

Revisiting Seven Decades of India's Achievements and Challenges

Revisitando Sete Décadas de Conquistas e Desafios da Índia

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RESUMO

Enquanto a Índia comemora 75 anos de independência, este ensaio procura fazer um balanço das conquistas, desafios e fracassos da República Indiana. Através de uma leitura abrangente da história política da Índia e foco em momentos históricos específicos, construiu-se uma narrativa da jornada. O ensaio destaca os sucessos da democracia, do bem-estar limitado e da gestão política dos conflitos garantindo a integridade territorial. Esses sucessos, no entanto, correm o risco de serem comprometidos por desafios contemporâneos aos valores fundamentais da república. O ensaio contribui para o discurso político sobre a Índia em três níveis: primeiro fornece uma narrativa histórica e examina as conquistas/fracassos do Estado Indiano em relação às promessas da república; em segundo lugar, faz uma análise das características estruturais que sustentam a narrativa política e, em terceiro lugar, destaca a natureza transitória das repúblicas em geral através de uma leitura do caso indiano.

Palavras-chave: Índia; narrativa histórica e política; democracia; 75 anos de independência

ABSTRACT

As India commemorates its 75th year of independence this essay seeks to take stock of the achievements, challenges and failures of the Indian Republic. Through an sweeping reading of political history of India and focus on specific historical moments it builds a narrative of the journey. The essay highlights the successes of democracy, limited welfarism and political management of conflicts ensuring territorial integrity. These successes, however, run the risk of being undermined with contemporary challenges to the core values of the republic. The essay contributes to the political discourse on India at three levels, first it provides a historical narrative and scrutinises the achievement/ failures of the Indian State against the promises of the republic; second, it provides an analysis of the structural features underpinning the political narrative and third, it highlights the transient nature of republics in general through a reading of the Indian case.

Keywords: India; historical and political narrative; democracy; 75th years of independence

1. Introduction

In 2022, India will commemorate its 75th year of independence and complete 73 years as a republic. At this juncture one may take stock of the achievements of India as a republic, to highlight its failures and reflect on the journey overall. Such an endeavour may be justified primarily on two grounds; first, it would focus on the history and politics of independent India, so as to enable us to evaluate and understand; and secondly, it may direct us to the larger consideration about democratic republics in general. The Indian experience informs us in no uncertain terms that the realisation and continuation of a republic entails an uneasy and unceasing process of democratisation, idealism and adaptation that requires constant reaffirmation and refurbishment.

India is the largest democracy in the world, one of the largest economies, and a globally relevant power today. At the time of independence in 1947, none of these could have been predicted or taken for granted. The country faced intractable challenges of preserving national unity, ensuring territorial integrity and realising the promises of the nationalist movement of overcoming pervasive deprivations. Most foreign observers were sceptical about India's ability to remain free and united given its diversity, social inequalities and widespread poverty (Guha, 2019). Three quarters of a century later, India remains integrated, sovereign and democratic. The republican and democratic experiment has been strengthened through periodic elections, a thriving multiparty system, institutional vigour and a vibrant public sphere drawing global admiration. The successes are, however, punctuated by shortcomings such as persistent economic inequalities, arduous sectarian relations, rising majoritarianism and ubiquitous imperfections in the polity.

At a broader theoretical level, India can instruct us about the politics of republics. As an idea, republics are based on the sovereignty of the people. The functioning of the republic requires the realisation of conditions needed to exercise sovereignty, actualising citizen participation and accomplishing democratic values (Mahmood, 2022). The ideas of citizenship, equality, justice, sovereignty are however not fixed and often face the danger of breakdown. The contemporary discussions on democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016) and crisis of republics can be informed by the Indian experience.

Through a sweeping and selective overview of Indian history and politics over the last 75 years, this essay provides a commentary on India and attempts to draw lessons for republics in general. It begins with independence and the establishment of the constitutional republic and then traces the journey of India focussing on the various challenges and successes at different periods. The essay concludes by reflecting on the challenges of the present conjuncture with the advancing discourses of populism, rising majoritarian politics, exclusivist conceptions of nationalism, and debilitation of democratic institutions.

It is imperative to mention that the India story is neither one of outright triumph nor catastrophe. India has managed to reduce poverty, create a semblance of inclusion for the socially and economically marginalised but many of these gains are undermined by social and economic inequalities, social and political intolerance. The challenges for India, or for that matter any country are neither inescapable or inevitable, and the political task of constituting the republic determines its future shape and prospect.

2. The moment of independence

Independence on 15th August 1947 after nearly 2 centuries of British rule marked the culmination of the movement for right to self-determination for Indians and the beginning of a radical democratic experiment. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, expressed the significance of the moment in his famous *tryst with destiny* speech in the following words

At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance...

The freedom at midnight was, however, initiated under the traumatic circumstances of partition of the country, post-partition settlement of displaced people, troubling concerns of national integration, and entrenched poverty

and inequalities (Kudaisya, 2017). The most immediate and consequential divisions for India were among religious communities, particularly Hindus and Muslims and inter-caste relationships within the Hindu community. There was also tension between the centre and the periphery with demands for local independence based on differences in ethnicity, culture, and language (Das, 1947). The ethno-religious distinctions were exacerbated by economic disparities between communities, between urban and rural India, between agriculture and industry. The country faced substantial challenges with widespread poverty, starvation and disease, worse than the war-devastated regions in Europe and Asia (Das, 1947; Archer, 1947).

These divisions extended into the realm of ideas for the future republic. As a colony of the British Empire, modern India remained tinted by postcolonial authenticity. The edifice of the modern state, the administrative structure, and even Indian nationalism were shaped by the colonial experiences. For Partha Chatterjee (1993: 10) (Indian) “*nationalism sets out to assert its freedom from European domination. But in the very conception of its project, it remains a prisoner of the prevalent European intellectual fashions*”. The inherent material and intellectual contradictions in the nationalist movement had pronounced impact on post-independence experiences.

There was also concern around the political system that would transform a colony into a republic through a regime of sovereignty and republican constitution (Purushotham, 2021). There were contesting strands of thought within the Congress party on models of economic development with the Gandhian idea of the self-sufficient village that was antagonistic to the idea of a modern strong state (Price, 1967) competing with the notion of Nehruvian socialism, based on a concoction of Scientific and Fabian socialism (Patnaik, 2013).

The synthesis to all these contradictions underscoring the future of the republic was sought through the Constitution of India. The Constitution would provide the institutional scaffold of the state; the fundamental values of the republic assuring equality, dignity, sovereignty of the people; the strategies for management of social conflicts; the outline for the social revolution to eradicate inequality, ensure freedom, and establish democracy (Panda, 1948; Ahmed, Kundu, and Peet, 2011). Consequently, the constitution adopted a distinct republican character with a federalism, parliamentary democracy, separation of powers principle and assured fundamental rights to the people. The preamble to the constitution expressing the core values of the republic characterised India as a ‘Sovereign Democratic Republic’ (Bhaskar, 2020). The Drafting Committee explicitly rejected suggestions for the inclusion of ‘in the name of God’ as it would amount to a compulsion of faith, and resemble

narrow sectarianism. Instead, the preamble proclaimed the people as the authority, the source of sovereignty for the constitution. A section emphasising Justice, Liberty, Equality was included highlighting the commitment to removing inequalities and discrimination, and correcting historical injustices. The framers were convinced that the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity would ensure the dignity of individuals, promote democracy and ensure the unity of the nation (Bhaskar, 2020).

Institutionally, the state was conceived as a federal republic with quasi-federal tendencies to ensure representation of diverse communities as well as subdue secessionist fears. Concerns however remained about the constitutional system particularly the tension between the federalist and centrist tendencies and the distribution of powers of the executive (Panda, 1948). The ambiguity in the division of powers between the President and the Cabinet in the Constitution reflected the anxieties of the founding fathers about the superimposed democratic structure. They were unsure about the moral claims of the electoral majority and wanted to ensure a system that equalised majoritarian tendencies with the ethos of republicanism (Mahmood, 2022).

The Constitution was a radical document that enshrined the promises of the freedom movement, made commitment to democratic and liberal ideals (Mehta, 2021) and pledged to the citizens the conditions necessary to transcend ascriptive identities, such as caste and religion to be part of a democratic, secular community (Patnaik 2013). The commitment to democracy, liberalism and social justice was radical in the context of partition of the country in the name of religion and historical inequalities. While Pakistan foregrounded religious identity, India let the legacy of freedom movement define itself. The focus on the individual underlined that the unity of the nation required unity based on the dignity of the individual (Mehta, 2019).

To realise these objectives India accepted the model of state-led development in order to bring about balanced growth, with a degree of egalitarianism in distribution of assets, incomes and alleviating existing inequalities (Mahmood, 2022). The model was undoubtedly a passive revolution through the state by an enlightened national leadership. As (Kaviraj, 1988) points out the vision of the republic and activities of the state had the clear imprint of bourgeoisie dominance in social, economic and political life. The aspiration for social justice, equality, dignity through liberal democracy was essentially a bourgeoisie project. The state led model of economic development was also consistent with bourgeois interests as massive investment for capitalist development was needed to ensure development of capitalism.

3. The successes and limits of passive revolution

By the end of the first two decades of independence, India successfully overcame the challenges of nation-building, particularly territorial integrity, and managed to establish a functional constitutional democracy. The fissiparous tendencies of religion, ethnicity, language were resolved through the creation of linguistically contiguous state under the States Reorganisation Act 1956 and the adoption of 22 scheduled languages instead of one national language. The princely states were integrated successfully except for the dispute in Jammu and Kashmir. The abolition of the zamindari system and privy purses (privileges of native kings) by subsequent governments partially displaced feudal structure.

The Constitutional structure also attained some rigidity with the success of federalism and multiparty democracy. The success of the democratic experiment created a sense of unity based on shared experiences and not on religion, race or language. It also involved the conscious effort at resolving internal differences through political means (Gandhi, 1972). The ideological uncertainty at the time of independence on the issue of socialism and secularism, was also resolved as these were incorporated in the Constitution as the defining values of the state. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1972) argued that the relationship between these concepts was natural- political independence being inseparable from economic freedom which in turn was meaningful to the extent it served the interests of the multitude who constituted the nation. At a fundamental level, the incorporation of the words socialist and secular reinforced the existing values of expressed through phrases like “justice, social, economic and political” and rejection of any phrase on God in the Constitution (Bhaskar, 2020).

The successes in nation-building, however, did not imply political stability or the achievement of socio-economic development. Political tranquillity encountered serious challenges in the mid-1960s with economic crisis, food shortages, war with China and Pakistan, and the emergence of competitive regional parties undermining the hegemony of the Congress (Hess, 1972). In the 1967 elections, the Congress party lost in 8 sub-national states and 70 seats in the lower house of the parliament. As Hess (1972) points out the decade of the 1960s was a period of waning hope and mounting discontent expressed in the weakening of the Congress party, and the assertiveness of regional identity. Planning was somewhat successful in building of infrastructure such as basic industries, communications, (Singh, 1997; Sen Gupta, 1997) with noticeable diversification and increase in industrial output. Such improvements were however, undermined by the low rates of economic

growth and lack of institutional reforms like land reform in the rural sector. Inadequate growth and lack of equity exposed the limitations of the top-down developmental project in the face of entrenched social and economic stratification (Frankel, 2005; Mahmood, 2022).

The main impediment to policy realisation with regard to removing poverty and ensuring equity, to actualise the passive revolution was the to opposition from different partners of the '*ruling coalition*', comprising of the bourgeoisie, landed elites and the bureaucratic managerial elite. According to Kaviraj (1988) the recalcitrant and conservative local units of the Congress party, judicial conservatism and feudal resistance contributed to the failure of institutional reform (Mahmood, 2022).

Interestingly the insertion of socialist and secular in the Constitution on the one hand represented an assertion of the state, a renewal of the vision of modernisation, development, and removal of archaic systems of discrimination. It however also disrupted the political settlements (big landowners, the private sector, regional leaders) that underpinned the republic. Paradoxically despite radical assertions the Indian state did not attempt the realisation of egalitarian policies but preferred implementing capital-intensive techniques (Green Revolution) in agriculture. The strategy of capital intensive agriculture alleviated food scarcity considerably and signalled the abandonment of institutional reforms aimed at growth with equity in the rural sector (Mahmood, 2022).

The expediency in economic management was in part due to the waning dominance of the Congress party in politics, institutional weakness of the Indian State and compulsions of political economy. The planned capitalist development increased the economic power of regionally-conscious groups, the rich farmers and the regional bourgeoisie who aspired for sectoral and regional allocation of resources (Mahmood, 2022). The green revolution improved the economic and political standing of the self-employed agricultural producers – the 'bullock capitalists' (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987) who demanded electrification of villages, subsidies on fertilisers and irrigation, which were provided as patronage (Ahmed, Kundu, and Peet, 2011). In the industrial sectors, the system of licensing and financial controls facilitated transactions between capitalists and the government. Businesses expressed allegiance to the government contributing to party funds and in return secured monopoly protection, cheap credit and guaranteed profitability (Ahmed, Kundu, and Peet, 2011). The opposing demands for resources from dominant classes and the predisposition of the government to establish patronage relationships framed the political economy of this period (Bardhan, 1984).

In 1969, the Congress party split over leadership issues that was articulated in terms of radical versus conservative visions of economic development. The massive electoral victory of the Indira Gandhi faction of the Congress in 1971 election signalled the beginning of a distinctive phase marked by the centralisation of the party and the government and assertiveness of the regime (Mahmood, 2022). Prime Minister Indira Gandhi writing in (1972) proclaimed the successes of the republic in the following words,

surging forces have torn asunder our past colonial feudal structures, safeguard our independence and overcome the blight of poverty. Contrary to predictions, the country has not broken into warring states. succumbed to civil anarchy. There has been no widespread starvation; on the contrary, we have become self-sufficient in cereals. We have not jettisoned our free institutions, but instead gained greater political cohesion and economic strength.

The successful intervention in the Bangladesh liberation war and defeat of Pakistan in 1971 reinforced the autonomy of India in foreign affairs. The successful manoeuvring of Cold War politics provided legitimacy to the Non Alignment principles of foreign policy. P. M. Gandhi (1972) asserted that India remained committed to the principles of Non-Alignment in foreign policy. Despite such rhetorical assertions, there was an implicit shift in policy during this period. The policy of non-alignment during Nehru was underpinned by a belief in India's exceptionalism, that it could shape the international order by principled moral and political arguments, accommodating different viewpoints, and setting an example for others (Wojczewski, 2020). In contrast, the Indian government of the period embarked on significant military modernisation and moved closer to the Soviet Union, with realist foreign policy motivations which reached its climax in the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship in 1971. The Soviet Union was professed to be a natural friend due to its shared values of peace, Afro-Asian unity and elimination of racialism and colonialism. In contrast, the United States was viewed as a threat to regional security and vital interests of India, particularly with the admission of Pakistan into the U.S.-military alliances (Gandhi, 1972).

The successes in international affair and in the management of domestic fissiparous tendencies however could not alleviate social and economic disparities. Although state intervention was professed as a solution with the victory of Indira Gandhi, such efforts were belied by the contradictory pressures from the dominant proprietary classes: industrial capitalists, rich farmers, and professionals (Kaviraj, 1988). The political settlement between the domi-

nant class coalition led to a system that was unable to address growth or bring about social and economic equality (Bardhan, 1984).

With the developmental state constrained there were subtle and long term transitions. Democratic structure was seriously weakened with the centralisation of Congress party and government. According to Kaviraj (1988), the transformation of the Congress into a highly centralised and undemocratic party and Indira Gandhi's populist politics warped the serious debates on social and political development into slogans not meant to be translated into policies, and an increasingly politicised administration. The failure to deliver on appealing election promises resulted in a gradual disillusionment with the Congress Party and created political space for other parties based on populist appeals (Wojczewski, 2020).

The Indian state was thus simultaneously strong and weak (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987). It could secure the cartographic imagination of the state, establish the core values of the constitution, and ensure the foundations of democracy. In contrast, the state was increasingly centralised and politicised undermining the ethos of the republic, and the vision of socio-economic justice and equality was abandoned in the alter of political expediency as patronage and clientelism became an important currency in politics (Mahmood, 2022). The situation eventually culminated in the crisis of the institutional structure of the state during the national emergency of 1975. In 1977, after the emergency was lifted the Congress party faced a united opposition in the form of Janata Dal and was routed in the elections. The Janata experiment was, however, short-lived as internal differences among ideologically incongruent parties and conflicts among ambitious leaders ensured its demise two years before the completion of its term in 1980. Indira Gandhi and Congress party were re-elected in the 1980 elections by the people of India.

4. From Passive to Elite Revolution

The 1990s was the decade of far-reaching changes with the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the second democratic upsurge across the world. It was also a period of momentous change for India. The transformations were so significant that Sen Gupta (1997) considers India at the start of the 21st century, a very different country compared to the one that emerged from colonial rule.

India commenced with the liberalisation of the economy affecting a radical shift in the social and economic vision of the republic. The adoption of economic liberalisation meant that market became the guiding principle of economic development while socialism remained as a constitutional value.

In politics, the dominance of the Congress party came to an end as regional parties became decisive and coalitions became the norm at the national level. The electoral dynamics was affected by the deepening of democracy with an upsurge in participation of lower castes/communities (Michelutti, 2008) along with violent upsurges of fundamentalism and communalism.

The mixed economic model built upon state control could not deliver either growth or equity. The failures in implementing economic policies and gradual degeneration gave way to patronage, statism, unaccountability, inefficiency, and corruption (Singh, 1997). By the late 1980's, poor economic performance, and the altered global context particularly the implosion of the Soviet Union raised serious questions on the model of state-led development. The Indian economy faced multiple crises, partly due to state policies and partly due to global situation and the country turned towards the liberalisation goaded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The liberalisation of the economy meant dismantling the license-permit raj, relaxing government regulations on the economy, and allowing private capital a larger role in economic development. The macro shift in policy was also supported by changes in the domestic political economy, particularly the disjuncture between the middle class and the working class and the gradual ascendance of private capital (Patnaik, 2013). Liberalisation indicated a convergence among sections of the dominant coalition on their discontent over state control of economy. Bardhan (1992) points out that by the 1990s there was an increasing social and economic interpenetration between the rich farmers, urban industrial class, professional classes and non-resident Indians. The new class configuration consisted of groups of entrepreneurs with an interest in reform (Pedersen, 2000) and sections within the middle class who were largely urban, English educated and potential beneficiaries of new employment opportunities (Fernandes, 2004). These classes wanted to remove aspects of the dirigiste state that most constrained business groups and the urban middle classes (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000).

Economic liberalisation improved the economic growth rate (Sen Gupta, 1997) and market led growth policies emerged as central to ending economic backwardness and mass poverty (Mahmood, 2017). The acceptance of the market model was, however, not very transparent and concerns remained about the poor and vulnerable populations. The promise of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice enshrined in the constitution contrasted with the anxieties of impersonal market edging out the poor and vulnerable and worsening inequalities. The concern was substantial as India firmly remained a democracy and the enfranchisement of the masses ensured that millions of poor and

lower castes could enter the power structure through the ballot box. Notably despite several major disturbances in the polity, such as the national emergency, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and secessionist movements, India resolutely held on to democratic foundations.

The period of economic reforms also coincided with important and subtle changes in the working of democracy. The period was marked by the second democratic upsurge with the assertion of the intermediate and lower castes against upper caste domination (Singh, 1997). The country saw the emergence of political leaders from humble social backgrounds who presented themselves as promoters of social justice (Michelutti, 2008). Institutionally democracy was extended to the villages through the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments that gave formal sanction to local self-government institutions (Sen Gupta, 1997). The political upsurge of 'the lower orders' was situated within a wider process of vernacularisation (Michelutti, 2008). As values and practices of democracy became embedded in local cultural and social practices it facilitated the entrenchment of democracy and in the process reinforced particularistic idioms such as caste, kinship, and religion in conceptions of democracy.

The most immediate effects of this democratic upsurge was felt in the party system that experienced fragmentation. The one-party dominant system under the Congress was undone and regional parties emerged as important players leading to a period of coalition governments. The sharing of political power through coalition implied greater representation but also, unfortunately, became coterminous with political instability (Sen Gupta, 1997).

The transformations in economy and politics affected important alterations in the structures and functions of the republic. The fragmentation in the party system and liberalisation of the economy altered the balance of power between the Centre and the States. The Indian republic has acceded more powers to regions and provinces. The decentering of the republic has evoked mixed responses. Federalism and decentralisation are considered positive developments to give voice to regional aspirations, and prevent and arrest ethnic discontent (Sen Gupta, 1997). Political economy scholars, however, trace decentralisation as part of the design to facilitate market reforms by promoting competition among states for private capital (Jenkins, 1999; Mahmood, 2017).

The upheavals, both internally and externally also evoked a changed approach to foreign relations. Singh (1997) points out two distinct approaches during this period. The first, informed by the idealism of the past, focused on the continuation of NAM, greater South-South cooperation and improved South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The second, a

more realism-inspired approach, aimed at the establishment of non-frictional relations with neighbours, to look East, forming bridges with ASEAN countries, developing cooperation with countries of the Gulf, CIS republics, and the West (Sen Gupta, 1997).

Liberalisation marked a renewed contradiction as the values of socialism, secularism, equality remained enshrined in the constitution, but the vision of equity and justice was discarded in the realm of economic thinking. Irreconciled contradictions in the political economy, particularly between economic outcomes, social vision and political power steered such a change. Interestingly economic liberalisation could also be interpreted as an 'elite revolt' of business groups and urban middle classes against the dirigiste state (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000) and signalled the political marginalisation of rural landed interest in Indian politics (Bardhan, 2009). It was a revolt against the constraints imposed by the state on the productive resources and caste-based affirmative action (Ahmed, Kundu, and Peet, 2011).

5. Populism, Hindutva^[1] and passive revolution

As India approaches its 75th independence fresh contradictions have bared with the rise of authoritarian tendencies, majoritarianism and fundamentalism. The values enshrined in the constitution, such as equality before law, non-discrimination and secularism have come under scrutiny. This is explicit in the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 that introduces a religious filter in citizenship infringing on the secular principles of the constitution and idea of inclusive citizenship. The amendment fits the narrative of 'ethnic citizenship' that claims India as the natural homeland of Hindus and other Indic faiths (Roy, 2021). Incidences of lynching over meat consumption, rise of armed civic group for protection of cows (Gau Rakhshaks), public expositions of majoritarianism by members of the government reinforce the perception of majoritarianism.

Interestingly, it is the democratic system that has become the chief enabler of majoritarianism that poses a serious challenge to constitutional values. According to Jafferlot (2017) the incumbent regime seeks to convert India into an ethnoreligious democracy where norms of multi-party elections and a semblance of liberal democracy such as free media and an independent judi-

1. Hindutva is a political ideology, drawing on Hindu religion. The relationship is analogous to the relationship between Christianity and Christian fundamentalism or Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. Hindutva is associated with the RSS and its affiliate organisations including the BJP. Hindutva proposes a distinct outlook on the Indian State, aspects of the Constitution of India such as secularism, citizenship and economic policy.

ciary exist, but the ethnic majority (defined by religion) is recognised as dominant and minorities are marginalised. The transformations so far has been de facto, occurring through the implementation of specific political ideology within the constitutional structure (Jaffrelot, 2017) but has the potential to transform the country irreversibly (Komireddi, 2019).

The Hindu nationalists challenge the constitutional vision of the Indian republic and the established procedures of conflict management. Primarily the fields of contestation revolve around the assertion of Hindu nationalists against secularism (according to Hindu nationalists pseudo-secularism), the imagination of India (according to Hindu nationalists India is a Hindu Rashtra) and management of political conflicts (opposition to the regime is labelled as anti-national, urban Naxal, secessionist). The idea of Hindu Rashtra is pivotal in the attempt to naturalize India as a Hindu nation, mythically reimagined as a glorious ancient Akhand Bharat, whose boundaries stretched from the Himalayas to the sea (Wojczewski, 2020). Such a conception disregards the history of medieval India, betrays the cultural-religious mixing and inclusive foundations of Indian nationalism – values that were foregrounded in the constitutional vision of India. The exclusivist conception locates Muslims and Christians as foreign and dangerous other, who had dominated Hindus by taking advantage of their alleged disunity and weakness (Wojczewski, 2020). The outright victory of the BJP in 2014 and 2019 has been followed by increased attacks on minorities, denunciation of secularism (which has its own set of contradictions) perpetrated in the name of Hindu nationalism. The state has facilitated the assertion of Hindu nationalists and suppression of secular and liberal voices. As Mehta (2020) points out, a whole arsenal of surveillance, detention, shutdowns, disinformation, and threats is becoming the norm in managing contrary opinions and voices. All protestors are labelled either as 'anti-national', 'Islamists' or 'urban naxal'.

These tendencies in the polity evoke obvious concerns of democratic backsliding. As pointed out by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) democracy is sustained not only through institutional mechanisms but also norms of democratic behaviour by political parties and elites. They point out two specific mechanisms, namely of mutual toleration of political opposition and forbearance of politicians in deploying their institutional prerogatives as critical to the survival of democracy (Andersen, 2019). Observer of Indian politics have pointed to the centralisation of administration, politicisation of investigative agencies, use of judicial recourse for political objectives and violation of civil liberties as systematic features of the republic (Mehta 2020) leading to fears of democratic backsliding.

At a fundamental level these developments in politics can be traced back to structural inequalities that have marked post-liberalisation India. Partha Chatterjee (2020) suggests that contemporary rise of muscular nationalism spearheaded by authoritarian leaders is a response to the crisis of the liberal state due to neoliberal austerity and retrenchment. Post-World War II liberal democracy was underpinned by the integral state (welfare orientation) that established the hegemony of the liberal bourgeois order. Neoliberalism with the retrenchment of the state has undermined the liberal compact creating a crisis of legitimacy for the hegemonic order. Tribalism, nepotism, cronyism, xenophobia are all symptoms of this crisis.

Economic liberalisation in India has corresponded with high growth rates, making India the world's seventh-largest economy (Varshney, 2017). Policies towards greater market integration, withdrawal of state support and adoption of capital-friendly policies have, however, increased inequality in society (Patnaik 2013). There has been noticeable increase in interstate inequality with diverging growth rates and per capita incomes (Nayyar, 1998; Mahmood, 2017). This has led to inter-sectoral poverty and inequality between rural and urban areas. Interregional and intersectoral divergences have exacerbated interpersonal inequality (Varshney, 2017). One reason for such inequality is the lack of promised trickle-down growth of market-led policies as capital-friendly policies have not translated into decent employment or redistribution (Patnaik, 2013; Mahmood and Banerjee, 2020).

The inequality in economy has implications for politics in a democracy as the poor outnumber the rich giving them greater electoral weight. Thus the state has to simultaneously realise market-friendly policies and attend to the welfare of the low-income segments of society. It is the weight of democracy that engenders social safety nets such as midday meals, and MNREGA (Varshney, 2017) to mitigate the adverse consequences of the market (Patnaik, 2013). The political management of these contradictions has been negotiated through the discourse of populism, nationalism and religion. Varshney (2017) argues that politics combining nationalism and religion is a calculated choice by the BJP to tide over the contradictions of the democracy and market economy. Religious nationalism pushes economic issues into the background helping in electoral success. It is the inability to manage the social and economic contradictions that incites Hindu nationalist tropes such as disapproval of Hindu-Muslim romances, Cow protection, Ram Janmabhoomi, Kashmir dispute (Varshney, 1999). Patnaik (2013) identifies the harmful politics of religious nationalism to economic dislocations and segregation among classes, but points to deeper structural conditions. He argues that groups of uprooted

and alienated people under the neoliberal system, do not acquire any new moral moorings through enrolment into any new organisation (due to a lack of decent employment or worker rights). The resilience of old community identities and the absence of opportunity for individuals to reconstitute their identity through work or citizenship recreates the conditions for 'politics under lumpen capitalism' where patronage and corruption become political instruments as constitutional propriety is undermined (Patnaik, 2013).

The rise of populism and majoritarian politics as a response to contradictions in polity suggest the near-hegemonic position of the capitalist class supported by sections of the new middle class. The redistributive pressures in a poor democracy are being accommodated through ethnic and cultural politics. The new dominant class coalition favour economic liberalisation and at the same time favour Hindu nationalism (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

In the realm of foreign policy the combination of nationalism and market has meant a gradual shift away from non-alignment in search of new partnerships for economic growth and security. In this context 'Nonalignment 2.0' has emerged as a doctrine to build strategic partnerships while ensuring balance among the major global powers (Sridharan, 2017). India is now one of the world's largest arms importers, a stable ally of the US, and a counterbalance to the rise of China in the region. The desire for global relevance notwithstanding, India remains a middle power in the global power hierarchy still short of its great power aspirations (Sridharan, 2017).

6. Conclusion

As India stands on the cusp of 75th independence day, the values enshrined in the constitution, such as equality; justice, secularism are under severe strain. Democracy is sustained procedurally but substantive claims have regressed, as inequalities have intensified, progressive interpretations of citizenship delimited and religious nationalism has emerged as a legitimising discourse. The management of social and economic contradictions, is negotiated through a discourse of populism, nationalism and majoritarianism. Such a transformations in politics and society is however not uncontested. Students, civil society groups, women's groups, farmers have been quite vocal against violations of civil rights, caste atrocities, and bigotry. Massive protests, involving hundreds of thousands of protesters across religious, ethnic, and class cleavages took place against the CAA for violating India's secular constitution (Roy, 2021). The farmers of India continued with their peaceful protests for over a year forcing the state to capitulate on the farm bills. These are a continuation of the democratic legacy which contributed to Indian exceptionalism among

the post-colonial republics. The accomplishments of the past are however not a guarantee for the future. The making or unmaking of a republic is never cast in stone (Kudaisya, 2017). The narrative of Indian politics shows that the progress of any democracy is an unfolding one and none of the foundational ideas of the republic are indissoluble. Thus the realisation of the conditions for popular sovereignty require an unceasing democratic reaffirmation and refurbishment by the people.

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