Democracy in India: Is it an Unfinished Project?

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In the last couple of decades, democracy became the dominant problem-solving model of governance or its institutions worldwide. However, there is a sense of crisis and instability in the political landscape, at this juncture, concerning democracy and its ideals. It can be gleaned from the rise of populist regimes across the globe, which have undermined the foundations of democracy, the role of institutions, the nature of political, and people. Democracy is often seen as a revolutionary and modernising force. However, it did not seem to be playing the same revolutionary role which was once envisaged. Similarly, India inherited it merely on an instrumental basis; it has been reduced to just elections and figures of votes and calculation while ignoring its emancipatory role in vibrant polity. The inconsistencies of democracies across the globe force us to rethink and ponder upon it and its constituents afresh. The conceptual constituent could be traced back to modernity from where it draws its strength, and to look critically at democracy as a concept in the Indian context, it would be essential to look at modernity and its colonial past. India adopted the principles of these two revolutions into the theory and practice of our democracy without accompanying industrial revolution and societal churning. The consequent result is the present political development of nationalism and authoritarian populism.

Most countries in the world avowed the concept of democracy directly and indirectly. India also adopted democracy as a political ideal to govern its fortune after it got independent. In the course of historical progress since World War II, democracy became the dominant problem-solving model of governance or a form of institutional management across the globe. However, there is a sense of crisis and instability in the political landscape at this juncture concerning democracy. It can be gleaned from the rise of populist regimes across the globe that has undermined the foundations of democracy, i.e., the role of institutions, nature of political and the definition of its people. Therefore, romance with such concepts is not yielding results as it was projected. In other words, democracy as an ideal, often seen as a revolutionary and modernising force that breaks up traditional societies marked by communal life for the advancement of society as a whole and its constituent individuals, is far from being true.

However, in India, it did not play the same revolutionary role of breaking up the old traditional society as its predecessors in the western world, neither eliminating the poverty or social ills of the society. India inherited it merely on an instrumental basis; it has been reduced to just elections and figures of votes and calculation while ignoring its emancipatory role in vibrant polity. The inconsistencies of the trajectories that Indian democracy took vis-à-vis its consequences on societal spheres force us to rethink and ponder on its constituents afresh since the same fractures are emerging in the western world. The conceptual constituent could be traced back to modernity and colonial experience from where it draws its strength, and to look critically at democracy as a concept in the Indian context, it would be essential to look at modernity and its colonial past. Since both modernity and democracy are products of revolution in Europe, namely the industrial revolution and the French revolution, India adopted the principles of these two revolutions into the theory and practice of democracy without accompanying industrial revolution and societal churning. The situation is that we have provided for ourselves political rights and democracy without providing accompanying means to realise them. In this background, the objective of the essay is to attempt to understand the problems of democracy. The first part of the essay shall discuss the two critical frameworks to understand the current problems of democracy. The second part shall discuss the Indian democracy, constituted in different historical

trajectories and became central to its polity. Finally, the paper ends with an open-ended question: What would be Indian democratic theory be, if there is any?

Democracy at Crossroads

The current political climate across the globe, particularly in India, has been marked by increasing ideological polarisation. The crisis in liberal democratic politics is not the result of a singular causality but due to the convergence of several recent phenomena that have affected the conditions in which democracy has been exercised. There could be two reasoned approaches towards analysing this present moment of crisis in democracy, i.e., Marxism and Liberalism. Both have serious preoccupations which hinder a critical enquiry – conventional Marxism is excessively critical of what it regards as bourgeois democracy. On the other hand, the liberal approaches are too uncritical and treat democracy as a political form, ideologically uncriticisable simply because it is preferable to other available arrangements in the modern political order. Critical theorists like Chantal Mouffe analysis' somewhat helps capture the crisis in western liberal democracy through what she termed as 'post-politics'. It implies that there is a consensus established between the parties of the right and the left on the idea that there is no alternative to the neoliberal form of globalisation which has led to the blurring of political frontiers between right and left. Under the definition of modernisation and development by neoliberalism, they have accepted the diktats of global financial capitalism and its imposed limits on state intervention and public policies. Thus, we are currently witnessing an exponential increase in inequality, affecting the working-class and a significant part of the middle-class around the liberal democratic societies. The role of parliament and institutions that allow citizens to influence policy decisions has been drastically reduced. The notion that represents the core of the democratic ideal 'power of people' was abandoned. Today, talking about democracy only refers to the existence of elections.

Due to these, several problems like the democratic deficit, TINA factor and socio-political crisis engendered by neoliberalism have created a sense of loss among the people and a political void in the community. A variety of right-wing populist movements has captured these structural changes of political voidness and sense of loss. They claim to give back to the people the voice that the elites or establishment has confiscated. Regardless of the problematic forms that some of these movements may take, it is essential to recognise that they are the expression of legitimate democratic aspirations. The success story of these parties comes from the fact that they articulate democratic demands which are not taken into account by traditional parties in a very dangerous way. They provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things could be different. Another failure or mistake of liberal democracies Mouffe highlights is that they ignore the affective dimension mobilised by collective identifications based on 'passions', which they think are bound to disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of rationality. They undermine the role of passion and emotions in politics. That is why liberal democratic theory is so badly prepared to grasp the nature of populist movements and phenomena like nationalism.

By viewing it from a different angle focusing on the historical precedents to offer normative claims, Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight in '*How Democracies Die'* the erosion of norms as the greatest threat to contemporary democracy. However, it lacks the explanatory power of popular discontent with democratic norms, including the impact of digital technology, the changing nature of work, the threat of rising inequality and the reconfiguring of gender relations compared to Mouffe. Nonetheless, it becomes crucial to understand the institutional and normative explanation to broader our understanding of the crisis, which is not entirely new in its dimension. Norms are the unspoken rules and conventions that hold democracy together, many of them based on the idea of what is good for one's side in the short term, but may not do one any good in the long run, because they will not be in power forever. The two primary norms that they think underpin democracy are "mutual toleration" and "institutional forbearance". The first norm refers to acknowledging the legitimacy of

one's political opponents to compete for power through the democratic process, so long as they play within constitutional rules. Mutual toleration excludes the use or encouragement of threats and violence to bar political opponents from competing for office. The second norm is closely related to the rule of law; institutional forbearance means that elected officials cannot exercise legal action that intentionally privileges one group of individuals at the expense of another. Citing historical experiences of various democracies, they claim that the seeds of authoritarianism are sown during a crisis. The great irony of how democracies die is that the very defence of democracy is often used as a pretext for its subversion in which elected autocrats use economic crises, wars, or terrorist attacks to justify anti-democratic measures. In other words, elected politicians lead democratic erosion, often quite legally. They pay lip service to the constitution while behaving as though it did not exist and government efforts to subvert democracy are legal because they are approved by the legislatures or accepted by the courts. What is legal is not necessarily democratic. Undemocratic legislation can be passed, or existing laws manipulated to undermine democracy. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy, subtly and even legally, to kill it.

Indian Democracy

Mouffe's framework tries to put an onus on the neoliberal forces to understand the problem of democracy, while in the case of India, neoliberal forces have not been able to permeate the Indian society to a large extent. A large number of the Indian population still depend on agriculture for their livelihood; the manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP lags far behind the service sector, making it problematic to claim that India is an entirely industrialised society. One can enumerate various sociological analysis about social relations in the society where caste and group identities override other identities. The populist discourse based on group identity is undoubtedly evident these days and is particularly significant in the current mobilisation of the nationalist discourse—the case of Hindutva populism, which partially can be understood by Mouffe's framework. There is a sense of loss and political voidness created based on religious identity by the political community and captured by the right-wing party. The reason behind the assertion of identity is the lack of political channels to solve the religious fundamentalism and the politics practised by the Congress party and followed zealously by the Left and Lohiaites. Their disregard of the Hindu identity has led to a large gap that the Modi-led BJP has effectively filled. Similarly, the Levitsky and Ziblatt framework, which emphasises norms for defining democracy such as institutional forbearance and mutual toleration, becomes a problematic category in the context of post-colonial societies. It does not mean that democracies in post-colonial societies do not need these normative values to sustain their democratic framework without these preconditions. Indeed, Indian democracy has proved that democracy can still thrive in its own peculiar way without having its preconditions. However, the larger question is what would be the meaning of these normative ideals in a post-colonial society such as India, one of the most diverse and complex societies.

Nonetheless, to think critically and historically, it is necessary to go beyond these two methods in their Indian form, where liberal democracy has had to inhabit a different cultural and historical world whose peculiarities are very different from the western societies. The reason is that politics is also made by the social, cultural, economic and even climatic circumstances in which it happens. They might help draw a certain line, but it would always be incomplete to grasp the fuller picture. Since political theory needs to observe these background conditions with care, their existence can be read in two ways: theoretical and historical. The theoretical reading might falsely construe contingent historical conditions into theoretical preconditions for the future success of democracy everywhere. On the other hand, the historicist reading problematises if those conditions were contingent, why we need to see them as preconditions relevant to all cases.

Democracy as a form of government and a framework for organising politics has remained a contentious category in India. Parliamentary democracy is not considered by many as the ideal form or the ultimate goal of government. It is sometimes seen as a compromise to be accepted only for a transitional period after independence. Some of the leaders challenge the very foundations of democracy and suggest alternative forms to realise the ideal such as Mahatma Gandhi idea of village swaraj, Vinoba Bhave distinction between raj-niti and lok-niti, Jayprakash Narain idea of communitarian democracy or party-less democracy, M.N Roy – radical humanism, Ram Manohar Lohia and so on. There are various problems in Indian democracy as in all other democracies, but what makes this problem a unique experience is that the existence of democracy in India is itself a problem. In other words, viewing it from the angle of conventional political theory, Indian democracy is inexplicable. It defies all the preconditions that theory lays down for the success of democratic government – namely, the presence of a strong bureaucratic state, capitalist production, industrialisation, the secularisation of society (or at least the prior existence of a secular state), and relative economic prosperity (Parthasarthy & Rao, 2017; Kaviraj, 2011). Not only is it established without a precondition – even its relative success to a great extent; all of these go against some of the deepest assumptions of conventional democratic theory.

However, one could next jump into the details of what made it or why Indian democracy survived amid these unfavourable conditions or without having gone through the same historical experience. Varshney (1998) tries to analyse the grounding work done by scholars such as Bashiruddin Ahmed, Rajni Kothari, James Manor, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, and Myron Weiner. He framed the answer to this question in four parts. The first part is historical, which seeks to draw out the democratic implications of the processes of party formation and nation-building during the period of the independence movement. It was considered that Indian democracy was realised due to the political experience that indigenous leaders were able to during colonialism's last phase and the characteristics of the leading political party that emerged during the national movement. Subsequently, Varshney points out that recent comparative scholarship on the topic of nationalism suggests that, between the 1920s and the 1940s, the independence movement, under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru, and the Congress party, turned what previously had been only a cultural unit into a cultural-political unit-a nation. Without this transformation, Indian democracy would not have been possible. There has to be a political unit before there can be a democracy. In other words, he emphasises that it was not the British legacy or mercy but rather the strategic interactions that took place between British authorities and national movement leaders that laid the foundations of democracy. The second reason he highlights is economic, which suggests links between India's economic development strategy and its democracy.

Generally, there are two sorts of arguments of democracy concerning the economy. Firstly, Seymour Martin Lipset claimed a simple correlation between wealth and democracy that democracy needs certain levels of economic prosperity as a precondition to thrive. Though this largely remains true in western democracies, it does not help understand India, which is an exception. A second quite economic argument is by Barrington Moore, who studies the comparative economic history of varied countries to excavate the rationale that generated democracies. Moore concluded that eliminating the peasant question through the transformation of the peasantry into another social formation appears to augur best for democracy reasoning, which does not fit in the Indian democratic narrative. Varshney further says that what makes India an exception is that democracy has survived, albeit the persistence of peasantry made possible with the arrival of the green revolution. It boosted agricultural productivity so effectively that India, often threatened by food shortages within the 1950s and 1960s, enjoyed surpluses since the late 1970s. The agrarian question at large has been resolved by instant technological advancement and improving infrastructural capacities. It also made agriculture a productive enterprise (though only to some parts of the country) enough to blunt the contradiction between industrialisation and the peasantry's existence. Before the revolution under Nehru's leadership, the state-led heavy

industrialisation program sustained the democratic project. Among the solutions that Nehru proposed were nationalising the food grains trade, gathering small peasant farms into larger cooperatives, and compulsory government purchases of food grains at fixed and reasonable prices. Nehru was, however, persuaded by the Congress party leaders at the state level to abandon the two primary measures and substantially reduce the third as they were far better informed about the political realities of rural India. In effect, Nehru chose democracy over development. Nehruvian leadership realised that one could not give suffrage to rural India and at an equivalent time extract vast quantities of food from it at below-market prices. By not forcing the peasantry, the Congress party avoided putting democracy in danger. The third connects the structure of India's ethnic configuration to its democracy. India has suffered from Hindu-Muslim riots to caste-based strife to insurgencies in Kashmir or sons-of-the-soil movements in Assam, Telangana, and Maharashtra. Yet democracy has endured. Varshney argues that there is a distinction between dispersed and centrally focused ethnic configurations. While there is a plethora of locally or regionally specific identities in the dispersed configuration, the centrally focused configuration features identities that cut across the entire country. In the former, ethnic conflict remains localised, and therefore the centre can often manoeuvre between the fighting groups while seeming to face outside the conflict. In the latter, centrally focused configuration, the ubiquity of the cleavage tends to foster heightened conflict throughout the system, threatening the integrity of the country.

In India, all ethnic cleavages except one are regionally or locally specific. For instance, the Sikh-Hindu cleavage is essentially confined to Punjab and insurgency within Kashmir has never spilt over to an all-India level, and similarly, violence within the northeastern state of Assam killed hundreds within the early 1980s but never went beyond state borders. As a result, Punjab and Assam burned while living within the remaining parts of India went on more or less uninterrupted. Even the all-pervading caste system, intrinsic to the Hindu society, is locally based. Caste riots in one part of the country do not necessarily affect other parts. The same goes for the tribal populace. There are numerous tribal groups, but they form only 6 percent of the population and are widely dispersed over central and eastern India. When dispersed ethnic conflicts break out, it is easy for observers to urge the misunderstanding that the system is breaking down, even when the middle is holding. Parties mobilised around ethnic issues may cause turmoil in one state but cannot generate a spill-over effect to the entire country. An insurgency gets bottled up in one area, and democracy suspended there while the remainder of the country continues to function under more or less routine democratic processes with no threat of systemic breakdown. The only cleavage that can tear India apart is the divide between Hindus and Muslims. The geographic distribution of India's Muslims, moreover, magnifies their political significance. They are the majority within the states of Jammu and Kashmir, about 22 percent of West Bengal; 16 percent of Uttar Pradesh and 14 percent of Bihar in north-central India; and in the South, 18 per cent in Kerala and 11 percent of Karnataka. Overall, in several cities throughout the country, they constitute considerably 20 per cent of the total populace. Thus, unlike the Hindu-Sikh problems confined to Punjab or the tribal insurgencies limited to the northeast, a significant worsening of Hindu-Muslim relations anywhere could harm such relations everywhere. Especially, rising communalism among the Hindu majority makes things potentially unstable. Therefore, what we witness today is a glimpse of the bitter reality of Varshney's analysis. Though all his explanation stands validated, since Varshney wrote this text in 1998 when BJP was in a coalition government, he largely underplayed the danger of centrally focused identities that many scholars once thought might eventually recede within the background. However, the opposite is happening nowadays, and the BJP is at the helm of power. Lastly, the fourth and final part looks at the crucial role of political leadership within the period before independence, when democratic norms were institutionalised. A democracy cannot function if the institutional logic of the system is subservient to the private ambition or the ideological predilections of political leaders. Leaders must accept institutional constraints on their decisions. In a parliamentary system, this suggests accepting the sovereignty of parliament, working within the ambit of the constitution,

separation of power and opposing adverse court rulings only through proper constitutional channels, and if the system is federal, respecting the degree of autonomy afforded to state governments.

However, having discussed the main argument of why Indian democracy survives, taking a cue from Varshney's analysis which also in a way summarises the saga of Indian democracy, we should always search for models which supply a more critical way of asking the question about how far democracy is feasible, and what it does to societies. The strength of Indian democracy within different trajectories shows that rather than asking how Indian democracy has survived, we should probably turn the question around those preconditions for democracy. In other words, why should we convert the historically contingent conditions that accompanied the increase of western democracies into its theoretical preconditions? As democracy has evolved in India, it has developed forms and trends radically different from Western historical precedents. These differences do not constitute failures; they are what Palshikar calls an unrecognised form of success. They do not show the inability of Indian democracy to follow 'real' democratic models; rather, they indicate a historical process of differentiation of forms. India provides one example of the expansion of democracy in a world within which Europe does not constitute the whole continent of democracy but a province. This must be seen as the main achievement of democracy in India because it has not only established procedural democracy but has also established practices that go beyond the contours of procedural democracy. In recent Indian history, its consequences have been compelling, even if many social problems stay unresolved.

Nevertheless, can one claim that Indian democracy, which has stood the test of time, is a substantive democracy? The answer is unfortunately negative – the economic policy of successive governments has remained the same. Voters are happy, it seems, to see the leaders of their castes and communities occupying seats of power. They want their own governments, i.e., a government representing their caste or community and not necessarily their interests. It appears that people do not expect the government to deliver the goods anymore. They are satisfied with symbolic participation and intangible benefits. This behaviour reflects their feudal submissiveness, which supports the rule of their caste or community fellows. Apart from these implications, substantive and normative ideals of democracy, its deliberative nature, empowerment of individual choices in terms of good life and its institutional integrity on which it survives remain in jeopardy at large. Political mobilisation, regarded as one of the most significant factors contributing to the vitality of Indian democracy, could also be undertaken for purposes that are not necessarily democratic. These developments have a bearing on the central issue of India's democratic thinking and practice: the substantialising of democracy.

Conclusion

Varshney, in his recent article argues that from exclusionary religious principles to press freedom, "democracy which speaks with one voice, which elevates citizen duties over citizen rights, which privileges obedience over freedom, which uses fear to instil ideological uniformity, which weakens checks on executive power, is a contradiction in terms. For democratic theorists, these are all signs of creeping authoritarianism, not of democratic deepening. Elections alone cannot define what it means to be democratic." To sum up his central argument, India's democratic exceptionalism is now withering away. The point to be highlighted is that the notion once held that Indian democracy would continue to survive despite being at odds uniquely is waning nowadays. At this juncture, what the Indian democracy requires above all is neither celebration nor dismissal but a historical reflection. To frame it differently, what does success or failure of Indian democracy mean? The institutions of the liberal state remain fragile, and the society has descended into what appears to be an interminable state of turmoil. India presents a picture of one of the complex

multi-ethnic societies in the world being governed by a modern nation-state. Traditionally, all the communities maintained their own form of social governance and evolved procedures for resolving conflicts; all were subjected to political governance limited to the maintenance of larger social and economic codes. Indeed, a number of these receiving societies have their own civilisational pasts and highly evolved, complex forms of governance. Although their rulers did not often depend on the direct consent of subject populations, they sought to retain the legitimacy of their rule through a multi-layered structure of authority that accommodated various interests and identities in society. While representing power as sanctified authority, the ruler presided over a system of multiple governance in the society. The democratisation of forms of governance in such societies, if they succeed in maintaining critical institutional linkages with tradition, is not a disjunctive and disruptive process.

For various reasons such as colonisation, westernisation and modernisation, these societies have not been able to develop political institutions of democracy based on their own political-cultural traditions. Thus, the process of global homogenisation is not through intense ideological and normative debates about the superiority of ideals such as freedom and equality, but in terms of its utility for expanding the global market and for hastening a country's economic development. The unique project of globalising liberal democracy is concerned with ensuring the governability of a country to maintain the stability of the world market and openness of political order to global political-institutional and economic initiatives. The tool for its homogenisation is the global institutions of democratic decision-making and accountability as on the hegemonic power of the world capitalist system. This point brings in Nandy articulation about his reservation about democracy altogether, where he argues that the governing function of the State which unleashes the democratic project, usually negatively defined in post-colonial societies since numerous cultural and social entities were held together within a broad order of social hierarchies, provided a great deal of fluidity and interaction among them. Such an order provided cultural expression of pluralities and multiple and overlapping governance within its fold. Such a society was strait-jacketed into a single territorial state through colonial rule into nation-state after independence which relentlessly pursuing the project of homogenisation of diversities use of coercive power of the state for effecting homogenisation in the society and counter-violence by the political-cultural entities resisting such incursions of the state constitute the problem for the political system in India today. The sense of cohesion and boundary, which was strongly perceived and lived by Indians primarily in cultural-civilisational terms for centuries became partly co-terminus with an idea of a single territorial polity – i.e., centralised governance. The discourse on democracy is unidimensional in terms of liberal democracy – faith in the formal institutions of representation has eroded – the Hindutva movement is now addressing the issue of creating a national society in which the State can find stability by rooting its governance politically and culturally. In this context, there is an urgent need to expand and indigenise the discourse on democracy.

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