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The Largest Democracy in the World: Are We?

Ankita Jain^a

^aDES Shri Navalmal Firodia Law College, Pune, India

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Imagine a vast land where the power rests within its people, where freedom and participation shape the nation's destiny. Here we examine whether our claim as the Largest democracy in the world still holds as we have self-proclaimed ourselves in a recent G20 meeting. India assumed the role of G20 Forum's President on December 1, 2022. During the media briefing before the 2023 G20 summit, the G20 presidency highlighted India as "the largest democracy, vibrant democracy over the ages". Furthermore, India's leadership of the G20 has been characterized as a "People's Presidency", emphasizing its commitment to inclusiveness and broad participation. In this article, we will discuss from a historical background, the evolution of democracy to the current status of democracy, our political structure, various fundamental rights and freedoms that are guaranteed to citizens because of democracy, how diversity and pluralism influence democracy, voters participation and elections, challenges and reforms and compare our democracy with other nation.

Keywords: *democracy, g20 meeting, people's presidency.*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is made out of two words 'Demos' and 'kratos' that means 'Rule by People'. According to Professor Seeley, democracy is a form of government where everyone has a share. Everyone takes part in the day-to-day affairs of government. India is known as the largest

democracy in the world because it is a democratic country with the largest population in the whole world. Here, citizens exercise their power by voting. Recently, we have celebrated the 75th Republic Day on 26th January. On that day 74 years from now in 1950, our constitution was enacted and India declared itself a Sovereign, Democratic and Republic state, it is also mentioned in our preamble¹. On March 2023, there is a statement came from the opposition party (Congress) leader Rahul Gandhi in a lecture at Cambridge University, '*Indian democracy under attack, opposition leaders being spied on*'. Yes, you heard it right, allegations were made about the government that it had used Pegasus spyware on several opposition leaders and citizens and to investigate these allegations Supreme Court appointed a committee under Justice R.V. Raveendran. The committee submitted its report in a *sealed manner* hence we do not know what are the findings but the technical committee set up by the Supreme Court confirmed the presence of some kind of malware in 5 handsets. A little while back, 146 opposition MPs, 100 in Lok Sabha and the rest in Rajya Sabha were suspended.²

The opposition alleged that the government suspended MPs and passed bills without discussion. Passing the bills when these large numbers of MPs are suspended means neglecting the voice of the people of those constituencies where these MPs were selected. A similar event happened recently when the Uttarakhand assembly passed the bill on the Union civil code, the opposition alleged that there was not enough discussion on that. These types of incidents force us to think about whether we really have democracy in its true sense and if not then how can we say ourselves as the largest democracy because it's just not about the number of people but the democratic values it holds.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of democracy is traced back to 580-507 BC when Athenian democracy was established. It is a widely recognized notion that democracy first appeared in ancient Greece in

¹ Constitution of India 1950, Preamble

² 'Parliament Proceedings | Three More MPs Suspended, Total at 146 as Opposition's Protest over Mass Suspension Continues' *The Hindu* (21 December 2023) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/parliament-proceedings-three-more-opposition-mps-suspended-as-protest-over-mass-suspension-continues/article67661514.ece>> accessed 06 February 2024

the city-state of Athens, even the word democracy comes from the Greek language ‘Demos’ which means common people and ‘kratos’ which means strength. Cleisthenes is known as the father of Athenian democracy. It was a direct democracy.

The Roman Republic played a major role in the development of democracy. Natives of North America, before they came in contact with the Europeans also developed the form of democratic society around 1450-1680 AD. The first English parliament was created in 1265 starting the separation of power. The power of the King began to fade to local nobles and afterward to people. After some centuries, the case of Proclamation in 1610 in England decided that the king by his proclamation or any other way could not change any part of common law. Now much research on the origin of democracy has shown that democracy existed much before Athenian democracy. In the primitive society, there were also some glimpses of democratic values that we can see. For example, a description of Tacitus of the primitive German tribes.

Describing their method of doing their business, Tacitus says: “on affairs of smaller moment, the chiefs consult; on those of greater importance, the whole community-; yet with the circumstance, that what is referred to the decision of people is first maturely discussed by the chiefs..... Then the king or chief and such others as are conspicuous for age, birth, military renown, or eloquence are heard and gain attention rather from their ability to persuade than their authority to command. If a proposal displeases, the assembly rejects it by inarticulate murmur; if it proves agreeable, they clash their javelins for the most honourable expression of assent among them is the sound of arms”.³

In India, it is considered that the institution of democracy was usurped when the longest-written constitution of the world was enacted on 26th January 1950 but in the recent Ministry of Culture, the government of India curated an exhibition on ‘Bharat: The Mother of Democracy’ where it can be seen that democratic values in India exist from the very old. The Arthshashtra (book 11) is clear: ancient India knew kingdoms (rajya), but also republics (sangha). Some of them followed farming and other economic endeavours as well as military arts, that is, true

³ Thomas R. Trautmann, ‘India’s Place in the History of Democracy’ *The India Forum* (30 June 2023) <<https://www.theindiaforum.in/history/indias-place-history-democracy>> accessed 08 February 2024

democracies of farmer-soldiers. Others called themselves rajas, presumably large landowners maintaining servants and deciding affairs of the state.⁴

It was similar to the threefold categories of the Greek political system. However, it is not true to say that India is the mother of democracy, a single centre from which all democratic institutions have spread rather it would be more correct to say that democratic values have sprung up in many places.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

India's political structure is divided into three parts: legislative, executive and judiciary. These institutions have a separation of power and at the same time, they ensure the proper working of each institution. Media works as a medium that shows people how their elected representatives work and whether the country is governing systematically or not. Opposition plays a significant role in the governance. It not only represents the voice of the people and raises issues of common people in the house but also criticizes the government and picks its mistakes.

India has a proper electoral system where voters (citizens of or above the age of 18) elect their representatives by voting. There is a constitutional body called the Election Commission constituted under Article 324⁵ that conducts and regulates fair elections. This is the political structure in India but the question is whether it is working in that way as it should be. In today's scenario especially after 2014, we are seeing the constant decline of opposition and there are many reasons for that like internal differences, lack of vision, lack of leadership, ideological shift, etc.

A strong opposition is essential for democracy without that ruling party may become authoritarian and it can be seen in the present scenario where many bills pass without even proper discussion. Another problem that is evolving nowadays is 'heroism'. In a democratic country if people treat, their political leader like a hero and without any logical thinking they

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Constitution of India 1950, art 324

just believe in their decision then it would be the start of the end of democracy. It has been seen that people do not know what the government is exactly doing, or how it is working.

Apart from this, there is a controversy regarding the recent chief election commissioner and election commissioners (appointment, conditions of service and term of office) bill 2023 where the main controversy is regarding the committee that appoints the chief election commissioner⁶. Previously the committee consisted of the prime minister, the chief justice of India and the leader of the opposition but now it consists prime minister, the union cabinet minister and the leader of the opposition so the bias can be seen.

If we talk about the judiciary, during the period of Emergency there were allegations of arbitrary retirement and appointments of judges although now the judiciary has their appointment system through the collegium. It has also been in the news from time to time there are many allegations that Supreme Court fared during Modi's years. After 2014, the Supreme Court appeared to be more cautious in handling cases that could potentially disrupt the political interest of the ruling party. Verdicts in cases like Sahara-Birla, loyal, Bhima-Koregao, Rafael, and Aadhar, among others have faced backlash due to the perception that the court has been hesitant in challenging the establishment⁷. Critics argue that the court seems less willing to take bold stances against the system, especially when it could conflict with the interests of the ruling party.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

In any democracy, fundamental rights are the main component because they prevent the establishment of dictatorial and authoritarian rule. In India, originally, there were seven

⁶ Shweta Kumari, 'Controversial Bill on Appointments to Election Commission Clears Lok Sabha' *India Today* (21 December 2023) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bill-to-regulate-appointment-of-chief-election-commissioner-other-top-officials-passed-in-lok-sabha-2478786-2023-12-21>> accessed 08 February 2024

⁷ Manu Sebastian, 'How Has the Supreme Court Fared During the Modi Years?' *The Wire* (12 April 2019) <<https://thewire.in/law/supreme-court-modi-years>> accessed 08 February 2024

fundamental rights then the right to property was removed. Now we have six fundamental rights. These are mentioned in part 3 of the constitution from articles 12 to 35⁸.⁹ These are:

1. Right to Equality (arts 14-18);¹⁰
2. Right to Freedom (art 19-22);¹¹
3. Right against Exploitation (arts 23-24);¹²
4. Right to Freedom of religion (arts 25-28);¹³
5. Cultural and Educational Rights (arts 29-30);¹⁴
6. Right to Constitutional Remedy (arts 32-35).¹⁵

However, in today's situation, we have come to see many scenarios where these fundamental rights are being curtailed. If we talk about equality, it has been seen many times also in the news that minorities' rights are being curtailed. There is no equal treatment for Muslims and Dalits according to various reports. When the incidents like 'bulldozer event' are glorified and the rights of the people are openly murdered then how can we say ourselves a democratic country?

According to the Times of India report, there is a steady and alarming erosion of fundamental rights, particularly religious rights in India, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority issue has told the USCIRF. Human Rights Watch in its World Report 2023 mentions the same. Not only this, in Amnesty International Report of India 2022, it is mentioned how the government curtailed speech and the situation of today is that Amnesty International stopped

⁸ Constitution of India 1950, arts 12-35

⁹ 'Fundamental Rights' (*Know India*) <<https://knowindia.india.gov.in/profile/fundamental-rights.php#:~:text=Right%20to%20freedom%20of%20speech,order%2C%20decency%20or%20morality>> accessed 09 February 2024

¹⁰ Constitution of India 1950, arts 14-18

¹¹ Constitution of India 1950, arts 19-22

¹² Constitution of India 1950, arts 23-24

¹³ Constitution of India 1950, arts 25-28

¹⁴ Constitution of India 1950, arts 29-30

¹⁵ Constitution of India 1950, arts 32-35

their operations, it cited the Indian government's 'reprisals' and 'witch hunt' against human rights organisations as a reason for its decision.¹⁶

In the recent telecommunication bill 2023, many provisions are the type that give the government a tight grip on digital platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, etc. According to Wire, the bill passed by both houses of Parliament is another action to cement authoritarian control over the rights of ordinary citizens.¹⁷

The recent Union Civil Code Bill which is now implemented in Uttarakhand is criticized on the basis that it violates an individual's right to privacy because of its provisions like couples having to register their live-in relationship to the registrar otherwise they may face serious consequences.

VOTERS PARTICIPATION AND ELECTIONS

India is the world's most populated country with 1,436,856,690 population¹⁸ and counting. Nearly 97 crore people are eligible to vote in the coming Lok Sabha elections according to the election commission.¹⁹ There has been a 6% increase in registered voters from 2019. The gender ratio has also increased from 940 to 948; this shows the effective participation of women in elections. Nevertheless, the question here is do young Indians (especially the age group of 18 to 25) participate in the electoral process as much as they should. In the 2019 elections, out of the total 90 crore voters, over 4.5 crore were eligible voters in the age group of 18 – 19 years, whom

¹⁶ 'Protect Our Human Rights Work in India - Amnesty International' (*Amnesty International*, 27 August 2021) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/petition/protect-our-human-rights-work-in-india/>> accessed 09 February 2024

¹⁷ Apar Gupta, 'With Cleverly Drafted Telecom Bill, Government Tightens Grip on Digital India' *The Wire* (22 December 2023) <<https://thewire.in/government/cleverly-drafted-telecom-bill-government-tightens-grip-digital-india>> accessed 10 February 2024

¹⁸ 'World Population by Country 2024 (Live)' (*World Population Review*) <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/>> accessed 10 February 2024

¹⁹ 'Nearly 97 Crore People Eligible to Vote in Coming Lok Sabha Polls: EC' *The Hindu* (09 February 2024) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-nearly-97-crore-voters-now-says-ec/article67828780.ece>> accessed 10 February 2024

less than a third actually voted²⁰. Statements of this nature necessitate a strong plea for proactive measures to be taken.

The Election Commission of India through its various programmes like Systematic Voter's Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) trying to fill this gap. However, there are various other reasons for this lack of participation. Multiple studies from various organisations like the United Nations, and IMF, researchers found a risk of lack of trust in political institutions in the 21st century. The corruption scandals, inadequate representation, and the belief that their vote cannot make much difference are some reasons. In a democracy, it is necessary that there should be proper participation of each age group.

Another problem is election commission pays much attention to voter education but it lacks in providing civic education. Voter education refers to the distribution of knowledge, resources, and initiatives intended to educate voters about particular election details and procedures. Civic education, which encompasses a wider scope, focuses on imparting an understanding of a nation's political framework and environment. This concept covers the governmental structure, the role of authorities in positions up for election, and major economic, social and political challenges confronting the country. In order for an election to be successful and uphold democratic values, it is imperative that voters have a clear understanding of their rights, the political system, and the candidates they are choosing between. This awareness appears to be lacking within the Indian context.

In 2018, the Government introduced an electoral bond scheme that allowed individuals and firms to anonymously fund political parties by purchasing these bonds. But the problem is these bonds allow ambiguity in funds and chances of hiding black money and corruption also the voters have the right to know about whom and from where these funds coming from. That is why the Supreme Court recently struck down the Electoral Bond Scheme saying that it violates

²⁰ Gaurishankar S and Harsha Lal, 'Do Young Indians Participate In Elections?' (*Centre for Public Policy Research*, 01 November 2023) <<https://www.cpvr.in/articles/ylf-youth-vote>> accessed 10 February 2024

voter's rights. These types of schemes not only curtailed the rights of the voters but were also dangerous for democracy.

If we talk about elections in India, it is conducted according to the constitutional process as of now but there are nowadays many instances where voters choose a party and some other party comes into power by bribing or fearing MLAs chosen by the people. Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and recently Bihar government change are some of the examples. These types of incidents really make democracy a joke and it is very sad to say but how can we even call ourselves a democracy when there is no value for the voters because of their dirty politics?

INTERNATIONAL PROSPECTIVE

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index, there is a decline in total scores from 5.29 in 2022 to 5.23 in 2023 as war and conflict spread across the globe. These conflicts badly dented the global democracy score. According to its report half of the world's population live in democracy of some sort, only 7.8% live in full democracy and one-third of the population reside under authoritarian rule.

The V-Dem (variety of democracy) report published in March 2023²¹ also stated that by the end of 2022, 72% population lived in autocracies, of which 28% lived in close autocracies. This is very alarming for the democracies of the world. The report titled *Defiance in the Face of Authorization* indicates that there are more closed autocracies than Liberal democracies.

In 2021, the V-Dem Institute categorized India as an 'electoral autocracy' while the Freedom House designated it as 'partially free'. Additionally, the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance labelled India as a democracy experiencing backsliding according to the global state of democracy report between 1975 and 1995 India's score was moved from 59 to 69 and in 2015, it was 72 however in 2020 it stood at 61.²²

²¹ Vasundhara Sirnate, 'India Is 'One of the Worst Autocratisers in the Last 10 Years,' Says 2023 V-Dem Report' *The Wire* (07 March 2023) <<https://thewire.in/rights/india-autocratiser-v-dem-report-2023>> accessed 10 February 2024

²² *Ibid*

The Modi government enjoys genuine popularity, a sentiment supported by both international and Indian polls. It is highly likely that BJP will emerge victorious once again as the ruling party. Given India's significance as a crucial partner in the Indo-Pacific region and its growing economic importance, it is very difficult for the Western government to offer mild criticism of the current regime. In the liberal democracy index, India's rank is 97, in the electoral democracy index, it is 108 and in the egalitarian component index, it is 123.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, India's status as the largest democracy in the world raises important questions about the nature and practice of democracy in the country. It is crucial to emphasize the fundamental requirements of a functioning democracy. A democracy relies on several elements such as free and fair elections, protection of basic rights and freedoms, rule of law transparency in governance, and accountability of those in power. However, when evaluating India's democratic status, it becomes evident that certain shortcomings exist which prevent it from being considered a truly democratic country.

India faces challenges like corruption, lack of political accountability, unequal access to justice, limitation on freedom of speech, and instances of social and economic inequality. These issues pose significant obstacles to the ideal functioning of a true democracy within the country. The presence of these challenges raises legitimate concern about the state of democracy in India and highlights the need for urgent reforms.

To address these shortcomings and to truly enhance democracy in India, it is imperative for the citizens to actively engage in a democratic process. People should be educated enough to understand their social, economic and political problems. They should have a genuine thrust for democracy and can pay any price to preserve the same. People should understand the importance of unity in democracy and maintain it otherwise; politicians will always take benefit as they are taking now. In addition, there should be a system of political training for leaders and give more emphasis on discussion, not dictation. Questions and issues should not vulgarized and popularized in order to appeal to the people and catch votes.

Citizens should exercise their right to vote responsibly, hold their elected representatives accountable, participate in peaceful protest and advocacy, demand transparency from the government, and work toward social cohesion and inclusion within society.

By taking these measures, citizens can actively contribute to the strengthening of India's democratic institutions and ensure that the country moves closer to being a model country. The responsibility to uphold and safeguard democracy lies not only with the government but also with the engaged and vigilant citizens who strive for a more just and equitable society.