Indian democracy needs a reinvigorated civil society

We must involve our youth in volunteering and socially conscious work and value those youngsters with genuine civic engagement backgrounds.

By [Prateek Raj](#)

Published Jun 08, 2024 | 11:00 AM ─ UpdatedJun 08, 2024 | 11:00 AM

India is a truly unique democracy. It is the only decolonized country with a sustained democracy since its independence among the 39 nations that became free between 1945 (the end of the Second World War) and 1960 (the end of the decolonization wave). Most countries that gained independence after the Second World War quickly collapsed into autocratic or military regimes (like Pakistan and North Korea), while a few, like Sri Lanka, began as democracies but faced significant periods of widespread conflict and backsliding. Some nations like Cyprus, Indonesia, Senegal, and South Korea eventually became democratic, while the democratic credentials of Israel, amidst its recurrent conflict with Palestine, remain severely contested.

India gave universal franchise to all its adult citizens from the very beginning, and elections remained largely free and fair in most parts throughout its history. In the 1940s and 50s, giving voting rights to hundreds of millions of people was a revolutionary and unprecedented move. To gauge how radical the idea of a universal adult franchise was, it is worth remembering that the world's "oldest" democracy, the United States, extended the right to vote to people of colour only in the 1960s. Even more notably, the non-violent mass mobilization by a Gandhian, Martin Luther King, led to this universal right to vote in the United States. The Republic of India, with all its religious, lingual, and ethnic diversity, was truly a global pioneer in building the world's first true multicultural democracy. We, as Indians, must be truly proud of our democratic heritage.

India is a constitutional democracy, which pioneered the concept of an irrevocable "basic structure" of the Constitution. This implies that Indian citizens are enshrined with irrevocable fundamental rights of liberty and equal treatment, which the whims and fancies of a populist majority or ideological elites cannot take away. There exists a strong separation of power between the executive, legislature and judiciary, with each arm of the government having checks and balances over the actions of the other.

Civil society

But at the heart of Indian democracy is a strong civil society. Nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience engrain our country's DNA, and such acts of resistance from time to time —

often from marginalized people — have saved us from the grips of governmental overreach. In this, the legacy of India's leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and BR Ambedkar looms large, who laid the foundations of non-violent mass mobilization and resistance. These mass mobilizations not only fought peacefully but fiercely against political oppression (Gandhi), but also social oppression (Ambedkar), giving India a pioneering place in history, as the cradle of true grassroots multicultural democracy.

None can take democracy for granted, and the desire to have more unchecked executive power, like by Indira Gandhi's government during the 1970s, tempts many governments, often justified as a way to bring "stability" and curb "unrest". Such governments view criticism and protests as "too much democracy", and if the public gives legitimacy to such usurpations, democracy can collapse, as it regularly collapses in our neighbouring country, Pakistan.

However, throughout its history, Indians have shown a ferocious appetite for democracy and freedom. The nonviolent movements across the country, led by students, played a critical role in restoring and strengthening our democracy during the emergency (1975-1978) when the country's democratic institutions were systematically weakened. The fact that these civil disobedience movements were participated in by the masses and remained non-violent was a major reason why they gained public legitimacy, and the attempts of the government to portray these movements as "anarchy" failed. India emerged stronger after the emergency as a democracy.

Many do not consider India a full democracy. Outsized government powers to censor the media (e.g., BBC documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots), shut down the internet (e.g., India shuts down the internet more than any other country), and prohibit non-violent protests (e.g., most recently in Ladakh) are some of the examples of systemic overreach of executive power in India. Increasing instances of hate speech and persecution of minorities in India also pose a threat to individual rights and freedoms. The lack of transparency in the electoral funding of political parties is yet another imperfection in our democracy.

Weakening democracy

However, democracy is on a decline worldwide, driven by the rise of populism, polarization, and hate speech. Social media exploitation leads to the creation of radical and hate-filled echo chambers supported by unaccountable algorithms and design architecture (e.g., Twitter and WhatsApp in India) that promote clickbait and visceral content. In a time when hate speech is weakening our democratic muscle as a society, we need to strengthen civic society and involve the youth in community building and civil society works.

Social media, if used constructively, has the power to empower marginalized groups. For example, historically marginalized groups like Dalits, tribals, and LGBTQ persons are more engaged today than ever as civic groups thanks to the internet and social media. Twitter

became a potent tool for civic engagement and help during the COVID-19 second wave, connecting people in need with volunteers and resources.

Despite these positive stories, our graduates and young professionals in India today have limited civic engagement and volunteering experience. They focus too much on topping particular exams and achieving particular grades and too little on socially conscious volunteering. The sense of citizenship can erode in such a hypercompetitive environment for the youth where jobs still remain scarce. Educational institutions and corporations must do their due to ensure that India's youth understand their responsibilities as citizens. We must involve our youth in volunteering and socially conscious work and value those youngsters with genuine civic engagement backgrounds. If our youth engages with the grassroots issues of our times, courageously using their right to self-expression, our democracy will be safe. Democracy, after all, is only as deep as the depth of community engagement of its citizens with their country.

(Prateek Raj is a faculty member at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore and an Affiliate Fellow at the Stigler Center at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. Views are personal.)