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Historical Perspective on Indian Democracy

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ABSTRACT

After gaining independence from Britain in 1947, the government was initially dominated by the Indian National Congress Party ('Congress'). The party was heavily identified with independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist in 1948. Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister from independence and served for 17 years. Congress' electoral dominance would last for the next four decades. India is an incredibly diverse nation with many regional variations, religions and languages. Some external observers of India expected the country would break up as a result. In fact, Congress managed these differences effectively, redrawing state boundaries along linguistic lines and forming a coalition of regional powerbrokers, rather than attempting to impose a centralized state run out of Delhi. In the 1970s Indira Gandhi broke with this successful formula and attempted to concentrate power in the central government. When these efforts were resisted, she declared a state of emergency in 1975, arresting journalists, politicians and other opponents. In 1977 she lifted the emergency, held elections, and was defeated by a coalition, giving India its first non-Congress government.

KEYWORDS- independence, Congress, democracy, government, India, elections

INTRODUCTION

Though that government quickly failed, the election fractured the Congress coalition that had held since independence, creating regional Congress breakaway parties. It also empowered parties like the communists, whose Left Front would go on to rule the state of West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh, for three decades.

Support for Congress gradually eroded over the decades, but the party has remained reliant on the Gandhi dynasty – Indira and her descendants. (It is worth noting that Indira was Nehru's daughter and was not related to Mahatma Gandhi. She was married to Feroze Gandhi – who was not related to Mahatma either).

Rajiv Gandhi led Congress to power again in the 1985 election, which followed the assassination of his mother Indira in 1984. But this proved a one-off rather than a return to the dominance of old.[1,2,3]

25 years of coalition governments followed, sometimes led by Congress and some by other parties, from 1989 up until 2014. The 2009-2014 Congress-led coalition, led by Manmohan Singh, was increasingly portrayed by political opponents as representing a decadent, English-speaking elite lacking vision for India.

India grew relatively strongly during the period, but the sense that a more authoritarian form of government might deliver more was common, particularly among the urban middle class.

2014 saw Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001, elected prime minister. Modi had cultivated an image as an efficient governor who had transformed Gujarat's economy, attracting investment from various Indian industrialists.

He was also known for his Hindu nationalist beliefs and for the Gujarat riots of 2002. Months of communal violence spread across the state that year, after Modi blamed Islamic terrorists for a fire on a train of Hindu pilgrims.

The riots resulted in more than a thousand, mostly Muslim, deaths. Modi's administration was accused of both inciting the violence and then failing to bring it under control but was cleared of complicity in 2012.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi's party, won 31% of the vote in 2014's general election, enough to gain 282 seats – an outright majority. In 2019 the BJP increased its majority, winning 37% of the popular vote and securing 303 seats.



Most of the BJP's support is from the most populous and generally poorer Hindi 'heartland' states in the north of India like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, though it would like to grow support in other states.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the greatest challenge democracy faces in India is that it has failed to deliver the kind of sustained economic development enjoyed by neighbours like China over the last four decades. It has also failed to eliminate extreme poverty.

Educated elites in more globalized cities like Delhi and Mumbai live completely different lives from India's poorest citizens.

There has been considerable development in India since independence, but it has been uneven.

Low-wage, low-skilled jobs remain the probable form of employment for millions of young Indians, particularly in poorer, populous states such as Uttar Pradesh, creating a large population of poor disenchanted voters.

Indian nationalism and populism have fed off this discontent by scapegoating religious minorities – notably Muslims and Dalits – while increasing pride for many Hindus.

Prime Minister Modi and the BJP party represent the Hindu nationalist movement, whose ideology – Hindutva - has remained consistent for a century. Since before independence nationalists have argued that India should be the homeland for South Asia's Hindus, as Pakistan was for its Muslims.

The contemporary BJP hopes to consolidate the Hindu community – arguing, not without merit, that caste divisions were artificially exaggerated during the colonial period as part of a divide and rule strategy by the British.[4,5,6]

Since taking power the BJP has been preoccupied with pursuing this agenda. Hindu nationalists are not concerned about other religions which originate in India, such as Sikhism and Jainism, but its attitude to religions which originate elsewhere, notably Islam and Christianity, is more hostile. The BJP argues that other parties have privileged the minority (Muslim) population, and that it is levelling up the status of Hindus.

Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in India, was put under lockdown from 2019-2021 and subjected to a communications blackout. The region's autonomous status was revoked, and thousands were arrested, including Kashmiri politicians, activists and separatists.

In Assam, a north-eastern state, where illegal immigration is a significant problem and Muslims represent around the third of the population, detention camps have been created for those who cannot prove their Indian citizenship.

This followed the Citizenship Amendment Act passed in 2019, which eased citizenship requirements for various religions – but expressly omitted Muslims. 1.9 million Muslims had already been effectively stripped of their citizenship in Assam after being left off India's National Register of Citizens.

But the BJP's attempt to remake India has seen political discourse become increasingly polarized, while economic growth has slowed. It has also eroded trust in India's institutions and in basic democratic foundations like the rule of law.

Trust in the law is further undermined by India's dysfunctional legal system, which leaves many languishing in detention before trial for 'crimes' including peaceful protest. Meanwhile Amnesty International reports numerous uses of excessive force by India's police and security forces.

India also faces several demographic challenges. Decades of selective abortion have led to a significant imbalance between males and females. India is currently undergoing a 'demographic dividend' – a rising working age population. However, it is struggling to generate jobs. Unemployment stands at a 40-year high. Finally, population growth has been higher in poorer northern states than in generally better-educated southern states.



Indian democracy faces further challenges because of criminality in the political system. 43 per cent of those who won national parliament seats at the 2019 general election had been charged with a crime of some kind.

Democracy and corruption in India

Indian politics has been plagued by corruption for decades. A wave of scandals engulfed the Congress-led coalition government that assumed power in 2010.

Various accusations were made in relation to the 2010 Commonwealth Games. The Indian government formed a special committee to investigate allegations against the Games Organizing Committee, resulting in arrests of the Committee Chair and various other officials. As of March 2022, no convictions have occurred.

Another major 'scandal' saw India's telecoms minister, Anidimuthu Raja, imprisoned on corruption charges relating to India's auction of 2G spectrum licences. The case damaged the coalition government's support, though it was eventually dismissed.

As part of their winning 2014 electoral strategy the BJP promised to tackle corruption. High-profile arrests have taken place, including that of former finance minister and Congress party MP, Palaniappan

Chidambaram, who was charged in 2019 over allegations that he cleared foreign investments in exchange for bribes while minister in 2007.[7,8,9]

However, the BJP has faced corruption allegations of its own. Congress accused the government of favouritism in the awarding of contracts relating to a €7.8 billion purchase of Rafael fighter jets and the privatization of six major airports, with Modi allies winning lucrative contracts. Again, nothing has so far been proved.

Future of democracy in India

The trajectory of Indian democracy is more uncertain after two terms of BJP rule, as key democratic institutions have proven themselves to be brittle. Opponents and critical journalists have been harassed, prosecuted, investigated for tax irregularities or put under surveillance, restricting critical voices.

Election campaign finance laws have become more opaque, making it easier for individuals to make unlimited anonymous donations, undermining the integrity of elections. Worst of all, religious division and resentment has intensified, challenging the constitutional right to religious freedom and undermining the rule of law.

Government measures against Muslims have stoked a more polarized politics reflected online and in communities.

In December 2021 BJP allies helped organize an event in the northern state of Uttarakhand at which Hindu leaders called for violence against Muslims. Public lynchings have taken place elsewhere and been shared on social media.

The BJP is accused of encouraging religious division in pursuit of its objective of a Hindu homeland, rowing back from the earlier secular consensus.

Whether such a monochrome vision can fit in a country as diverse as India is far from clear cut.

Through its control of the media, monopolization of campaign finance and harassment of opponents, India seems set on a path to becoming an illiberal pseudo-democracy similar to Turkey or Russia. However, when the BJP has faced a united opposition in recent state elections it has generally lost.

It has also failed to usher in a period of higher economic growth. While the pandemic had a significant negative impact, so too have some of the government's policy choices.

Demonetization was a BJP initiative apparently intended to tackle widespread tax evasion. Around 90 per cent of all transactions in India take place in cash and few people pay income tax. In 2016 the government made 86 per cent of banknotes in India worthless in an effort to address the issue by surfacing untaxed cash.[10,11,12]



There were some positive impacts – widening the tax base and encouraging digital payments for instance – but most economists agree the pain far outweighed the gains, particularly in rural India.

In 2020 the government proposed a series of reforms to the agriculture sector. India’s system of agriculture is in dire need of reform. Most farmers are poor, and while the country is self-sufficient in food, malnutrition is widespread. Around 40 per cent of India’s food production rots somewhere along inefficient supply chains.

While some economists suggested the reforms would benefit India, many did not. Thousands of farmers, mostly from Punjab and Haryana, demonstrated outside Delhi. After months of protests in 2021 the government was forced to back down.

While there is a disparity between the BJP’s campaign success and its record in government, many Indians may well believe that any alternative party would have fared worse.

Nonetheless, the most significant factor in determining recent elections, and likely to determine the outcome of the next general election, will be whether opposition parties can work together or compete, splitting the anti-BJP vote.

RESULTS

Recently the Parliament 20 (P20) summit was held in New Delhi. It is an engagement group led by the parliamentary speakers of the G20 countries. It aims to bring a parliamentary dimension to global governance under the theme "Parliaments for One Earth, One Family, One Future."

- The event included an exhibition called "Mother of Democracy," highlighting India's ancient democratic traditions and values. India's democratic legacy, emphasizes the importance of equality, harmony, freedom, acceptability, and inclusivity, which have been integral to Indian culture from ancient times to the present.

How is India the Mother of Democracy?

- Ancient Concept:
 - Democracy has a long and deeply rooted history in India. This underscores the idea that democratic principles are not new to the Indian subcontinent.
 - The relationship between the ruler and the ruled, has been considered similar to that of a father and progeny.
 - The concept of Dharma (duty) is crucial in Indian democracy, encompassing the obligations of both the king (Raja Dharma) and the people (Prajā Dharma).[13,14,15]
- Core Values:
 - Indian democracy's core values—harmony, freedom, acceptability, equality, and inclusivity—underpin citizens' dignified lives;
 - Familial importance is seen in democratic family structures, with inclusive decision-making; women's participation in assemblies reflects inclusivity in early democratic processes.
 - India's democratic foundation, rooted in history and societal values, emphasizes enduring democratic principles guided by Dharma, shaping the roles of both the rulers and the ruled;
 - The historical tradition of participatory democracy underscores public involvement in selecting and approving rulers, highlighting the ruler's likability and the importance of public consent, mirroring a caring father ensuring the people's welfare.
- Philosophical Foundation Of Democracy:
 - Democratic-Spiritual-Social ethos: The Ancient Indian scripture, Rigveda, states: Ekam Sad Vipra Bahudha Vadanti-“The Supreme Reality is One, the sages call Him by various names.”
 - “Equality is the soul of democracy. Philosophers, saints and poets across India recognised this and preached its importance over centuries.



- Public Participation in the Vedic Era(6000 BCE - 1100 BCE):
 - The four Vedas (Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Samveda, and Yajurveda) encompass a comprehensive civilizational value system, including political, societal, and educational principles.
 - The Rigveda, the world's oldest composition, and the Atharvaveda mention representative bodies like Sabha, Samiti, and Sansad, terms still in use today.[16,17]
- Democratic Governance in Epics:
 - The Ramayana emphasizes governance for people's welfare, as seen in Rama's unanimous selection as king for Ayodhya.
 - The Mahabharata, highlighting Dharma, addresses ethics, morality, and governance, notably in Bhishma's advice to Yudhishtira on the battlefield, with the Bhagavad Gita offering ancient guidance on duties.
- Mahajanpada And Gantantra(7th And 8th Century BCE):
 - People's collective governance, a key feature in ancient Indian systems, manifested in Mahajanapada governance models: 15 Kingdoms with a council and 10 Republics where the Head was elected.
 - Texts like Ashtadhyayi highlight 'Loktantrik' institutions – Gana, Puga, Nigama, Janapada.
- Jainism:
 - Jainism, dating back to the 7th century BCE, promotes pluralism through Anekanatavada, acknowledging that truth has multiple facets. This fosters co-existence and tolerance, aligning with democratic principles.
 - With non-violence as a core tenet, Jainism advocates peaceful co-existence, still followed in India today.
- Buddhism (Since 500 BCE):
 - Buddha Sangha, founded by Gautama Buddha in the 5th century BCE, exemplified early democratic practices. This monk community upheld Buddhist doctrines and democratic traditions, promoting open discussions and elections for leaders. Buddhist principles continue to shape democratic values in India.
- The People's Leader:
 - Early India embraced participatory governance, electing a Mahasammatta (Great Elect) in the face of anarchy. The King, chosen by the people in a great hall, ruled as 'Vasetha' (head) for their protection in the Ganarajya, or People's State.
 - Buddhism's democratic principles influenced rulers, ensuring the adoption of democratic values in kingdoms. Inscriptions urged regular elections for prosperity and prevention of decline.
- Kautilya & Arthashastra(350 - 275 BCE)
 - Democracy prioritizes citizens, as emphasized in Arthashastra, a 3rd-century BCE governance treatise by Kautilya, advisor to Chandragupta Maurya.[18]
 - It asserts the ruler's happiness and welfare depend on the people's well-being, embodying India's enduring democratic principle of serving, not ruling.
- Megasthenes and Diodorus Siculus' Records(300 BCE)
 - Ancient Greeks noted democratic governance in various states. Indians had a commendable custom: no one as a slave, ensuring equal liberty. Global slavery ended 150 years ago, true democracy excludes it. But, India had never embraced slavery.
- Ashoka's Governance (265 - 238 BCE)
 - A state embodies democracy when equal rights and respect, protected by the law, ensure people's welfare.
 - Emperor Ashoka, post his victory in Kalinga, established such governance, promoting peace and wellbeing through systematic ministerial elections every five years. His ideals endure in India's national emblem, symbolizing democracy.



- Fa Xian's Records, 5th century CE:
 - Democracy empowers officials to serve the people. Fa Xian observed Indian respect for people, Rule of Law, and public welfare.
- Khalimpur Copperplate, 9. century CE:
 - Gopala was elected by people to replace unfit ruler. Inscriptions highlight the end of disorder and the principle of justice.
- Shrenisangha System, 876 CE:
 - Democratic administration in India involves electing and holding accountable administrative officials, including guilds and town leaders.
- Uthiramerur Inscriptions, 919 CE:
 - Inscriptions in South India's Uthiramerur temple, from ruler Parantaka Chola I, affirm democratic elections and local self-governance a thousand years ago.[19]
- Vijay Nagar Empire's Governance:
 - Sarv-sammati' is the democratic foundation, exemplified by Vijayanagar in South India, where Krishnadeva Raya's participatory governance, division into mandalams, nadus, and sthlas, emphasized self-governance at the village level—a model state for the people's benefit.
- Padishah Akbar (1556 – 1605 CE)
 - Padishah Akbar (1556 – 1605 CE) practiced inclusive governance, introducing "Sulh-i-Kul" to combat religious discrimination.
 - He fostered harmony with the syncretic religion "Din-i-Ilahi" and 'Ibadat Khana.' Navaratna counsellors aided pro-people initiatives, showcasing Akbar's advanced democratic ideals.
- Chhatrapati Shivaji(1630-1680 CE)
 - Chhatrapati Shivaji (1630-1680 CE), founder of the Maratha Empire, advocated for democratic governance. His Agya Patra outlined duties for the Ashtha-Pradhan, ensuring equal rights. Shivaji's lokatantra legacy persisted through his successors.
- The Constitution Of India (1947 Onwards):
 - India's Constitution, crafted by the diverse Constituent Assembly led by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, establishes a modern, democratic Republic.
 - It outlines the powers and relationships of the Legislature, Judiciary, and Executive, ensuring equality and universal suffrage.
 - With numerous amendments, the Constitution evolves to resonate with the people, embracing inclusivity in a three-tier system of Union, States, and Local Self-Government.
- Elections In Modern India (1952 Onwards):
 - India, a pillar of global democracy, has experienced 17 national elections, 400+ state elections, and over a million local self-government elections since independence.
 - The Election Commission, an independent body reporting to the President, ensures peaceful transfers of power, reflecting India's deep-rooted democratic ethos across all levels of governance.

What are the Sources that Help in Rediscovering Indian Democracy?

- Rich Literary Heritage: Mahabharat and Ramayan, India's epics, greatly influence the concepts of democracy and dharma in Indian culture, serving as enduring sources of wisdom.
- Democratic Values: India's democratic principles have persisted throughout its history, even through challenging times. The influence of both Western and traditional values has contributed to the modern Indian democratic system.



- Continuity of Values: Despite historical challenges, India has retained its democratic spirit, and this spirit is reflected in its democratic structures, including the Constitution and governance practices.[20]

What Role can India play as the Mother of Democracy?

- Nurturing values:
 - India can play a crucial role as the "Mother of Democracy," nurturing fundamental values through its diverse cultural heritage. The country's rich history, influenced by epics like Mahabharat and Ramayan, contributes to the cultivation of democratic principles and enduring ethical values.
- Public awareness:
 - India can play a crucial role as the "Mother of Democracy" by fostering public awareness. With a rich democratic heritage, the nation serves as a beacon for promoting civic engagement, political participation, and a deeper understanding of democratic principles among its citizens.
- Modern education:
 - India, as the Mother of Democracy in modern education, promotes democratic principles through a curriculum fostering critical thinking, inclusivity, and civic engagement, shaping generations with a strong democratic foundation.
- Global leadership in forums like G20:
 - India's commitment aligns with G20 goals of economic stability and sustainable development. India's democratic ethos advocates open dialogue, human rights, and inclusive policies, contrasting with some global players.
 - India amplifies developing nations' voices, promoting equitable representation and diverse perspectives in decision-making. India underscores the global importance of democratic values, shaping discussions and policies for international cooperation and understanding.
- India's Leadership:
 - India's presidency of the G20 reflects its commitment to democratic values and international cooperation. The country aims to lead by example and promote global democratic principles.
- Collective Strength:
 - India's progress and vision are grounded in the collective strength of its people. The focus is on the power of collaboration, consensus, and unity to overcome challenges and achieve national and global goals.

CONCLUSION

The Parliament 20 (P20) Summit in New Delhi showcased India's rich democratic heritage and core values to the world. The emphasis on inclusivity, equality, and harmony is central to Indian democracy.

India's role in the G20 demonstrates its commitment to democratic principles and its belief in the collective strength of its people to address global challenges. The country is working to inspire future generations to embrace these timeless democratic values through education and public awareness initiatives.[20]

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