



DECODING BHARATIYA DEMOCRACY: APPLYING VALUES TO GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

by
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The International Day of Democracy is celebrated on September 15 each year, encouraging governments to strengthen and consolidate democracy. But, ‘democracy’ is a word that can have various meanings depending on which country or person you ask. For instance, in his book *The End of History* published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama declared the triumph of liberal democracy and this idea became fundamentally important over several decades. Yet, recently democracy, as we know it, faced distinct challenges during [the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Alternatively, the pandemic also taught us how to conduct democracy in an emergency situation.

The Indian Approach

India, the world’s largest democracy in terms of the number of voters, underwent huge transformations during the pandemic. The Modi government argued during this crisis that India is a distinct model of democracy based on [welfare](#). The administration provided food grains to 800 million people. The approach was different from the prevalent practice of fiscal stimulus in other democracies. The administration claimed it as a distinct way to conduct democracy. It is significant to note that democracy became a political priority in foreign policy during the [Vajpayee administration](#) after the nuclear tests in 1998, and such trend has been noticed by subsequent administrations.

For over a decade now, India continues to play a major role globally with its leaders advocating for democratization of global governance. They were proponents of liberal democratic ideals as well as a unique Indian way of doing democracy. But, some institutions raised issues regarding a decline as far as democratic practices are concerned with respect

to India. Scholars have argued [shortcomings in](#) the existing democratic indices. While many including this writer support [alternative methods](#) for the analytical evaluation of democracy in India, this commentary focuses on the democratic conception of Indian administrations post 1998 till now, particularly in foreign policy

Foreign policy under Vajpayee’s leadership showcased democracy emphasizing terms such as triumph of democracy, rule of law, equality, freedom and plurality among others. They claimed India’s adoption of democracy made the idea universal. The Singh and Modi governments shared these ideals indicating their approximation in relation to western style liberal democracy. The Singh government especially placed emphasis on secularism and minority rights which appeared more aligned with western type of liberalism given its divergence from the Vajpayee and Modi styles.

While the Modi administration’s first term explicitly endorsed liberal values, all three administrations have emphasized unique, home-grown features of Indian democracy. Raymond Cohen noted that Indian diplomacy is deeply rooted in history, a trait reflected in these administrations’ democratic conceptions. The national movement and civilizational legacies underpin the distinct and home-grown Indian or *Bharatiya* democratic model.

The three administrations contended that Indians think in concentric circles thereby averting dichotomous classifications such as liberal or non-liberal democracies. They argued that the democratic journey of India is molded by its local socio-economic, cultural and historical factors. As proof for this perspective, the BJP-led government referred to a Sanskrit verse which goes ‘*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti*’ (truth is one, yet wise people explain it differently). The Singh administration has supported the local variation without invoking the verse. They indicated the primacy of democracy, and hinted at the different paths to achieving democracy. In their view of human rights, all administrations regarded them as an intrinsic part of democracy advocating



for contextual understanding rather than using them as a political weapon that divides nations. Further they pointed out that decolonization was the pathway through which India played a role internationally. They contended colonialism as a curse and against the idea of democracy

Consideration of Democratic Values

The stance of the Indian administrations towards democracy promotion echoed the memory of the colonial period. Their support has not been for the exportation of democracy ideology, but rather facilitating the consideration of democratic values. The Vajpayee government was one of those who founded the Community of Democracies while the Singh administration formed a partnership with the Bush administration in establishing the United Nations Democracy Fund. At both forums, India emphasized promoting democratic values with the consent of interested states. The approach underscored the sovereignty of the State.

Development partnerships are also supported by these Indian governments such as helping in constitution drafting, election management assistance, and human resources development. This inclination towards sovereignty can be traced to experiences with colonial oppression and the national movement. One more aspect in spreading democratic values is 'power of example'. The Vajpayee government portrayed India as a lantern bearer on the way to democracy especially as concerns about electoral issues and diversity management rose worldwide over time. Consistently focusing on persuasion rather than interference emphasized sovereignty even more and this has been the underlying pattern in communication with the external world about democracy from Indian leaders.

The Indian or Bharatiya conception of democracy is unique in its approach of integrating rights and duties. According to Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, Dharma (the right way of living) is essential for democracy since it obliterates the arbitrary distinction between rights and duties. Dharma does not give binary answers; instead,

it suggests conduct according to time as well as circumstances so that social order can be maintained based on righteousness. To support the merging of rights and responsibilities, Dharma was used by the BJP regime as an example. The merger was also supported by the Singh administration. Every regime has advocated for balancing personal versus societal rights which showcases distinguishing features of the Bharatiya type of democracy. For instance, the Singh regime opted for harmonization between personal rights with weaker group's rights.

Global Responsibilities

Besides this, all administrations in India have sought to promote idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("One world, one family") towards building cooperation in the service of humanity. A good example is during the COVID-19 pandemic where the Modi government cited distribution of vaccines to about 150 nations worldwide as a manifestation of this obligation.

Furthermore, both the Vajpayee and Singh regimens made reference on serving mankind as part of global responsibilities that India can share in terms of humanitarian support efforts worldwide. The Indian efforts during Boxing Day Tsunami and anti-piracy operations are just some examples. They considered burden sharing to be an essential aspect of democracy.

Contradiction management is another facet of the Indian democratic conception. The support for Western liberal democracy and stress on home-grown values indicates the same. The same is evinced by the Indian success in economic terms in a democratic space where diversity exists, which serves to testify this fact. This is evident in how all administrations have laid emphasis on diversity and the capability of weaving diverse groups into one unit.

A common element can be deduced from their insistence that democratic principles be applied to both domestic and international governance equally. In line with this, Indian administrations have criticized global institutions because few selected countries have no say or stake in them at all. They have stressed on equitable principles in global

economic regulation. Among other things, there were demands for the comprehensive democratization of the UN system including UNSC and Bretton Woods institutions.

In this context, Indian administrations attempted to be the voice of the Global South. The Indian administrations claimed to have adhered strictly to discriminatory nuclear non-proliferation treaties but at the same time demanded reforms in world forums. The call for reforms is a manifestation of mingled values and interests with regard to the Indian administration.

The independence in decision-making is a critical dimension of the Indian foreign policy. The Vajpayee and Singh administrations termed it as strategic autonomy, in reference to the U.S. The Modi administration started to move away from strategic autonomy towards issue-based partnership. As Deepa Olapolly points out, the colonial experience and civilizational legacy fostered an ethos of independence in India. Thus, according to Indian governments, independent decision-making is essential for democracy.

The Modi administration cited the existence of ancient republics and asserted that India is the 'mother of democracy'. Some scholars view this claim as an attempt to refute the criticism of the Indian government for democratic backsliding. Such a nativist orientation is not exclusive to the Modi administration alone. In 1978, during an address at the Sri Lankan parliament, Prime Minister Morarji

Desai argued that Indian democracy existed before the Greek city-states. The Vajpayee and the Singh administrations indicated that the British rulers had created modern parliamentary institutions in India. Yet, these institutions achieved organic growth in India due to home-grown roots.

The discussion suggests that Indian administrations have prioritized democracy in foreign policy through varied approaches. While aligning with Western liberal democracy, they emphasized sui-generis Indian or Bharatiya traits shaped by local social, economic, cultural, and historical factors, reflecting a distinct democratic journey. Rejecting the export of ideology, they advocated applying democratic values to global governance, with Dharma as a crucial element of the Indian government's democratic conception.

In the past decade, India has taken on global responsibilities, showcasing its capabilities. The administrations have argued that India's quest for its roots and authentic identity could enrich democracy, potentially leading to a distinct, non-liberal or Bharatiya democracy. In this context, the debate around the health of Indian democracy calls for a need to understand and internalize the Bharatiya conception of democracy.

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