



Indian Democracy In Transition: Examining Recent Trends And Challenges

Chitrasen Bhue
Student

Mukesh Kumbhar
Independent Scholar

Department of Political Science and Public Administration Sambalpur University,
Jyoti Vihar, Burla

Abstract: India's post-independence democratic trajectory has long been celebrated as an extraordinary experiment in self-governance within a highly diverse, deeply stratified society. However, the first quarter of the twenty-first century has brought with it an array of structural strains, institutional recalibrations, and normative contests that compel a sober re-examination of the democratic health of the world's most populous nation-state. This article undertakes a systematic introspective analysis of recent trends shaping Indian democracy, with particular attention to the period from 2014 to 2024. Drawing on a mixed theoretical framework that incorporates Dahl's conception of polyarchy, Levitsky and Ziblatt's theory of democratic erosion, and Schedler's electoral authoritarianism paradigm, the study examines five critical dimensions: electoral integrity and the consolidation of party dominance; institutional independence, especially the judiciary, Election Commission, and investigative agencies; civil liberties, freedom of expression, and media pluralism; the relationship between majoritarianism and minority rights; and the resilience demonstrated by democratic forces in the 2024 general elections. Empirical evidence is drawn from V-Dem indices, Freedom House assessments, Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index data, and legislative records. The findings indicate that while India retains core features of electoral democracy, a measurable erosion of liberal-democratic norms-particularly in civil liberties, media freedom, and institutional autonomy-has occurred, warranting classification as a competitive authoritarian regime rather than a full democracy. Simultaneously, the 2024 electoral outcome signals residual democratic resilience and the continuing vitality of citizen agency. The paper concludes by mapping pathways for democratic renewal and highlights the theoretical implications of the Indian case for the comparative study of democratic backsliding in the Global South.

Index Terms - Indian Democracy, Majoritarianism, Democratic Backsliding, Electoral Autocracy, Civil Liberties, Competitive Authoritarianism

I. INTRODUCTION

India's constitutional democracy, inaugurated in January 1950, has long occupied a singular position in comparative political science. Against the backdrop of mass poverty, vast social heterogeneity, and post-colonial institutional fragility, India sustained competitive multiparty elections, a functioning judiciary, a free press, and a vibrant civil society for several decades achievements that have commanded sustained scholarly attention (Varshney, 2013; Kohli, 2001). The democratic experiment was, in the words of Amartya Sen (2005), a test of whether universal suffrage could anchor legitimate governance in conditions that liberal theorists had long assumed were inimical to democratic consolidation. The first decade of the twenty-first century appeared to confirm this optimism. Coalition governance, judicial activism, Right to Information legislation, and a boisterous media ecosystem suggested a deepening rather than narrowing of democratic space. Yet the second decade has been marked by a series of developments that have prompted leading scholars and democracy-monitoring institutions to revisit these assessments with considerably greater concern. Since 2014, under the successive administrations of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and

the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), India's rankings across multiple independent democracy indices have declined sharply. The V-Dem Institute reclassified India from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy as early as 2018 (Lindberg et al., 2022). Freedom House downgraded India from 'Free' to 'Partly Free' in 2021 (Freedom House, 2021), The Economist Intelligence Unit continues to categorise India as a 'flawed democracy' (EIU, 2024). These classifications are contested, both methodologically and politically. The Government of India has characterised such assessments as methodologically flawed and reflective of Western-centric normative biases (Economic Advisory Council, 2022). A body of counter-scholarship argues that the coalition-era baseline from which backsliding is measured was itself somewhat idealised, and that certain authoritarian tendencies are deeply embedded in India's constitutional and political heritage (Singh, 2023). The 2024 general elections further complicated the picture: the BJP fell short of a parliamentary majority for the first time in a decade, suggesting that electoral accountability mechanisms retain meaningful force (Way, 2024). It is precisely this complexity—the co-existence of genuine democratic vitality with measurable institutional erosion that makes India an analytically compelling and theoretically significant case. This article aims to provide a rigorous, evidence-based introspection of recent trends in Indian democracy, contributing to both the regional literature on South Asian politics and the broader comparative literature on democratic erosion. The central research question is: In what ways, and to what extent, have democratic norms, institutions, and practices in India changed over the 2014-2024 period, and what do these changes imply for India's democratic trajectory?

II. CONCEPTUALISING DEMOCRATIC EROSION

The scholarly literature on democratic backsliding has undergone considerable refinement over the past two decades. Earlier conceptions of democratic breakdown, rooted in the experience of mid-twentieth century military coups and executive seizures of power, have given way to a more nuanced understanding of gradual, incremental erosion of democratic norms and institutions by elected incumbents (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). Bermeo (2016) identifies 'executive aggrandisement'—the incremental concentration of power in the executive through legal and ostensibly democratic means—as the dominant form of contemporary democratic backsliding. This is distinguished from the 'promissory coups' and 'executive coups' that characterised earlier waves of democratic breakdown. Robert Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy provides a foundational reference point. Polyarchy requires, at minimum, the institutionalisation of meaningful electoral competition, inclusive suffrage, the protection of civil liberties, and access to alternative sources of information. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) add a normative dimension, arguing that sustainable democracy rests on two unwritten norms: mutual toleration (accepting political opponents as legitimate competitors) and institutional forbearance (restraint in the deployment of formal powers against opponents). Their analysis of contemporary backsliders across Latin America and Europe resonates strongly with the Indian case. Schedler's (2006) concept of electoral authoritarianism—regimes that maintain the formal machinery of elections while systematically undermining the conditions for genuine political competition—has been applied directly to India by multiple scholars (Tudor, 2023; Vaishnav, 2024). Way (2024), however, resists this classification, preferring the term 'competitive authoritarianism' for regimes in which meaningful democratic competition coexists with serious incumbent abuse. These conceptual debates are directly relevant to the empirical analysis undertaken here.

III. The Indian Case in Comparative Perspective

India has attracted a rich comparative democracy literature. Rudolph and Rudolph's (1987) concept of the 'demand polity' drew attention to how popular mobilisation and electoral incentives shaped state behaviour in ways that defied both Marxist and liberal-modernist expectations. Yadav's (1996) analysis of the 'second democratic upsurge'—the mobilisation of lower-caste and subaltern groups as democratic subjects—highlighted the deepening and diversification of Indian democracy through the 1990s. More recently, scholars such as Mehta (2022), Ganguly et al. (2023), and Vaishnav (2024) have chronicled the structural pressures on Indian democracy in the Modi era, documenting trends in institutional capture, media freedom, minority rights, and judicial independence.

Tripurdaman Singh's (2023) revisionist contribution is notable for arguing that the current trajectory is not a departure from but a continuation of historically embedded authoritarian tendencies within India's constitutional framework, which from its inception vested substantial discretionary powers in the executive. This perspective cautions against using the coalition era as an idealised baseline and calls for a more historically grounded assessment of democratic norms in India.

IV. Electoral Integrity and Party Dominance

a. Electoral Participation and Result

India's electoral scale remains without parallel. The 2024 general elections saw approximately 640 million voters cast ballots across 543 constituencies a logistical achievement that democratic theorists rightly celebrate. Voter turnout has remained consistently high: 66.4% in 2014, 67.4% in 2019, and an estimated 65.8% in 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2024). These figures suggest robust popular engagement with electoral democracy and constitute an empirical check on narratives of wholesale democratic collapse.

At the level of electoral outcomes, however, significant structural asymmetries have emerged. The BJP's dominance of the national media ecosystem, its command of campaign finance, and its effective organisation of social coalitions gave it a formidable structural advantage through the 2019 cycle. The introduction of electoral bonds in 2018 a scheme subsequently struck down by the Supreme Court in February 2024 as unconstitutional raised serious concerns about the opaque financing of political parties and its differential impact on opposition resources (Supreme Court of India, 2024; Vaishnav, 2024b).

b. The Election Commission and Institutional Impartiality

The Election Commission of India (ECI), historically regarded as one of the most respected independent constitutional bodies in the country, has faced mounting criticism regarding its institutional autonomy. Critics have pointed to the delayed enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct against BJP leaders, the differential application of speech norms to incumbents and opposition figures, and procedural anomalies in scheduled state elections as evidence of compromised impartiality (Vaishnav, 2017; The Hindu Editorial Board, 2023). The ECI's credibility was further tested by the 2023 amendment to the Election Commissioners' appointment procedure, which removed the Chief Justice of India from the selection committee—a change that the Supreme Court had previously recommended against (Ganguly et al., 2023). These concerns must be weighed against the 2024 election outcome itself, which delivered an unexpected rebuke to the ruling coalition and demonstrated that the ECI facilitated a credible competitive process. The result the BJP's loss of outright parliamentary majority and its dependence on coalition partners for the first time since 2014—constitutes significant evidence of electoral accountability's residual force (Way, 2024).

V. Institutional Independence and the Rule of Law

a. The Judiciary

The Supreme Court of India occupies a constitutional position of fundamental importance in the architecture of Indian democracy. Through the doctrine of basic structure (Kesavananda Bharati, 1973), the practice of public interest litigation, and a tradition of judicial review, the Court has historically served as a significant check on legislative and executive overreach. In the current period, however, multiple scholars and former judges have expressed concern about the Court's readiness to exercise this role robustly (Chandrachud, as cited in Mehta, 2022; Krishnaswamy, 2023). The Supreme Court's handling of constitutional challenges to the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution (which conferred special status on Jammu & Kashmir), the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, and the preventive detention of activists and journalists under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, has been widely characterised in the legal literature as constituting 'judicial evasion' rather than proactive rights protection (Chandrachud, 2021; Gonsalves, 2022). The long pendency of constitutional benches including a five-year delay in the Article 370 case has been interpreted as de facto acquiescence to executive preferences.

b. Investigative Agencies and Political Targeting

A particularly significant dimension of institutional erosion concerns the deployment of federal investigative agencies notably the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)—in ways that critics characterise as politically targeted. Data compiled by The Wire (2022) and cited in Vaishnav (2024) indicate that since 2014, there has been a four-fold increase in ED cases against politicians, with approximately 95% of such cases involving opposition party members. While such statistics cannot by themselves prove political motivation, they do not control for actual levels of financial malfeasance within different parties the pattern has aerated significant concern from constitutional scholars and the opposition (Ganguly et al., 2023). The freezing of the Indian National Congress's bank accounts in early 2024—shortly before the commencement of the general election campaign was particularly noted as demonstration of the incumbent government's capacity to use regulatory institutions as instruments of political pressure (Way, 2024; Vaishnav,

2024b). That the election proceeded competitively despite this pressure arguably demonstrates both the resilience of Indian democratic institutions and the limits of institutional capture in the absence of outright electoral manipulation.

VI. Civil Liberties, Freedom of Expression, and Media Pluralism

a. Press freedom

India's press freedom rankings have undergone a dramatic deterioration over the study period. In the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, India ranked 140th out of 180 countries in 2024—down from 80th in 2002 and 133rd in 2016 (RSF, 2024). This decline reflects a documented pattern of physical attacks on journalists (particularly those covering conflict zones in Manipur, Kashmir, and Chhattisgarh), the filing of sedition and criminal defamation charges against critical reporters, and the broader structural concentration of mainstream media ownership in conglomerates with significant exposure to government approval processes (Mehta, 2022).

The chilling effect on investigative journalism has been widely noted. The BBC documentary critical of Prime Minister Modi's handling of the 2002 Gujarat riots was banned in India in January 2023, and its offices in New Delhi and Mumbai were subjected to income tax surveys by the IT Department. The documentary remained accessible internationally but unavailable through mainstream Indian platforms a pattern consistent with what Schudson (2008) terms 'soft censorship.'

b. Internet Freedom and Digital Dissent

India has emerged as the world's leading practitioner of internet shutdowns, accounting for a disproportionate share of all recorded global internet shutdowns between 2018 and 2023 (Access Now, 2024). Kashmir alone experienced the longest continuous internet blackout in a democracy's history over 552 days following the August 2019 revocation of Article 370. The Supreme Court's ruling in *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020) recognised internet access as an aspect of fundamental rights under Article 19(1)(a) but stopped short of striking down the shutdown orders, a decision critiqued in the legal literature as procedurally weak (Bhatia, 2021).

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021 introduced significant government oversight over digital content platforms, requiring their compliance with content takedown orders from government authorities. Critics argue that these provisions, alongside the use of sedition law (Section 124A IPC) and UAPA against online speech, have created a regulatory environment that disproportionately burdens dissent (Rodrigues, 2022). The Supreme Court's 2022 stay on Section 124A and the subsequent legislative proposal to replace sedition with broader provisions under the *Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita* (BNS) represent an ambiguous reform removing a colonial-era provision while arguably substituting comparably broad restrictions.

VII. Majoritarianism, Minority Rights and Secularism

a. Constitutional Secularism Under Strain

India's constitutional framework explicitly enshrines secularism and guarantees equal citizenship irrespective of religion. The 42nd Constitutional Amendment (1976) formally inserted 'secular' into the Preamble, but the substantive commitment to religious neutrality and minority protection predates this amendment and is embedded throughout the Fundamental Rights provisions of the Constitution. The current period has witnessed a measurable tension between this constitutional inheritance and the governing ideology of Hindu nationalism advanced by the BJP and its wider Sangh Parivar network (Vaishnav, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021).

The Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), which created an expedited pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim religious minorities from three neighbouring countries but explicitly excluded Muslims, was criticised by constitutional scholars as violating Article 14 (equal protection) and the basic structure doctrine (Bhatia, 2020; Ramchandran, 2020). When combined with proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercises, critics argued that the legislation could create a category of stateless Muslims. The Supreme Court's five-year delay in hearing constitutional challenges to the CAA-petitions filed by more than 200 parties was itself a subject of widespread scholarly and legal concern.

b. Violence, Lynching, and the Failure of State Protection

A distinctive and deeply troubling feature of the period has been the documented increase in communal violence, cow-vigilante attacks, and what Jaffrelot (2021) describes as the 'Hindu Rashtra' project the gradual transformation of India's political and cultural norms in ways that marginalize Muslims as second-class citizens. Human Rights Watch (2019, 2022) and Amnesty International (2020) documented dozens of mob lynchings and vigilante attacks on Muslims, Dalits, and Christians. State responses were frequently characterized by the failure to prosecute perpetrators and, in some documented cases, action against victims or their advocates.

India's 204 million Muslims approximately 14.2% of the population constitute one of the world's largest Muslim-minority communities. Their experience in the current political climate represents a profound normative test for the constitutional commitment to equal citizenship. At the same time, scholars caution against reducing the analytical complexity of Indian majoritarianism to a simple perpetrator-victim binary, noting that class, region, and local political dynamics significantly mediate the incidence and form of communal tension (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004).

VIII. Democratic Resilience: The 2024 Elections and Counter-Current

The 2024 general elections, held between April and June across 543 constituencies, produced an outcome that surprised most commentators and significantly complicated prevailing narratives of Indian democratic decline. The BJP, which had won outright majorities in both 2014 (282 seats) and 2019 (303 seats), secured only 240 seats-63 fewer than its 2019 tally and 32 shorts of the majority required to form a government independently. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) retained power but as a coalition dependent on regional allies, most notably the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Janata Dal (United). The opposition INDIA alliance secured 234 seats, with the Indian National Congress alone winning 99 seats-nearly double its 2019 tally of 52. This outcome is analytically significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that the structural advantages accruing to the incumbent including asymmetric media access, financing advantages, and the deployment of state machinery were insufficient to guarantee a predetermined electoral result. Second, the strong performance of the opposition, despite the freezing of Congress party accounts and the disqualification proceedings against Rahul Gandhi, suggests that the formal institutions of electoral democracy retained their functional integrity to a meaningful degree (Way, 2024). Third, the result reflected genuine popular discontent over unemployment, agricultural distress, and the perception of governance arrogance-signalling that democratic accountability through elections retains purchase in contemporary India. Alongside the electoral result, several institutional counter-currents merit recognitions. The Supreme Court's February 2024 judgment striking down the electoral bonds scheme as unconstitutional on grounds of voter rights and transparency (Association for Democratic Reforms vs Union of India, 2024) represented a significant exercise of judicial review. The Court's 2022 stay on sedition law and its incremental rights jurisprudence on privacy (Justice K.S. Putt swamy v. Union of India, 2017) demonstrate that the judiciary retains the capacity for principled constitutional reasoning, even if it exercises this capacity selectively. Civil society, despite operating under increasing constraints, has shown considerable resilience. The nationwide Shaheen Bagh protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (December 2019-March 2020) mobilised hundreds of thousands of citizens and demonstrated the enduring vitality of the right to peaceful assembly. Farmer organisations conducted sustained and ultimately successful protests against the farm laws (2020-2021), which were eventually repealed. These episodes suggest that Indian democracy possesses adaptive mechanisms of popular resistance that limit the completeness of any authoritarian consolidation.

IX. Synthesis and Theoretical Discussion

The empirical evidence presented in this article supports a nuanced but ultimately sobering assessment of Indian democracy's recent trajectory. Across the five dimensions examined-electoral integrity, institutional independence, civil liberties, minority rights, and democratic resilience the evidence points to significant erosion in the first three dimensions, serious normative contestation in the fourth, and meaningful but qualified resilience in the fifth. The theoretical framework of competitive authoritarianism, as elaborated by Way (2024) in direct application to the Indian case, offers the most analytically precise characterisation. India retains genuinely competitive elections in which the incumbent can be and, in 2024, was punished by voters for poor governance performance. Simultaneously, the incumbent systematically exploits state resources, regulatory institutions, and information asymmetries to maintain structural advantages. This combination-real competition

coexisting with serious incumbent abuse distinguishes India from both consolidated liberal democracies and closed autocracies, locating it in the grey zone that is the analytical terrain of competitive authoritarianism theory. Singh's (2023) historicist argument that authoritarian tendencies are not novel departures but continuities within India's constitutional heritage is methodologically important as a corrective to ahistorical benchmarking. However, it risks becoming a counsel of democratic fatalism if taken to imply that incremental authoritarian consolidation is constitutionally predetermined rather than politically contingent. The 2024 election result suggests that contingency, not structural determinism, governs India's democratic trajectory. The Indian case carries significant theoretical implications for the comparative study of democratic backsliding. First, it illustrates the analytical limits of binary democratic/autocratic classifications and the importance of capturing regime variation within the broad category of democratic forms. Second, it highlights the distinctive role of electoral accountability rather than constitutional courts or civil society alone as the primary mechanism of democratic self-correction in competitive authoritarian contexts. Third, it draws attention to the paradox of democratic resilience in conditions of institutional erosion: democratic institutions can be simultaneously weakened by incumbents and deployed by citizens to discipline those same incumbents.

Conclusion

This article has undertaken a systematic introspection of recent trends in Indian democracy, examining the decade from 2014 to 2024 across five analytically distinct but empirically interrelated dimensions. The picture that emerges is one of measurable democratic erosion—particularly in institutional autonomy, civil liberties, and minority rights coexisting with the resilience of core electoral mechanisms and a continuing capacity for popular democratic assertion. India cannot be classified as full democracy in the liberal sense; nor can it be meaningfully described as an autocracy. It occupies the increasingly important and analytically distinctive terrain of competitive authoritarianism regime form that challenges conventional democracy promotion frameworks and demands theoretical refinement. The 2024 electoral outcome constitutes a significant data point that should complicate, without entirely reversing, the dominant narrative of democratic decline. For scholars, the Indian case offers a rich empirical ground for the comparative study of democratic backsliding, resilience, and the institutional conditions under which competitive elections can serve as effective corrective mechanisms despite structural disadvantages for the opposition. For policymakers and democratic practitioners within India, the evidence presented here underscores the importance of sustained attention to institutional independence, press freedom, minority rights, and campaign finance transparency as preconditions for the deepening, rather than the maintenance, of democratic governance. Future research should examine the sub-national variation in democratic performance across India's states, the role of digital technology in both enabling authoritarian control and facilitating popular mobilization, and the longer-term implications of coalition-dependent governance for the BJP's reform agenda and democratic accountability mechanisms at the federal level.

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