The Indian Model of Democracy: A Historical and Contemporary Overview

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Abstract

The concept of democracy in India has deep roots in its ancient traditions, often characterized by a unique blend of collective decision-making, social harmony, and respect for diverse viewpoints. Unlike the modern notion of democracy, which focuses primarily on political systems and electoral processes, India's traditional approach to democracy can be traced to its ancient republics (Mahajanapadas), where decision-making was often collective, and leaders were chosen based on merit and consensus. Texts such as the Rigveda and Upanishads emphasize the importance of participatory governance and the welfare of the community, highlighting the role of the people in the functioning of the state.

The panchayat system, which remains an integral part of Indian governance today, has its origins in these traditional practices, where local self-governance and direct participation in decision-making were emphasized. Even in medieval India, rulers were expected to consult with their subjects and address their grievances, reflecting a deep commitment to the ideals of justice and accountability.

In modern India, the idea of democracy has evolved with the establishment of a parliamentary system, but its traditional roots continue to influence governance structures. The Indian concept of democracy, therefore, is a harmonious blend of ancient practices of collective decision-making and modern political ideals, ensuring inclusivity, justice, and representation for all.

Keywords: India, democracy, history, culture, parliamentary system, Indian perspective, social harmony, inclusivity

1. Introduction

Democracy, often described as the "government of the people, by the people and for the people" has been a central tenet of India's political fabric. The Indian perspective on democracy has evolved over time, shaped by historical events, cultural diversity, and the country's ever-growing population. Famous political theorist Raymond G. Gettell commented that, "the main problem in a modern democratic government is to secure a proper balance between the recognized values of democracy and the equally desirable principle of efficiency. It must be highlighted that Indian society has, since long, been extensively exposed to the democratic style of governance. Indian society has not treated democracy as only a legal- institutional structure or a form of government. Rather, we have always believed in democracy as a greater value system. It embodies the principles of equality, inclusivity, and popular participation in the decision-making processes (Bhambhari, 1974). Democracy empowers individuals, fostering a society where diverse voices are heard, rights are protected, and progress is collectively pursued. At its core, democracy represents the belief that power must reside with the people. It thrives on the principles of political equality, civil liberties, and the rule of law. Democracy breathes life into fundamental rights and freedoms that underpin human existence. These include freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the right to participate in the decision-making processes that shape our lives.

2. Ancient Roots of Democracy in India

Democracy in ancient India has a rich history that predates ancient Greek democracy. The Indian subcontinent witnessed the development of democratic practices long before they emerged in other parts of the world. India's democratic systems evolved over time, and various forms of governance were practiced in different regions. It is important to note that the concept of democracy in India varied across different periods and regions.

There appears to be a Panchayat system prevalent during the Harappan times. The administration of the settlements including cosmopolitan cities was probably managed by group of elderly people. There appears to be a two-tier administrative system (Kapoor, 2021). The sites like Harappan and Mohenjo-daro could have an important central administrative center.

Democracy thus including Ballot Box democracy is not an invention of the Greek civilization, it was there in the Indian civilizational roots. As in most matters of ideas and human institutions, the roots of people's self-governance also lie in India's Vedic period going back, vide the recent archaeological Rakhigadhi and the Sanauli excavations, to at least 5000 BCE. Lokatantra (Democracy) of India is a self –governing society and polity in which all people have at all levels from the village to the state, a voice in their governance by choosing, nominating, or electing those who are given the responsibility of regulating the society and or governing the polity on the principle of dharma and justice.

In India, there was a kind of participative governance, governance by discussion with all the stakeholders, had been practiced since the ancient times. The concept of democracy can be traced back to as early as the Vedic period (1500-500 BCE). We find from the Vedas that national life and activities 'were expressed through popular assemblies and institutions which worked as a platform for decision making and consensus building. The decisions taken through these assemblies were binding for all the subjects (Manusmriti; Gupta, 2021). The assemblies which were attended by all the members of the community performed various legislative and executive functions including nominating the king or the representatives where the community was too large to allow everyone to be present. Here we can trace the roots of modern indirect representative democracy. It is quite clear that there was a hierarchy of assemblies, samitis, beginning with the village and going up through a whole group of villages, that is the whole community, to finally all the communities together. Vedas indicate all this and hymns in both Rigveda and Atharvaveda specifically, describe the function of the highest samiti to arrive at a 'common policy of state', 'common aim and common mind'. The word samiti, it is important to note, continues to be used in that very meaning in all modern Indian languages.

Vedas and other ancient Indian texts attest to the co-existing republican states and Kingships. Instances of women being elected as leaders or members of assemblies have been documented in various historical texts (Bhambhari, 1974; Chauhan). This early recognition of gender equality within democratic practice is a testament to the progressive nature of ancient Indian society.

The democratic traditions of ancient India were remarkable in their outlook and implementation. Assemblies, republics, panchayats, and the active participation of women and marginalized communities showcased a deep-rooted commitment to collective governance and inclusivity. Hindu dharmashastra thinkers like Manu, Kautilya, Yajnavalkaya, and Kamandaka believes that Ram Rajya is that form of the governance which ensures the realization of justice and welfare of common man, as the goal of governance. Ram Rajya envisages a society in which virtue, morality and justice are the core ideals around which day-to-day interactions between citizen and state occur. Ram Rajya, with its focus on justice, equity, and welfare for all, shares common ground with the principles, democracy upholds. The doctrine of Rajya Dharma as justice and its dignity has been declared by Manu in these terms(Manusmriti; Gupta, 2021).

"If justice is violated, it destroys the state; if preserved, it preserves the State"

The ancient Indian texts do not specifically outline concept of democracy as it is understood in the modern sense, they provide valuable insights into various aspects of governance during those times. One of the earliest references to democracy in India can be found in the Rigveda, an ancient test from around 1500 BCE. It mentions the Sabha and Samiti, which were assemblies of people who debated and made decisions collectively. These assemblies allowed for consultation and participation of various groups within society. Arthashastra, the ancient treatise written by Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) provides detailed insights into statecraft, administration, and governance in ancient India (Mishra, 1997; Chauhan) . It highlights the role of the king as a

central authority responsible for maintaining law and order, economic prosperity, and welfare of the people, while it does not directly advocate for democracy, it emphasizes the importance of listening to advisors, considering different perspectives, and seeking consensus before making any decision (Mishra, 1997).

Another form of ancient Indian democracy was the Mahajanpadas, or the "great kingdoms." These were independent republics or oligarchies that functioned with a relatively high degree of autonomy. These republics had assemblies and councils where decisions were made, and important matters were often put to a vote. The leaders of these republics were often chosen through a democratic process, such as election or selection by a council. Another example was seen during reign of Mauryan emperor Ashoka (273 BC to 236 BC). Ashoka established a system of governance that included administrative units called "Janapadas." These janapadas had a council of representatives, and their opinion were taken into consideration for making important decisions (Sharma, 2021).

The most well-known and influential example of ancient Indian democracy was the republic of Vaishali. It is believed to have had a complex and structured governance system. The Lichchhavi clan ruled Vaishali, and they practiced democratic governance through assembly called the Vajjian Sangha. The Sangha included representatives from different classes and provided a platform for consensus-based decision making (Sharma, 2021; 3. Mahabharata).

It is important to note that ancient Indian democracy was not identical to modern western democracies. Ancient India differed in its political structures and ideologies from the modern ideas of democracy. The level of inclusivity and participation varied across regions and civilizations. Voting rights were often limited to certain sections of society, such as male citizens belonging to certain social classes. Thus, the ideas of fairness, representation, and equal participation that are often associated with democracy today were not fully realized (Kapoor, 2021; Lochan, 2011). Overall, democracy in ancient India demonstrated a form of collective decision-making and valued consultation and participation of citizens. It played a significant role in shaping the region's political and social fabric.

3. Influence of Social and Political Movements

In modern times, India's tryst with democracy began in 1947 when it gained independence from British colonial rule. The country's founding-father envisioned a democratic system that would empower its diverse population and uphold the ideas of equality, justice, and liberty (Bhambhari, 1974).

India's status as mother of democracy is not only significant for nation but also resonate globally. Its success in establishing and maintaining a democratic system against all odds has inspired many other countries around the world. India's commitment to democratic ideas serves a beacon of hope for nations striving to establish inclusive and participatory governance.

The social and political movements have shaped public discourse, influenced decision making, and pushed for progressive changes in Indian democracy. The Indian Independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and various political parties, brought an end to British colonial rule in 1947. This led to the establishment of a democratic framework in India. Likewise, the Dalit and social justice movements have sought to address caste-based discrimination and unequal hierarchies in Indian society. They have been instrumental in broadening the democratic space and advocating the rights of marginalized communities.

Women's rights movements have also been instrumental post-independence in advocating gender equality and securing legal reforms to enhance women's rights in Indian democracy. These movements have played a crucial role in bringing attention to issues such as gender-based discrimination, domestic violence, and political representation.

In the recent past, environmental, and anti-corruption movements have emerged in India which have redefined Indian democracy, making it more vibrant, inclusive, and participatory. These movements have raised

awareness about ecological conservation leading to policy changes and the inclusion of environmental concerns in democratic governance. Besides this, recent anti-corruption movement, such as the Anna Hazare led movement and the subsequent formation of Aam Aadmi Party, have focused on combating corruption in Indian politics. These movements have highlighted the need for transparent and accountable governance in Indian democracy.

4. The Framing of India's Democratic Constitution

The framing of India's democratic constitution is regarded as one of the most significantmilestones in the country's democratic history. It laid the foundation for a vibrant and diverse nation with the principle of justice, equality, and liberty at its core. The process of framing this constitutionwas remarkableendeavour, reflecting the wisdom, aspirations, and the collective will of the Indian people.

The framing of India's constitution took place in the aftermath of the country's struggle for independence from the British colonial rule. The Indian National Congress, under the leadership of prominent leaders like Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, played a pivotal role in envisioning and shaping the constitution. The constituent Assembly, consisting of representatives from all walks of life, worked tirelessly for almost three years to draft a constitution that would govern the newly independent India. Democracy in the Constituent Assembly of India was an important topic of discussion as it laid the foundation for democratic principles and values that define India today (Bhambhari, 1974).

We would say that democracy in India has survived for so long because of our values and strong civilizational foundations. Pluralism, cultural diversity, and willingness to share political power are some features of Indian society that have allowed a huge variety of opinions and belief system to co-exist. When Indians were framing the constitution for themselves, it is these values and belief systems that came into play, sometimes consciously but mostly in a subliminal fashion. One of the key aspects of democracy in the Constituent Assembly was the principle of universal adult suffrage. Shri R.K. Sidhwa said clearly in the debate on 17th November 1949 that despite 85% of the Indian population being illiterate, they had still taken the risk of adopting universal adult franchise because that was the key to democracy. While discussing the Preamble to the Constitution on 17th November 1949, the members pointed out the Indian roots of the concepts of justice and liberty that are keywords in the Preamble. Seth Govind Das said that Indian culture was the only one out of six ancient cultures to survive in the modern day: China, Egypt, Greece, Babylon, and Mesopotamia. He also said that while it was neither possible nor desirable to re-create the India of Rigvedic vintage, at the same time," the civilization and culture, which is the heritage of our early history and the continuity and vitality of which in our age Mahatma Gandhi – the Father of our Nation – sought to promote in many a way, should not be rejected by us". Shri B. Dassummed it up rather well when he said, "Sir, after the three years' hard work, however, inadequate maybe my contribution in the shaping of this Constitution. I have concluded that we have done our task well. There must be differences of opinion Constitution." because if all of us will be of one mind it will be fascism or autocracy, it cannot be a democracy. Therefore, there might have been and there may be differences now and hereafter, but the fact stands out foremost that we have got our Constitution, a democratic"

The framing of India's democratic constitution sought to establish a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic country that would guarantee justice, equality, liberty, and dignity for all its citizens. The constitution aimed to create a framework for governance that reflected the aspirations of the diverse Indian population and fostering an inclusive society. The constitution embraces a federal system of government with a strong central government and individual state governments. It outlines the distribution of powers between the center and states, ensuring that both levels of government have defined roles and responsibilities.

5. India's Democratic achievements

India with its rich cultural heritage and diverse population, stands proudly as the world's largest democracy. Since its independence in 1947, India has made significant strides in establishing and nurturing its democratic

ideals. Through inclusive governance, free elections, and active citizens participation, India's democratic achievements shine as a beacon of inspiration for nations worldwide.

One of India's democratic achievements lies in its commitment to inclusive governance. Despite its vast population and diverse cultural tapestry, India has successfully maintained a pluralistic society, accommodating, and representing various linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities. Though a federal structure, with power shared between the central government and states, India ensures the interest and aspirations of different regions are well represented in decision-making process. Furthermore, India's constitution provides a framework that upholds secularism, equality, and social justice. By safeguarding individual rights and freedom, India allows its citizens to thrive and contribute to the democratic processes, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership in nation's governance.

Central to the democratic progress is its commitment to conduct free and fair elections. The country has an extensive electoral system, widely regarded as one the most efficient and transparent in the world. Every five years, millions of Indian citizens exercise their right to vote, ensuring their voices are heard and their choices reflected in the formation of government. The Election Commission of India, the independent body diligently overseas the electoral process, ensuring its fairness and integrity. Through electronic voting machines (EVMs) and strict enforcement of Representation of peoples Act and other electoral laws, India has successfully minimised electoral malpractices, enabling the establishment of a government that genuinely represents the will of the people.

India's democratic journey has witnessed remarkable levels of citizen participation. Despite its challenges, such as social inequalities and economic disparities, India has fostered a vibrant civil society that actively engages in public affairs. The right to freedom of speech and expression empowers Indian citizens to voice their opinion, question the government and engage in peaceful protests, guaranteeing the robustness of democratic ideals. Additionally, the democratic decentralization through initiatives like Panchayati Raj Institution and local self-governance have facilitated grassroot democracy. Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies have been strengthened by grating them constitutional status in 1992 through 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment Acts. Now, citizens at local level actively participate in decision -making, prioritizing community needs and fostering a sense of responsibility towards collective development.

India's democratic achievements are further fortified by its robust system of constitutional safeguards. The Indian judiciary acts as an independent and impartial interpreter of the constitution, ensuring that the principles enshrined are upheld. The courts play a vital role in protecting the fundamental rights, resolving disputes, and maintaining a balance of power between different branches of government. Moreover, freedom of press the press is cherished in India. A vibrant media landscape plays a critical role in safeguarding democracy by holding those in power accountable, acting as watchdog, and informing the public about critical issues.

6. Challenges to Indian Democracy

Indian democracy, the world's largest democracy, has made significant progress in its journey towards political and social inclusivity. With its diverse cultural heritage and vibrant political landscape, it has successfully weathered numerous challenges since gaining independence in 1947. However, it also faces various challenges that can undermine its ideals. As the country evolves and confronts new realities, several pressing challenges pose significant threats to the stability and efficacy of the democratic framework.

One of the most significant challenges confronting Indian democracy is the persistent social and economic inequality. Despite commendable economic growth over the past few decades, a significant portion of the population remains marginalized, deprived of basic necessities, and excluded from the benefits of development. This glaring disparity marginalizes certain communities and can breed frustration, leading to social unrest and

political instability. Addressing this challenge requires comprehensive reforms aimed at reducing poverty, empowering marginalised groups, and providing equal opportunities for all.

Another challenge that Indian democracy confronts is corruption. It continues to be a major obstacle to India's democratic growth. Rampant corruption erodes trust in government, undermines institutions, and hinders economic progress. Rooting out corruption requires multi-pronged approach, including strengthening anti-corruption laws, improving accountability mechanisms, promoting transparency, and enhancing public participation in decision-making processes. Additionally, promoting ethical values and instilling a strong sense of integrity in public officials is crucial for building a corruption-free society.

Apart from above, communal tensions and religious conflicts have periodically threatened social harmony and have potential to destabilize the country. It is essential to reinforce and uphold the principle of secularism, religious tolerance, and respect for diversity. Promoting interfaith dialogue, fostering inclusive policies, and combating hate speech are crucial to nurturing a robust and inclusive democracy.

Indian democracy has demonstrated resilience and adaptability over the years, but it must confront and address the challenges it faces to sustain its progress. By prioritising social and economic equality, fighting corruption, fostering religious harmony, reforming electoral processes, and bridging the digital divide, India can build a resilient, vibrant, and inclusive democracy.

7. Future Perspectives and Recommendations

There is a need to develop a long-term vision forIndian democracy that is inclusive, sustainable, and adaptive to the evolving challenges. Focus should be on strengthening key democratic institutions such as the judiciary, election commission, and anti-corruption agencies. Ensuring the independence, transparency, effectiveness of these institutions is critical for maintaining a robust democracy.

Electoral reform is need of the hour to make Indian democracy strong and vibrant. There is need to implement measures to ensure free and fair elections, such as increasing transparency in political funding, leveraging technology for voter registration and verification and enhancing effectiveness and independence of Election Commission.

Although, constitutional status has been granted to Panchayati raj institutions and Urban local bodies through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992, these institutions still lag behind in terms of effectiveness at the grassroot level. There is urgent need to strengthen these local bodies to bring democracy at the grassroot level by giving them more teeth and nail.

India must prioritize inclusive and sustainable development that addresses socio-economic disparities among different sections of society. Ensuring that marginalized communities, including women, minorities, and rural populations, have equal access to opportunities and resources to make Indian democracy more sustainable and inclusive. Apart from this, we need to invest in civic education programs to promote democratic values, awareness of rights and responsibilities, and active citizenship from an early age. This can help cultivate an informed and engaged citizenry.

Collaborative governance has emerged as a bedrock of 21st century. Fostering a culture of collaborative governance involves citizens, civil society organizations, and government entities. The better policy outcomes can be achieved through participatory decision-making processes that involve multiple stakeholders. This will go a long way in strengthening the foundations of Indian democracy in 21st century and foster a more inclusive, accountable, and responsive system of governance. India can be a torch-bearer of democracy in tumultuous and transitionary phase as it assumes the presidency of G20 block. All the developing countries look at India as a model of democracy which has the potential to solve the problems of today's world order.

8. Conclusion

By delving into the historical roots of democracy in India, recognising the influence of social and political movements, and analysing India's democratic achievements, this research paper asserts that India is rightly considered as the "mother of democracy" In conclusion, India's journey as a mother of democracy is the testament to the power of democratic ideals in shaping a nation. With its commitment to universal suffrage, strong institutions and active citizenry, India stands as shining example of democracy in action. Through an exploration of the challenges faced by Indian democracy and recommendations for future progress, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the broader understanding of democracy as an enduring and evolving concept. That India to the great surprise of the world with all its multiple-plurality is today the world's largest successful working democracy is, because Indian people, infused with the spirit of equality, have had since the very Vedic times a *lokatantarika-parampara.*

India's democratic journey reflects a unique blend of historical, cultural, and social factors. Despite the challenges it faces, India's commitment to democracy is evident in its vast electoral processes, decentralization efforts, and vibrant citizens engagement. However, there is still a room for improvement, particularly in addressing socio-economic inequalities, ensuring transparent governance, and deepening citizens participation. A robust and inclusive democracy remains crucial for India's continued socio-economic development and aspirations for more equitable society.

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