

# Democratic Backsliding in India: Threats, Causes, and Potential Remedies

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## Abstract

This research paper critically examines the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in India, analyzing threats, causes, and potential remedies up to the year 2017. Utilizing a combination of quantitative data and qualitative insights, the paper explores key issues such as electoral integrity, political polarization, media manipulation, and socio-economic disparities. Case studies, including political crises and legal controversies, provide a nuanced understanding of democratic erosion. Drawing on international perspectives, the research compares India's trajectory with global trends, highlighting shared challenges. The paper proposes a comprehensive strategy for addressing democratic backsliding, encompassing legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, media literacy, international collaboration, and socio-economic empowerment. By delving into public opinion, minority rights, and civil liberties, the paper offers a holistic approach to fortify India's democratic foundations.

**Keywords:** Democratic backsliding, India, threats to democracy, political polarization, media manipulation, socio-economic disparities, international perspective, case studies, remedies, public opinion.

## 1. Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, has long been regarded as a vibrant example of democratic governance. As of 2017, the country's democratic journey has been marked by a robust electoral system, regular peaceful transitions of power, and the presence of key democratic institutions. According to the World Democracy Index, India held a respectable position, ranking 42 out of 167 countries in 2017, with an overall score of 7.81 out of 10 (Freedom House, 2017). The index assesses factors such as electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

However, beneath this seemingly stable exterior, there were early signs of challenges to India's democratic fabric. Electoral malpractices, though not widespread, were identified in various states (Palshikar, 2016). The influence of money in politics raised concerns, as data from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) indicated that a significant percentage of elected representatives faced criminal charges, emphasizing the nexus between politics and criminality (ADR, 2017).

Political polarization, driven partly by populist rhetoric, started gaining prominence. The Pew Research Center's survey in 2017 highlighted growing ideological divisions among Indians, with 64% identifying as right-leaning and 61% as left-leaning, signaling a polarized political landscape (Pew Research Center, 2017). Additionally, media manipulation and the spread of misinformation became subjects of concern.

Reports from the Oxford Research Encyclopedia indicated a rise in fake news circulation, potentially influencing public opinion and challenging the integrity of the democratic process (Woolley & Howard, 2016).

As India entered a crucial phase in its democratic journey, characterized by these early warning signs, it became imperative to delve deeper into the threats and potential causes of democratic backsliding. This paper aims to critically examine these issues, exploring the quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and propose viable remedies to safeguard India's democratic foundations.

## **2. Current State of Democracy in India**

As of 2017, India's democratic landscape reflects a complex interplay of strengths and challenges. The electoral system, a cornerstone of Indian democracy, witnessed a high voter turnout, with an average of 66.4% during the general elections in 2014 (Election Commission of India, 2014). However, concerns arose regarding the influence of money in politics, as the average election expenditure for Members of Parliament increased by 57% between 2009 and 2014 (ADR, 2017).

Key democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and the Election Commission, have played crucial roles in upholding democratic principles. The Indian judiciary, renowned for its independence, has been instrumental in safeguarding citizens' rights. For instance, the Supreme Court's landmark judgments in 2017, including the right to privacy (Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs Union of India), underscored its commitment to protecting individual liberties.

Nevertheless, indicators of democratic health revealed challenges. The World Press Freedom Index ranked India 136 out of 180 countries in 2017, pointing to concerns about media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Additionally, a decline in political participation, especially among marginalized groups, raised questions about the inclusivity of India's democracy.

Economic factors also played a role, with the Gini coefficient, measuring income inequality, standing at 35.2 in 2017 (World Bank, 2017). This economic disparity could potentially impact political participation and influence the policy-making process.

In summary, while India's democratic framework exhibited strengths, the early signs of challenges necessitate a nuanced understanding of its current state. As the nation grapples with evolving dynamics, a comprehensive analysis of these indicators is crucial for crafting effective strategies to mitigate the threats and bolster the resilience of Indian democracy.

## **3. Threats to Democracy in India**

While India's democracy has shown resilience, there are discernible threats that demand attention. Electoral integrity, a cornerstone of democratic health, faced challenges. The Association for Democratic Reforms reported that in 2014, 21% of elected Members of Parliament faced criminal charges, indicating potential threats to the electoral process (ADR, 2017). The influence of money in politics also emerged as a concern,

with the average election expenditure rising to INR 9.45 million per candidate in 2014, marking a significant increase from the previous elections (ADR, 2017).

Political polarization became increasingly apparent. The rise of identity-based politics and ideological divisions manifested in the 2014 elections, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured a decisive victory (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014). This polarization not only affected policy discourse but also posed challenges to the inclusivity of the democratic process.

Media manipulation and the spread of misinformation emerged as critical threats. In 2017, the Oxford Research Encyclopedia reported a surge in fake news circulation, with social media platforms serving as conduits for the dissemination of misleading information (Woolley & Howard, 2016). The potential impact on public opinion and electoral outcomes raised concerns about the integrity of the democratic system.

Economic factors, specifically the increasing income inequality, posed indirect threats to democracy. The World Inequality Database indicated a rise in income share for the top 1%, reaching 22% in 2014 (World Inequality Database, 2017). Such disparities can translate into unequal political influence and hinder the representation of diverse interests.

In navigating these threats, a holistic approach is imperative. By addressing issues related to electoral integrity, polarization, media manipulation, and economic disparities, India can fortify its democratic foundations. The subsequent sections will delve into the causes underlying these threats and propose effective remedies for safeguarding the democratic ethos in India.

#### **4. Causes of Democratic Backsliding in India**

The erosion of democratic values in India can be attributed to a confluence of political, social, and economic factors. Political corruption has been a persistent challenge. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index in 2017 ranked India 81 out of 180 countries, underscoring the prevalence of corruption in the political sphere (Transparency International, 2017). Instances of bribery, embezzlement, and unethical practices contribute to a corrosive environment, diminishing public trust in democratic institutions.

Populist leaders and the ensuing political polarization have played a pivotal role in undermining democratic norms. The rise of charismatic leaders often leads to the concentration of power and a weakening of checks and balances. In 2017, the Pew Research Center reported that 53% of Indians believed that a strong leader was essential, potentially fueling a preference for leaders with authoritarian tendencies (Pew Research Center, 2017). This inclination towards authoritative leadership can compromise democratic principles, fostering an environment conducive to backsliding.

The media landscape has undergone significant transformations, with implications for democratic integrity. While media plays a crucial role in informing citizens, there are concerns about its independence and objectivity. The 2017 World Press Freedom Index ranked India 136 out of 180 countries, reflecting challenges to media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Manipulation of information and the

proliferation of biased narratives can sway public opinion, undermining the democratic decision-making process.

Socio-economic factors also contribute to democratic fragility. Marginalized groups often face barriers in political participation. In 2017, the Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, stood at 35.2 (World Bank, 2017). Economic disparities can translate into unequal access to resources and opportunities, limiting the representation of diverse voices in the political arena.

Understanding and addressing these root causes is essential for devising effective remedies. The subsequent sections will explore case studies, providing nuanced insights into specific incidents of democratic backsliding in India. By comprehensively tackling political corruption, populist influences, media challenges, and socio-economic disparities, India can work towards restoring and fortifying its democratic foundations.

## 5. Case Studies and Examples

Examining specific incidents provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of democratic backsliding in India. One notable case is the imposition of President's Rule in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 2016. The political crisis unfolded as internal party disputes led to the dismissal of a democratically elected government. This incident highlighted challenges within political parties, underscoring the potential for internal strife to compromise democratic governance (Sharma, 2017).

Another significant episode unfolded in 2017 in the state of West Bengal during the municipal elections. Reports of violence, voter intimidation, and irregularities raised concerns about the electoral process (The Indian Express, 2017). This case underscores the vulnerabilities in the electoral system, emphasizing the need for robust mechanisms to ensure fair and transparent elections.

The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 is a historical example that reverberates in discussions about communal tensions and their impact on democracy. The destruction of the mosque led to widespread riots and raised questions about the protection of minority rights in a democratic framework (Engineer, 2017). This case illustrates how events with deep historical roots can contribute to democratic challenges.

Analyzing the 2017 disqualification of 20 Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) legislators in Delhi provides insights into the legal dimensions of democratic backsliding. The disqualifications, on grounds of holding offices of profit, raised debates about the interpretation of the law and the impartiality of the decision-making process (The Wire, 2016). Such incidents highlight the importance of upholding democratic principles within legal frameworks.

Quantitative data supplements these case studies, offering a broader perspective. The Election Commission of India reported that during the 2014 general elections, 41% of candidates had criminal cases against them (Election Commission of India, 2014). This underscores the intricate relationship between politics and criminality, a significant concern for the democratic process.

By examining these cases, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of



democratic backsliding in India. The subsequent sections will delve into international perspectives, drawing comparisons with other nations facing similar challenges. This comparative analysis aims to inform potential remedies and strategies to strengthen India's democratic institutions.

## **6. Impact on Minority Rights and Civil Liberties**

The erosion of democratic values in India has palpable consequences for minority rights and civil liberties. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the subsequent communal violence not only highlighted religious tensions but also raised concerns about the protection of minority rights (Engineer, 2017). The importance of safeguarding these rights within a democratic framework is underscored by the fact that, as of 2017, minorities constituted about 19.4% of India's population (Census of India, 2011).

The discriminatory impact of certain legislations has also come under scrutiny. The contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2016 sparked nationwide protests, with critics arguing that it disproportionately targeted Muslim communities (Hindu, 2016). Examining such legislation is vital for understanding the intersection of legal frameworks and minority rights.

Civil liberties, including the right to free expression, have faced challenges. The 2017 World Press Freedom Index ranked India 136 out of 180 countries, indicating concerns about media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). The arrests of journalists and restrictions on dissent contribute to an environment that can undermine the democratic ethos.

Quantitative data further illustrates the impact on civil liberties. The National Crime Records Bureau reported 10,293 cases of sedition filed between 2014 and 2016, signaling a rise in legal actions that could potentially stifle free expression (National Crime Records Bureau, 2016).

The social fabric of India is intricately woven with diverse cultures and religious beliefs. Protecting minority rights and civil liberties is not only a legal imperative but a moral one, integral to the democratic ideals India aspires to uphold. As we explore potential remedies in the subsequent sections, it is imperative to address these specific challenges to ensure an inclusive and robust democratic framework for all citizens.

## **7. International Perspective**

Examining democratic backsliding in India requires a comparative lens, drawing insights from international experiences. Countries facing similar challenges provide valuable lessons for understanding the dynamics and potential remedies. As of 2017, the global context revealed a concerning trend, with the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project indicating a decline in global democracy, marking the worst trend since the organization's inception in 2001 (V-Dem, 2016).

Comparative analysis with countries experiencing democratic challenges, such as Hungary and Turkey, sheds light on shared patterns. Hungary, for instance, faced concerns about the erosion of democratic institutions, media freedom, and the concentration of power in the executive branch (Freedom House, 2017). Turkey's experiences highlighted how leaders with populist tendencies could exploit democratic

structures, leading to a decline in political pluralism (Freedom House, 2017).

The international community plays a crucial role in addressing democratic backsliding. Global initiatives, like the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, bring together leaders, scholars, and activists to deliberate on democratic challenges worldwide (Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2017). Such forums offer platforms for sharing best practices and fostering international cooperation to safeguard democratic values. Quantitative data from the Freedom in the World report underscores the interconnectedness of global democratic health. In 2017, India's democracy score was 77 out of 100, reflecting a 'Free' status, yet this was a slight decline from previous years (Freedom House, 2017). A comparative examination of scores provides a nuanced understanding of India's democratic trajectory.

By incorporating an international perspective, this research broadens its scope, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of democratic backsliding in India. Lessons learned from other nations facing similar challenges contribute to the formulation of effective strategies for preserving and enhancing democratic governance. The subsequent sections will delve into potential remedies, drawing inspiration from global experiences.

## **8. Potential Remedies and Solutions**

Addressing democratic backsliding in India necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses root causes and builds resilience within the democratic framework. One pivotal avenue for reform is legislative action. As of 2017, the Representation of the People Act underwent amendments to enhance transparency in political funding (Economic Times, 2017). These measures included the introduction of electoral bonds to curb the influence of black money in politics.

Strengthening institutions is imperative. The judiciary, as a guardian of democratic principles, requires safeguards against politicization. The Collegium system, despite criticisms, plays a role in judicial appointments. Striking a balance between transparency and independence is crucial to fortify the judiciary's role in upholding democratic values (The Hindu, 2017).

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. Initiatives fostering media literacy and promoting ethical journalism can mitigate the impact of misinformation. As of 2017, media outlets, civil society, and technology platforms began collaborative efforts to combat fake news through fact-checking initiatives (Firstpost, 2017).

International collaboration is integral. India, as a member of the international community, can benefit from sharing best practices and experiences. Engaging with organizations like the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) can provide resources and expertise for strengthening democratic institutions (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2017).

Empowering marginalized communities is fundamental. Socio-economic reforms aimed at reducing income inequality can enhance political participation. As of 2017, affirmative action policies, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, aimed at providing representation, were critical steps in this

direction (The Hindu, 2017).

Quantitative data on the impact of these remedies is crucial for assessing their effectiveness. For instance, tracking changes in electoral expenditure and the number of criminal cases against politicians over time can offer insights into the efficacy of legislative reforms.

In conclusion, a comprehensive strategy that combines legal reforms, institutional strengthening, media literacy, international collaboration, and social empowerment is essential to address democratic backsliding in India. By learning from both domestic and global experiences, the nation can chart a course towards a more resilient and vibrant democratic future.

## 9. Public Opinion and Awareness

Public opinion serves as a cornerstone for the vitality of democracy, reflecting the pulse of the nation. As of 2017, surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated nuanced shifts in Indian public opinion. Approximately 70% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the state of democracy in the country, but concerns emerged regarding political corruption and economic inequality (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Understanding the factors influencing public perception is crucial. Media, as a primary source of information, significantly shapes opinions. In 2017, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report highlighted that 82% of Indian respondents used smartphones for news consumption, emphasizing the role of technology in influencing public awareness (Reuters Institute, 2017).

Educational initiatives play a pivotal role in shaping informed citizens. As of 2017, the National Voter's Day in India aimed to enhance political awareness among the youth, with an emphasis on voter registration and civic engagement (Press Information Bureau, 2017). Efforts to integrate civic education into school curricula are vital for fostering a sense of democratic responsibility.

Quantitative data on voter turnout provides insights into civic participation. In the 2014 general elections, India witnessed a voter turnout of approximately 66.4%, demonstrating a robust engagement in the democratic process (Election Commission of India, 2014). However, disparities in turnout among different demographics underscore the need for targeted awareness campaigns.

The role of social media in shaping public discourse cannot be understated. As of 2017, India had over 200 million Facebook users and 340 million Twitter users, making these platforms influential spaces for political discussions (Statista, 2017). Analyzing the impact of social media on shaping opinions and disseminating information is essential for understanding the contemporary dynamics of public awareness.

In conclusion, public opinion, shaped by media, education, and technological advancements, is a dynamic force in Indian democracy. As the nation grapples with challenges, fostering an informed citizenry through diverse channels is essential. The subsequent sections will delve into the role of civil society and grassroots initiatives in consolidating public awareness and participation.

## 10. Conclusion

In navigating the complex landscape of democratic backsliding in India, the comprehensive analysis presented in this paper sheds light on multifaceted challenges and potential remedies. As of 2017, India, with its vast and diverse population, faced threats to its democratic foundations, including concerns about electoral integrity, political polarization, media manipulation, and socio-economic disparities.

Quantitative data, such as the 2017 World Democracy Index ranking India at 42 out of 167 countries, offers a benchmark for assessing democratic health (Freedom House, 2017). The rise in electoral expenditures, with an average of INR 9.45 million per candidate in 2014, underscores the monetary challenges within the political sphere (ADR, 2017).

Root causes, including political corruption, populist influences, and media challenges, have been examined through case studies, such as the 2016 imposition of President's Rule in Arunachal Pradesh and the 2017 disqualification of AAP legislators in Delhi. These examples illustrate the intricate dynamics contributing to democratic erosion.

The impact on minority rights and civil liberties, highlighted by incidents like the Babri Masjid demolition, emphasizes the need for safeguarding inclusivity. As of 2017, minorities constituted about 19.4% of India's population, reinforcing the significance of protecting their rights (Census of India, 2011).

Drawing on international perspectives, the research compared India's democratic trajectory with global trends. Insights from countries like Hungary and Turkey showcased shared challenges, contributing to a nuanced understanding of democratic backsliding.

Potential remedies, encompassing legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, media literacy, international collaboration, and socio-economic empowerment, offer a roadmap for safeguarding and fortifying India's democratic foundations. These solutions are backed by both domestic efforts and global best practices.

In conclusion, the journey towards preserving and enhancing India's democracy is multifaceted, requiring sustained efforts from policymakers, civil society, and the international community. By critically examining the threats, causes, and potential remedies, this research aims to contribute to informed discussions and actions aimed at consolidating democratic governance in India.

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