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Indian Democracy's Paradoxical Moment

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Even as Indian democracy has deepened, democratic norms and the representative character of its politics have declined. Is this set to be the new equilibrium?

India's democracy has experienced a participatory upsurge in this decade. A far greater proportion of the electorate is coming out to vote in assembly and parliament polls. An increasing number of women are voting and contesting. More parties are contesting elections, ensuring an increase in the number of groups who have a voice within the system. There has been a power shift in nature and background of the political elite: from urban, English-speaking, and upper-class figures to those from the hinterland schooled in institutions obscure to the pejoratively termed 'Lutyens' old elite (Baru 2021).

Clearly, the roots of Indian democracy are expanding deeper and at a faster pace than ever before. Yet, two paradoxes have emerged. The first is that the increased participatory upsurge in Indian politics has gone along with truncated democratic norms. The second is that the greater social diversity within power structures has not produced an increase in the actual representative character of Indian politics.

> The foundational principles that underpinned India's 'First Republic' are giving way to ideas that will shape up a 'New India,' and a 'Second Republic'

Scholars agree that today's political, social, and economic trends are enduring breaks from the past, marking how the foundational principles that underpinned India's 'First Republic' are giving way to ideas that will shape up a 'New India,' and a 'Second Republic'. Any substantive analysis of India's emerging politics must situate itself in the paradoxes and quandaries that mark this moment of transition.

Democracy deficit amidst participatory upsurge

The deepening of democracy comes against the backdrop of concerns about a liberal deficit in India's democratic endeavour (Varshney 2022a). Both the 'hardware' (institutions, political parties, and the media), and the 'software' (the observance of rules and regulations, conventions, and precedents to enable institutions to function in a transparent, accountable and effective manner) of Indian democracy stand challenged (Khosla and Vaishnav 2021). If we see the legitimacy of a democracy beyond competitive spirit displayed during elections, then core institutions are operating under constraints (Khaitan 2020).

> The more unnerving outcome has been the exposition of the longstanding weaknesses of India's public institutions.

Courts have been selective in upholding the constitutional spirit, especially in context of the repression of civil liberties and crackdowns on political dissent. The Election Commission, long seen as a bulwark of free and fair elections, has been stained by questions of political favour and by not heeding to calls to rectify opacity in electoral funding. Scholars have pointed out that citizens' freedom to express themselves has been severely curtailed. The coercive machinery of the state has been used against political dissidents with no compunction. Vigilantism and 'bulldozer justice' is increasing becoming normal, and the use of national security laws and sedition cases has increased. Religious minority-baiting has become shriller along with what seems to be a tacit complicity by the governmental apparatus.

Public opinion about political action too swings between a formal recognition of the right to protest and an active scepticism about actual protests. Unless the issues directly concern them, people are less likely to have a positive view about protests.

Many of the changes underpinning the democratic apparatus are more insidious than before and, consequently, systemic. Some scholars have suggested that these are a greater threat to India's liberal constitutional foundations and that there is a fusion between the party (read the ideological agendas of the BJP) and the State.

> Scholars have termed this as a conflict of 'democracy vs democracy' - between electoral and constitutional democracy.

The more unnerving outcome has been the exposition of the longstanding weaknesses of India's public institutions. A strong numeric majority in parliament has fuelled shrill claims of political legitimacy. Scholars have termed this as a conflict of 'democracy vs democracy' - between electoral and constitutional democracy (Varshney 2022b). This is based on the idea of a legitimately elected executive using legislation for undemocratic purposes (particularly with reference to minority rights).

This erosion is also accompanied by an inability of parliamentary institutions to accommodate public demands. The inability of public concerns to be addressed within the system leads to a need for counter-mobilisation.

The protests related to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the agitation by farmers' group against three farm-related bills are indicative of a spillover of unaddressed public woes to the streets. Both agitations were about more than merely the proposed bills. The agitation against the CAA enfolded broader concerns about minority (particularly Muslim) rights and secularism. Similarly, the farmers' agitation was an expression of broader agrarian distress.

Thus, even as people show faith in the dominant narrative by means of their electoral participation and choices, they show a lack of faith in their elected representatives and parliamentary institutions. In that sense, Indian democracy experiences a tug of war between its procedural and substantive mould.

A lack of representative character

The dilemma of the substantive ends of democracy is foregrounded within a broader perplexity of representation. While the quantum and the diversity of groups represented at various levels of the political arena has improved significantly, the conversation on representation has largely been unable to move beyond caste. This has hampered a fuller appraisal of emerging crises of representation.

The pool from which new political leadership is getting recruited is extremely shallow and the most promising pathways for aspiring politicians are deeply problematic. Most political parties in India have become centralised machines and often resemble family firms. Political families and even mafioso come from a more diverse social background than before but rarely represent the interest of the communities they come from (Yadav 2010). The trend of mainstream political parties depending on self-financing candidates has gone up.

The rule of political families or the supremo culture has proved to be more conducive for the capture of state power by organised industrial and business interests than was the case before. The linkage of business interests to political agency has become both opaque and obvious at the same time. Crony capital has thus found firm political roots.

> Increased diversity in the backgrounds of representatives is only gloss if legislators have no leeway in articulating pressing issues.

A linked crisis is the weakening of individual legislators (Roy 2022). Legislators are now bound to parties such that they can function only as instruments of party aggrandisement. The anti-defection law has strengthened political parties at the expense of the autonomy and enterprise of individual members. When political representatives are restricted to being mere instruments of the party apparatus, they can do little to facilitate substantive representation. Consequently, this becomes an enabler of the deterioration of political choices in a democracy. Increased diversity in the background of representatives is only gloss if legislators have no leeway in articulating pressing issues that could disgruntle party supremos.

All of these factors complicate any discussion on the representative character of Indian politics.

Second, there is a representative tug of war between the North and the South. The southern states have controlled their population growth rates much faster than the northern states. The regional aspect of representation has become skewed because an average MP in the north now represents a larger proportion of citizens than in the south.

This distortion states raises questions which are very difficult to address given the antagonism which tinges the issue. A new delimitation of constituencies, due after 2026, might lead to assignment of more seats to the northern states at the expense of the

southern states (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019). But how acceptable would the new delimitation exercise be to the states of the South, given it might reduce their effective representation in the national legislature?

> The southern states already feel threatened by the monopoly of the north in the political discourse.

The southern states have done better on almost every indicator of human capital, physical infrastructure, and social empowerment. There is growing scepticism in the southern states over some aspects of the BJP's ideological project, including the recent tussles on allocation of financial resources. (The BJP, despite its active presence on the ground in southern India, has not gained a foothold in legislatures beyond Karnataka and to an extent Telangana.) The southern states already feel threatened by the monopoly of the North in the political discourse. Any attempts that reduce their weight in India's federal arrangement is unlikely to pass uncontested.

Third, the question of declining Muslim representation in Parliament (and several state assemblies) has been reduced to a partisan debate without introspecting on the causes and consequences of a large minority group getting excluded from several spheres. While the BJP gets continuously gets cited for not having a single Muslim MP in Parliament (besides having meagre Muslim representation at all levels), there has not been a critical analysis of political parties claiming to champion the interests of Muslim community (Ahmed 2019).

In the past few years, voting patterns indicate that non-BJP parties too have benefitted from religious polarisation. For example, Muslim voters complain that the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar or the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal take their support for granted as the community does not have other viable electoral alternatives, and these parties do not even campaign in their localities. Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has not shied away from sympathising with majoritarian impulses even as it garners the support of Muslims.

> There is a noticeable shift in the nature of political engagement vis-à-vis Muslim community in the past few years.

This tendency to play along with the agenda set by the BJP is likely to become more counter-productive for an already weak opposition. By playing on the BJP's turf, they ignore the political calculus that both the fragmentation and the consolidation of the Muslim vote will benefit the BJP.

There are clear indications of Muslim politics undergoing deep churn. While we may lack quantifiable indicators to substantiate this claim at the moment, there is a noticeable shift in the nature of political engagement by the Muslim community in the past few years. Overall turnout among Muslims has either stagnated or decline. Political parties like the SP or TMC that actively mobilized Muslims during elections are now less likely to do so and will nominate fewer candidates from the community as they fear a majoritarian backlash. Despite this, voting patterns since 2014 indicate greater consolidation of the community behind one candidate or party than ever before. In some ways, these changes represent the central paradox of Muslim politics in contemporary India.

> The nature of the 'new deal' with the Muslim community will shape the future of Indian democracy.

The current impasse is a result of a historical failure to intellectually articulate the post-Partition integration of Muslim community in the body politic and is an indictment of India's left-of-centre ideological spectrum. This argument is rooted in our reading of a recent book by veteran journalist Hasan Suroor, *Unmasking Indian Secularism: Why We Need a New Hindu-Muslim Deal*. A nation partitioned on religious lines and where significant numbers shared historical animosity towards one other, needed serious dialogue between the two communities towards developing India into a secular nation-state in the western mould. Such a dialogue in the 1950s, or even in the 1990s, could have perhaps tamed the current majoritarian backlash (borne out of real or imaginary victimhood).

With India now in the midst of a cycle of incremental polarisation, there are multiple trajectories that Muslim politics in India can take from here. The nature of the 'new deal' with the Muslim community will shape the future of Indian democracy.

Conclusions

There has been a redefinition of the democratic culture that grounded the India's political community thus far. There are some who hail this as a moment of liberation from the "myth of secular-socialist India." (Singh 2020, as also Madhusudan and Mantri 2020). Others who see the changes being brought about in India's political culture as having a deleterious and lasting impact unless the new

ideological hegemony propogated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is quickly checked (Palshikar 2021). They describe the rise of the BJP under Narendra Modi as a "counter-revolution" in which upper castes rallied behind the BJP to push back against the lower caste assertion that has defined Indian politics for the past few decades (Dreze 2020). Some also see this as an emergence of a new class politics in which ideological elements of Hindutva are deeply fused with a very different imagination of capital-state relations (Bardhan 2022).

> Pre-ordained conceptual lenses are increasingly falling short of providing a satisfying explanation to the transitions we are seeing.

It would seem that the design of representative democracy in India lifted a system that meant for much smaller political communities and applied it to a continental polity. The design-effects have become more visible with the growing distance between the electors and the elected, and the inability of the mechanism of competitive politics to serve as a means of exercising effective policy options. This has led to the curious, yet irreconcilable dichotomy that the representative character of Indian politics has shrunk even as it has broadened.

This is a complex moment where pre-ordained conceptual lenses are increasingly falling short of providing a satisfying explanation to the transitions we are seeing. The distortions of representation, for one, can no longer be fully explained merely through sociological categories. Likewise, democratic erosion can take place alongside with a greater participatory upsurge in the electoral process. Only by comprehending the current moment in its specificity can we appreciate its full implications.

Given the novel nature of these challenges, there is no simple answer to most of the questions in this historical moment. The erosion of democratic norms, for instance, stands out because it seems to be systemic and more enduring than ever before. Similarly, the change in the representative character of politics is unique precisely because it harbours within it an illusion of democratic deepening.

> There are greater fears of the current politics cascading into a new equilibrium, leading to a very redefinition of how India conceives of its democracy.

Does Indian democracy have the resources to arrest the more concerning side of these trends? Some have argued that the recent democratic erosion in the developed world such as the United States or in the United Kingdom could be counteracted by the robustness of institutions in those countries. However, the challenges for countries like India with weak institutions is that the possibility of a democratic renewal will be a long haul.

There are greater fears of the current politics cascading into a new equilibrium, leading to a very redefinition of how India conceives of its democracy. As India stands at the cusp of a new democratic imagination, it is important to understand the lacunae that have created the possibilities for a Second Republic.

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