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THE GREAT INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

India, a country of 1.3 billion people, 150 languages, 7 religions and enormous socio-economic disparity. The largest democracy in the world today.

Despite doubts raised by western scholars on whether democracy could be sustained in a country like India, the Indian people have chosen to maintain a democratic system of governance for the last 72 years since its independence. However, just as the state of democracy in different countries around the globe has come under an alarmed radar, not much has been different in India. Studying the journey of the Indian democracy under the light of cultural values enables one to understand some of the constraints in adopting a fully democratic system in a country like India where so far, dynastic politics has now paved the way for more assertive governance. Well on its way to becoming the next global power, thanks to a young and educated middle class population, the Great Indian Democracy maybe at a turning point in its history...

Key Words: Democracy, India, Modi, Gandhi, Independence

Introduction

From the second row of the air-conditioned, very formal classroom in the Kasetsart University in Bangkok, Thailand, I listened intently to the lecture by a Chinese professor on his government's approach of "development first, democracy later". Though he tried to keep a neutral tone, I could sense his advocacy on the form of governance that had helped a populous China surge ahead to become the strongest contender for the next world power. After his lecture, I walked up to him, introduced myself, and asked, "Do you think India would fare better with a stronger government like you have in China? Do you think democracy has stood in the way of development in India?" The senior professor looked away, and without much hesitation said, "You have enjoyed too many years of democracy in India. Your people would never accept a stronger government." An indirect answer as ever there was, but the message seemed clear.

In 1947, after more than 300 years of Mughal rule (1526 – 1857) followed by almost a 100 years of British rule (1858 – 1947), independent India became one of the first countries in the non-western world to adopt a democratic government. It is important to note that till the Mughal or the British rule, India as we know it today was a non-existent entity – the current geographical perimeter of India held a number of kingdoms, tribes and other groups, all enjoying a different system of governance and identity. This is with the exception of the Maurya Empire (322 BCE – 187 BCE), which ruled over most of India, except for the states below Madras, but including Afghanistan in the northwest (History of India, 2019). On August 15, 2019, contemporary India though, completed 72 years of a rather tenacious persistence of the democratic system, notwithstanding a 19-month emergency state in the 1970s. Most other non-Western, post-colonial nations, in the meantime, have teetered between dictatorships, hybrid regimes and flawed democracies.

How is India different from other post-colonial nations in this regard? What are the cultural components that allow for the country with the second largest population in the world and one that teems with an overwhelming religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity

to maintain a democratic system? 72 years later, what is the state of democracy in India? This paper will attempt to explore these questions while echoing Amartya Sen’s confession in the beginning of the *Argumentative Indian*:

“India is an immensely diverse country with many distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, widely divergent customs and a veritable feast of viewpoints. Any attempt to talk about the culture of the country, or about its past history or contemporary politics, must inescapably involve considerable selection. (Sen, 2005)”

In making this selection, I have chosen to study the history of democracy in India, the contemporary political scenario in India using the categories defined by The Economist to calculate its Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.) and the cultural values based on Hofstede’s 6D model (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2017) and the corresponding Mental Images (Wursten, 2000). There are indeed a great many factors to be considered in a country like India, with its many tides and undercurrents and within a rather complex contemporary political scenario. It is also important to consider the political narrative shift in India – from its post-colonial identity to an identity of its own, as the world’s largest democracy and one of its fastest growing economies.

History of Democracy in India

The Indian economist and author, Amartya Sen points to the history of public reasoning in India as the earliest evidence of democratic practices in the subcontinent, exemplified in Emperor Ashoka’s courts in third century BCE. The councils held in Pataliputra (contemporary Patna) had the objective of resolving differences in religious principles and practices, and also addressed the demands of social and civic duties. They helped to consolidate and promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues, which can be argued as one of the foundations of democracy. As the third king of the Maurya Empire, Emperor Ashoka championed public discussions on important matters and codified and propagated what must have been among the earliest formulations of rules for public discussion (Sen, 2005). He also erected pillars of his edicts that preached his “Law of Piety” all across his kingdom, most notably, in the respective regional languages.



Figure 1: Ashoka's pillar on Indian coins

The Indian democracy is said to have drawn inspiration from these edicts of Ashoka (through Mahatma Gandhi) and to date, Ashoka’s pillars are considered the emblem of India (BBC, 2014).

Two thousand years after Ashoka, Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Dynasty, is said to have also sponsored open debates and discussions between adherents of different faiths, including agnostics and atheists (Sen, 2005).

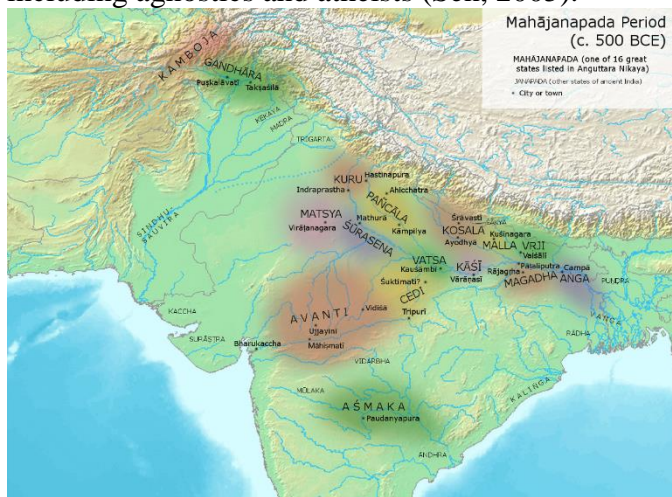


Figure 2: The Mahajanapadas of 6th Century India

In fact, some historians point to the occurrence of republican states in India even as far back as the 6th century BCE, amongst the 16 territories that comprised the Mahajanapadas. Monarchies and republics are said to have thrived side by side - Vriji and Malla cited as the best examples of republics at the time. Besides these two states, the republican forms were also said to have been seen

among some other notable people like the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, the Koliyas of Ramagama, the Bhaggas of Susumagiri, the Bulis of Allakappa, the Kalamas of Keshaputta and the Moriyas of Pippalivana; these territories were small and were ruled by their elected assemblies. In the state of Vriji, there were no kings, only elected representatives that formed the “gana” or the popular assembly. The chief executive or head of the state was an elected leader, the Raja, and the actual administration rested in hands of elected elders. The representatives apparently ruled by consent and united opinion (Sharma, 1972).

Buddha’s advice to his disciple Ananda points to the early democratic practices in the Vriji or Vajji state in 6th century BCE India.

“So long as the Vajjians hold these full and frequent public assemblies, so long may they be expected not to decline, but to prosper. So long, Ananda, as the Vajjians meet together in concord, and carry out their undertakings in concord, so long as they enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has been already enacted and act in accordance with the ancient institution of the Vajjians as established in former days so long as they honour and esteem and revere and support the Vajjain elders, and hold it a point of duty to harkens to their words, so long may be Vajjians be expected not to decline but to prosper” (Priyadarshini, 2015).

A strong preference for tradition and respecting the elders is, however, quite evident in this quote. Buddha’s own people were the Sakyas, who are reported to have been a freedom-loving people of nearly half a million distributed among eighty thousand families (Violatti, 2019). They lived in several groups in their villages and towns. *“The affairs of each of these groups were looked after by an assembly of the young and old meeting in the open air under a tree, or in a motehall, which was just a roof supported by pillars without walls and called Santhagara.*

Decisions were generally unanimous, doubtful questions being turned over to a committee of referees. There were also Ganapurakas (whips) of the assembly and salakagrahakas, gatherers of voting papers. The executive power was in the hands of a raja who was elected, for how long is not known” (Priyadarshini, 2015).

While the existence of these republics is recorded, it is also evident that they did not survive long, as they were, without exception, taken over by monarchies.

During the later periods, the panchayat system (with historical mentions dating back to 250 CE) came to become the oldest existing (in contemporary forms) system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. The panchayats traditionally consisted of five locally appointed elders with a leader, the “sarpanch” or “mukhiya” or “pradhan”. These panchayats traditionally settled disputes between individuals and villages (Udgaonkar, 1969). A variation of the traditional panchayat system was advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, as the foundation of India’s political system : each village would be responsible for its own affairs as a decentralized form of government. However, it was only in 1993 that the Panchayati Raj Institutions were formally institutionalized in India (Rath, 2019).

Democratic practices and pluralism, thus, existed in parts during the rich and diverse history of India, but in limited periods of time and within a limited number of people. A common trend to note is the dependence on a leader or a group of elders to make these democratic practices possible.

This trend is still visible in contemporary Indian politics too. Since 1952, there have been 17 general elections held, with the Indian National Congress (party that is believed to have led the Indian freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi) having won the majority of the elections. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, held his

elected position for 12 years and was succeeded by his daughter Indira Gandhi¹ after his death in 1964. Indira Gandhi, in turn, served as Prime Minister for 11 years, ending her term with a state of emergency that changed the face of Indian politics and paved the way for other political parties riding on dissent. While other governments have held coalitions at the center, the Indian National Congress (commonly known as ‘the Congress Party’ or INC) has ruled India for 53 out of the 72 years of independence (including the years from 1947-52 when the Indian constitution was being written and Nehru was appointed as Prime Minister of the newly free India). In recent years, Narendra Modi, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress Party’s sole contemporary rival, became only the 3rd person in India’s history, after Nehru and Gandhi, to have secured a single party majority two times in a row (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). The Congress Party, in the meanwhile, is still led by a descendent of the Nehru family, Rahul Gandhi.

Thus, on the one hand, dynastic politics prevailed, with the descendants of Nehru continuing as actual or de facto rulers of the Congress party, while on the other, the emergence of a strong and decisive leader in India sets the bar for contemporary Indian politics.

Contemporary India – a Full Democracy?

According to the Freedom in the World 2019 report by Freedom House, democracy is in retreat mode, and global freedom has been continuously declining for more than a decade (Freedom in the World 2019, n.d.). India, however, is one of the 44 countries in the world that are considered “free” by Freedom House measures, alongside the countries of North America, Europe, Australia and a few countries in Africa and South America.

In an article written to commemorate India’s 72nd year of independence, historian and author Ramachandra Guha chose the headline: “India was a miracle democracy. But it’s time to downgrade its credentials.” (Guha, 2019). In contemporary world politics, and particularly in India, with its increasingly polarized views and opinions, it is difficult to find a balanced report on the status quo of governments, even if one were to rely on seasoned and renowned journalists. Thus, this paper will proceed to study the Indian democracy as objectively as is possible, using a number of sources, including international political analysts, historians, economists and thinkers from opposing political fields, in an attempt to represent the different currents of thought.

In order to further analyze the state of democracy in India, this paper will use the concept as described by the Economist’s Democracy Index. This index defines democracies as those countries that fulfill certain indicators within five categories (The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.):

1. Electoral Process and Pluralism
2. Civil Liberties
3. Functioning of the government
4. Political participation
5. Political culture

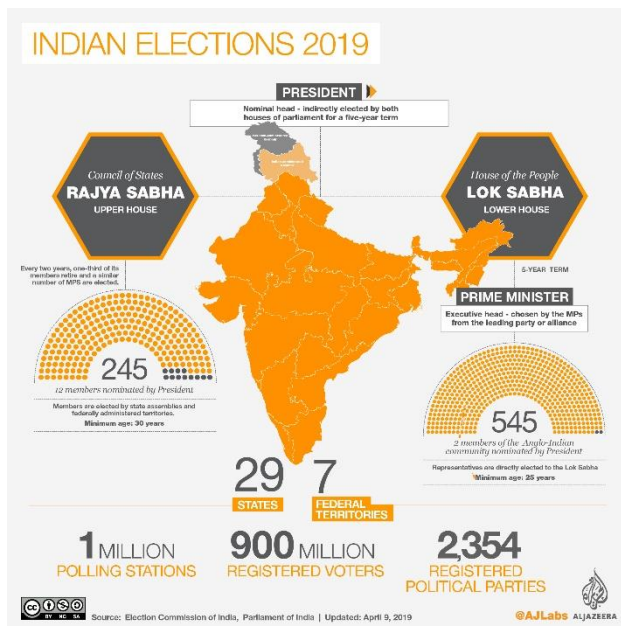
This segment of the paper tries to analyze very briefly the contemporary scenario in India in each of these categories.

1. Electoral Process and Pluralism:

In April 2019, the world witnessed what is considered as the largest exercise of democratic freedom yet - 900 million voters from a population of 1.3 billion people, voting

* The family does not bear any kinship to Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru’s descendants have the family name Gandhi, thanks to Indira Gandhi’s marriage to Feroze Gandhi.

between a total of 2354 political parties. For the second consecutive term, Narendra Modi's right wing Hindu nationalist BJP won a landslide victory, ousting a Congress Party accused of dynastic politics and corruption. The free people of India had chosen – in what may have been the most polarized contest yet in Indian political history.



Held over a period of a month, in 91 constituencies and more than a million polling booths, elections in India have never been a simple feat. With such an enormous population and administrative complexity, institutional measures have been set up to ensure smooth functioning. An autonomous constitutional authority called the Election Commission (EC) of India administers the Indian elections to all the major offices of the country, setting codes of conduct for fair and free elections (ECI, n.d.). The EC is known to have modernized the electoral process and taken various stringent measures over the years to make it incorruptible.

India, however, was ranked 59th out of 167 nations by the EIU

Figure 3: Structure of Indian General Elections 2019

for “Electoral Process and Pluralism” as per the Democracy Index 2018 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.). According to Sanjeev Ahluwalia, former officer of the Indian Administrative Service and currently Adviser to the Observer Research Foundation, it does not help that the responsibility for the selection of the Chief Election Commissioner and other commissioners of the EC rests solely in the hands of the government of India. Ahluwalia, in his commentary published on May 14, 2019 opines, “The EC is a child of political happenstance and *jugaad*², not thoughtful institutional strategy. It remains under-powered and under-used beyond the minutiae of election management. If politics is to be more representative and participative and political parties more democratic and transparent, foundational institutional reform cannot be postponed.” (Ahluwalia, 2019)

While the Election Commission, as part of its role, sets up the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) for every general election, which constrains the ruling party from exerting undue influence or using state resources illegally and stigmatizes any candidate or party indulging in divisive politics or using money or favors to buy votes, it lacks the authority to implement these constraints. Cases are filed at state police stations, but as former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswamy notes, “A large number of criminal cases are filed (during the polls). Unfortunately what happens is that after the elections are over, the election commission goes out of the scene, and it is the state police that has to pursue. It may or may not pursue vigorously.” (“India election”, 2019).

Ramachandra Guha, in his opinion piece published in the Washington Post, talks about how pessimistic Western experts were about India's continuance as a democracy back in 1947. He quotes the observation of a British official who visited India in 1952 during her

² *Jugaad* is an Indian word that literally translates to “improvisation” or a “flexible approach to problem-solving that uses limited resources in an innovative way”.

first general elections: *“a future and more enlightened age will view with astonishment the absurd farce of recording the votes of millions of illiterate people.”* (Guha, 2019).

67 years on, India still has a 26% illiteracy rate and an estimated 40 million people living in poverty. Can an electoral process be considered credible in the face of such illiteracy and poverty?

Moving on to pluralism, if 2354 political parties are not impressive enough, the power exercised by the Indian corporate world is something of contention (corporate donations formed 92% of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s total donations in 2017-18, according to a report in Observer Research Foundation (Sahoo, & Tiwari, 2019)). Moreover, a federal system of governance allows the different states in India to have their own state governments with various ideologies (including communism). Add to this equation the trade unions, non-governmental organizations and other powerful institutions, India seemingly boasts of pluralism, despite alleged attempts by various elected governments to thwart some of the powers.

On August 5, 2019, in a surprise move, the recently re-elected Modi government announced the revoking of Article 370 from a state that enjoyed special status since its accession to India in 1947 - Jammu and Kashmir. According to the special clauses in Article 370, included in the Indian constitution, all decisions pertaining to the status of Jammu and Kashmir have to be decided by plebiscite, which the government of India over-ruled and overnight, changed the status of the state to two union territories, placing state leaders under house arrest.

“In recent days, India has sent 10,000 extra troops to Kashmir, cut phone and Internet access, placed prominent Kashmiris (including leading politicians) under arrest, and told pilgrims visiting from other parts of India to leave.” reports Time. (Perrigo, 2019).

The current Indian government's narrative has been one leaning heavily on national security – Kashmir has been a cause of tension between India and its neighbors Pakistan and China, with China constructing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a part of its new Silk Road, through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Border conflicts between Pakistani militants and Indian troops have been frequent and the two countries have been at war and at the brink of others in the last 72 years. Supporters of Modi have lauded his firm stance on the Kashmir issue, pointing to a new and assertive leadership that would change the face of a merely defensive strategy that India has adopted over the years. Those opposed to this move attribute motivation to the undesirable Muslim majority status of the former state (the only Muslim majority state in India), and the fact that under Article 370, only citizens of Jammu and Kashmir could buy or own land there, thus, making a potential demographic shift impossible. This is still an ongoing issue while this article is being submitted.

Hence, while on the surface, it may be impressive that the world's largest democracy displays its democratic freedom when 900 million people come out to cast their vote, the question of whether informed (and objective) decisions can be taken by voters in the face of extreme poverty and illiteracy looms large. Add to that some of the decisive moves that the current government has made since it has been in power, the score given to India in the Democracy Index seems fair. As Guha writes, India may be “in danger of becoming an election-only democracy” (Guha, 2019). Or has this always been the case?

2. Civil Liberties:

India has long been known for her diversity – religious, linguistic, ethnic, et al - having been home to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Baha'is, etc. in chronological order of occurrence. Each of these religious communities has managed to retain its identity despite stints of conversions and communal violence. Moreover, there has never been any attempt to impose one single linguistic identity on the

country. The 2001 census recorded the existence of 30 languages spoken by more than a million native speakers each and 122 languages, which were spoken by more than 10,000 people each (Government of India, 2001).

Ethnic groups have also co-existed over centuries and as author, professor emeritus and former Indian ambassador to Lao S.D. Muni beautifully describes it:

“Several cultural markers - language, race, tribe, caste, religion, and region serve as identity axes for ethnic groups and their mobilization. In most of the ethnic groups, more than one of these cultural markers are pertinent for identification. In other words, India's ethno-communities have multilayered and multidimensional identities that impinge on each other in a non-stratified and dynamic manner. The identity composition of ethno-communities has been further complicated by the imposition of class distinctions, not only between one and another ethno-community, but also within each. Multilayered, non-stratified identity composition has enabled ethnic groups to assert and reshuffle their cultural markers to advance their perceived objectives.” (Muni, n.d.).

While religious and ethnic conflicts have arisen despite and due to this multilayered, non-stratified identity composition, civil liberties have seldom been curtailed, except during the infamous Emergency of the 1970's. Advances in civil liberties, particularly in women's rights and gay rights have been admirable in the past decade. Impressive advances in gender inclusive laws and policies include the rights for divorced women, single mothers, women as caretakers for elderly parents, as property owners and the banning of the “triple talaq” (Islamic practice by which men can divorce their wives by merely stating the word “talaq” thrice) for Muslim women, to name a few. The banning of the triple talaq though, rests on a sensitive religious fault line whereby the aforesaid cultural markers play an important role. While the majority of women applauded the ban as a win for gender equality, in a sensitive India, this came to be seen as some as the Hindu government's interference in another religion's matters. Another big advance in civil rights has been the decriminalization of homosexuality, as well as the advancement of transgender rights; the latter led by the southern state of Kerala.

However, criticism against the Modi government in India has included the curtailing of some other civil rights – notably the ban on beef consumption in some states, the alleged hunt on journalists opposing the government, the demonetization of currency in 2016, the government's strong actions in Assam and most recently, the Jammu and Kashmir case. While the banning of beef in BJP majority states is on religious grounds (the cow is a holy animal for the Hindus), it has been interpreted as a covert threat on the civil rights of Indian minorities (the Christian and Muslim communities in India are the main consumers of beef) (“Beef Down”, 2019).

The murder of Gauri Lankesh, an outspoken left-wing journalist who openly criticized the BJP government, in 2017, stunned India and shed light on a possible deterioration of the freedom of speech. According to the 2017 Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, India ranked 136 out of 180, a position quite out of keeping with India's image as the world's most populous democracy (Deb, 2018). However, this does not seem to be an issue exclusively of the present government: according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as many as 70 journalists were killed in India over the course of 24 years until 2016 (Dixit, 2019).

Meanwhile in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, more than 4 million people are said to be at risk of being declared as “foreign migrants” due to insufficient identity papers. While some news reports use the narrative: the Indian government's crackdown on illegal migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh, others choose to dwell on the fact that a lot of the affected people are illiterate and that they have been born and raised in India; they would find themselves stripped off their homes in the worst kind of abrogation of civil liberties.

The Freedom in the World 2019 report gives India a score of 3/7 in Civil Liberties (1 being the most free) (Freedom in the World 2019, n.d.); while some advances have been made, civil liberties have been rather questionable in India, depending on the bar used.

3. Functioning of the government:

India has been steadily progressing in the world economy for the past two decades, maintaining an average GDP growth rate of almost 7% and is the 6th largest economy in the world in 2019. The various governments in India have intermittently taken credit for advances made and blamed oppositions for losses incurred as per the circumstances. The current government in India has made some more than impressive advances in the past years, however. These include improved international relations, a switch from a defensive position on international issues to a more assertive stance on them, a more aggressive take on internal security, the Make in India and Digital India initiatives, Swachh Bharath (an initiative to clean India), the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, Beti Bachao campaign (to remove the stigma around having girl children) and several notable initiatives for rural India (Sankhla, 2019).

In a survey conducted by The Economic Times, one of India's most widely circulated financial dailies, 60% CEOs and 73% readers rated the Modi government's first 5-year stint as "good" with the greatest achievements voted as "infrastructure" and "brand India". "Unemployment" was voted as the greatest failure and 71% of CEOs and 78% of readers predicted the re-election of Modi for a second term (Goyal, 2019).

An opposing point of view though, accuses the Modi government of causing havoc to the steadily growing Indian economy through the demonetization move in late 2016, of neglecting farmers, of curtailing freedom of speech in the media, the weakening of institutions and the cultivation of communal hatred (Khurshid, & Khan, 2018). The Guardian takes a rather grave view on the Modi administration in an editorial published on February 1, 2019:

"Mr Modi prefers to campaign on his own reality. In a break with Indian political tradition, the prime minister has never held a traditional press conference. His spat with the central bank revealed a penchant to suborn independent institutions for political purposes. His administration suppresses inconvenient facts. Since 2014 there has been no update on official poverty statistics. There is scant indication Mr Modi will be running on his economic record. The concern is that he might fall back on the BJP's Hindu majoritarianism to whip up social tensions. Since he came to power there has been a 28% jump in the number of incidents of communal violence, including lynchings of Muslims. When the country heads to the polls, at stake will – almost certainly – be matters quotidian but also something deeper about the struggle for India's soul. (The Guardian, 2019)".

In April 2019, free India seemed to vote unanimously for a second round of Modi's governance despite these rather serious accusations.

4. Political Participation:

Political participation in India has always seen an enthusiasm often stronger in the lower classes and with general apathy in the educated upper classes. As the Council on Foreign Affairs reports on India's Electoral Politics:

"The Indian electorate has turned the standard law of political participation on its head, say experts. In India, the lower castes vote more than the upper castes, and the poor vote as much or more often than the rich. Similarly, the illiterate cast ballots more often than the educated, and rural voters more than urban populations. India's universal suffrage long preceded transition to a modern industrialized economy, Ashutosh Varshney, a political science professor at the University of Michigan, wrote in Foreign Affairs in 2007. And in this

low-income democracy, these large numbers of voters, most concerned with their basic needs and livelihoods, have made economic issues an important part of the debate." (Bajoria, 2009)

In 2019, India had a 67% turnout in the general elections, the largest ever turnout yet, as well as the largest participation from women (Jainn, 2019). Apart from the usual stories of names missing from voting lists to faulty machines, the Indian general elections, were, as ever, an impressive spectacle.

In addition to exercising their voting rights, Indians are largely active in other political exercises including taking part in protests (again, more strongly taken up by lower segments of the population), contributing money to campaigns (the richer segments of the population), and in some cases, entering politics through existent political parties or by starting a regional party. The Indian diaspora from around the world have been particularly active in contemporary politics, through funding for their political parties.

The advent of social media has further increased political participation through online petitions to collect signatures on community decisions, fund-raising and expressing dissent. However, as Dr. Sangeeta Mahapatra (Institute of Asian Studies, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg) notes, *"there has been the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, enabling the quick and pervasive spread of polarising politics, especially by political parties that are flush with funds. Social media has also been used as a call to action platform to mobilise supporters; the underside of this is that the flashpoint of a communal conflict can be quicker."* (Mahapatra, 2019).

While political participation is quite active in India, the earlier posed issue of illiteracy and poverty is relevant here too. With these two realities looming large, it has also been possible to instigate political participation, often in support of those who promise the most in economic terms.

5. Political Culture:

Sajjan Kumar, a political analyst, describes India's political culture as the *"politics of othering"*. According to him, *"By the 1950s, against the backdrop of the domineering discourse of Congressism, which was a politics without 'othering', India witnessed the emergence of four dominant political threads: Lohiaite, Ambedkarite, Hindutva and Dravidian, championing the fault-lines of caste, religion and ethnicity, thereby practising the politics of 'numbers and othering'."* (Kumar, 2019).

Whether this analysis is true or not, one aspect of Indian political culture is clear, even to the untrained eye: the total lack of cooperation between opposition parties, regardless of the common good of the people. B.S. Raghavan, in his opinion article in The Hindu Business Line calls India's political culture a "repulsive" one where political parties take to the streets and go on a rampage causing loss of life and destruction of property every time they differ from the policies of the parties in power. He takes the example of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, on the contrary, attending a ceremony to dedicate the George W. Bush presidential library and lauding the former Republican president's service and dedication to his country. This, he says, would never happen in India (Raghavan, 2013).

India's political culture seems to have become increasingly polarized over the years. Which is not to say that it is not an improvement from a single party dominion during the first 28 years from independence. Polarization between two strong opposition parties is, after all, much more "democratic" than dynastic, single-party governance. However, this polarization (which arguably happens in other democracies as well) leads to an extremely narrow vision in those who exercise their democratic rights. Anecdotally, those that have traditionally supported the Congress party, continue to do so, turning a blind eye to the corruption and lack of leadership and focusing only on the pros of the party ideology. The same goes for the supporters of the BJP. Social media only exacerbates this polarized view of the political

scenario with accusations of being “anti-India” following anyone criticizing the Modi governance.

Khatri, Mujtaba, et al writes in their 2013 paper Globalization, Change and Learning in South Asia, the political culture facilitates and exacerbates cronyism in South Asia:

“As one of the world’s oldest and largest political parties, the Congress Party in India has evolved an elaborate culture aimed at protecting the Gandhi dynasty. Sycophantic Congressmen are always in a race to outdo each other; pushing away bright, competent, and strong individuals. The result is lack of vision and lack of great ideas needed to move society forward.” (Khilji, 2017).

The current Modi governance seems a welcome change from this “sycophantic” and “crony” political culture that has existed thus far, but of course, for the BJP supporters. This also corroborates with a recent article in Freedom House, which suggests, Indian voters may be starting to choose performance over identity, with many identity-based parties finding themselves emphatically rejected at the polls.

“Formed in the 1960s as a reaction against the powerful Congress Party, these groups built political support by appealing to voters’ language, caste, ethnicity, or religion. In the past, such tactics had been largely successful. However, recent state elections suggest that Indian voters have begun casting ballots based on performance, not loyalty to caste or religion.” (Mitra, & Killian, 2013).

The BJP government seems to have ridden well on a good mix of performance based identity politics.

In the 2018 report on the Democracy Index by the Economist, India was ranked 41 (with a score of 7.23), below the US (ranked 25) and some flawed democracies like France, Botswana and South Africa, making it also a flawed democracy. The Scandinavian countries held the top spots (The Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.). In a very brief examination of the different categories by which a democracy is measured, this paper contends that corruption, poverty and illiteracy tarnish the electoral process and pluralism, as well as affects the political participation in India. Civil liberties are something that is subjective to what nation one compares India with. The functioning of the current government is arguably the best India has seen, with some rather considerable advances made in the last five years. As for the political culture of India, dynastic politics and identity politics and more recently, performance based politics, vies for the attention of the Indian electorate. So while India is different from other post-colonial nations in its adoption of a continuous democratic government, it is also a very different democracy from other global democracies; this can be further attributed to the cultural components involved.

Cultural Components of the Indian Democracy

In this section of the paper, we use Hofstede’s 6D model of cultural differences (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2017) and the corresponding Mental Images of Culture Clusters as developed by Huib Wursten (Wursten, 2000) to understand the cultural peculiarities that make India quite a unique entity as democracies go.

India scores high on the Power Distance Index (77), characterized by a deeply embedded need for hierarchy and a top-down approach to management, social order and governance. While management has taken many forms in varying degrees over the years, thanks to the several multinational companies that have set up shop in India, at a societal level, the country continues to be divided along the caste and class divisions that are centuries old. Governance then, would naturally follow suit, and if the analysis of the past 72 years of Indian independence are anything to go by, it has indeed followed suit, in a rather predictable way.

On the second dimension of Individualism/Collectivism, India scores 48, which is more towards the collectivistic side, although not overwhelmingly so. If one studies the religions that are autochthonous to India (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism), one cannot but notice the individualistic traits of these religions – the tenets prescribe the finding of self-enlightenment, a very individual path, and not based on do's and don'ts as Abrahamic religions preach. However, a strong tribal or community bond has persevered in India despite or perhaps, because of its rich diversity. Loyalty to the in-group is strong, and protection in exchange for that loyalty is rampant.

Another important dimension to consider is the fourth – Uncertainty Avoidance, for which India has a score of 40. This shows a moderate acceptance of ambiguity or uncertainty, characterized by the popular concept of “*jugaad*” which literally translates into improvisation. “*Chalta hai..*” (=anything goes) is a common refrain to comfort, justify or shrug away any situation where things don't necessarily go your way. Lord Krishna is quoted in the Bhagavad Gita as telling King Arjuna “*Give a 100% effort to the task at hand but invest exactly 0% in the return.*” The attitude seems to have pervaded into the psyche of the Indian, allowing for a tremendous amount of flexibility and the ability to work in and around the most complex of situations without batting so much as an eyelid.

Putting these dimensions together in a cluster, India finds itself in the Family Cluster in Wursten's Mental Images (Wursten, 2000) – characterized by hierarchy, a reliance on traditional wisdom, loyalty, flexibility and high-context communication. Other countries that fall in this cluster are China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore. If we were to apply the Democracy Index to all of these countries, China falls under an authoritarian regime whereas all the others, including India, are “flawed” democracies. The question arises, do the cultural characteristics matter in whether a nation can indeed adopt a full democracy?

If we take a closer look at the countries that are considered full democracies in the world today, we notice that all of them, with the exception of Spain, Costa Rica and Uruguay fall under the contest, network or well-oiled machine clusters. Whether democratization changed their values over the years or whether it is due to the values that democracy has “stuck” in these countries is an important consideration to make. If it is true that democracy is under attack in several countries (including the United States, the United Kingdom and the like), however, there are several contemporary factors involved in this changed dynamic. The oldest democracy is said to be the United States (219 years), followed by Switzerland (171 years) and Canada (152 years) and so on with very notably, countries in the Contest and Network clusters (Desjardins, 2019). However, universal adult suffrage (male, female and multi-ethnicity) was only seen well after the 1900s with the exception of New Zealand (Nohlen, 2001).

Going back to our country of study, however, and in understanding where it lies on the different categories that define the Democracy Index, the cultural values connections are quite discernible. The Indian citizen has, in the 72 years of independence, voted for a party led by a renowned family in the political spectrum regardless of their campaign promises or alternatively and more recently, voted for a strong and assertive leadership. Other than the Indian National Congress, the great Gandhi family dynasty that dominated the Indian political scene for more than half a century since the Indian independence, the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Narendra Modi has been the only party to have won by an overwhelming majority.

The cultural values correlations here are hard to ignore:

Hierarchy:

A strongly hierarchical culture, the average Indian citizen looks for a strong, competent leadership – either in the form of a high pedigree family or of a charismatic

individual who has the power to take decisive action. A leadership that while caring for its people, also takes assertive actions in the interest of the country and its people. The democratic buy-in of citizens becomes secondary; the average Indian citizen is happy to let a seemingly competent leadership take important decisions and will stand behind that leadership regardless of arguments from the opposition, as long as civil liberties are not dramatically curtailed (as in the Emergency of 1970s, which had the opposite result). The increased polarization in Indian politics shows just that: the BJP supporter will stand behind any policy adopted by the BJP government, regardless of its success or failure, pointing to another important cultural trait in this cluster: loyalty.

Loyalty:

Loyalty is a central quality of the family cluster, centered on just that – the family. The Indian is happy to call everyone around them “bhayya” and “didi” (brother and sister) or “uncle” and “aunty”, depending on the age of the person. Older people are even called “grandfather” and “grandmother” in the respective regional tongues. This does not depend on caste, community or religion – everyone is called a relative across these lines. So when a Rahul-bhai or Modi-ji tries to capture people’s imaginations and through that, their votes, people are happy to oblige because of their strong sense of loyalty. As mentioned earlier in the paper, people who have always voted for the Congress party (through generations) continue to do just that, unquestioning of the new possibilities or an obviously incapable leadership within their preferred party. This loyalty overrides objectivity, regardless of the education or socio-economic levels of the electorate. There is only a small minority of people that exist in India who are open to questioning their loyalties in the face of new evidence or possibilities. The exception in this game of numbers though, is the poor populations of India, which the cleverest of politicians target through promise of economic resources and betterment.

Wisdom:

As seen in the rich traditions of Indian political and social history, age and experience, and through those, wisdom, is an important factor in choosing leadership. Respect for one’s elders is an important cultural value in Indian society. The most popular ritualistic manifestation of this value is the touching of the elder’s feet when greeting them. Indians believe that when a person bows down and touches the feet of their elders, their ego gets suppressed as they acknowledge their age, experience, achievements and wisdom. They in turn, get the blessings of their elders. This is a noteworthy indicator of the recent general election results in India. The Congress party, led by a young and inexperienced Rahul Gandhi, failed in their choice of leader, if we consider this particular cultural value. At age 49, Gandhi is far beneath the median age at which Indian Prime Ministers have been elected to power – a ripe 64 years and 8 months. The exception was Rahul Gandhi’s father, Rajiv Gandhi, who took over after his mother Indira Gandhi was assassinated, a different era, where the Gandhi dynasty still had a firm grip on Indian politics. Indira Gandhi also took over at age 48, shortly after her father, Nehru died. Narendra Modi, on the other hand, is 68 years old, and a seasoned politician, despite the controversies that surround him (“List of prime ministers”, 2019).

Flexibility:

The flexibility of the Indian allows for a rather relaxed attitude towards the uncertainties and less desirable outcomes that come with voting for a particular political party. An Indian is comfortable to “wait” and “watch” for things to change rather than actively play a role in changing things for the better. The lackadaisical approach from the well-educated and elite populations of India in political discourse and action is a case in point. The “*chalta hai*” attitude also makes it very easy for an Indian to overlook the faults and promises undelivered by the governments that hold their loyalties and hope for better

action the next time around. A ray of hope exists in the slight switch from identity-based voting to performance-based voting in some Indian states, as well as, some would argue, the central government in the recent years. However, as Indian cultural values go, if things do not necessarily go one's way, "*chalta hai*"...

Taking these core cultural values that predominate the Indian psyche, and adding to it the extreme educational and socio-economic disparity that exists in India, the flawed state of democracy in India as assessed by the Economist's Democracy Index is quite predictable.

Conclusion

In 1998, Ashutosh Varshney published an article titled: *India Defies the Odds: Why Democracy Survives* in the Journal of Democracy, where he talks about how India has long baffled the theorists of democracy. "*Democratic theory holds that poverty, widespread illiteracy, and a deeply hierarchical social structure are inhospitable conditions for the functioning of democracy,*" he wrote. "*Predictions of an imminent collapse of India's democracy have continued since the 1960s. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democracy in June 1975 and declared a state of emergency, it seemed that India was finally starting down the path that most of the world's poorer democracies had already traveled. Yet democracy returned 18 months later, and emergency rule proved to be a conjunctural aberration rather than an emerging structural trend.*" (Varshney, 1998).

In 2019, opposition to the current Indian government has vehemently expressed concern over what they perceive as an emerging structural trend, and not merely a conjunctural aberration.

Freedom House expresses alarm at the decline of democracies across the world; but the question of whether democracy is indeed a universally adoptable model of governance remains to be asked. When cultural values are studied, it comes to one's attention that democracies have thus far been sustained only by those cultures in the Contest, Network and Well-oiled Machine clusters, which are characterized by low Power Distance and high Individualism. In higher power distance and collectivist cultures, where there is an innate need for strong leadership and a loyalty towards the in-group, democracy as is defined by the west may be a far-fetched reality. Add to that the discrepancies in education levels and socio-economic development within the society, especially in a country like India, it would appear that the state of affairs maybe "as good as it gets".

This paper questions the possibility of a truly democratic system of governance in the face of such disparities and poses an additional question of whether near equality in education and socio-economic parity is a precondition to a fully functional democracy, as are certain cultural values (low power distance and high individualism). And in a country like India, where social inequalities have dwelled over centuries, is this a plausible (or desirable) reality in the near future?

Conversely, how is it possible at all that India has maintained a democratic (albeit flawed in many ways) system over these years? The answer may lie in the heterodoxy that has existed in India over its rich and diverse history, like Amartya Sen says. A penchant for argument and dialogue and tolerance for diversity has existed in India throughout its history and this quite possibly translates to acceptance for different opinions and points of view. And if the autochthonous Indian religions are anything to go by, the Indian people seem to have individualistic traits despite their in-group loyalties.

The Great Indian Democracy, with its own tides and undercurrents, ebbs and flows, has survived 72 years of self-governance, flawed maybe, but still standing tall and proud, and still a contender to be the next global power. With a 1.3 billion population and tremendous linguistic, religious and socio-economic diversity, can one really expect a fully functional democracy in western terms, with such diverse people reaching consensus on important

decisions to take them forward? What would that look like without a strong leadership? And finally, was the Chinese professor in the anecdote at the beginning of this paper right about Indians not accepting a strong leadership? Recent events seem to point otherwise...

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