Research Article

Indian Politics @ 75: Issues and Challenges

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A B S T R A C T

The India story at 75 is an extraordinarily consequential and researchable one. The single biggest challenge for anyone analyzing Indian politics is that the subject seems like a "Project in Progress", conveying a sense of a country perennially in a state of transformation. For the study of Indian politics is, in many ways, the study of India's democracy, understood in the most comprehensive sense. The constitutional foundation and the institutional framework on which India's politics rests, is to my mind also the bases of democratic politics in India. Indian democracy today remains the unwritten evolving subtext of any discussion on Indian politics. Our transformation from a "soft" state to a "hard" state should make us more confident, compassionate inclusive and humane- qualities that the world's largest democracy can well afford to stand for and stand by, because these are the qualities that have sustained our democracy in 75 years.

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INTRODUCTION

The single biggest challenge for anyone analyzing Indian politics is that the subject seems like a "Project in Progress", conveying a sense of a country perennially in a state of "Transition to Transformation". While a broad commitment to the institutions of democracy is the lowest common denominator, almost everything else seems up for deeper contestation in scholarly discourses. Let me simply recapitulate some of the major dimensions of these transitions or transformations and how we might think about them. I will lay out, without being exhaustive, some threads that students of Indian politics will have to weave together in the years to come to interpret Indian politics within an academic framework of enquiry.

I sincerely believe that much of the recent popular interest in India's political institutions and processes is fundamentally an interest in its democracy and it is for the world to know that we are the world's largest. For the study of Indian politics is, in many ways, the study of India's democracy, understood in the most comprehensive sense. The constitutional foundation and the institutional framework on which the architecture of India's politics rests, is to my mind also the bases of democratic politics in India. The idea of democracy infuses almost everything that is pivotal to the Indian political experience, from its existing institutions and political processes to public policies and ideological contestations. Indian democracy even today remains the unwritten evolving subtext of any discussion on Indian politics, according to Neerja Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta.

In discussions of democracy and authoritarianism, India has in many ways been something of a museum exhibit. It still lacks the prerequisites of most theories of democracy that look at structural variables – such as class structure, extent of ethnic diversity, level of income, and education-to

predict the prospects of a country instituting and remaining a democracy. Even as the longevity and deepening of democracy in India has been remarked upon and admired, it has remained a wonder. The default explanation has been that it is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon, a case of Indian exceptionalism. But its existence gives rise to a whole host of other questions. Why, despite being a democracy, is India's capacity to deliver material well-being to a large number of its citizens often in doubt? Why is its increasingly more representative system not responsive enough to different sections of the population through its public service delivery system? What is the capacity of this democracy to create a sense of national identity without conflicts? What is its capacity to manage social tensions arising out of the process of development? Even as these remain deeply troubling questions, a slide into an outright authoritarian system of governance is not high on the list of possibilities about India, according to even India's worst critics. India does well on most other measures of success that are counted in a procedural democracy: voter turnouts, turnover of incumbents, the empowering of new groups, the maintaining of a core set of liberal freedoms, civilian control over armed forces, and political contestation. Democracy in India is as much of an established fact as its constitutional continuity a matter of amazement to Political Scientists.

How does one think about the Indian democratic experience? Rather than looking for a single theory validating its sustenance, the focus should be to examine the myriad mechanisms by which this democracy has been sustained. These narratives of Indian democracy, rather than simplistically emphasizing one or two variables (a propitious class structure, or cultural norms, for instance) indicate the extent to which a whole host of other factors, from the colonial legacy to the character of India's inherited institutions, from the beliefs of its leaders to the character of social divisions can interact with each other to sustain democratic institutions. These factors are now noteworthy of recognition in scholarly studies.

We should be able to navigate two different perspectives on politics. On the one hand, Indian politics is clearly shaped by the long-term structural features of our society. Social hierarchies, economic potential, and historical legacies influence the nature and character of a political society. These long-range influences impact democracy. For instance, there is very little doubt that deep-seated structures of social and economic inequality have had a profound influence on the way in which Indian democracy has functioned. Indeed, their persistence has been a constant reminder of the fact that democracy does not necessarily lead to economic levelling in society. But there is also little doubt that these hierarchies have been modified and reconfigured on the ground in such a way that scholars have been forced to rethink democratic theories and recontextualize Indian democracy, time & again.

At independence, the project of building a national civic identity, transcending the particularistic identities of caste, tribe, language, religion, and region, was recognized as the most important challenge facing the new nation. The social cleavages and identities of Indian society proved to be resilient in unexpected ways and came to be articulated and reproduced through the very language and processes of democratic politics that were intended to render them redundant. In the constitutional moment of the Indian nation, Jawaharlal Nehru refused to give nationalism a primarily majoritarian definition, giving it a developmental content instead. The markers of cultural identity came to be treated as societal non reversible, therefore non changeable. This project of constructing a nation with an "Idea of India" in the popular imagination subsequently came to be attacked and challenged by, among others, regionalist and secessionist movements, majoritarian politics and the assertions of minorities alleging exclusion and unfair absorption in an assimilative conception of Indian identity.

The contestations over secularism, representation, and social justice have been expressed not only in mainstream party politics, but also through a range of civil society assertions on these and many other issues including development. Some important research questions have surfaced majorly in the public domain: what is the impact of new social movements and of articulated concerns of new pressure groups in recent years? The big question to my mind, continues to be whether and to what extent democracy can be a force for moderating the deep-rooted inequalities existent in our society.

While there has been an enormous expansion, even explosion, in the availability of data, (including online) we should alert researchers to issues of quality and reliability in all types of data-from crime to development spending besides checking on their reliability. Democracy in India is not immune to these processes. We too are deeply embedded in this digital world, and therefore, our democracy is equally vulnerable to manipulation and undermining. In post-election analyses there is speculation that similar strategies of targeting and discourse manipulation are being used in elections today. In addition to the use of these technologies by political players in India, we must also consider the possibility of global players using artificial intelligence and big data tools to interfere with our democracy. It is time to accept that the digital world is today more powerful in determining democratic outcomes than world of print media within which our thinking about democracy is still largely embedded in India.

Most case studies on Indian politics, illustrate the three most clearly identifiable features of Indian democracy, its "resilience", its "fragility" and its working where it "muddles through". Most of the critical studies talk about the deficiencies of Indian democracy, understandably because there is a culture of recurring disillusionment that pervade

the review of its working, a frustration that comes from personal experiences of dealing with the democratic state, from media reports of self-serving political elites, and from the accounts of the turbulent struggles of vulnerable and marginal groups to get economic justice. It also shows the high expectation from democracy that exists not just among scholars but among ordinary people as well.

In the last seven decades, according to Peter Dsouza there have been four distinct sub discourses that have grown within the broader political discourse of Independent India. The first is that of state formation, of building the legal and ethical codes-such as "conflict of interest" issues-required for running a modern state. The second is the discourse of a civic nation, by crafting a national imaginary that Jawaharlal Nehru imagined when he described India as a "palimpsest", to one today when the nation is seen as primarily the nation of its "majority". The plural idea of the nation has been challenged by the majoritarian idea of the nation. Here a culturalist nationalist discourse has supplanted a civic nationalist discourse and the debate is an ongoing one. The third sub-discourse is mainly about "development" which contains within it the aspiration for economic growth, for the building up of scientific and technological capability and infrastructure, for self-sufficiency, self-reliance, redistribution of wealth, welfare protection, increasing employment opportunities in the modern economy, and overall, for livelihood security. Here again, the discourse on development in India has changed from a state-centric development to a market-driven one, from redistribution to growth, from autarkic development to linking the Indian economy with the global economy. The fourth sub-discourse is largely about the expansion and deepening of democracy. There is substantial literature on each discourse and, hence, all we wish to note here is:

- the concurring presence in Indian politics of the four sub-discourses and
- the relation between them which is dynamic and changing.

The Narendra Modi years — as the post 2014 period of Indian history, has redefined the nature of politics in India in three different respects. It has changed the nature of political and electoral competition and altered the way political power is exercised. It has transformed political and social realities on the ground. Each of these elements has, together, altered the nature of the Indian State.

The most revealing statistic that explains the story of the post-2014 years is the number of voters who have reposed their faith in the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). In 2009, 78 million voters backed the party. In 2014, in an election that was fought solely in Modi's name in the backdrop of anger against the United Progressive alliance and hopes of a better future, over 171 million voters supported the BJP. And in 2019, after five years in office, in an election that was once again a referendum on the Modi years, at least 220 million voters supported the BJP.

A lasting legacy of the eight years of Modi government has been in expanding the base of the (BJP) beyond its traditional pockets of influence among city dwellers, business communities, and "upper castes". It is this breadth of support that has made the party the central pole of Indian politics. However, and here is the irony, no single factor, definitely not ideology, has contributed more to the party's dominance in the last 5 years than the government's singular focus on welfare delivery. It's a phenomenon that unfolded almost in a surreptitious mode at first – assessments of the link between welfare and electoral politics only started getting explored after the 2019 general elections – but has come to supplement grassroots political mobilization to the extent that it has now spawned a culture of government benefits with strong political branding.

To be sure, welfare schemes or linking politics to government benefits is neither unique to the National Democratic Alliance nor a new phenomenon. States such as Tamil Nadu and Odisha have an impressive and longstanding record of delivering benefits to their citizens – the former even using the bouquet of services to augment its "Dravidian model" of governance. Indira Gandhi had created the Garibi Hatao slogan to vanquish the old guard of the Congress and establish herself in national politics. But for the first time in a generation, and for the first time on a national scale, the efficiency of welfare delivery is being used by a party to aggressively recruit new constituencies (Dalit and backward classes), co-opt political messages (for the empowerment of lower castes), and forestall criticism of some of its administrative failures (e.g., the handling of the second wave of the pandemic).

The model of this "new welfarism" – as economist Arvind Subramanian calls it – discarded what it saw as old models of "entitlement politics", instead of recasting citizens into beneficiaries or "labharthis" who have a strong connect with the personal brand of the prime minister. Welfare delivery is a pivot around which the Narendra Modi administration revolves today. It has helped the government weather farm anger (PM Kisan Samman Nidhi), overcome anti-incumbency in some states (Ujjwala and health care) and even re-establish its standing during the Covid crisis (the free ration scheme). It has helped the party's attempts at expanding its base by reaching out to the poor, creating a new constituency of supporters that are less tied to community and caste allegiances than before, and crafting a new language of political mobilization that opponents have found difficult to encounter by a counter narrative.

However, challenges will remain in Indian politics in the future. With the inevitable rise in aspirations, relative inequalities of a society mobilizing towards prosperity and some opposition leaders now retooling the welfare message for local needs, BJP has its future mandate ready. It is

now focused on providing piped water supply in all homes by 2024, again an indication of how the lack of last-mile government capacity had left India crippled for decades. Whether water can pay the same political dividends for the BJP will shape the story of the next general elections.

Old distinctions between Left and Right are no longer very easy to map either onto class formations, or political parties, or even issues in Indian politics today. Some state governments-such as that in Bihar, with its roots in Lohiate socialism-are surprisingly keen to experiment with cash transfers. Other governments that are prime examples of collusion between capital and state like Tamil Nadu have been very successful at traditional institutions of welfare like PDS and a robust health care model. Similarly, issues of environmental devastation also cut across boundaries of Left and Right. The very nature of policy choices and judgements in contemporary Indian politics do not lend themselves to easy ideological categorization. This is not to say that ideology does not matter. It matters at two levels of politics. First, at the macro level the choice of models of development clearly makes various ideological assumptions. What our pathways to growth, prosperity, and equity should be, will remain contested. But it is not a foregone conclusion which parties or groups will adopt which strategies. The 'Left-Right' distinction often runs within major political parties as it runs between them. Often policy responses are shaped by societal circumstances and political opportunities rather than neat ideological templates. But it is clear that no society can avoid a politics of privilege versus a politics of under privilege. No matter how successful an economy is, there will be political tendencies that try and make sense of those who are marginalized or are unable to be a part of the "trickledown" effect to coopt them in an ideological contestation. But it is likely to remain fragmented and beset by cross-cutting cleavages. The big challenge for the Indian state will be to negotiate these diverse forms of contestations. Inequality (in its myriad avatars) and its impacts remains to this day the biggest governance challenge of all times in Indian politics.

In India in the last few decades, as we transit from the "politics of scarcity" to the "politics of prosperity", we will notice a major paradigm shift in the discourses on democracy and good governance. What stands out is the distinction made between a procedural notion of democracy debated by the constitutional legal functioning of its public institutions and a substantivist nation of democracy where the nation building exercise has been redefined in terms of concrete citizen entitlements and actual access to rights and public goods. Democracies are often slow, deliberative and procedure oriented unable to deliver electoral promises effectively and therefore dubbed as "soft" states. The biggest bane in India today is the phenomenon of differentiated citizen entitlements in different states of India e.g., you might get access to a decent platter of public goods like food, education, health and employment depending on which state

you are residing in. Niti Aayog has a SDG India Index and a Human Development Index of Indian states which has made interstate comparison possible in all development parameters. Today 300 schemes come under the Direct Benefit Transfer. The Central government's biggest challenge will be to weave together a credible welfare architecture and execute it with efficiency in tandem with states so that it reaches every Indian who needs it most. I say this with great conviction that India and democratic public power must deliver growth with social justice to its citizens if the developing world is to choose the democratic governance model over an authoritarian one like China. Decades ago, former World Bank economist was lauded for his thesis that while India was definitely not a "failing" state, it was a "flailing state". That is, while its performance was world class by some measures of governance, it underperforms in other respects, notably in public service delivery in sectors like health, education, and sanitation. If India finally delivers on implementation and improves on its public service delivery systems, India can truly demonstrate that only democracies can deliver slow, but steady good governance. Francis Fukuyama, the American political scientist has endorsed the Indian model of governance over China's precisely on this argument alone.

I would like to end with a few conjectures on why I believe our Constitution remains a stand-alone Constitutional experiment in the entire Global south constituting the developing world. I firmly believe that the future of constitutionalism today depends a good deal on the future of the experiment in the world's largest democracy. Here are my arguments:

First, India was the first Third world country to experiment with a democratic model of governance knowing full well that it is the best model of governance in theory but the most difficult model in practice. India's Constitution was the framework through which the world's largest and one of its most contentious democracies was brought into being. Second, Constitution survived because of its amendability and of the several multi-layered narratives within, which left a lot to the imagination of the courts to interpret and reinterpret. Subsequently, chiefly through the instrumentality of Public Interest Litigation, the Supreme Court emerged as that branch of the state to which citizens could appeal on matters as diverse as the environment and primary school admissions. The Court came to be popularly perceived, especially by the urban middle classes, as the only branch of the state that could be trusted to govern.

Third, the Constitution gave a model of civil military relations which is worthy of emulation in the developing world where military coups were routine phenomena and curbing authoritarian power the biggest political challenge in the public domain. Fourth, the Indian constitution is a part of its national identity, is a norm setter, it is used by both judges and citizens to invoke constitutional value

and has constitutionalized so much of India's life, making it a truly people's constitution. Lastly, the Constitution will survive in future only because of its aspirational character, it's ability to bend to generational change and it's incessant efforts to incorporate ideological flexibility with governance continuity over several decades and through several societal transitions with innate resilience.

Therefore, I would like to end by saying that the India story at 75is an extraordinarily consequential and researchable one. The spirit in which I speak is exploratory: there is a need to explore the many different facets of this profound historical phenomenon called India. In many ways I can foresee India moving ahead with decades of great change to overcome the stupendous challenges of our times.

But looking at our last 75-year history of democracy, the knowledge of India's historical legacies, how the democratic state is currently transforming and where it might be headed, will also help us understand why our model of democracy and governance will survive and be a role model for the developing world in the 21st century. India's rise stems from civilizational choices made nearly 200 years ago – To learn, To adapt, To unite. Our transformation from a "soft" state to a "hard" state should make us more confident, compassionate inclusive and humane- qualities that the world's largest democracy can well afford to stand for and stand by, because these are the qualities that have sustained our democracy in 75 years and will sustain us in the years to come.