



Challenges to Indian Democracy in Plural Society

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Abstract: Indian democracy, as the world's largest, faces a complex array of challenges that threaten to undermine its foundational principles of equality, liberty, and justice. Despite successful, regular, and free elections, the country struggles with deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities and institutional hurdles. Key challenges facing Indian democracy includes poverty and economic inequality. With a significant portion of the population still living below the poverty line, basic necessities often take precedence over political participation for many. This gap between the rich and poor hampers national progress and leads to a "chalta hai" (let it be) attitude toward systemic issues. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in the system and rampant corruption exists at political, bureaucratic, and corporate levels, weakening the foundation of democracy and reducing trust in public institutions. Caste-based discrimination continues to prevail, with caste consciousness often exploited for political gains (vote banks). Similarly, communalism and religious fundamentalism undermine secularism and threaten social harmony. Criminalization of politics, intersection of money and muscle power in elections has led to an increase in politicians with criminal backgrounds, negating democratic values. Gender Discrimination, illiteracy and Lack of awareness among the members have functionally hinders their ability (voters or citizens) to engage meaningfully in the political process. (200 wor

Index Terms - Poverty, Democracy, Caste, Communalism, Language, Discrimination, Challenges.

I. Introduction

It is inevitable that in multiethnic and plural societies the effective political community is restricted to the dominant state structures of powerful centralization a one hand and on the other the instrument of human freedom and social justice. For nearly four-decade, democracy in India has appeared somewhat of an anomaly. India is a multinational agrarian society with a rigid hierarchical social structure. Our national leaders offered democracy to the Indian masses as a means of incorporating them into the decision-making process. Apart from all this India is still, of course, a functioning democracy¹, but interestingly it is not well governed. The evidence of eroding of political order everywhere that is the personal rule has replaced party rule in all levels – national, state and district. Below the rulers, the entrenched civil and police service have been politicized. Various social groups have pressed new and ever more diverse political demands in demonstrations that often have led to violence. The purpose of this study is to describe in which ways Indian democracy is facing a challenge today. Rajni Kothari tries to provide answers to the puzzle of why the “world’s largest democracy”, has become difficult to govern because of its leadership role leading to institutional decline² resulting various challenges in democratic setup.

Postcolonial times were marked by recurring conflicts between centralized monarchs and assertive regional overlords. Colonial rulers laid the basis of centralized power and thus for a modern state – but the writ of their law never carried far; colonial power seldom penetrated the tradition-bound villages of India. Although the nationalist movement in India during the first half of the century created unity and thus the basis for a new system of authority.

The new constitution laid the basis for a British-style parliamentary democracy, arrangements were made to keep the armed forces out of politics, and the diversities of the Indian people were carefully considered in designing the new federal system³.

The political arrangements in the early phase were clearly dominated by educated, nationalist elite. The business class was also politically influential and the landed and caste elites were slowly brought into the ruling coalition. The new rulers enjoyed widely perceived legitimacy in part because of the nationalist legacy and in part because the traditional patterns of authority in society such as caste structure.

Most important, the state's capacity to govern (that is the capacity simultaneously to promote development and to accommodate diverse interests), has declined. Although with this decline, order and authority have been eroding⁴. Since the mid-1960s, the surface manifestation of this process has been widespread activism outside of the established political channels that often has led to violence. Below the established state elites, the vertical patterns of fealty in India's civil society have been eroding. Members of higher castes and other "big men" have gradually lost their capacity to influence the political behavior of those below them in the socio-economic hierarchy. As a result, new social groups⁵ have entered the political arena and pressed new demands upon the state. Without a dominant party and other conflicts-resolving institutions, democratic accommodations of such demands have been difficult.

An analysis of social and political regime alone cannot be used to predict the future of a distressed political regime. As illustrated by the emergency of 1975-77, during Indira Gandhi's regime, leadership actions can be as much responsible for a breakdown of democracy as can underlying social trends⁶. For a brief moment in 1985, when Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister, his decision to take advantage of this considerable popularity to pursue a more reconciliatory approach similarly demonstrated how important leadership actions can be. India's direction following V.P.Singh's rise to power in late 1989 has yet to be determined. Leadership actions are both important and difficult to predict, so is the future, of this troubled regime. Surely, we can say, India is no longer the land of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhiji, Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai nor the land of Deshbandhu Chattaranjan Das, Vithalbhai Patel, Dadabhai Naoraoji or Badruddin Tyabji. Their generation died a long time ago. Another generation is taking over the leadership and it is not a pretty picture. When India became free there was a strong and sophisticated leadership⁷. In the first phase it was a leadership that has been tested in the crucible of the freedom movement. Whatever one might think of men like C.Rajagopalachari, Govind Vallabh Pant, B.G.Kher or Bidhan Chandra Roy, they were men of high principles, incorruptible. In retrospect, they were all upper caste Hindus, highly educated who has participated in the freedom movement and were known for the sacrifices they made. They were not after power for power's sake. They have graduated to leadership because of their years of struggle and were natural choices as chief ministers of their respective states. Another generation of leaders waiting in the wings to snatch power who were aware of meaning of sacrifice and unaware of the immediate past. Today we have the Kanshi Rams, the Mayavatis, the Mulayam Singh Yadavs, the Veghelas, the Laloo Prasads, not to speak of the Karunanidhis and Devegowdas who have climbed to their political eminence through the caste vote. Unraveled, unsophisticated, unreal in the true sense, they have pursued casteism with a favor that once drew patriots to invite suffering. Thus, all good principles have long been thrown overboard and corruption has been turned into a way of life only to acquire power. Political system has been distorted⁸, more or less all political parties maintain criminal gangs routinely. Mulayam Singh Yadav's party has under control twenty-five out of one thirty-six identified gangs. The congress comes second with thirteen gangs and Bahajan Samaj party third with eight gangs. The third generations of leaders have arrived with criminal backgrounds. Arun Gawli who remained in jail for six years had set up a new political party called the Akhil Bharatiya Sena with more than one lakh members demanding dismissal of the Shiv Sena- BJP government. Veerappan a common murderer and smuggler influenced both the governments of Tamin Nadu and Karnataka in making political decisions.

The leadership role ultimately leads to continuous institutional decline⁹. Rajiv Gandhi came top power with a large electoral majority. He used his power to seek out “new” path for India. His priorities were re-building of the congress party, settlement of regional disputes and liberalization of India’s economy. But due to the opportunist and corrupt leaders, soon conflict started between the corrupt leaders and the institutional head, this conflict in turn reflects the vicious cycle of centralization and powerlessness that weakness of institutions¹⁰ has created in India, because institutions such as parties are weak, elections are owned by general mandates, and when leaders attempt to translate such mandates into specific policies, potential winners and losers become politically divided and the link between the leaders and the supporters is quickly exposed for what it really is, namely fragile and since leaders cannot implement many of their policies and thus cannot count on policy success as a vehicle for assuring electoral support, they tend to centralize power in their person and utilize leadership¹¹ appeals and general “mood swings” as means for a new round of electoral competition. Failure in implementing policies by a centralized party thus gave rise to innumerable hostile parties in the regional level lead to the decline of political institutions, for example – many congress elites, who are not in position of power and want to grab political power by contesting a fair election enlisted them as other party member who assured them to give secure power and position hence leave congress party. Institutional decline occurred due to absence of space for the self-seeking opportunist leaders. These factors lead to challenges of the democratic setup. Today India is facing challenges from caste groups, regional upheavals, social and new social movements, linguistic groups and communalism or ethnic conflicts.

II. Caste and Challenges to Indian Democracy

For decades, Indian politics was ruled by traditional elites. Pranab Bardhan calls them the proprietary class and the Indian National Congress (congress party) dominated the political life relied on the collaboration of elite groups¹², who exerted strong control over land as well as over industrial and business activities. Thus the congress system worked with the social hierarchy in a clientelist way, since the local notables who supported the party could call upon their ‘vote banks’ at the time of elections.

The conservative brand of democracy was more in evidence in northern India but in the south and in the west leaders from the lower castes – Jyoti Rao Phule, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in Maharashtra, Periyar E.V.Ramaswami in Tamil Nadu initiated consciousness rising movement which had exerted a strong political influence. Gradually the non-brahmins dominant castes such as the Marathas in Maharashtra, the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas in Karnataka, and the Reddys and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh sprang up posing their demands and in most cases the congress party accommodated these upwardly mobile groups. Things started to change when the congress party lost power in 1977, where in the northern state’s caste (intermediate castes and other backward classes, that is the OBCs) rose to power to almost twenty-percent in Indian politics.

The rise of intermediate castes¹³ began with the jats who are still a dominant caste in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Though they are not well educated but their socio-economic status is higher than that of most peasant groups. They began to invest in irrigation systems and fertilizers and came to a position to defend their own interest against the state¹⁴. The most famous was the congress politician from western Uttar Pradesh, Charan Singh, who was minister in the state government but who was never given his due by the party’s high command of the province because of his peasant background. He broke from the congress party in the 1967 elections, joined with other opposition parties and the political force created by Charan Singh was to play a major role in Uttar Pradesh politics for two decades. He mobilized the cultivators who were accustomed to voting for their landlord or any other upper caste notable and convinced them to emancipate themselves from this loyalty: thus, cultivators started to vote for their own people and primarily for the candidates of Charan Singh’s party.

The rise of a new Kisan Constituency partly explains the rise of OBCs¹⁵ and members of parliament (MPs) among the lower caste in 1977 as many kisans were from OBCs. The OBCs are not primarily defined by class criteria as

the kisans are but by castes. Soon after the constitution was promulgated, president Rajendra Prasad appointed a commission to identify the needs of other backward classes (they were all lower shudras) and they need positive discrimination programs. The lower caste in turn resented the government's decision, attributing it to the fear of the upper-caste dominated establishment vis-à-vis measures that might prompt lower caste empowerment. The demand for positive-discrimination¹⁶ programs are more precisely for quotas in the bureaucracy became the rallying cry of the OBCs all over India. In Bihar where caste divides were dramatic, politicians were especially successful in mobilizing OBC voters. In 1977, the rise of the MPs from the intermediate castes and the OBCs stemmed from the electoral success of the Janata party, an anti-congress coalition where Charan Singh played a significant role. The aftermath of Charan Singh's regime, the caste politics were continued by V.P.Singh and in the long run the OBCs were no longer simply an administrative category, they had risen to the challenge of organizing themselves politically. In northern India, they started to concentrate their vote on parties representing their interests¹⁷, for example – Samajwadi Janata Dal. In this context, the OBCs were joined by the scheduled castes who feared that the anti-reservationists campaign of the upper castes might affect their own quotas. The dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) later made an alliance with Samajwadi Janata Dal in 1993. Thus we find in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan the OBC leaders turned up for example – Shivraj Singh Chauhan in Bhopal (by caste kirar), Nitish Kumar in Patna (by caste kurmi), Mulayam Singh Yadav (a caste of cow herders) with their political powers and tried to influence the governmental decision in politics.

In three-fifths of India, the nationalist middle classes, who emerged out of the British colonial experience, aimed not only at independence, but also at the transformation of the Indian society¹⁸. Within the new context of political democracy, caste remains a central element of Indian society. Caste however, provides channels of communication and bases of leadership and organization, which enable those still submerged in traditional society and culture to transcend the technical political illiteracy that would otherwise handicap their ability to participate in democratic politics. Caste has been able to perform this novel role by developing a new form for political activity, the caste association and after independence it became increasingly apparent that they would be a central feature of Indian politics.

Social integration¹⁹, the relationship of the caste to other castes was governed by 'dharma', the sacred and traditional perception of duty which permeates Hindu life. Finally, its organization was latent, embedded in habit and custom rather than manifest and rationalized. Caste association has often expedited and co-ordinates such emulative activities like in the South where the caste culture has been conspicuously dominated by Brahmanical norms. The caste association is no longer a natural association that is one must also join the other caste association example Kshatriya Mahasabha or the Jat Kisan Sabha through some conscious act involving various degrees of identification. When the caste association turned to the state for furthering their purposes their initial claims²⁰ were aimed at raising caste status in terms of the values and structure of the caste order. Caste associations attempted to have their demands nominated for elective office, working through existing parties or forming their own to maximize caste representation and influence in state cabinets and lesser governing bodies and to use ministerial, legislative and administrative channels to press for action on caste objectives in the welfare, educational and economic realms.

Thus we find that Bahujan Samaj Party came into prominence in 1993 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram. The party projects itself as an organization of the scheduled castes or dalits. Its ideology is aggressively anti-upper caste, the later leaders like Mayawati publicly denounced Gandhiji as having led the scheduled castes or Harijans onto the wrong path. The party swears by Ambedkar²¹ and believes in the separate mobilization of the scheduled castes on caste lines. It is yet to make a mark on the national level. They basically instigate the caste groups to ascribe to their own caste identity and not to integrate with the other upper caste members. The DMK in Tamil Nadu under the leadership of E.V.Ramaswami Nalcker formed a caste association which criticized the dominance of the Brahmans in south India. The purpose of the Self-Respect Movement was to uplift the Dravidians and aimed at removing the

control of the Brahmins at the social level, it considered Brahmanism as the symbol of all exploitation and the Brahmins the only exploiters. It touched the heart of the lower class. DMK later participated in elections of 1967 and came out as the ruling party. In 1987, the party suffered a split and ADMK under the leadership of Mrs. Jayalalitha in 1991 won the election.

The aim of these caste²² based political parties is to acquire and demand more powers and autonomy for the state. Similarly, the Reddies and Kammas of Andhra play an important role in the politics of their state. The Nair Service Society of Kerala played an important part in the politics of the state. A caste association combines in itself the modern and the traditional and represents the qualities of adopting itself to modern, social, economic and political changes. Caste based political parties seek social upliftment, economic development and effective participation in the political process. They provide channels of communication and base for the leadership and enable them to participate in the democratic policies²³. The result is that there has been politicization of caste and solely the hold of caste on individual is being loosened. It is believed that with greater political awareness caste would ultimately get politicized.

Lower caste, especially members of scheduled castes, remain badly treated by those of higher castes. But the gap between beliefs and practices is the source of tension and change. The lower castes no longer accept their position in the social hierarchy, no longer assume that their lower economic status and the lack of respect from members of the higher castes are a “given” in their social existence. The lower castes become incorporated into political system and significantly increased their political power²⁴.

The caste groups posed a challenge to Indian elite or to the authoritarian and bourgeois nature of Indian democracy. As the leaders were all from upper caste but in the long run the party leaders from the upper castes set out to broaden their policies by recruiting the members from the lower castes. Ram Monohar Lohia set out to mobilize the backward castes, while Charan Singh, a Jat (peasant proprietor), brought large numbers of members of the middle class and backward castes into his political party, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD). Sometimes to hold power the congress leaders build a coalition with the middle and the lower caste leaders.

Caste politics²⁵ really is not a threat but it challenges the very authoritarian nature of Indian democracy. They fully want their identity to be accepted in the mainstream culture that is not as dalits but to achieve their rights as members of other castes (upper caste). They want them

socio-economic development by organizing their own caste association or political party based on caste identity. The leaders of the caste groups also secure their position in mainstream politics by mobilizing huge masses belong to backward class and sometimes in obtaining reservation status for the backward community.

India is inventing a unique route towards democracy. The country has been a political democracy since the 1950s, but until the 1990s the ruling elites – whichever the party in office – came from the same dominant class and castes. India is probably the first country in which a formal institutional democracy has been given social substance through a quite transfer of power²⁶. It is by voting that the subalterns have been rising to power because they are large in numbers and have stopped supporting local notables. Lower castes realized that as OBCs, they had common interests – namely, quotas- and the upper castes would not give them this share of the spoils if they did not organize and unite in the political sphere. Changes in caste politics²⁷ occurred due to political ‘conscientization’ by Ambedkar including Lohia (socialist), who talked about equality to all individual, major socio-economic changes such as the green revolution which gave birth to ‘kisan politics’ and affirmative action programs, which helped dalits to acquire some education and jobs in the bureaucracy. The struggle for equality is the basis of caste politics in Indian democracy, we really will not clarify it as a threat but definitely a challenge or a revolutionary challenge that shakes the very nature

of Indian elitist democracy. Today India has to incorporate the caste based political party in its domain of democratic setup and to reshape its bourgeoisie ideology.

III. Language and Challenge to Indian Democracy

What is it about languages that can give rise to the strongest expressions of cultural nationalism among its users? It is only in modern times as the members of the Indian constituent assembly discovered all too well - that the 'mother tongue' is invested with unique emotional powers. However, the same tongues were spoken and visited in older times, in a completely unself-conscious and functional way. In modernity, languages suddenly assumed self-conscious direction²⁸.

Of the one hundred and fourteen languages, eighteen are included in the eighth schedule of the constitution and ninety-six are non-scheduled. Thus, the eighteen languages dominate the list and are the most widely spoken in the country. During the constituent assembly debates, except for English and Sanskrit, other major languages added in the list with the pressure of the Hindi speaking zone. Part xvii in the constitution (articles – 343-351) constitutes the provisions on the government's language policy. But the language question gave rise to the maximum amount of stress and strain for the members of the constituent assembly. The acceptance of Hindi as the national language was vociferously pushed by the hard-core linguistic extremists from the Hindi belt²⁹ that is from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan who constituted less than half the members in the Assembly. Finally, it was decided that Hindi would be the official, rather than national language. Hindi would also be used for inter-state communication. Hindi extremists proclaimed that in order to maintain (one cultural) tradition, that they want one language and one script for the whole country. They do not want it to be said that there are two cultures in India, all efforts to maintain integrity of the nation³⁰.

Linguistic groups play an important role as separatist groups. They have been responsible for the basis of language. Language groups also promote the languages concerned in their states. These groups demand an increasing use of the language by the state in official matters, more linguistic, literature, greater employment facilities for those who are proficient in their languages and education at all levels in one's own mother tongue. Sahitya Parishads, Samitis and Sanghs and their conferences are the platforms where they air their views. The DMK advocates the cause of Tamil language and Tamil culture. The Akali Dal advocates the use of Punjabis in every sphere.

The creation of the bilingual state³¹ of Mumbai created a controversy and Sampooran Maharashtra Samiti came into existence. The Agitation for the creation of unilingual states continued till the creation of the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960. In the mid-sixties, when the issue of imposition of Hindi as the national language was revived, riots broke out in Tamil Nadu and helped pave the way for the rise of regional politics, following the fall of the pan-Indian Congress party. The movement for the state³² of Telangana became strong, in 1969 and a group called the Telangana Praja Samiti under Dr. Chenna Reddy was formed. It took part in the Lok Sabha election of 1971 and state assembly elections of 1972. The Gorkha League acts as a strong secessionist group in the politics of West Bengal to safeguard the interests of the Gorkhas.

To solve these separatist tendencies, in Indian democracy the use of a regional language as the language of administration in a state and as the medium of instruction in schools is by now an established policy. Right now, there is a dual system of schooling in every state, creating a 'Bharat' versus Indian syndrome. Mother tongue instruction for children is an accepted principle everywhere. Under the constitutional language policy, some states are thus expected to be multi-lingual, because school children must learn Hindi and English, in addition to their mother tongue. In the Hindi speaking belt, they are really only expected to learn two languages, namely Hindi and English, even though Sanskrit may be tagged along in the curriculum as an appendage. Resistance to Hindi as official language involves not just the issue of its linguistic complexity³³ but on the other hand raised the demand of

recognition to other regional languages. How can a multicultural nation-state forge a nationalistic metaphor that will appeal to all sections of society? Struggle when a common enemy ('the outsider') can be identified. The language controversy has taught us at least one lesson: we must learn to 'imagine' ourselves as a nation state that is forced into redefinition by the moral force of multiculturalism³⁴. National identity is what is the long-term political stability of states dependent on their being built on the history of a dominant cultural group. But regional linguistic groups from different parts of India pose a challenge to the democratic trend of the nation.

Nearly two and a half millennia ago, Aristotle warned that power politics leads to corruption and decay; it could prove particularly dangerous in the case of poor-nations. We have two options before us. One is to continue the rhetoric of the unitary nation-state and increase state oppression – thereby providing the justification for further disintegration of the polity on the basis of irreconcilable cultural differences. The other is to accept the reality of multiculturalism and to learn to live in peace and justice within our nation-state and with other nation-states around us. The second is the long term, more difficult but undoubtedly, more fruitful – option. It would of course, involve the recognition of different cultural groups in the country and the granting of specific group rights in order to enhance their self-esteem.

IV. Communalism and Challenge to Indian Democracy

During the time of India's freedom struggle, the leaders of the Indian National Congress, including Gandhi and Nehru argued that India's religious diversity could effectively be managed through the creation of a secular and democratic state. The Congress view of the democratic and secular state was challenged by Mohammed Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League, fearing that the Muslims forever be an entrapped minority at the mercy of an overwhelming majority. Later on the partition of British India in 1947, was accompanied by large scale population movements and major incidence of communal violence. After independence, the Indian political elites who are the architects on Indian democracy tried to achieve an overarching Indian identity by accommodating all ethnic identities and safeguarding the interests of minorities, and ensured freedom of religion to all its citizens³⁵.

Even as Indian political elites accepted ethnic plurality and worked to promote and strengthen such diversity, they agreed of a secular and federal polity. Elite consensus on the need for a secular state had existed prior to independence. The debate after independence therefore focused on the specifics; what kind of secularism to promote and how to obtain the right balance the performances of the majority and the interests of the minorities. In this context, as constitutional provisions and practices indicate, Indian secularism does not mean the strict separation between church and state but rather the recognition and promotion of all religious communities by the state³⁶. The idea of a federal polity also had historical roots and "was envisaged as a project to ensure reasonable national agreement across regions and communities to support and develop durable political order".

The early stewards of Indian democracy, notably India's first Prime Minister Nehru, for ideological reasons and also perhaps with the trauma of partition and its communal riots fresh in mind, preferred "to deny religiosity in any arena of Indian public life". This stance greatly upset the majority Hindu community and played into the hands of fundamentalist Hindu political parties³⁷ such as the Jana Sang, the predecessor of the BJP, RSS, the VHP, the Shiv Sena, Akali Dal and the Bajrang Dal. Referring to issues such as the assignment to "special status" to Kashmir, the Jana Sangh argued that the congress government was pandering to the Muslims and ignoring to the legitimate interests and grievances of the Hindus³⁸. The trauma of the partition and the communal bloodbath that accompanied it, along with the massive population migration and human hardship that it generated, also contributed in large measure to the feelings of mistrust and hatred between members of the Hindu and Muslim communities. Religious fundamentalist and Indian nationalists and the so-called secularists all tried to take advantage of the situation. Under pressures from Muslim religious elites, the Nehru administration allowed Muslim personal law to be retained and

applied in matters of their marriages, divorce and inheritance. At the same time, other Indians were brought under a uniform civil code.

Hindu fundamentalists³⁹ and nationalists immediately saw this as evidence of congress's "pseudo-secularism" and pandering to minority community. But gradually, the era of complete congress dominance of Indian politics had started to fade and the party began to face serious electoral competition from the Hindu nationalists and fundamentalists. To ensure congress's survival and electoral success, Indira Gandhi, for example – to win state assembly elections in Kerala made electoral alliances with a number of political parties including the communal Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi continued this tradition of making concessions to "minority communities"⁴⁰ in order to win support and votes. This was dramatically displayed during the Shah Bano affair in 1985. To Hindu nationalists, this act was an glaring appeasement of minorities by the congress for political purposes which once again exposed the party's pseudo secular credentials.

Throughout the 1980s, as Muslim fundamentalist voices grew louder and communal tensions simmered, Hindu nationalist parties such as the BJP gained popularity especially in the Hindi speaking states of central northern and western India. The ideology that the Hindu political parties promoted was known as Hindutva – which may be broadly translated as "Hinduness"⁴¹ or even "Indian ness". Behind the notion of Hindutva is a particular vision of the Hindu or Indian 'nation', and it is a matter of debate whether Muslims and other religious minorities have a place within it. But to Hindu organization such as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), Hindutva "embodies the notion that all Indians including Muslims – are part of a Hindu nation and that Ram and the gods and heroes of Hindu mythology are part of their patrimony. As the 1990s unfolded, Indian national politics seemed to be entering an era of turmoil and weak central governance, the BJP and its allies chose to play the religion card as a way of capturing political power by tapping into the "Hindu vote".

One of the most militant regional political organizations is the Shiv Sena⁴² in Maharashtra. Founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena's ideology is based on the concept of the 'bhumiputra' (son of the soil) and 'Hindutva' (Hinduness). Taking advantage of the socio-economic grievances and frustrations of the Hindu Maharashtrian community, the Shiv Sena rose to political prominence in Maharashtra under the banner of 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' and by launching 'verbal and physical' attacks at South Indian immigrants and Muslims to create communal tension in the state. Such conflicts were not however confined to Maharashtra but flared up in other provinces on India.

We may identify four sets of causal conditions⁴³ that combined in different ways in different areas to produce communal violence that pose a challenge to our democratic setup.

First the fears of assimilation or cultural dilution and unfulfilled national aspirations have often played key roles in ethnic political mobilizations and conflict.

Second, the process of modernization – by including large scale migrations and by raising standards of literacy and aspirations – has not only forced the communal groups to live closely together and to compete for rewards and resources, but has also sharpened their socio-political awareness and increased their capacity to mobilize for collective action. Such mobilization tends to occur where there is a lack of civil society linkages but could foster mutual understanding, respect and trust among minority groups and help defuse crisis and violent conflicts.

Third, unequal development, poverty, exploitation, lack of opportunity and threats to existing group privileges have often endangered strong feelings of relative deprivation among communal groups and sparked communal political mobilization and conflict.

Finally, political factors such as endemic bad governance, the growth of anti-secular forces, institutional decay and political chicanery and vote bank politics (maintaining a loyal bloc of voters through divisive policies) on the part of unscrupulous political parties and politicians have greatly contributed to the outbreak of communal conflict.

Much earlier prior to partition, during 1919, the Singh Sabha Movement⁴⁴, Central Sikh League was formed to safeguard the economic and political interests of the Sikhs and to promote among the Sikhs a sense of self-consciousness and identity and the league waned in close co0operation with the Indian National Congress. The Akali Dal was formed in 1920 as a part of the Gurdwara Reform Movement and tried to protect the interests of the Sikhs, especially their representation in the legislative bodies. It worked for the reservation of seats for the Sikhs in nominated bodies and after independent, a separate group consciousness had grown among them. They demanded Sikh majority state and exploited the religious sentiment of the Sikhs fused and to gain political power for the community was a religious duty of every Sikh. The Akali Dal⁴⁵ demanded separate and sovereign Sikh state of Khalistan and create an environment in which national sentiments and aspirations of the Sikhs will be satisfied fully. Later on, it resulted in violent communal clash. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala along with his lieutenants took shelter in Golden Temple of Amritsar with their destructive weapons to fight against Indian state. But to prevent the situation, Bhindranwala was killed and the Golden Temple was cleared by the Indian government in an operation known as “Operation Blue Star”. But after this Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated in 1984.

Thus, we may say that after independence till now Indian democracy was severely threatened by the communal forces and communal based political parties. In 1992, the cadres’ belonging to the RSS, the VHP, the Shiv Sena and the Bajrang Dal completely destroyed the structure of the sixteenth century mosque (the Babri masjid) in the north Indian city of Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). The BJP and its allies claimed that the mosque had been constructed by the Mughal Emperor Babar after the destruction of a Hindu temple that had venerated the birth place of Lord Ram (a icon in Hindu mythology). The complete failure of the Indian government⁴⁶ to prevent the situation sparked Hindu-Muslim rioting across the country. Muslim criminal gangs in Mumbai with help from allies in foreign states set off a series of bomb blasts in India’s major commercial city in 1993. In retaliation, Hindu mobs, organized and carried out massacre of Muslims. The VHP periodically⁴⁷ threatened to begin the construction of a Hindu temple on the sight of the demolished Babri Mosque and set the date 2002 as a deadline to bring thousands of stone pillars to the sight. Hundreds of workers were brought in by train from Gujrat to Ayodha where the BJP government Narendra Modi (now our Prime Minister) was in power, but several compartments of a train (the Sabarmati Express) that contained Hindu workers and pilgrims who were returning to Gujrat from Ayodha caught fire and rumors quickly spread that the train had been attacked by Muslim mobs (Godhra station dominated by the Muslims). The Godhra incident⁴⁸ sparked some of the worst anti-Muslim violence in Indian democracy. Similarly, in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi, bombs were exploded which resulted in several deaths of innocent people. Being our country a secular one, question thus arises why it has been targeted to communal threats. We may seek out the causal explanations behind the communal challenge to Indian democracy.

First, Asutosh Varshney emphasizes the role of civil society in the outbreak or absence of communal violence. Arguing that most communal riots tend to be localized. He suggests that if civic engagement between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in a particular area is strong, such areas or towns are more likely to prevent the outbreak of communal conflicts. Varshney argues instead that the effectiveness of the state’s response is at least partly a function of the degree of civic engagement between members of two communities⁴⁹. Thus, for example – he explains that during the 2002 Gujrat riots, towns such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara witnessed shocking violence while nearby Surat saw very little. While in Varanashi where the blasts occurred, communal clashes did not occur and leaders of both the communities publicly condemned the blast and appealed to their respective members not to fall into the trap set by the communal forces.

Secondly, Antonio Gramsci explained that perception of culture⁵⁰ in each community influenced the social life too. Gramsci makes a link between culture and political practice which in the long run creates identity problems. Gramscian theory have a played a major role in focusing attention on the dynamics of culture within the Indian context, later on specified by the political parties such as RSS, the VHP and the BJP in their ideology. It is true that like the colonial orientalists, these political parties did not accept modernity (manifestations like secularism, science and the nation-state) or western imperialism and power or the liberal aspects of democracy which pays no attention to indigenous culture and civil society. According to the RSS ideology, 'is to salute the saffron rather than the tri-color flag and to oppose the Indian constitution. The hidden face of the culture is often political. The BJP's version of cultural nationalism attempts to invest the Brahmanical cult in nation-building that is combining the upper caste Hindus, socio-religious values, folk culture which are marginalized and devalued by the present secular government. Democracy they argued not alien to Hindu civilisation⁵¹, rather they preferred monarchy prevailed in Vedic times as an ideal form of government. They insisted on the Atharvaveda indicative of the people choosing their king. They the Hindu traditionalists were not hostile to democracy rather they want to preserve democracy rooted in Indian soil and culture. Every fundamentalist religious party tried to use culture in obtaining their rights and hence they challenge the existing democratic set up of the country.

Thirdly, there exists a strong co-relation between communal clashes and exigency of electoral politics. If a party in power depends on the Muslim votes to win election, then it is unlikely that riots will take place. Riots are often deliberately instigated by parties in power to polarize the electorate and scare voters into voting as part of a community vote bank⁵².

Fourthly, the Ulema (the Muslim clergy) and the mainstream political parties have used Muslims for a different reason, as a vote bank and therefore get benefit from the low socio-economic status of the Muslim community. The Ulema have thus raised the banner of, "Islam in danger"; to thwart efforts to mobilize the community, political parties went along with this so long as the Muslim religious elite could deliver the Muslim vote. Low socioOeconomic structure with lack of formal education and inadequate employment opportunities leads to a disproportionately high number of Muslims being involved in communal trigger.

All these factors have led to communal clashes in the country which challenge the basis of Indian democracy. The anti-communal forces were always at work in earlier days also but lack of space between the government and the governed in the governance process lead to such communal challenge in Indian democracy.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion regarding the challenges of Indian democracy is that while it has proven remarkably resilient over seven decades—maintaining free elections and peaceful transfers of power—it remains in a state of constant evolution, battling deep-rooted structural issues. Its future strength depends on addressing the interconnected issues of inequality, corruption, and communalism while strengthening democratic institutions. Key takeaways regarding the state and future of Indian democracy include a) Resilience Amidst Turbulence: Despite challenges like poverty, illiteracy, and political violence, India has sustained a functional democracy and effectively adapted to challenging situations, b) Persistent Core Challenges: The primary threats continue to be poverty, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, regionalism, and the criminalization of politics, c) Institutional and Procedural Issues: Rampant corruption, red-tapism, slow judicial processes, and the influence of money and muscle power in elections weaken the foundation of democratic trust, d) Need for Active Citizenship: For Indian democracy to become more vibrant and successful, it must move beyond political democracy to social and economic democracy, requiring proactive, vigilant, and educated citizens to hold authorities accountable. The sustainability of Indian democracy hinges on implementing reforms, ensuring the independence of institutions, and fostering a more inclusive political culture. In

essence, Indian democracy is a "shining example" that has survived significant trials but must actively work to transform into a truly egalitarian society that fulfills the expectations of all its citizens.

Notes and References

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2. Kohli Atul, 'Interpreting India's Democracy: A State Society Framework', in Kohli Atul ed. 2001, India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations, Hyderabad, Orient Longman Publication (pp.12-13)
3. Kohli Atul, 1990, Democracy and Disorder; India's Growing Crisis of Governability, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press Pub. Part IV (pp. 92-93)
4. Chanda M.B, 1999, Betrayal of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Atlantic Publications and Distributers (pp.267-269)
5. Kohli Atul, 'State-Society Relations in India's Changing Democracy', in Kohli Atul ed. 1991, India's Democracy An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations, Hyderabad, Orient Longman (pp.315-17)
6. Chanda M.B, 1999, Betrayal of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Atlantic Publications and Distributers (pp.270-271)
7. *ibid* (pp.267)
8. Bardhan Pranab, 'Dominant Proprietary Classes and India's Democracy', in Kohli Atul ed. 1991, An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations, Hyderabad, Orient Longman (pp.216-18)
9. As Henry Hart and James Manor explains, the Congress party that Rajiv Gandhi inherited was essentially a top down structure of appointed officers. Many of these appointed individuals were in power in states and districts because they enjoyed the support of those above rather than of those below them. When Gandhi announced that party elections will be **held** soon, it became readily evident that most party positions would go to those who could muster support of grass-roots party member. This prospect, in turn, generated two types of power conflicts; one involving the appointed officials against those who sought to challenge them in open, intra-party elections and the other involving the top leadership, who became worried about ensuring their own power in face of a newly elected party hierarchy.
- Kohli Atul, 1990, Democracy and Disorder; India's Growing Crisis of Governability, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press Pub. Part IV (pp. 189-192)
10. Kohli Atul, 'India's Democracy under Rajiv Gandhi (1985-89)', in Kohli Atul ed. 1991, An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations, Hyderabad, Orient Longman (pp.321)

11. The Congress leaders came mostly from the intelligentsia – many of them were lawyers by profession – whose caste backgrounds drew generally from the literate castes includes Kayasthas and more importantly Brahmins (like Nehru), Congress leaders also had established close working relationships with traders and industrialists that is the capitalists (pujivadi) and with the landlords (the former zamindars, jagirdars, malguzars and maharajas) who financed in times of election and exert their strong feelings on the administration in government affairs. The upper castes (including Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) became a symbol of power elite.

Jaffrelot Christophe, 'Caste and the Rise of Marginalized Groups in Ganguly Sumit', ed. 2009, The State of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Oxford Publications (pp.68-69)

12. Intermediate caste are 'twice born' that is possess two different identities.

ibid (pp.70-72)

13. The state still decided the cost of the electricity used for the pumps, the level of fertilizer subsidies and the price at which agricultural products could be sold. Jat leaders thus emerged to defend their interests.

Ibid (pp.70-73)

14. The President appointed a Commission consisting of eligible persons to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes in India and to grant facilities to improve their status that is they need positive discrimination programs.

Rudolph and Rudolph, 'Living With Differences in India', in Rudolph and Rudolph ed. 2008, Explaining Indian Democracy, A Fifty Years Perspective (1956-2006), vol.I, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (pp.102-108)

15. Alam Zaveed, What Is Happening Inside Indian Democracy? In EPW, vol 34, No.37 (September-11th-17th September), 1999 (pp.2652-2653)

16. ibid (pp.2654)

17. Omvedt Gail, 'The Anti-Caste Movement and the Discourse of Power', in Jayal Gopal Niraja ed. 1995, Democracy in India; Themes in Politics, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (pp.484-485)

18. ibid (pp.486-489)

19. ibid (pp.491-502)

20. Jaffrelot Christophe, 'Caste and the Rise of Marginalized Groups', in Ganguly Sumit ed. 2009, The State of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Oxford Publications (pp.75-79)
21. The caste association was the first form in which the 'peasant masses rose in struggle against feudalism', however, these associations consolidate community separatism and must be transcended if the peasantry is to be organized as a class. Very often the caste dilutes the programmatic and ideological aspects of political parties. It reduces the strength and impedes the activities of the interest's groups that often challenge the democratic governance.
- Omvedt Gail, 'The Anti-Caste Movement and the Discourse of Power', in Jayal Gopal Niraja ed. 1995, Democracy in India; Themes in Politics, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (pp.486-487)
22. Myron Weiner, 'The Struggle for Equality; Caste in Indian Politics', in Kohli Atul ed. 2008, reprint,2011, The Success of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press Publications (pp.196-197)
23. Jaffrelot Christophe, 'Caste and the Rise of Marginalized Groups', in Ganguly Sumit ed. 2009, The State of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Oxford Publications (pp.82-83)
24. Anderson claims that the new significance attached to languages was facilitated by the advent of the printing press and mass production, which made the nation 'imaginable'. From face to face communities of village life, we have move to the anonymous world of nation-building, where the role of media is enormous.
- Rajan Nalini, 2002, Democracy and the Limits of Minority Rights, New Delhi, Sage Publications (pp.134)
25. 'Hindi- wallahs' that is the people of major hindi-speaking belt, claimed, "The highest dictates of nationalism require that our terms of any technical, value must be based on Sanskrit". This way lies the linguistic unity of India, the fact that Sanskrit has little relation to the four Dravidian languages in the south and that, in the best of times, was spoken only by a small elite is ignored.
- ibid (pp.135)
26. ibid (pp.137)
27. Shankarrao Deo, for once reacted to this sentiment by proclaiming that he was a Marathi speaker and also an Indian. There was a warning from T.T. Krishnamachari of Madras that such an attitude of 'Hindi'- imperialism would exacerbate secessionist tendencies in the South.

Sten Widmalm, 1997, Democracy and Violent Separatism in India, Sweden, Uppasala University Publications (pp.185-187)

28. Vanaik Achin, 1990, The Painful Transition; Bourgeois Democracy in India, London, Verso Publication (pp.199-205)

29. Rajan Nalini, 2002, Democracy and the Limits of Minority Rights, New Delhi, Sage Publications (pp.142-143)

30. In new social movements protest behavior is employed with greater frequency by more diverse groups and is used to represent a wider range of claims than even before. The contentions claims of the various groups change the realm of conventional politics.

Kothari Smitu, 'Social Movement Politics in India; Institutions, Interests and Identities', in Kohli Atul ed. 2008, reprint,2011, The Success of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press Publications (pp.242-244)

31. Foucault suggests that the field of discourse is primarily constituted by relations of power while the primary effect of knowledge is the exercise of these relations. Discourse is a field of strategies and tactics that create differentiations by posing limits on what can be stated and by whom.

Prarajuli Pramod, 'Power and Knowledge in Development Discourse; New Social Movements and the State in India', in Jayal Niraja Gopal ed.2001, Democracy in India; Themes in Politics, New Delhi, Oxford Publication (pp.260)

32. Hegemony in Gramscian terms is a predominance obtained by consent rather than by force of one class or group over other classes through myriad ways in which institutions of civil society diffuse and popularize the world-views of the ruling classes to such an extent that the subaltern classes perceive and evaluate social reality in that context. According to the will of the subordinates power is established. Hegemony stands for a condition of dominance such later persuasion outweighs coercion. Defined in these terms hegemony operates as a dynamic concept and keeps even the most persuasive structure of dominance.

ibid (pp.259)

33. Dean Vora Micheles, 2005, New Patterns of Democracy in India, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (pp.95-106)

34. Chakroborty Bidyut, 1995, Wither India's Democracy, Calcutta and New Delhi, K.P.Bagchi and Company Publications (pp.68-72)

35. Shiva Vandana; 2005, India Divided, Diversity and Democracy under Attack, New York, Steven Stories Press Pub (pp.38-42)
36. Kishwar Madhu Purnima, 2005, Deepening Democracy; Challenges of Governance and Globalization in India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (pp.98-110)
37. Mahajan Gurpreet, 2001, Identities and Rights; Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (pp.52-58)
38. The pre-colonial configuration of domination and subordination was guided by the supreme concepts not only of the prerogatives of coercion but also an obligation to protect, foster, support and promote the subordinate. Subordinate never opposed to the supreme authority if the authority (state) fails to protect the subordinate (the sabalterns).
- Prarajuli Pramod, 'Power and Knowledge in Development Discourse; New Social Movements and the State in India', in Jayal Niraja Gopal ed. 2001, Democracy in India; Themes in Politics, New Delhi, Oxford Publication (pp.263)
39. Women's movement challenged the patriarchal state which goes against the rights of the women in the rural areas. All states actions are anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, the eco-feminist critique is focused against the homogenizing project of technological and capitalist development of state which goes against the interest of the women in particular and the rural people in general.
- ibid (pp.265)
40. ibid (pp.269)
41. ibid (pp.270-272)
42. Ganguly Rajat, 'Democracy and Ethnic Conflict', in Ganguly Sumit ed. 2009, The State of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Oxford Publications (pp.46)
43. ibid (pp.47-48)
44. ibid (pp.57-59)
45. Mohanty Monoranjan, Democracy Limited, EPW, vol.31, no.13 (March 30th), 1996 (pp.804-805)
46. Engineer Ashgar Ali, Democracy and the Politics of Identity, EPW, vol.33, no.13 (March 26th-April 3rd), 1998 (pp.697-698)

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48. Jaffrelot Christophe, 'Hindu Nationalism and Democracy', in Jayal Niraja Gopal ed.2001, Democracy in India; Themes in Politics, New Delhi, Oxford Publication (pp.509-513)
49. Basu Partha Pratim, 'Parliamentary Democracy and Communalism in India', in Chatterjee Aneek ed.2005, Indian Parliamentary Democracy in Transition, Kolkata, Presidency College Pub. Department of Political Science (pp.34-37)
50. Puniyani Ram, 2010, Communal Threat to Secular Democracy, Delhi, Kalpaz Pub. (pp.86-91)
51. Rajan Nalini, 2002, Democracy and the Limits of Minority Rights, New Delhi, Sage Publications (pp.125)
52. Given the present indifference of secular forces to cultural issues like value education in schools, the terrain is left wide open to predatory indoctrination from communal parties. As Kumkum Sangari reiterates, "The Hindu right can not only appropriate both universalism and particularism, but also both strategies are put to work towards the same goals".
- Ganguly Rajat, 'Democracy and Ethnic Conflict in Ganguly Sumit', ed. 2009, The State of India's Democracy, New Delhi, Oxford Publications (pp.50)

