

The Health of Indian Democracy: A Critical Diagnosis

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Abstract

To delineate a myth from the truth is difficult. As the lines between a democracy and oligarchy continue to blur in contemporary politics, it becomes important to assess the leakage points in India's governance. Elections can no longer be the defining characteristic of a progressive society as communalism and inequality continues to be fed and fattened. This paper dwells on the origins of democracy in India and courses through to the blind spots of the nation, such as the censure of media, bigotry, and continued exploitation of the masses by political figureheads. It argues as to why democracy in India is more namesake than pervasive.

Keyword: Democracy, India, Corruption, Vote-Bank Politics

Introduction

When we think of 'good governance' our mind automatically meanders to 'democracy' as it bestows value upon the people – without whom the state cannot exist. India saw the inauguration of her democratic era following the end of colonialism, and seventy-seven years into independence, the nation has come a long way from being positioned among the world's poorest countries to becoming the voice of the Global South. As the nation aims to become the third largest economy by the hundredth year of freedom, it must be reinforced that monetary growth has value only for as long as it goes hand in hand with socio-political development. That is to say India must foremost be evaluated in terms of her democratic health and what it means for the future ahead.

This paper will outline the origins of democracy in India, assess the current political climate alongside the cavities that plague popular sovereignty within the country today, and will conclude by providing a prognosis on how to fill the democratic lacunas.

National Rebirth and the Democratic Dream

As the clock struck 12 at midnight and the fifteenth of August dawned, India was declared a free country. This freedom didn't just signify the material exit of the British troops, but was rather a marker of an independence that penetrated the very spirit of a new-born nation – a polity that had room for all. Democracy, as understood in terms of the parliamentary Westminster model, first set its foot in the nation through English imperialism – the gobbets of which can be found across decrees such as the Government of India Acts in both 1919 and 1935.¹ However, the participation and extent of India's erstwhile

¹ Ganguly, Sumit. "The Story of Indian Democracy." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 15 Aug. 2016, www.fpri.org/article/2011/06/the-story-of-indian-democracy/.

democracy was extremely limited, as only the Anglophones and Indian male elites were deemed as eligible political actors.

Shashi Tharoor, a former diplomat and current member of parliament, argues that Britain cannot be credited for Indian democracy, but rather their atrocities instilled an ethos of self-rule that outlived the hegemony of their empire itself.² The banning of free press through the draconian Vernacular Press Act³, or the curbs on people's right to protest during the British Raj⁴, indicate a milieu of opportunism and not democracy.

Similarly, the placards of "Dogs and Indians not allowed"⁵ that hung outside elite locales connote Social Darwinism and not social welfare. The panoply of tactics utilized by the British didn't gift India a democracy, but rather the denial of it crystallized the consciousness of a nation that sought just, decentralized rule.

Indian democracy hence, is primarily aspirational – charged by the need to right the wrongs of the colonial past. However, its procedural components stem from British processes due to the familiarity the country as well as the Constituent Assembly had with its model.

The Conundrum of Popular Sovereignty

Although democracy is theoretically the bridge to 'good governance' and the *summum bonum* of political regimes, in India it has transformed into a tool for populism and hegemony. Amongst the multitude of quandaries that democracy faces in the country, the most prominent ones are:

1. **Corruption:** the fine line between a politician and a criminal is majorly eroded, as an overarching majority of 363 out of 534 parliament members in India have been convicted of crime.⁶ The penchant for unconstitutional behaviour permeates the country's politicians who have cases of felonious dealings stitched to their records. Unlawful representatives cannot mould a lawful society, which is what prevents policies and reforms from reaching the last man standing.
2. **Bigotry:** from the violence of the partition, to the riots that plague the nation currently in Manipur and parts of Haryana are a reflection of the growing polarity amongst the citizens. Parameters such as language crystallise otherness between the north and south, while religious fundamentalism accentuates a puritanical lens of how we view people.⁷ The flagging of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' at international events reaps no fruit unless India pulsates with a secular fraternity in its veins.

² Tharoor, Shashi. "Democracy, the Press, the Parliamentary System and the Rule of Law." *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*, Penguin Books Ltd, 2018.

³ "Vernacular Press Act." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., www.britannica.com/topic/Vernacular-Press-Act.

⁴ "Remembering the Men Who Shook up the British Raj." *The Economic Times*, 23 May 2017, economictimes.indiatimes.com/nation-world/remembering-the-men-who-shook-up-the-british-raj/martyrs-day-it-is/slideshow/57792771.cms.

⁵ Bose, Siddhartha. "No Dogs, No Indians." *openDemocracy*, 13 May 2017, www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/no-dogs-no-indians/.

⁶ Financial Express Online. "363 Sitting MLAs and MPs Have Criminal Cases against Them: BJP Tops the List with 83." *The Financial Express*, 23 Aug. 2021, www.financialexpress.com/india-news/363-sitting-mlas-and-mps-have-criminal-cases-against-them-bjp-tops-list-with-83-adr/2315943/.

⁷ Joshi, Ankur, and Sumedha Chauhan. "Tolerance in Indian Society: Implications on Society, Natural Resources and Lifestyle." *SSRN*, 22 Nov. 2015, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2693907.

3. **Vote-bank politics:** most policies in the nation happen to be driven by power-seeking ambitions of the political figures than constructive decision-making. The phenomenon of ‘revadis’ that is freebies, falls into this larger dialogue, which not only jeopardizes the economy, but also reflects the predominant illiteracy and unhinged poverty among a significant chunk of the population.⁸
4. **Misnomer of Freedom:** India’s poor rankings in terms of free press, curbing of protests such as that of female wrestlers and filtering of what is publicly acceptable, draw eerie parallels with the bygone days of colonial administration.⁹

Navigating Other Weak Links

Division of powers is an integral part of any democracy, as it ensures that the three organs of Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary keep each other in check. With the expanding influence of the Executive and Legislature, the duty of balancing the souring democratic climate rests upon the Judiciary.

While judicial activism can pave the way for a more just society, scholars have argued that the Indian judiciary is no longer independent enough to carry out the needed reforms. The close nexus between the ruling part and the bench of Supreme Court (SC) judges, has resulted in legal-political prejudice.¹⁰

When scrutinized, verdicts of the Rafale Deal, Assam NRC and Article 370 cases are seen to have been consistently in favour of the Executive. The notion of the Judiciary as the guardian of the constitution continues to be punctured as unipolarity within the nation continues to balloon.

Similarly, the juncture between the industrialists and the government is fabricated under the term ‘national interest’,¹¹ although it happens to be a case of unbridled cronyism. For instance, a report by Oxfam that was presented at the World Economic Forum, the nonpareil class that constitutes a meagre 1% of the population had amassed 40.5% of the nation’s wealth. The elite 10% happen to own 77% of the national wealth and assets.¹²

The disturbing numbers give the reader a reality check: poor distribution lies at the apex of the democratic deficits in India. Despite being the fifth largest economy in the world, the masses go to bed hungry – which undoubtedly question’s our country’s welfarist policy objectives and the socialist credentials enshrined within the preamble. It is not to say that free market trade must be defamed, but rather that the trickle-up economic model deserves consideration and even implementation by our nation-builders.

Samuel Huntington, a political scientist, had posited that countries which refuse to de-secularize and aspire to a higher quality of life for its people, can experience democracy only for temporary period before automatically becoming authoritarian.¹³ Without the untangling of these knots, the smooth functioning of

⁸ Sinha, Arun. “Why Too Many Indians Love Revadis.” *Free Press Journal*, 11 Aug. 2022, www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/opinion-why-too-many-indians-love-revadis.

⁹ Vaishnav, Milan. “The Decay of Indian Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 Oct. 2023, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2021-03-18/decay-indian-democracy.

¹⁰ Richhariya, Arpit. “Is the Indian Judiciary Independent Anymore?” *Jurist*, 13 May 2020, www.jurist.org/commentary/2020/05/arpit-richhariya-indian-judiciary-independence/.

¹¹ Shahwaiz, Mohd. “India and ‘Crony Capitalism’| Countercurrents.” *Counter Currents*, 28 Aug. 2019, countercurrents.org/2019/08/india-and-crony-capitalism/.

¹² “India: Extreme Inequality in Numbers.” *Oxfam International*, 9 Sept. 2022, www.oxfam.org/en/india-extreme-inequality-numbers.

¹³ Huntington, Samuel Phillips. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

a democracy cannot be actualized as justice and opportunity lie at the core of a free society that puts citizens first and not the leaders.

Conclusion

The perfect democratic makeover of India rests upon the pillars of equity, discipline, and social cohesion. As a vibrant land that is home to a vast array of cultures and intra-societies, India can truly become the ‘mother of democracy’ provided that it shifts to a more substantive framework than remaining hung up on its procedural happenings. A vote is pointless unless the citizen’s aspirations are made a note of.

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