



## Constitutional Democracy in India: The Past, The Present and The Future

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**Abstract**—The constitutional democracy in India is a complex interplay of historical developments, cultural nuances and socio-political dynamics. This article traces the development of constitutional democracy in India from its colonial beginnings to its present-day tribulations and prospects. It discusses the basic concepts on which the Constitution is based, the roles played by the various institutions, and the ongoing debates on democratic values in the context of globalisation and technological advancement.

**Keywords:** Constitutional Democracy, Constitution, Constituent Assembly, Public Administration, Democratic Values.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest democracy and also one of the most diverse in political and cultural traditions. Running such a diverse society is a daunting task, with more than 1.4 billion people and more than 2,000 different ethnic groups. The Constitution of India came into force on 26th January 1950 and forms the basis of its democratic structure, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of millions of people (Austin, 2019). As put forward by Khoshla (2022).

The birth of modern India marked the historical node at which democracy, constitutionalism, and modernity occurred simultaneously. The Indian revolution combined a set of concerns that had proceeded at separate rates in the West, and it signaled a time at which a set of processes—the introduction of popular authorisation, the creation of rules constituting public authority and participation, the concentration of authority in the state, the identification of self-determination with individual freedom, the separation of public and the private—emerged at a single moment. The moment was a historical response to both eighteenth-century failures and nineteenth-century critics of democracy. The fact that India encountered troubles that earlier moments of democratic creation were able to avoid makes it the new paradigm for what it means to create a democracy in the modern world. This is what makes the experience of one nation but the experience of *democracy* itself. (p. 24)

The Indian experiment was unique in multiple ways. It evolved over a period, facing multiple challenges. Today, It grieves the loss of balance between the “ethic of moral conviction” and the “ethic of responsibility” that the sociologist Max Weber (1946) had championed in his essay “Politics as a Vocation.” Constitutional democracies had preserved a certain balance between change and order, but the “regressive modernism” that has usurped their place has eroded the constitution's bedrock (Gudavarthy, 2023). It has to take a long path to become truly a participatory democracy. The Constitution's ideals and philosophy are reflected in the Preamble and are based on the fundamental principles of personal dignity and national unity. These principles are understood in the context of radically egalitarian justice. These elementary ideas were forcefully advocated by people like Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, M.K. Gandhi, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Jagjivan Ram, R. Amrit Kaur, Ram Manohar Lohia and others; they are a broad consensus among the founders of the nation, transcending various social and political ideologies. The architects of modern India had one vision: that every person gets an equal opportunity to live with dignity and security, has equitable access to a better quality of life, and is an equal partner in the development of the nation.

But there is increasing anxiety that most core constitutional values have not been fully realised. Almost all the public institutions created to fight domination and subordination are not able to justify their actions, creating new hierarchies instead of destroying old ones and generating disparities instead of reducing them. Despite government policies of equality, the administration of justice and enforcement of laws encourage illegality, criminality, corruption, bias, nepotism and unfairness. The growing social intolerance and exclusions based on gender, caste, religion and other factors undermine an inclusive understanding of citizenship, governance, nationhood and India's constitutional democracy (Rathore et al. al, 2024). This research article is an attempt to analyse the historical setting, present status and future course of constitutional democracy in India.

## II. THE CONCEPTUAL ASPECT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

Constitutional democracy is a modern form of government based on the idea of "self-government". This is a commonly understood form of government today. As put forward by McConnell (1988), "Constitutional democracy is that form of government in which representative institutions, acting through constitutionally-prescribed procedures, have the authority to make legally-binding decisions about some (though not all) matters". The other view about the definition of a constitutional democracy has been given by Ginsburg and Haq (2018). They state that the constitutional democracy consists of three elements, viz. free elections, the recognition of basic rights and the maintenance of the integrity of legal institutions.

Throughout human history, societies have been ruled by long-lasting oligarchies, emperors, and kings. This has been the way since the beginning of human history. Such governments are autocracies in various guises, and can be overthrown entirely only through the exercise of the right of national self-determination. There is a general agreement that the fight to actualise this right is a very recent history. But the practice became widespread only in the 20th century, though it could have been a source of inspiration for the revolutions that occurred in the United States and France in the second half of the 18th century (Loughlin, 2019).

## III. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### A. The Colonial Legacy

Indian constitutional democracy has its roots in the British colonial period. The British had established a system of government that was mostly geared to their own ends and that frequently ignored the aspirations of the Indian people. The Government of India Act of 1919 (Montagu-Chelmsford reforms) brought limited self-government, setting up a bicameral legislature but restricting the franchise to a small, wealthy section of the population (Brass, 2016).

The Government of India Act, 1935 was a significant step in the direction of constitutional government as it established a federal structure and enlarged the electorate. But it did not, however, give full representation and empowerment to the Indian people. These Acts set the stage for further constitutional development by introducing features of governance that were to be revived during the independence struggle (Keith, 1936).

### B. The Freedom Movement

India's independence movement comprised a tapestry of socio-political currents united in their pursuit of autonomy and democratic systems. Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded pacifist resistance strategies, whereas intellectual leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar prioritised direct constitutional engineering (Chandra et al., 1989). Yet there were unseen coordination and cohesiveness.

Various political factions, led by the Indian National Congress, demanded a foundational text aligned with the aspirations of a pluralistic population. A core area of consensus centred on constitutional protections for fundamental rights and social equity. Furthermore, the active participation of women and underprivileged groups underscored the vital importance of building an inclusive democratic system.

## C. The Constituent Assembly

The Constituent Assembly formed in 1946 was instrumental in shaping India's democratic framework. It consisted of representatives from different regions, religions and communities, which ensured a comprehensive approach to nation-building. The Assembly had long debates on important issues like fundamental rights, government structure, and the relationship between the centre and states (Austin, 2019). To say the entire gamut of Indian life was decided by the Constituent Assembly.

B. R. Ambedkar, as Chairman of the Drafting Committee, played a pivotal role in incorporating fundamental rights and social justice into the Constitution. His focus on protecting the rights of the marginalised communities was a hallmark of the Constitution. The Assembly ended its deliberations with the adoption of the Constitution on 26th January 1950, celebrated as a day of liberation and democratic renewal.

## IV. CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

The Constitution of India was the 'national idea of India', and this included personal freedom, said Jawaharlal Nehru. equality of opportunity, social justice, secularism, the spirit of logical inquiry and independence of action and judgement in global affairs, of which non-alignment was a contingent expression (Parekh, 2021).

### A. Basic Features

India's Constitution provides for a parliamentary system, a federal structure and an independent judiciary. It ensures fundamental rights and duties, protects individual freedoms and promotes social justice (Nariman, 2022). Main characteristics are:

1. Sovereignty: India is a sovereign state, and it is free from external control. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land.
2. Socialism: The Constitution intends to reduce economic inequalities and promote welfare, reflecting the influence of socialist ideology.
3. Secularism: The state recognises all religions equally and ensures separation of religion and state affairs. This is necessary for social harmony in a pluralistic society. A Gandhian approach of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhaav'.
4. Democracy: Representative democracy, with elected representatives governing on behalf of the people. Regular elections and an independent election commission exist (Brass, 2016).

### B. Basic Rights and Responsibilities

The Constitution ensures fundamental rights like equality, freedom of speech and expression, right to life and personal liberty, right to constitutional remedies, etc. These rights are justiciable in a court of law, which means that if the citizens' rights are violated, they can seek justice (Basu, 2007).

Moreover, the Constitution emphasises fundamental duties, encouraging the citizens to foster harmony, safeguard the environment, and uphold the Constitution. For a democracy to function, there must be a balance between the emphasis on rights and duties.

### C. Amendment Procedure

The Constitution provides for a flexible process of amendments, which allows for changes to be made to adapt to changing social, political, and economic circumstances. The amendment process is divided into three categories: requiring a simple majority, requiring a special majority, and requiring ratification by half of the state legislatures (Bakshi, 2018). Such flexibility has allowed the implementation of necessary reforms like the inclusion of new fundamental rights and the reform of the structure of governance.

## V. THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

### A. Institutional Framework

Indian Public Administration is an important instrument to strengthen the constitutional democracy through effective implementation of policies and programmes of Government. The bureaucracy (what Sardar Patel called a steel frame) is the backbone of governance and a bridge between legislative intent and action. The public administration system is designed with different levels of administration like central, state and local administration. The core functions of public administration are to provide services, maintain law and order and develop socio-economic development (Arora & Goyal, 2013).

## **B. Accountability and Transparency**

Accountability and transparency are core principles of good public administration. The Right to Information Act (2005) and similar mechanisms have enabled citizens to ask for information from public authorities, thereby promoting a culture of openness and accountability. These mechanisms increase the accountability of administrative bodies and help in the fight against corruption by making them more subject to public scrutiny.

## **C. Civil Service and Democratic Principles**

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and other civil services are expected to serve the public impartially and efficiently, upholding democratic values. Training programmes stress the importance of ethics, accountability and responsiveness, which are fundamental to building trust in public institutions. Public administration, however, is often hindered by problems such as political interference and bureaucratic red tape (Brass, 2016).

## **D. Strengthening capacities and empowerment**

Capacity building in public administration is a must for contemporary challenges. Training and capacity building programs targeting skills upgrading of civil servants can enhance service delivery and policy implementation. Moreover, the decentralised governance models empower local bodies like Panchayati Raj institutions, which facilitate governance that is more responsive and participatory.

## **VI. THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA**

### **A. Politics of the elections**

India's democratic experience has been of regularly held elections at the central and state levels. The Election Commission of India (ECI) is an essential institution to ensure free and fair elections. It supervises the electoral process and election conduct. The introduction of the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) has further simplified the electoral process, though debates around transparency and reliability continue.

However, challenges have been presented by electoral fraud, manipulation of voter lists and voter apathy, despite the strong electoral framework. Low voter turnout in some areas and disenchantment with political parties threaten the legitimacy of the electoral process.

### **B. Function of Political Parties**

Political parties have emerged as powerful organisations in India, shaping public policy and governance. The multi-party system reflects the nation's diversity, with regional parties gaining greater prominence alongside national parties. Such fragmentation has resulted in coalition politics where parties have to collaborate to form governments that often culminate in compromises that dilute policy effectiveness.

Parties also tend to dominate, and there are concerns about concentration of power. Parties often use populist measures to win votes, and this can undermine long-term developmental goals. The challenge is still to build a political culture that prioritises accountability and transparency.

### **C. Independence of Judiciary**

The judiciary has been instrumental in upholding the Constitution and protecting the rights of the citizens. Landmark judgements such as the Kesavananda Bharati case, which propounded the ‘basic structure doctrine’, have strengthened democratic ideals by ensuring that some basic features of the Constitution cannot be amended (Mody, 2013).

But there are concerns over judicial overreach, delayed justice and the appointment of judges. The growing backlog of cases in Indian courts points towards the need for judicial reforms to improve efficiency and accessibility (Mishra, 2025).

## VII. PRESENT CHALLENGES

### A. The need to strengthen democratic values

Democratic values have declined not because of one stakeholder. The citizens are just as much at fault. They have to absorb and internalise the democratic values within them. In recent years and decades, there have been growing concerns about the erosion of democratic values, regardless of the political dispensation in power. Questions about the health of democracy in India have been raised over issues like the rise of authoritarianism, suppression of dissent and curbing of freedom of expression for decades. As also observed by Tumula (2023), you can damage democracy without ever needing to change the Constitution itself. Events threatening the inclusive fabric of the nation have exposed the fragility of democratic principles and the need to revisit the nation’s commitment to inclusivity.

### B. Social Inequality

Social inequalities still exist despite the constitutional guarantee of equality. Caste, gender and economic inequalities have been subverting the ideals of justice and equality since independence. There is still a serious problem with the marginalisation of many sections, as systemic barriers are preventing access to education, employment and political representation.

There have been efforts in terms of affirmative action and social justice policies, but there are gaps in implementation and attitudes in society which often undermine efforts. Legislative changes can address social inequality, but also a social commitment to be inclusive.

### C. Technological Effects

The digital age presents Indian democracy with both opportunities and challenges. For example, e-governance and online grievance redressal systems can enhance transparency and citizen engagement. Social media platforms have become a major tool in political mobilisation and public discourse.

But these platforms also carry risks of misinformation, cyberbullying and surveillance. The proliferation of “fake news” has clouded public discourse, resulting in polarisation and a breakdown of trust in democratic institutions. In this age, promoting digital literacy and ethical use of technology is essential to protect democracy.

## VIII. THE FUTURE

One of the interesting arguments is given by Kartik Muralidharan (2024) while talking about India’s development, which, according to him, in turn will strengthen Indian constitutional democracy, a kind of middle path. He stresses that it is a goal that should be prioritised by all Indians, irrespective of their political or ideological leanings along the spectrum. By investing in India’s public systems in a way that is cost-effective, we will be able to deliver basic services and welfare to the poor and vulnerable in a more efficient manner. But it will also make public spending more productive and prepare the ground for sustainably higher long-term growth. The key areas can be the following

### A. Strengthening democratic institutions

Strengthening democratic institutions is essential for the health of Indian democracy. This includes strengthening judicial independence, ensuring independence of the Election Commission and accountability in governance. Transparency, integrity and public participation promoted by institutional reforms are conducive to increasing trust in democratic processes

Civil society organisations and grassroots movements can further strengthen democratic practices by creating a culture of accountability and participation.

## B. Building Civic Engagement

Civic engagement and political participation are the only ways to breathe life into democracy. Educational programs that aim to improve civic awareness can enable citizens to take an active role in the democratic process. Promoting the participation of youth in politics and governance can further invigorate democratising institutions and generate new ideas.

Grassroots movements and community organising can help to amplify the voices of those who are marginalised, ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives is represented in political discourse.

## C. Democracy and Globalisation

As India struggles with globalisation, it has to balance economic growth with social justice. Policies should aim at inclusive development which addresses the needs of the marginalised communities while promoting sustainable growth. Economic policies need to be scrutinised to ensure they do not further entrench existing inequalities (Brass, 2016).

India's engagement with global issues such as climate change, migration and technological advances also provides opportunities for cooperative governance and the promotion of democratic values on the international stage.

## IX. CONCLUSION

India's constitutional democracy has emerged from its eventful history, vibrant present and an uncertain future. The challenges are many, but there is hope for a strong democratic future because of the strength of democratic institutions and the active engagement of citizens. If we follow the principles enshrined in the Constitution, which will be supreme, then India will be a vibrant democracy, reflecting its diverse populace and a developed nation as we celebrate the centenary of our independence in 2047.

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