

The Troubling State of India's Democracy
by Sumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree, and Larry Diamond
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As democratic regression increasingly permeates political systems of countries across the world, most of the governments are resorting to majoritarian nationalism, populism, and the centralization of executive powers to consolidate their authority. The book '*The Troubling State of India's Democracy*' was jointly co-edited by Sumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree, and Larry Diamond, who are prominent political scientists and scholars. In this co-edited volume, they establish the notion that India is no exception to this epidemic of democratic backsliding. The book serves as a follow-up to *The State of India's Democracy* (2007); however, the latest edition offers a considerably bleaker assessment than the former edition. While the Indian democracy historically faced numerous challenges, none have proven as formidable as those it faces today.

The book argues that the quality of democratic governance in India has markedly deteriorated, particularly since the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). While traditionally an urban, upper and middle-class party, the BJP has since evolved into an umbrella party (like the Indian National Congress), with the notable exception of its limited appeal among the Muslim minority. Consequently, it has emerged as a dominant force in national politics. According to the book, India's democratic system is now experiencing increasing institutional and political strain. Although considerably free and fair elections continue to be regularly conducted at the national, state, and even municipal levels, the broader democratic foundations of the country are steadily weakening.

As it is an edited volume, the book brings together a wide range of scholars who examine India's democratic backsliding across three interconnected levels, including politics, state, and society. The key developments contributing to this backsliding, as identified by the contributors, include the transformation of India's party system from the long-standing

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dominance of the Congress party system, to the ascendance and consolidation of the regional parties' system, to the ultimate rise of the BJP's electoral dominance. While the era of regional party dominance encouraged a wide range of political parties to engage with national elections, the dominance of a single party has weakened the competitiveness and organisational capacity of opposition parties.

At the state level, the book highlights the increasing politicization of state institutions. As power has become progressively focused within the central government, the autonomy and credibility of state institutions like the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency, the Enforcement Directorate, and the Income Tax Department have steadily eroded. Likewise, the Indian judiciary and bureaucracy are experiencing growing political pressure. At the societal level, the book points to a noticeable contraction of civil liberties, with media freedoms and the functioning of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations increasingly coming under pressure. The contributors further highlight a significant rise in religious polarization within Indian society, and an increased mobilisation around Hindu nationalist narratives and the broader ascendance of majoritarian politics. As a result, communal divisions have deepened, reshaping the social foundations of India's democracy.

In comparative politics scholarship, India's democracy, has received much academic focus as a relatively successful case in the global South. Likewise, the recession of democratic principles since the rise of Hindu nationalism has also been extensively examined. However, what distinguishes this book, is its ability to consolidate a vast data of empirical evidence on the subject, making it a valuable resource for future research. While the volume positions India as an electoral democracy, it doesn't, theoretically speaking, propose any ground-breaking or entirely new lens to view democratic decline of India. Nonetheless, it makes a significant contribution toward refining the existing framework of 'democratic backsliding' and applying it to the Indian context.

The theoretical clarity of the book spares readers from becoming entangled in the often complex and overlapping concepts that characterize this subject. On the other hand, this conceptual simplicity comes at a cost, the book ultimately stops short of arriving at a single, definitive verdict on India's democratic status. While some contributors argue that India can no longer

be recognized as liberal democracy, others employ frameworks such as 'illiberal democracy' or 'ethnic democracy,' while still others continue to describe it as an electoral democracy undergoing steep erosion.

Unlike many edited volumes, this book succeeds in maintaining a consistent methodological approach and coherent set of data sources across its chapters. or empirical grounding, the book draws predominantly on global democracy indices, such as those developed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit. It may be noted that this analytical reliance on western democracy indices, though widely used in comparative politics, may nonetheless invite scepticism from India's domestic audiences who may tend to question the normative and methodological assumptions, supporting such indices. At the same time, each chapter also draws a wide range of subject-specific empirical studies and data to substantiate its arguments. Moreover, the contributors incorporate qualitative evidence from field observations and policy analyses, which adds an additional layer of rigour to the subsequent analyses. Therefore, this methodological approach of complementing statistical trends with qualitative evidence strengthens the overall analytical framework of the book. This triangulation of numerical indicators with on-ground insights constitutes a distinctive feature of the volume, particularly given that much of the existing scholarship on the subject has relied predominantly on qualitative data alone.

Lastly, while the book primarily attributes the change in India's democratic trajectory to the internal lapses of the Indian National Congress and the consequent rise of BJP, it could have engaged more deeply with the underlying structural drivers of this transformation, like ideologically driven mobilization and the ascent of Hindu nationalism. Moreover, given the policy relevance of this subject, the practical utility of this book could have been further strengthened by the inclusion of a dedicated chapter exploring policy options or reforms to mitigate democratic backsliding in India. Nevertheless, the insights offered by the book remain valuable and can serve to shape policy debates and guide international engagements with India.

With democratic erosion now a widely recognized global phenomenon, future editions of this volume, if undertaken, will likely be anticipated with the hope that they turn more directly to the question of how democratic backsliding of India might be reversed.