

Grammar of Democracy

Part 2: Indian Democracy

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Flawed assessments of Indian democracy

- India turned into an “Electoral Autocracy”. *Varieties of Democracy project, 2021*
- India dropped from “Free” to “Partly Free” status: *Freedom in the World 2021* by Freedom House
- India is a “Flawed democracy”: EIU’s *Democracy Index, 2021*
- India is undergoing ‘democratic backsliding’ (a more severe and deliberate kind of democratic erosion): *Global State of Democracy, 2021*, International IDEA

Indian model?

- Conditions under which India began its journey as independent democracy:
 - Low levels of industrial and agricultural development
 - Poverty and very low levels of human development
 - High social pluralism
 - Strong traditional ties and values

An 'improbable democracy' (Dahl), 'a puzzle' (Lijphart)?

- Is Indian democracy different from Western democracies?
The Indian model: the challenge of simultaneous change –
Rajni Kothari

The “Banyan tree”



John Keane uses the metaphor of the “Banyan tree” to describe Indian democracy.

“The sacred banyan tree symbolized the coming of democracy to India: not only did India now feel more democratic, but democracy itself came to feel more Indian” (p.632).

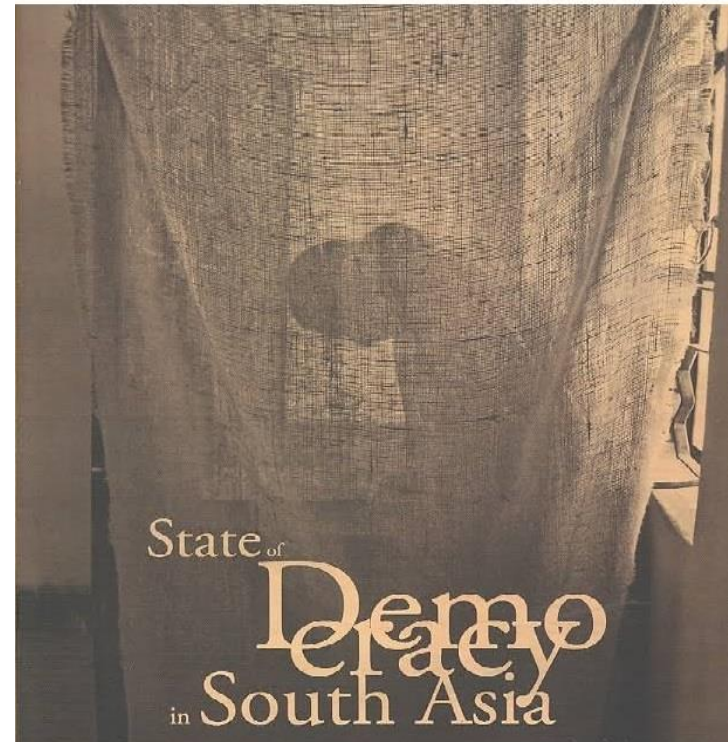
John Keane seeks to underline the path-breaking historical importance of the Indian experiment with democracy and to underscore the much greater depth and span of this form of democracy.

“The only game in town”

Those who support democracy outnumber those who do not.

Democracy has become ‘the only game in town’. Support for democracy, as a value and as an institutional form, is the highest in India among the South Asian nations.

“Democracy has become an object of desire – something that is viewed positively, is considered suitable, and is generally preferred over its opposite”. (p.86)



Who wants democracy?



Ordinary people want democracy in India, while the elite are ambivalent. People want democracy because they see it as a means to gain self-respect and improve their living conditions.

“Democratic politics seems to have finally become internal to the political consciousness of people. Democracy emerges as a choice made by the people, not any longer as an act of faith granted from above. It is the elite who are becoming alienated from democratic institutions and practices” (p.18). Javed Alam



Resilience of Indian democracy

- The historical inheritance (sustained struggle for freedom from colonial rule; Institutions of democracy under the British rule; Mature political leadership; presence of a small middle class)
- Structural factor: Absence of any one nationality dominating the rest (unlike Soviet Union and somewhat like EU of today)
- Formation of linguistic states and the federalization of the polity
- Inclusive language policy
- Secularism: constitutional safeguards as well as in political practice
- Identity politics: emergence of parties that appeal to caste, religion and region, language and they coming to wield political power
- Democratic upsurge; Extent of popular support for democracy; Convergence of elite and mass attitudes towards democracy

Democracy deficits

Political decay and governability crisis?

- Undermining of political institutions
- Lack of inner-party democracy
- Political and bureaucratic corruption
- Populism and patronage politics
- Low levels of trust in political institutions

Fragility of support for democracy. The proportion of 'core democrats' is still low compared to western democracies. There is also the unease that while democracy has expanded over the decades, its deepening has not taken place in terms of improving the living conditions or bridging the disparities between various groups and classes

Indian democracy has not provided for radical solutions to problems in social life. Constrained by the hegemonic bourgeois condition and the remnants of the ritual world -- Javeed Alam

India in the world of democracy

- One-third of the population of the world living in democracies is in India. No global theory of democracy is complete without including and learning from the Indian experience
- Not an exception but a model: Development and welfare through democracy in a multi-national and socially diverse country which confronts poverty under post-colonial condition. Pluralism and respecting diversity; Inclusion and empowerment; Federalism and decentralization.

Why are democracies in crisis

- Why are democracies in decline? Is it due to the legitimization crisis that the western democracies are unable to resolve? Growing inequalities in income, lack of employment, the decline of manufacturing industries in the west, inability of the regimes to sustain welfare programmes to support education and health for all, etc.
 - Voters are becoming more sophisticated, informed. Political leaders and parties or the government or the public media are not the only sources of information.
 - People's expectations of the accountability of the government have grown. Their levels of trust in politicians around the world have gone down.
 - Electorate are in constant search of political alternatives. They are not bound by loyalties based on traditional social identity, family, or party. As voters become more mobile, the stability of party support has declined and electoral volatility has increased.
 - Political competition has become closer and more intense. Governments and politicians are now open to greater scrutiny. Political discourse and language politicians use have become coarse and vitriolic.

Democracy's future

- ✓ More democracy rather than less democracy: trust collective wisdom of the voter.
- ✓ Moving beyond minimalist conception of democracy: emphasis on equality, participation and deliberation
- ✓ Moving beyond markets. Markets do not solve all problems. Significance of welfare policies
- ✓ Toleration of dissent, diversity and individual freedoms; protection of minority rights
- ✓ See politics not as a game to gain and retain power for the leader and his family and use that to amass wealth for one's own self, but a fair way of offering people genuine alternatives as the basis of government policy and action
- ✓ Strengthen democratic political institutions; enforce rule of law; increase citizen's efficacy

If yearning for order and security led to the creation of the state and continue to be at its base, yearning for freedom, equality and personal well-being are the foundations of a democratic state. There has been a see-saw movement between the two conceptions – between the conception of a state led by a strong ruler in an autocratic manner to ensure the security of the individual and the conception of a state as an association of free and equal citizens capable of active participation in public affairs. Democracy will keep expanding and winning over the minds of people as more and more of them become educated, attain reasonable standards of living, and break free from conditions of subordination and relations of dependency. This is the central characteristic of the politics of our time. The two conceptions of democracy -- the procedural and the substantive – need not be opposed to each other. The task is to blend them together in an ideal and workable whole. That should constitute the grammar of democracy in our times.

Thank you.