The Case for Liberal Democracy

Our founding fathers chose democracy when India became independent. In this seventy fifth year of our independence, it is easy to miss how audacious, yet appropriate, that choice was. In the horrendous aftermath of the Partition, it was not clear India would survive as a country, let alone a democratic one, whether the provinces of British India and the princely states could be welded together, whether their peoples would feel a sense of national unity and purpose that overcame the religious, caste, language, and socio-economic identities that differentiated them. Much of the population was poor and illiterate, unequal economically and socially. The prospect of political freedom was most valued by the elite who were best positioned to slip into the roles vacated by the colonial administration. Gandhi’s greatest fear was that the white sahibs would simply be replaced by brown sahibs.

Against all odds, India emerged as a robust democracy. People grew into voters and voters into citizens. We were blessed that our early leaders were largely committed democrats, who set and then strengthened democratic traditions and practices. Consequently, they were able to correct course, and did so repeatedly. Indeed, democracy’s ability to respond to the varied pressures emerging from our vast country allowed it to function as a safety valve, ensuring that most battles were fought at the ballot box and in Parliament and not in the street.

A collateral benefit was that our flourishing democracy gave us soft power internationally. We were respected as the idealistic voice for developing countries, even though our economic footprint was miniscule.

The passage of time did raise concerns about our initial design. First, our constitutional structure, perhaps influenced by the caliber of the leaders then in government, credited the executive excessively with good intent. There were relatively few checks on its power over citizens. Perhaps this bias was necessary when the needs of the new nation were enormous and institutional capabilities untested.

Yet by allowing the State substantial leeway to set its own powers against the citizen, the framers of our constitution were perhaps too trusting. The problem was not just that the citizenry had little redress against a potentially petty politician or bureaucrat, but that the entire government machinery could be subverted to the will of a single leader. Ambedkar seemed to have recognized this possibility when he said “…if things go wrong under the new Constitution, the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is that Man was vile.” Yet the constitution did not place sufficient guard-rails against such a possibility.

Second, the constitution recognized the importance of federalism but stopped with decentralizing to the state level. It did not empower, fund, or staff government at the village or municipality level to any significant degree. In part, framers like Ambedkar believed that the village was “but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism”, and that India could only be dragged into modernity if the more enlightened national and state
governments took charge, casting aside the tradition-bound village republic. This meant there was no clear way to decentralize governance if required – if, for example, population growth made the country vastly larger and harder to govern from the center or state capitals.

Third, the economic system was left to be determined. Given the widespread resentment of the privy purses paid by a poor nation to the erstwhile rulers of the princely states, it was hard to establish strong protection for contracts between the citizen and the state, or for private property. With our top leaders influenced by the dominant development narrative of those times, the Soviet Union, it was almost inevitable that the public sector would occupy the commanding heights of the economy, with the protected private sector playing a limited role.

These concerns were not merely academic. India experienced the dark side of authoritarianism during the 1975-76 Emergency, which affected not just the Opposition but also the common man. Furthermore, the delivery of public goods to improve the lot of the ordinary citizen, especially the poorest, was abysmal in the initial years – unlike the typical experience of Western countries when they democratized. Take education. In 1950, Indians had, on average, 1 year of education. In comparison, the then Chinese average was 1.8 years. By 1970, after 20 years of democracy, India had crept up to 1.7 while communist China had progressed to 4.2 years of education, over double democratic India’s level.

Why was our performance so terrible on mass education? The explanations partly lie in lacunae in our democracy. Major parties were dominated by upper castes, who seemed largely unconcerned about spreading educational benefits; the quality of government school teaching was indifferent as teachers, paid by the state or national government, had little incentive to heed the poor parent or local authorities; there was little demand for higher skills from a small, uncompetitive, and protected industrial sector.

The virtue of democracy is that it can be moved to a better path. After the Emergency, India strengthened some of its democratic institutions, though perhaps not sufficiently. Regional parties, some representing the underprivileged, captured more of the vote and refocused government on providing better public goods. The constitution was amended to enable Panchayati Raj. The liberalization of the economy, after a brush with crisis in the early 1990s, increased the demand for skills. The average years of education in India more than doubled in the period 1970-1990 to 3.6 and doubled once again by 2015 to 7.4, narrowing the gap with China to 1.3 years.

Once again, though, our democracy and our economy need course correction today. Credible journalists and academics describe the recent decay of a range of democratic institutions, be they parliament, the judiciary, the election commission, academia, even the arts. Misguided attempts to build national strength around a centralized Hindu identity are alienating our religious minorities, and dividing and weakening the country. Our relationship with friendly neighboring countries has deteriorated, even while our northern neighbor appears increasingly willing to flex its muscles.
The difficult political environment is mirrored in a lost decade for the economy. There are bright spots, no doubt. But the euphoria in the stock market, part of a worldwide phenomenon, should not mask our inability to build substantially on past economic reforms. The capabilities of our people are once again falling below what are needed in an ever-more-competitive world. By reverting to the populist and protectionist policies of the past, we risk frittering away the demographic dividend, and instead seeing crores joining the ranks of the frustrated unemployed.

Today’s dominant narrative, a beguiling but eventually debilitating cocktail of Hindutva-driven nationalism, sweetened with populist welfarism, and made politically attractive by a charismatic leader, is partly why we face these challenges. Once again, our liberal democracy can allow us to confront this narrative with persuasive alternatives that aim to improve our economic well-being, while preserving a strong open society that takes pride in our culture and our nation. The most fitting tribute to the seventy fifth anniversary of our independence would be for all of us to help make this possible by strengthening our democracy.

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