

Indian Democracy and Contemporary Challenges: An Assessment through the Lens of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

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ABSTRACT:

This analytical research paper assesses the contemporary challenges facing Indian democracy, utilising the critical framework established by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution. The study specifically evaluates the impact of recent political issues, including executive overreach, institutional erosion, and rising socio-economic polarisation, against Ambedkar's three core warnings: the necessity of achieving social democracy, the danger of hero-worship in politics, and the abandonment of the 'Grammar of Anarchy.' Findings suggest that India's established democracy is under considerable strain. The accumulation of political power has systematically compromised constitutional institutions, leading to legislative complacency and strategic judicial retreat. Simultaneously, the failure to address entrenched socio-economic inequalities and the rise of institutionalised majoritarianism have undermined the requisite foundation of social democracy and fraternity.

KEYWORDS:

Democracy, Contemporary politics, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Democratic Survival.

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Introduction

The Indian Republic, often celebrated as the world's largest democracy, faces a period of profound institutional and ideological stress. This paper undertakes an analytical assessment of the contemporary political issues challenging the integrity and function of Indian democracy, focusing specifically on the enduring relevance of the warnings articulated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. His vision provided a crucial, conditional roadmap for India's success, arguing that political equality must be underpinned by genuine social transformation. The foundational premise of this research is that the current democratic backsliding is a direct manifestation of the nation's failure to heed Ambedkar's three core warnings, particularly the failure to establish Social Democracy as the "top-dressing" for political institutions. This analysis will proceed by: first, establishing

the critical framework derived from Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy; second, detailing the contemporary erosion of institutional checks such as the Parliament, the Judiciary, and the Election Commission, third, examining the shrinking space for civil liberties and dissent; and finally, evaluating the impact of socio-economic inequality, corporatism, and centralized federalism on the essential principle of fraternity.

Research Methodology

The V-Dem Institute classifies India as an "electoral autocracy," suggesting that although elections are valid and participation is high, the foundations of electoral democracy are weak. There are inadequate checks on the executive by the legislature and judiciary, leading to a decline in the rule of law and civil liberties. This situation reveals not an electoral failure but a systematic erosion of checks and balances, jeopardizing Ambedkar's vision of a "dictatorship in fact."

Review of literature

A literature review is an essential part of any research. The existing literature related to the particular discussion unequivocally shows that India's democracy has experienced a significant decline since 2014. Prominent international bodies like the V-Dem Institute have reclassified India as an "electoral autocracy," highlighting the erosion of effective checks on executive power from both the legislature and judiciary. This backsliding is directly linked to increasing economic inequalities since the 1990s, which have destabilised traditional political structures.

The Theoretical Anchor: Dr B.R. Ambedkar's Vision for Indian Democracy

Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, articulated a profound and conditional vision for the success of Indian democracy. His analysis moved beyond mere procedural mechanisms, positing that a political structure cannot survive long unless supported by a fundamental change in the social structure. For Ambedkar, democracy was not merely a form of government established by adult suffrage but fundamentally "another name for equality".

Democracy Beyond the Ballot: The Primacy of Social Democracy

B. R. Ambedkar argued that political democracy was necessary but critically insufficient for India, cautioning it would be a mere "top-dress-

ing” on an “essentially undemocratic” soil. His goal was the establishment of Social Democracy, which he saw as the indispensable foundation for political legitimacy, resting upon the inseparable “union of trinity”: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. He stressed that these ideals must be interdependent, as liberty without equality leads to the supremacy of the privileged, and equality without liberty kills individual initiative, both requiring Fraternity (common brotherhood) to prevent constant coercive enforcement. The greatest obstacle to this vision was the Caste System and its principle of ‘Graded Inequality,’ which acted as a “standing denial” to democracy, leading him to warn that any democratic structure built upon such schisms would inevitably falter unless genuine equality for marginalised communities was established.

The Three Warnings for Democratic Survival

In his final address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, B. R. Ambedkar issued three crucial warnings regarding the future of Indian democracy. First, he cautioned against continuing to use the “Grammar of Anarchy”, referring to unconstitutional methods like civil disobedience and Satyagraha, that constitutional avenues for change were available, and that their persistence would undermine the state’s integrity. Second, he denounced “Hero Worship or Bhakti in Politics,” fearing that the traditional tendency to venerate individuals would translate into the political sphere, causing citizens to surrender their liberties to a “great man” and thereby paving the “sure road to dictatorship.” Finally, he reiterated the need to convert political democracy into Social Democracy by bridging the deep social and economic disparities, particularly those created by caste and class, warning that a failure to establish genuine equality would ultimately destabilise the constitutional edifice.

Contemporary Political Challenges: Erosion of Institutional Checks

The present state of Indian democracy is marked by core institutional stress, characterised primarily by the accumulation of power in the executive branch and a corresponding decline in the efficacy and independence of constitutional checks, a phenomenon often categorised globally as a decline in the liberal dimension of democracy.

The Executive Ascent and Legislative Constraints

Evidence indicates a structural weakening and complacency in the legislative branch, largely due to the executive’s increasing reliance on

ordinance-making power (Articles 123 and 213). Originally for emergencies, this power is now frequently used to enact “broad, sweeping laws,” bypassing necessary legislative scrutiny and setting a precedent that constitutional checks are “dispensable.” Furthermore, Parliament’s institutional restraint has diminished, evidenced by its failure to act upon accountability reports, such as those from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) regarding schemes like MPLADS. While Departmentally Related Standing Committees (DRSCs) perform some scrutiny, the overall trend reflects a global decline in effective parliamentary oversight, suggesting the legislature is complicit in undermining its own accountability mechanisms at the expense of executive overreach.

Compromised Institutional Autonomy

The erosion of democratic health is most acutely visible in the perceived compromise of institutions designed to be politically neutral and independent.

The Election Commission of India

The independence of the Election Commission of India is being questioned following the passage of the Election Commission Act, 2023, which altered the selection mechanism for the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners. The new selection committee grants the executive a dominant majority (Prime Minister, a Union Cabinet Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition), potentially undermining the ECI’s functional independence. Additionally, changing the ECs’ salary equivalence from that of a Supreme Court Judge to the Cabinet Secretary could increase executive influence over their service conditions. This institutional vulnerability of the ECI, combined with executive overreach enabled by legislative weakness, demonstrates a systemic erosion of constitutional constraints, where constraint mechanisms are increasingly subordinated to the political will of the ruling executive.

Legislative Instruments and the Expansion of State Power

The 2024 implementation of the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bhartiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bhartiya Sashay Adhamiya replacing the IPC, CrPC, and Evidence Act, was framed as a decolonisation move toward justice (Nyaya), though critical analysis shows they retain about 80% of the old text. These new laws significantly enhance police powers and curb civil liberties, focusing on increased state punitive

power (Dand) by introducing 16 new offences and increasing penalties for 116. A key concern is the creation of vague, broadly worded offences under the BNS, such as criminalising the publication of “false and misleading information jeopardising the sovereignty, unity and integrity or security of India.” This deliberate lack of clear definition empowers law enforcement to arbitrarily target and prosecute critics and dissenters, fostering widespread self-censorship due to fear of state action, a trend already seen with the use of draconian laws like sedition and criminal defamation against peaceful expression.

Erosion of Academic and Civil Society Space

Critical inquiry, crucial for democracy, is under significant strain, confirming a “precipitous decline” in academic freedom since 2014. Governmental control intensified through the politicisation of appointments, constraints on research, and threats to campus integrity via vigilante intimidation. Specifically, the Academic Freedom Index score for India fell significantly from 0.69 in 2012 to 0.46 in 2020. Concurrently, the space for civil society and media has shrunk, marked by attacks on independent journalists, censorship, the weaponisation of law against opposition, and the media’s credibility being undermined by sensationalized narratives. The state’s use of sweeping new criminal laws to curb dissent fundamentally closes the constitutional avenues for change, thus effectively neutralizing peaceful opposition and inadvertently justifying the very “unconstitutional methods” that Ambedkar implored the nation to abandon.

The Political Economy of Inequality and Corporatism

Despite having one of the world’s highest absolute numbers of people living in poverty, socioeconomic inequality remains pronounced in India, as institutionalised obstacles prevent effective economic redistribution. This failure is closely tied to the growing corporate–government nexus fuelled by opaque political financing. Following the unconstitutionality of electoral bonds, alternative mechanisms like Electoral Trusts have seen a dramatic surge in donations (₹1,179 crore in FY 2023–24 alone), with the majority (₹856.45 crore) going to the ruling party, primarily from the top 10 corporate donors. In return, the centralized government prioritises corporate interests over welfare and redistribution, thereby exacerbating economic inequality and confirming the systemic obstacles originally identified by Ambedkar.

Strains on Centralised Federalism

India operates under a “Centralised Federalism” structure, where the Union government is constitutionally given an inherent bias and the upper hand. This centralisation has been exacerbated by ongoing fiscal disputes, creating significant strains on cooperative federalism.

Fiscal Disparities and Autonomy

The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax curtailed states’ control over revenue generation. Critics point to the weighted voting system in the GST Council, which grants the central government one-third of the total votes, as being antithetical to the spirit of federalism. Furthermore, the central government’s increasing reliance on cesses and surcharges which fall outside the divisible tax pool, has shrunk the revenue shared with states, reducing their revenue shares and deepening the trust deficit.

States, particularly those ruled by opposition parties, have expressed alarm over borrowing restrictions and the rigid conditions attached to Centrally Sponsored Schemes. Kerala, for example, faced a significant deprivation in transfers and loan approvals in 2023–24.

Centralisation and Fraternity

The current political and fiscal centralisation acts as a comprehensive attack on Ambedkar’s principle of Fraternity. The centralisation of policy framing often leads to a “Uniform Approach” that ignores India’s profound heterogeneity. Politically, this allows a majoritarian government to enforce ideological agendas while fiscally restricting opposition-ruled states from addressing local needs. This combination exacerbates regionalism and alienation, actively dissolving the political goodwill necessary for the successful, associated living that Ambedkar described.

International Assessment of Democratic Decline

International democracy assessment bodies have captured this decline, confirming that India’s status has shifted from a fully liberal democracy to one facing significant constraints on its freedoms and institutional checks.

Comparative Assessment of India’s Democratic Status (International Indices)

| Index | Status | Score | Primary Rationale for Down-grade |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---|
| Freedom in the World (Freedom House) | Partly Free | 63/100 (2025) | Discriminatory policies against minorities, harassment of critics, and weak enforcement of the rule of law. |
| V-Dem Democracy Indices | Electoral Autocracy | Mid-to-Low Range (LDI) | Decline in the liberal dimension: reduced constraints on the executive by the judiciary/legislature, attacks on academic freedom, and increased disinformation. |
| Economist Intelligence Unit | Flawed Democracy | N/A | Erosion of core democratic institutions and civil liberties. |

The V-Dem Institute classifies India as an “electoral autocracy,” meaning that despite high voter participation, the democratic institutions lack a liberal foundation. This classification stems from the systematic erosion of checks and balances, including insufficient constraints on the executive by the legislature and judiciary, and a weak rule of law protecting civil liberties. This decline highlights a risk of realizing Ambedkar’s warning of a “democracy in form, dictatorship in fact.”

Recommendations for Democratic Restoration

To combat democratic backsliding, a dedicated reform agenda is essential, centred on institutional reinforcement and Social Democracy. Restore constitutional checks and balances to limit executive power. Revise the selection process for the Chief Election Commissioner to include the Chief Justice of India, insulating it from political interference. Mandate thorough scrutiny of major legislation through Parliamentary Committees and ensure that strong findings from auditors like the CAG are debated and addressed. Dismantle corporatism by ensuring transparency in political funding to protect marginalised communities. Limit the use of the ordinance power to true emergencies. Reduce reliance on centralisation, promote fair revenue sharing, and empower local governments to ensure states’ fiscal autonomy.

Conclusion

Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s analytical framework offers a critical lens to assess contemporary Indian democracy, revealing alarming challenges

such as the executive's concentration of power, compromised institutional autonomy, suppression of dissent, and dismantling of socio-economic fraternity. These issues stem from neglecting his three warnings. The failure of the Denunciation of Hero Worship has allowed personality-driven politics to undermine institutions like the Judiciary and Election Commission. The Grammar of Anarchy remains prevalent as broadly defined criminal laws target dissenters, while the absence of Social Democracy leads to pervasive inequality and majoritarianism. India's status as an "electoral autocracy" underscores that while elections are efficient, constitutional safeguards and civil liberties are weakened. To reverse this trend, we must strengthen institutional independence, ensure transparency in political finance, and pursue reforms to achieve Ambedkar's vision of equality, essential for sustaining political democracy in India.

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