

THE INTERPLAY OF CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

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Abstract: This paper explores how culture has shaped democratic practices and ideals in India. It provides a sociological understanding of the relationship between Indian traditions and democratic governance. The analysis begins with a sociological exploration of ancient Indian social systems of sabha and samities, highlighting the early seeds of participatory governance.

Further, the paper investigates the influence of diverse religious and cultural narratives, including those from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, which have contributed to cultural pluralism and respect for dialogue and debate which paved the path for democracy. The study then examines the effects of colonial control, focussing on how the fight for independence inspired democratic feelings amongst different social groups and helped them develop a shared identity based on egalitarian principles.

The paper also addresses one of the basic social institutions in India, i.e., the caste system, which complicated the realisation of democratic values. By looking at the cultural context, the paper argues that India's democracy is not merely a political system but a complex social organisation that draws from its rich historical and cultural roots. Ultimately, this paper highlights that understanding the cultural underpinnings is crucial for developing a more inclusive and resilient democratic future.

Keywords: Governance, Colonialism, Cultural Pluralism, Caste, Religion, Democracy

Introduction

India is known as the mother of democracy. While much has been written about India's formal democratic institutions (Sarkar, 1918; Parikh, 1997; Heller, 2000;

Bryld, 2001; Kohli, 2001; Ananth Pur& Moore, 2010; Beteille, 2011; Das & Das, 2018; Ladwig III & Mukherjee, 2024), the impact of culture on the formation of democratic results and practices has frequently been disregarded or undervalued. The complex interrelationship between Indian democracy and culture is examined in this article, which shows how cultural elements have both supported and restricted democratic processes.

In a pluralistic nation, cultural identity frequently acts as a prism through which citizens view their obligations and rights. The definition of what it means to be a member of a democratic society is greatly influenced by culture, from the customs of local government to the overarching narratives of national identity. In addition, the historical background of colonialism and post-colonial identity continues to influence present political processes, resulting in a distinctive environment where conventional wisdom coexists with contemporary democratic principles.

Ultimately, this paper aims to broaden our knowledge of Indian democracy by emphasising the role of culture as a dynamic but sometimes disregarded factor. Understanding how culture and democracy interact will help us better understand the potential and problems facing India's democratic future.

From Vedic Sabha and Samities to Democracy

Despite having a monarchy and a strong basis, the early Aryan civilisation was not absolute and was constrained in several ways. The king's absolute power was restrained in several ways by certain democratic aspects (Pandey, 1952; Bhat, 1954). They include 1) people voting for the king; 2) the king was required to take oath during the coronation; and 3) the assembly of people. It was the final institution to significantly contribute to limiting the king's power.

The two Houses that made up the Vedic Assemblies were the Samiti and the Sabha. The Samiti served the following purposes, among others: 1. The King's election; 2. the exiled king's re-election; and 3. discussion of functions of the state. The samitis were attended by the king. The speakers were expected to give speeches at the Samiti gathering. The life of the Samiti was very long. The Rig Veda and the Chandogya Upanishad (c. 800–700 B.C.) attest to its ongoing existence. It vanishes before 600 B.C., the time of the Jatakas. While the Samiti was a national assembly, the Sabha was its standing body.

The Vedic Age's Sabha and Samiti did not vanish, leaving their heirs in the subsequent era's political structure. These republics of India appear to have prospered

alongside the monarchy. The Gana Raja, or the dominion of the Republics, is referred to in the Mahabharata. The renowned Sanskrit Grammar author Panini (600 B.C.) lists several republics that were in existence at the time of his writing.

Objective

- The analysis begins with a sociological exploration of ancient Indian social systems of sabha and samities, highlighting the early seeds of participatory governance.
- The paper investigates the influence of diverse religious and cultural narratives, including those from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, which have contributed to cultural pluralism and respect for dialogue and debate which paved the path for democracy.
- The paper also addresses one of the basic social institutions in India, i.e., the caste system, which complicated the realisation of democratic values.
- Ultimately, this paper highlights that understanding the cultural underpinnings is crucial for developing a more inclusive and resilient democratic future.

Research Methodology: Theoretical article sketches the logical or literature-based approach used to develop new conceptual frameworks, rather than empirical data collection. Critically analyzing existing literature, and identifying the process of building the new argument.

Tracing Religious thoughts to Democracy

Hinduism

Hindu scriptures like the Vedas mark the existence of democratic ideals, like that of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Rig Veda expresses the diversity of human behaviour and thought¹⁰ and asks for the propagation of noble noetic ideas among mankind from all directions in the cosmos. The goddesses of life, shelter, and bodily liberty are called in the Rig Veda; these sounds are comparable to contemporary rights like the right to physical liberty, the right to life, and the right to shelter. (Yasin and Upadhyay, 2004).

The Vedic literature promotes everyone's right to autonomy within the state. The Rig Veda advocates for everyone's equality and oneness. The Rig Veda holds that all people are brothers and that they should cooperate for the good of one another

in order to advance society as a whole. The hymns of the Atharva Veda also exhibit the egalitarian ideology, stating that everyone has an equal right to food and water, that everyone is responsible for the chariot of life, and that people should thus live in harmony and fortify their ties to one another. The idea of fraternity is magnificently enshrined in the Maha Upanishad, which asserts that all people are members of one family (Vasudhaivakutumbakam) and that only very narrow-minded people choose two opposing viewpoints on current affairs and do mine and thine. Individuals with a broad viewpoint, on the other hand, are more conscious and see all people as members of their own family. Enlightenment philosophers' goals are in line with the Vedic worldview that views the entire world as one family.

The preservation of people's self-respect and dignity is a foundational theme in Vedic literature. These writings praise the excellence of skilful labour and uphold the dignity of labour. Every profession, no matter how small or enormously large, was treated with the same respect. The Rig Veda advises the King to engage in farming periodically in order to set a good example for the Aryans. Rig Veda says that the King should be commended for his seed sowing and farming, which he undertakes occasionally with his ministers and sets an example for the Aryans (Kumar & Choudhury, 2021).

Islam

In India, the relationship between democratic ideals and Islamic education has a long and complicated history. Islam has aspects of consultative government and community involvement that are consistent with democratic ideals (Schwartz, 2008).

The Prophet Muhammad founded the first Islamic community in Medina, which serves as an illustration of consultative governance. The Prophet emphasised the value of shura (consultation) by often consulting with his companions on issues of public concern. Throughout Islamic history, the practice of shura was institutionalised in a variety of forms of government, with kings frequently consulting scholars and community leaders for advice. The Majlis al-Shura, or consultative council, which counselled the caliphs and served as a platform for deliberating on questions of state, is among the most prominent instances of consultative governance in Islamic history. These institutions demonstrate a dedication to inclusive and participatory governance despite not being democratic in the contemporary sense. To prevent authoritarian leadership and promote inclusivity, Shura makes sure that different

points of view are considered. This idea fits in perfectly with democratic governance because the public's opinion is vital in determining laws and policies.

Another element that Islamic education and democratic institutions in India have in common is accountability (Islam, 2020). Islam holds both individuals and leaders responsible for their deeds. Accountability fosters integrity and transparency, two traits that are necessary to guard against power abuse and guarantee sound government. Similar goals are served by the idea of checks and balances in democracies, which hold public officials responsible and guarantee that their decisions are consistent with the law and moral principles. The improvements of society and community service are highly valued in Islamic teachings. Muslims are urged to get involved in their communities by assisting those in need and pursuing social justice. This approach supports social responsibility and civic involvement, consistent with the democratic ideal of engaged citizenship. Community service is essential in a democratic setting to build a thriving civil society in which people actively improve their local areas.

Buddhism

Three remarkable achievements in Buddhism are consistent with the democratic roots of ancient Greek city-states: the concept of shared humanity as well as the ability to critique oneself and express disagreement (Muhlberger, 1998). Second, as an enduring and formative feature, a program of inherent human rights deserves attention. To a certain degree, it is a culturally transcendent trait that specifically supports the idea that all people are moral, biological beings with a collective culture that values individuality and reason. Thirdly, the ability to critically evaluate one is akin to having a broad mentality. It may be defined as the ability to assess, criticise, and dissent. This ability has a long historical history and has finally resulted in Indian constitutional democracy. Indeed, several behaviours, viewpoints, institutions, and representative and elective features are all part of constitutional democracy.

The most important thing to come out of the ruins of ancient Buddhist India is the great notion of universal inclusion and assimilation (Muhlberger, 1998). Humanity was a whole collective that valued the unique characteristics of its members rather than only being a spiritual or moral endowment. The process of humanising the idea that “all people of the world are human and there is only one definition of all humans and each of one that is rational—the Eightfold Noble thoughts path—the rich universal resonance of humanity to be whole” is consolidated in the Sangha. It

evoked the democratic ideas of Dhamma, Mitri, Karuna, and Sangha and created a vision of everyone in society as being profoundly interrelated.

British Colonialism and Indian Democracy

According to Mann (2005), colonisation has played a significant role in the historical processes that have produced and maintained modern democracies. British rule left India with certain political traits that helped the nation develop democratically in the future. These traits include a central government, an efficient civil service, early elections, and the indoctrination of the highest political elite in liberal democratic principles. For Weiner, it was the political experience that Indigenous leaders gained during the final stages of colonialism when they were granted more governmental participation, as well as the traits of the main political party that arose during the national movement—the Indian National Congress that linked British colonialism to Indian democracy.

A more critical view of Indian democracy is suggested by recent comparative studies on nationalism (Varshney, 1998). The independence movement, led by Gandhi, Nehru, and the Congress party, transformed what was a cultural unit—as summed up by the term “Indian civilisation”—into a cultural-political unit—a nation—between the 1920s and the 1940s. Since a political entity must exist before a democracy can exist, Indian democracy would have never come to fruition without this change. The roots of democracy were established by the strategic exchanges between national movement leaders and British authorities, not by the British legacy in and of itself. A historical account cannot be considered comprehensive until it acknowledges the “agency” of the Indian freedom movement.

Sarkar (2001) Sarkar acknowledges the British influence but focuses on how Indians built their kind of democracy, particularly the union of federalism, secularism, and full adult suffrage. The British opposed widespread adult suffrage even though they did create some electoral politics. In the end, Indian nationalist leaders who collaborated closely with the politically engaged Indian populace advanced the adult franchise. Because of India’s diversity, creating a cohesive nationalist movement also compelled Indian leaders to consider “unity in diversity,” which ultimately resulted in a federal system that differed greatly from the British vision. Finally, the same diversity—particularly the subcontinent’s Hindu–Muslim divide—pushed nationalist leaders to create a practical, political secularism that

provided equitable treatment to different religious populations in order to oppose colonial divide-and-rule policies.

Caste and Democracy

In 1933, the historian, administrator, and diplomat K. M. Panikkar, who was educated at Oxford, published *Caste and Democracy*. He made the case in the book that democracy and caste are incompatible. As he claims,

Democracy and caste are totally opposed . . . the one is based on equality, the other on inequality of birth. The one is actuated by the principle of social inclusion, the other by the principle of social exclusion. Democracy tries to break down the barriers of class; caste seeks to perpetuate them. . . . In all matters that are of importance, caste and democracy are fundamentally opposed, they are at their very bases, incompatible. (Panikkar 1933 [2004]: 24)

But caste and democracy have been working out together. Gerard Toffin, a renowned social anthropologist and ethnographer, stated that “the encounter of democracy with caste is a historical process accommodating two sets of opposed values” (Toffin 2014). Indeed, it appears that *homo hierarchicus* is the definite opposite of *homo aequalis*. When it comes to combining the two institutions, there are many inconsistencies. The caste system is frequently portrayed as a disease that plagues all Hindu nations and is the obvious reason why the democratisation process is stalling. Despite its lack of infrastructure and stark disparities between geographical regions and economic sectors, India has managed to improve the quality of life for a significant section of its population and compete economically with Western capitalist states. India has taken the first steps towards becoming a global economic powerhouse. While maintaining its cultural traditions and adhering to its own models, the world’s largest caste system has effectively changed. India has demonstrated that caste and rapid development can coexist (Zajęzowska, 2019)

Dalits and “low” castes have gained significant advantages from various quotas and are now more integrated into the broader social structure, thanks to affirmative action policies that have been in effect on the Indian subcontinent since the late nineteenth century. Dalits and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) have risen to prominent political positions, including inside the federal state system, thanks to the social privileges that reservations have granted them. The political elite have completely changed as a result of affirmative discrimination, particularly

in the northern Hindu belt. Particularly in the North, low- and middle-caste associations have grown to be very strong and significant at the regional state level. Caste seems to be a useful tool for democratising India, on the one hand (Toffin, 2014). Remember that caste has its origins in ancient India, even though it has evolved throughout time. The political idea of democracy is likewise relatively new in South Asian nations. The caste language has incorporated and vernacularised democracy (Toffin, 2014). However, we should be cautious, as Indian politicians often seek to exploit the caste system, transforming it into a form of corporate affirmative action. In essence, caste seems to be adapting to align with the current political environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper shows that India's democracy is far more than a political system, it is a complex social organisation shipped from the nation's rich historical and cultural roots. Understanding these cultural underpinnings is crucial for understanding Indian democracy. We trace the seed of Indian democracy from Vedas to religious ideologies and British colonialism. This paper illustrates that the vibrancy of Indian democracy is not solely dependent on its institutional frameworks but also on its cultural heritage. We also focus on complex objects like caste and its impact on Indian democracy.

In this context, the paper argues for considering cultural component into understanding democratic processes and governance strategies in India. Such integration not only enhances the understanding of democratic institutions but also cultivates a sense of the origin of democratic ideals. Infact, it is acknowledgement and embracing of India's cultural landscape that will be pivotal in building a resilient, democratic framework capable of adapting to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

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