Notwithstanding the robust and institutionalized democratic electoral procedure and process, the promotion and protection of the liberal ethos of democracy have seemed to take a perceptible backslide. This article would attempt to analyze how the various illiberal practices in the Indian context fits into the broader global pattern.

**Keywords:** Illiberal Democracy, Far-right Populism, Authoritarian, Democracy, India

The association of democracy with “liberalism” has had a chequered history. It had mutated over the years to eventually become the dominant orthodoxy in the organization of political life across Western Europe and North America after the Second World War. Throughout the cold war period only a few decolonized countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America had experimented with the liberal democratic form of government with varying degrees of success. With the end of the cold war and disintegration of Soviet Union there was genuine optimism in western academia about the triumph of liberal democracy across the globe and scholars like Francis Fukuyama lent strong intellectual endorsement to the great liberal dream, proposing the “End of History” thesis. (Fukuyama, 2012) But as ‘history’ unfolded, we find that the third wave of democratization that was supposed to have swept the third world countries and the hitherto “socialist” East Europe did not simply come about effectively. On the contrary, parts of Africa including states like Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia had been drawn into a vortex of unending violent conflict, anarchy, civil war, genocide, and complete collapse of the political system. Violence also rocked along ethnic lines in Yugoslavia leading to the disintegration of the Balkan state. In parallel to these worrying developments, another very significant trend emerged in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America which had been categorized by US intellectual Fareed Zakaria as the rise of “Illiberal Democracy”. In his 1997 article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Zakaria noted: “From Peru to the Palestinian Authority, from Sierra Leone to Slovakia, from Pakistan to the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon in international life- illiberal democracy”. (Zakaria, 1997) The crux of the argument was that in many of the countries quoted above, the practice of formal electoral democracy had not corresponded with the protection and promotion of liberal constitutional values like the rule of law, separation of power, freedom of speech, expression, assembly, religion and property or livelihood. On the contrary these values had been systematically sabotaged. In effect, the dynamics of “democratic” politics within those countries led to the curtailment and violation of individual liberties forcing us to problematize the equation between liberty and democracy.

Two decades later, Zakaria's original proposition surprisingly rings true with alarming frequency in today's global scenario and interestingly the phenomenon of illiberal democracy now has a far more extensive spatial 'reach', cutting across the traditional north-south, east-west divide. In Europe, countries like Russia, Turkey, Poland, and Hungary and across the Atlantic the United States of America under the presidency of Donald Trump are clearly now veering towards the orbit of "illiberal democracy". And quite worryingly for us the Indian polity has also taken a decisive 'illiberal' shift in recent years. As the title suggests this paper would specifically focus on India. It would highlight some basic tendencies of illiberal democracy in general and would examine how the Indian case fits into this broader pattern. It would then try to link the prevalence of illiberal practices in India with the formation of conflict zones across different overlapping categories of identity.

Noted scholar David Ost has recently identified certain specific trends of the current political condition in Hungary and Poland. These can be broadly summed up as symptomatic of the generic features afflicting illiberal democracies today across the globe. (Isaac, 2017) These are:

1. Eviscerating the constitutional court and purging the judiciary
2. Complete politicization of the civil service
3. Turning public media into a government mouthpiece
4. Restricting opposition prerogatives in parliament
5. Unilateral wholesale change of the constitution or plain violation of it
6. Official tolerance and even promotion of religious bigotry
7. Administrative assertion of traditional gender norms
8. Cultural resurrection of authoritarian traditions
9. Surveillance without check

At this point certain preliminary clarifications need to be made. The Indian democratic experiment since independence has been a unique, audacious endeavour that has sustained its vibrancy so far despite some genuine deficits (Varshney 2015). When we propose to investigate the Indian case through the prism of illiberal democracy, we would confine our analysis here to the present context and the practices of the incumbent government at the centre. This obviously does not necessarily mean that there have not been "illiberal moments" impacting Indian democracy in the past. On the contrary, there certainly have been deeply disturbing precedents and we are all aware of that. The imposition of national emergency in 1975 by the congress government and its attendant adverse consequences on the democratic profile of India needs no reiteration. But the present scenario demands special attention because there appears to be a concerted efforts by the present dispensation to fundamentally reshape the structural attributes of the political system.

There is no denying the fact that a perceptible majoritarian shift in Indian politics has taken place after the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) came to power at the centre with an overwhelming majority in May 2014. (Jaffrelot, 2017) Ever since virtually every sphere of public life has been penetrated by the government. The autonomy of public institutions has so far been the greatest casualty of the government's all-pervasive agenda. The government's de facto control of the Prasar Bharati, India's public broadcasting agency exemplifies the fact. The agency's refusal to broadcast the Independence Day speech of an elected chief minister of an Indian state for its apparent 'anti-government' orientation stand in stark contrast to its rather baffling decision to broadcast live the speech of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.) Chief Mohan Bhagwat on the festival of Vijay Dashami. The government's management of the public institutions of higher learning like the central universities has

also unambiguously betrayed a tendency to regulate in strictest terms the administrative/academic aspects of those institutions and to scuttle free articulations of diverse views and opinions.

Examples such as these can be multiplied on many of the categories mentioned above. But the moot point is that the government has so far been utterly ineffective and at worst completely unwilling to arrest the fissiparous tendencies that have been steadily intensifying throughout the country. In fact, the policy preferences of the central government have been to a large extent responsible for the crystallization of conflict along the lines of religion and caste and its manifestation in the form of crude, crass violence in different pockets of India with alarming frequency. As has been just mentioned, the central axis of conflict primarily revolves around the lines of religion and caste. Here we would try to analyse the dynamics of the conflicts and identify certain common threads informing them.

Hindutva has always been constitutive of the ideological core of the B.J.P. The party draws its distinct identity through its unique branding of Hinduism and the promotion and propagation of the philosophy as the organizing principle governing individual and social life (Jaffrelot, 1999). But post-Babri phase, the re-emergence of the malignant variety of Hindutva under the present dispensation has been a cause of immense concern for India. In fact, the deliberate evocation of religious 'myths', 'symbols', all too frequent references to periods of time, that apparently epitomize a glorious 'Hindu' past can be interpreted as an attempt towards the colonization of collective historical consciousness and re-imagining the idea of India, an India which is pristine and which originally belonged to the Hindus and where religious minorities lived on the 'fringes'-spatially, psychologically as well as culturally. B.J.P has also been vociferously active in structurally manipulating public memory. The mega projects, undertaken by the government, involving the construction of statues, monuments, museums, memorials of so-called iconic Hindu rulers like Shivaji, Ranapratap reveal the politics of memorialization. The whole business of pedagogical restructuring currently underway at educational institutions of various levels across the country constitutes an integral part of the project. The cultural manifestation of the Hindutva project in the realm of arts and entertainment has appeared to be a highly regressive and gendered one. The nature and terms of government's involvement in the controversy around films like S.Durga, Nude and Padmavati is symptomatic of the inherent prejudices that inform the government's stand on issues relating to the representation of woman on screen in particular and their place in patriarchal society in general. The total abrogation of artistic freedom of expression and the infliction of rampant cultural violence through a regime of censorship has almost become a regular practice under the present regime.

But more than culture, at present the performative discourse of Hindutva in India has been vigorously thriving through a process of domination, subjugation and otherization involving the use of brute force and mindless violence. The steady proliferation of instances of cow vigilantism and mob lynching of innocent people in different parts of India demonstrate a grotesque display of identity assertion bordering on perversion and acute paranoia that have been successfully fed to these perpetrators of crime through the diligent construction and imposition of a monolithic, hegemonic Hindu identity, one that is perennially un-reconciled to the idea of plurality and difference. And quite interestingly on many occasions the victims of violence remain beyond the ambit of any fixed categorization of identity. We may recall here the una flogging incident where all the victims happened to be Dalit Hindus.

The disturbing frequency of those incidents, mind-boggling calmness with which they are being carried out and sheer nonchalance and sense of conviction and certitude of actors involved in those missions all signal to the abyss we are heading towards where all the liberal constitutional values, proprieties, ethics

and ethos which the state institutions are supposed to promote and hold on to have either been wilfully bypassed or subjugated to legitimize the tyrannies of a majoritarian democracy.

Now where do we, the other minority, and members of the tiny liberal academia stand in the whole scheme of things? At present, there appears to be an insurmountable gap of communication pervading between us and the commoners. As entitled elite we seem comfortable living in an enclosed, gated community where the language, signs, symbols and modalities of communication are constantly becoming self-referential and self-reflexive. A palpable sense of disconnect with society has made our agency as responsible citizenry virtually redundant and ineffective. To get out of this quagmire and remain socially relevant we need to vernacularize or indigenize our mode of communication with the people at large. We are living at a time when the language of hate is communicated far more effectively than the language of reason and empathy. We need to be attentive of this fact and articulate our responses accordingly.

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