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Democratic Governance and Citizen Participation in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Democracy in India is no longer measured through the frequency of the elections but how good governance is and to what extent the decisions that affect the lives of ordinary citizens are influenced by them. This paper seeks to explore the link between democratic governance and citizen participation in India in the modern times from secondary data available with the Election Commission of India, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House and scholarly literature published. It explains how participation is treated constitutionally and institutionally, examines the long-term trends in the level of voter participation, positions India on some of the democracy indicators, and looks at the functioning of participative mechanisms like the Panchayati Raj institutions, the Right to Information Act, social audits etc. The paper argues that India has made strides to enhance its electoral participation, especially by women and historically marginalised communities; electoral participation between elections is uneven; issues regarding institutional autonomy, civic space and access to information colour the picture in India. It finds that this participation will lead to responsive governance only if it is backed by transparency in institutions, empowerment of local institutions and an informed population.

Keywords: Democratic governance; citizen participation; India; voter turnout; Panchayati Raj; Right to Information; accountability

Introduction

It is usually defined as government of the people, but the definition of democracy has evolved greatly over time and Held reveals that there are multiple competing notions of democracy: a protective form, a competitive form, a participatory form, and a deliberative form (Held, 5). A very simple view of democracy is that of Schumpeter, who characterizes the democratic method as an arrangement whereby people become the decision-makers as a result of a competitive struggle for their votes (Schumpeter 269). Subsequent writers broadened this concept. The central element of Dahl's definition of a democracy is the ongoing responsiveness of government to the preferences of its citizens; this is essential to free and fair elections, along with freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information and the right to form independent associations (Dahl, 3). On this broader canvas, the health of the democracy is as much to be judged by what occurs before the elections as on the day of voting.

The large majority of Indians were poor, without the ability to read or write at the time of their independence as a republic in 1950, and they were given the right to vote in every election since then. During the time there were many who doubted that such an experiment could survive. Despite this, Guha has chronicled the country's first general election without parallels in the history of the world, in 1951-52 (135). Since then India has held 18 Lok Sabha elections, witnessed the peaceful



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change of government at the Centre and in the States and has established an electorate of almost 97 crore registered voters in 2024 (Election Commission of India). This durability was a puzzle to Lijphart, who appears to find it hard to reconcile with the expectation that a high income, cultural homogeneity and a literate people are prerequisites for stable democracy (Lijphart, 258).

Democratic governance is the use of public power which is accountable, transparent, participatory and responsive to the people. This responsiveness is realized through citizen participation. Participation gives voice to people, it also means going to gram sabha meetings, getting information from government offices, joining movements and associations, joining in public discussion and keeping an eye on public services. Education and income are determinants of who is listened to and who is not and participation is never equally distributed; the resources of organisations are determinants; and time is a determinant. (Verba et al., 15) Even if the elections come regularly in a democracy that does not listen to, much less respect, all its citizens, it is still not a complete democracy.

India is a paradox in the modern world. The number of people voting has increased since the 1990s, women have attained the same or higher voting rates than men, and the system of local self-government is now enshrined in the constitution. On the positive side, electoral participation has increased since the 1990s, women's participation in elections has reached the same or higher level as that of men, and local self-government has become a constitutional right. In contrast, international indices have noted a deterioration in the quality of Indian democracy in recent years, and civil society groups highlight weak legislative oversight, unequal rights access and creeping limitations on freedom of dissent. This paper explores that paradox by asking the question of how much participation has been turned into accountable and responsive governance in India.

Review of Literature

Theories of participatory democracy suggest that participation in decisions is important in and of itself as it serves to train citizens and build their political efficacy. Participation in decision-making is not just in government; it is in the place of work and in communities that people develop their democratic capacities (Pateman, 42). The ladder of citizen participation, created by Arnstein (216), serves to differentiate between “token” and “citizen” involvement, ranging from informing to partnership, and delegated control. Fung and Wright developed the concept of empowered participatory governance, where ordinary citizens engage in deliberation and decision making around issues of public concern with support from state institutions (Fung and Wright, 5). A second type of work is a connection between participation and social capital. The study of the Italian regions by Putnam revealed that dense networks of civic engagement, trust and reciprocity were linked to the better institutional performance (Putnam, 167). It has had an impact on debates about local government in India, but, as Chandhoke warns, civil society here is not monolithic and cannot be assumed to be uniformly good, as it is divided by caste, class and gender. (Chandhoke, 9)

The Indian literature talks about the resilient but unequal democracy. In this initial period, Kothari's analysis of the dominant party system was able to account for the absorption of competing interests, following independence (Kothari, 160). Kohli and his colleagues studied the remarkable



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performance of Indian democracy and its persistent shortcomings in alleviating poverty (Kohli, 1). The increase in the numbers of lower caste and rural poor who took part in the second democratic upsurge from the 1990s onwards is described by Yadav (120). However, Varshney has pointed out that Indian democracy has managed to win crucial battles in creating various forms of inclusion but has failed to win other battles (Varshney, 3). Jayal analysed the way in which citizenship has been extended through rights and entitlements while at the same time it is uneven in practice (Jayal, 1) and Drèze and Sen discussed the fact that democratic engagement in India has not yet been fully leveraged to claim public services like health and education. Sen also reminds the readers that there is a rich tradition of public argument and reasoning in India that can aid democratic practice (Sen 12).

Empirical studies have been limited to local institutions. Chattopadhyay and Duflo discovered that the reserved women politicians in West Bengal and Rajasthan spent more on public goods of particular women interest like drinking water (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 1409). Ghatak and Ghatak analysed panchayat functioning in West Bengal, and how far village level meetings facilitated the participation (Ghatak, 45). Roy told how a struggle among rural workers in Rajasthan for the right to information grew to a national legislation (Roy, 12). The majority of the studies focus on elections or local institutions separately. This paper tries to make an attempt to link both with the help of secondary data.

Objectives

1. To explain the conceptual relationship between democratic governance and citizen participation.
2. To analyse the long-term trends in electoral participation in India.
3. To examine the constitutional and institutional mechanisms that facilitate citizen participation.
4. To assess India's performance on selected indicators of democracy.
5. To identify the major challenges to participatory governance and suggest appropriate measures for strengthening citizen participation and democratic governance.

Research Methodology

The study is of descriptive and analytical type and can be said to be secondary data-based. The voter turnout statistics have been sourced from Election Commission of India election statistics reports. The indicators of democratic quality are taken from Democracy Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit and the Freedom in the World reports by Freedom House. The information on law and institutions has been brought together from the Constitution of India and the relevant Acts of Parliament, with interpretation made with the use of books and journal articles. The information is displayed in three tables and analysed using basic value and percentage-point comparisons. There are some limitations in the study. It is not based on primary survey data, the numbers are rounded and so should be referred to the current versions of the sources, and global



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indices reflect a judgement based on various methodologies and so are a general indication of direction rather than exact measurement.

Constitutional and Institutional Framework of Participation

Participation is at the core of the democratic structure of the Constitution of India. The guarantee in Article 326 of elections on the basis of adult suffrage means that voting is equal for all citizens so long as they are not otherwise disqualified. The Sixty-first Amendment reduced the age of voting from 21 to 18 years, thus introducing many young people to the electorate. In addition to voting, the framework has been supplemented, first by constitutional amendments and second by ordinary law, which establish specific avenues for citizens to take part in the state. The main instruments are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Major Constitutional and Legislative Instruments Enabling Citizen Participation in India

Instrument	Year	Participatory Function
Universal adult franchise (Article 326)	1950	Equal voting right for all adult citizens irrespective of caste, class, gender or property
Sixty-first Constitutional Amendment	1988	Reduced voting age from 21 to 18 years
Seventy-third Amendment (Panchayati Raj)	1992	Constitutional status to rural local bodies, gram sabha, regular elections and reservation of seats for women, SCs and STs
Seventy-fourth Amendment (Municipalities)	1992	Constitutional status to urban local bodies and ward-level structures
Right to Information Act	2005	Right of citizens to seek information from public authorities
Mahatma Gandhi NREGA	2005	Employment guarantee with provision for social audit of works
Forest Rights Act	2006	Role of gram sabha in recognising individual and community forest rights
Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act	2013	Independent mechanism to inquire into corruption complaints
Introduction of NOTA option	2013	Option to reject all candidates, introduced following a Supreme Court direction
Women's Reservation Act (106th Amendment)	2023	One-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, to operate after delimitation

Source: Compiled by the author from the Constitution of India and relevant Acts of Parliament
Table 1 gives rise to the following observations. Firstly, the participatory framework has been built up gradually: the first step was political equality and access to the ballot, the second step



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was decentralisation of power to the local body from 1992, while the third step in 2005 saw the development of rights based instruments like the Right to Information Act and social audit which enable citizens to challenge the administration directly. Second, many of these instruments rely on the gram sabha or other fora, so the extent to which local participation is not poor determines the extent to which the legal promise is kept. Third, the law of reservation for women in the year 2023 brings to mind the issue of representation still being on the democratic agenda, but with a caveat: its implementation will be contingent on the timing of the delimitation.

Trends in Electoral Participation

The most ubiquitous politician participation in India is voting. Table 2 shows turnout in some Lok Sabha elections, along with the swing in percentage points from the previous Lok Sabha election as mentioned in the table.

Table 2: Voter Turnout in Selected Lok Sabha General Elections

Election Year	Voter Turnout (%)	Change over Previous Listed Election (percentage points)
1952	45.7	-
1957	47.7	2
1967	61	13.3
1977	60.5	-0.5
1984	63.6	3.1
1999	60	-3.6
2004	58.1	-1.9
2009	58.2	0.1
2014	66.4	8.2
2019	67.4	1
2024	65.8	-1.6

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Reports on General Elections

Table 2 reveals that the proportions of voters who turned out at the first two elections were less than 50 per cent, but by the late 1960s the turnout was around 60 per cent, an increase of over 13 percentage points between 1957 and 1967. From then on, turnout was more or less in a band of approximately 56–64 per cent over the next many decades. Turn out has been low, but a significant turnaround occurred in 2014, when it was about eight percentage points higher than in 2009 (66.4 per cent) and higher still in 2019 (67.4 per cent) - the highest level yet in a general election. The slight drop in participation to approximately 65.8 per cent in 2024 indicates that the level of participation has now reached a higher plateau and is not yet demonstrating a sustained downward trend. The increase in turnout has seen a change in who votes. In the early decades, women voted at lower rates than men, by well over ten percentage points in the 1960s, and by nearly 4 percentage points in 2014, though since 2006, the turnout rate gap has closed somewhat,



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and in 2019 women actually voted at higher rates than men. The democratic upsurge can be understood through Yadav's concept, as the idea shifts focus to groups which were on the periphery of electoral politics becoming active (Yadav, 120). Here too, as Sen has noted, political voice is an important feature of freedom, as voting is the most basic means by which marginalised groups make their demands known. But the number of people at a meeting is not the measure of the depth of the participation. Voting is an intermittent activity, and a high turnout doesn't necessarily mean candidates are known by the electorate, that money doesn't matter in electoral campaigns, and that the quality of the legislative debates is falling. Verba et al. make the point that participation of high quality needs resources and civic skills which are unevenly spread (Verba et al., 15). The figures of turnout, as such, are therefore taken as indicators of increasing access to the electoral process rather than being evidence that the electoral process is effective in holding the government to account.

Democratic Governance Indicators

This section takes up two commonly mentioned international indices to measure the quality of democratic governance. The Democracy Index of the economist intelligence unit rates countries according to 10 points of electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation and political culture and civil liberties. Countries are rated on a scale of 100 for political rights and civil liberties by Freedom House. Table 3 shows the results for India for recent editions (Economist Intelligence Unit; Freedom House).

Table 3: India's Position on Selected International Democracy Indicators

Year	EIU Democracy Index Score (out of 10)	EIU Global Rank	Freedom House Score (out of 100)	Freedom House Status
2019	6.9	51	75	Free
2020	6.61	53	71	Free
2021	6.91	46	67	Partly Free
2022	7.04	46	66	Partly Free
2023	7.18	41	66	Partly Free
2024	7.13	41	65	Partly Free

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index (various years); Freedom House, Freedom in the World (various years). Values are approximate and should be verified against the latest editions.

The two indices are somewhat at odds—and this is instructive. In 2020, India recorded the lowest EIU score of 6.61, followed by an improvement between 7.1 and 7.2 in 2022-2024, which put India in the category of a flawed democracy, but a better global ranking of 41. India's score in Freedom House has on the other hand decreased from 75 in 2019 to 65 in 2024 and is now categorized as Partly Free by Freedom House since the 2021 edition. The difference is due to the



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fact that the EIU focuses on electoral processes and participation, which India does quite well compared to other countries, and the Freedom House looks at civil liberties, freedom of expression, independence of institutions and the rights of minorities. The indicators collectively suggest that the right to vote and the right to vote effectively are two issues. Electoral participation possesses substance in the form of Dahl's conditions of free expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy (Dahl, 3). If the conditions are seen to be eroding, even with high participation, the quality of democratic governance may suffer. It is important to note that such indices are subject to expert opinion, may be disagreed with by governments, and cannot be considered as accurate indicators. They are useful in drawing attention to trends that require examination.

Participation beyond Elections: Local Governance, Information and Social Audit

The provision for a three-tiered local governance system for rural areas with over two and a half lakh panchayats, regular elections and at least one-third of the seats reserved for women, were introduced in the Seventy-third Amendment. In the current scenario, women constitute a significant majority, more than 40 per cent as per government data, in the elected body of panchayats. There is some positive evidence about the impact of reservation. female panchayat members are associated with provision of different types of public goods, suggesting that representation influences policy outcomes in the provision of public goods (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 1409). In Kerala, the People's Campaign demonstrated this when the local bodies have been provided with money and powers and the citizens participated in the planning process in large numbers (Fung and Wright, 5). Meanwhile, performance of local government varies by state. Many panchayats are short of resources, have insufficient number of functionaries and functions to be able to respond to local demands. Gram sabha meetings are poorly attended or dominated by local elites and reserved posts are sometimes filled by women or by people from the disadvantaged groups in name only. Political contestation and organisational strength of parties had an impact on the participation in the village meetings in West Bengal, said Ghatak and Ghatak (45). Decentralisation thus creates an enabling space for participation – without the devolution of fiscal and administrative powers, the space remains empty. The Right to Information Act, 2005, is considered as one of the most important reforms of participation since 1991. It was born in the fight of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in Rajasthan for copies of muster rolls and bills to reveal inefficient and corrupt activities in public works (Roy, 12). The Act grants any citizen the right to obtain information from public bodies, and has been exploited by many citizens to get ration cards, pensions, land records and information about expenditure from public bodies. The social audit, which becomes part of the employment guarantee scheme, enables the beneficiaries to confirm works or payments in public hearings, thereby making the people monitors of governance. There are a number of issues raised with these mechanisms. There have been consistent vacancies in information commissions and increasing backlogs of appeals and delays in disposal identified in civil society assessments. The 2019 amendment to the Right to Information Act altered the terms and conditions of service of information



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commissioners, some of which were pointed out as potentially undermining their independence. There have been threats and attacks against activists who have exposed wrongdoing under this Act. Such developments indicate the need for protection institutions for participative rights and for the erosion of formal rights in the absence of strong enforcement institutions.

Inclusion: Women and Marginalised Groups in Democratic Participation

The extent to which historically marginalized groups are able to participate as equals in a democracy is a test of its participatory nature. This was understood from the outset by the Constitution which had reserved seats for the SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, and the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments further the reservation of seats in local bodies. There are 84 seats reserved for the members of the Scheduled Castes and 47 seats reserved for the members of the Scheduled Tribes in the present Lok Sabha. In Yadav's description of the second democratic upsurge, he recounts how "formal inclusion" was accompanied by a political awakening among the lower castes, who went from being called out by others to voters to becoming claimants of power by themselves (Yadav, 120). Similarly, Kohli points out that, in India, the process of political incorporation of the poor is significant, but the social and economic transformation is not, and is limited (Kohli, 1). The situation of women is mixed. As mentioned earlier, this gap has narrowed and reservation at panchayats has taken lakhs of women to public office. Women's leadership presence has an impact on policy, as the findings of Chattopadhyay and Duflo on women leaders' priorities suggest. However, the percentage of women in Lok Sabha has not increased, and has been approximately 14 per cent in the past two general elections. The practice collectively known as proxy leadership, in which the powers of an elected woman are exercised by her husband or other relative, also demonstrates that reservation does not necessarily mean a woman has real authority at the local level. One way to understand this imbalance is by examining citizenship in India in relation to the status of citizenship or formal equality (Jayal, 1). This is true of religious minorities, people with disabilities, migrant workers and those living in remote areas, who are less able to register as voters, get to the polling stations or have their voices heard at local meetings. Verba et al. propose that inequalities in participation have a tendency to amplify inequalities in policy attention (Verba et al., 15). Specific measures to strengthen participation, including special enrolment drives, more convenient polling arrangements and facilitating postal or remote voting for migrants, in addition to general reforms, are required.

Digital Governance and E-Participation

The Government has been working towards the mission of digital governance since 2014, on platforms like Digital India and MyGov, and citizens have even been provided with online grievance redressal portals to submit their complaints to departments. These tools enlarge the participation sphere, they allow to save time and money on reaching out to administration and people in remote areas to be able to participate in consultations on the draft works of legislation and policy. At least in principle they fit the notion of empowered participation in which state institutions provide frequent forums for citizens to debate and shape decisions as described by Fung and Wright (5). The quality of e-participation, however, needs to be looked at with great



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care. Online consultation can be tokenistic (Arnstein, 216) if it is merely used to inform or consult citizens, without involving them in the decision-making process. Access is also unequal with many rural elderly female and poor citizens lacking smartphone, connectivity or digital skills. Technical glitches can deny access to welfare benefits, undermining a promise of increased access in welfare delivery where electronic authentication is involved. Concerns about privacy and data protection, which led to the enactment of a personal data protection law in 2023, are also part of the debate. Sen's focus on public reasoning indicates that technology can have a positive impact on democracy, but only if it extends the room for open debate, and not simply for more efficient administration. (Sen, 12)

Challenges to Participatory Democratic Governance

But there are several obstacles that constrain the ability of participation to enhance governance. The first is a lack of political voice. The unequal distribution of resources results in unequal participation, as Verba et al. demonstrated, and this is further exacerbated by caste, class, gender and region in India, such that those who most need access to public services have least capacity to demand them. This failure of public action has been a problem in failing to provide basic health and education, said Drèze and Sen (6). The second challenge is that of money and criminalisation in electoral politics. Increased campaign expenses and candidates with criminal charges against them limit voters' options and diminish accountability. The third challenge is a lack of deliberation in representative institutions. If legislatures are allowed to meet fewer days, and enact laws with little debate, the connection between citizens' participation and policy-making is weakened. The 4th challenge is about civic space. Yet, while civil society must not be romanticised as per Chandhoke, it is the independent associations, a free press and the right to protest that enable participation between elections. There have been concerns raised by both domestic and international observers regarding the use of preventive provisions, funding restrictions on NGOs and pressure on the media, and these are reflected in the current civil liberties score for the country (Table 3). The fifth is the digital divide and the spreading of misinformation. Digital platforms and e-governance portals have presented new opportunities for participation but not all are equal, and false information can skew public opinion. Lastly, the gap between what rights are stated on paper and what they are enjoyed in practice. For Jayal, citizenship in India is more of an entitlement that is subject to administrative discretion and social status (Jayal, 1). It is not enough to pay attention to legislation to overcome this gap: attention to implementation is required.

Suggestions

On the basis of the analysis, the following measures are suggested. It was suggested that the local governments be strengthened by transferring funds, functions and functionaries in reality, and that gram sabhas be held regularly with advance intimation and women's involvement and minutes be published. Second, the information commissions should be speedily established under transparent nomination procedures, the independence of their members should be assured and the information should be made available voluntarily by the departments without citizens needing to



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apply for it. Thirdly, institutionalisation of social audit needs to be created with independent audit units and follow-up action on the irregularities, such that irregularities can be exposed and corrected. Fourth, reforming the electoral process should include reforms to campaign finance transparency and the presence of candidates facing serious criminal charges, and legislatures should establish a minimum number of sessions and increased committee examination of legislation. Fifth, civic and political education should be reinforced in schools and colleges to educate the youth not only about their right to vote but also to question and monitor the government. Sixth, digital participation platforms must be inclusive and accessible in multiple languages, especially regional languages, and have low bandwidth access; they must also have misinformation countermeasures. Finally, safeguards should be effective in protecting whistleblowers and information seekers and participation should not be at risk of death or livelihood.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed about the connection between democratic government and Citizens participation in the present scenario of India by using the secondary data. The evidence confirms that India has made significant strides in expanding participation in elections. The turnout has improved from less than half of the voters in 1952 to about two-thirds in recent years, the gender gap in voting has been reduced, and the channels of engagement between the people and the state between elections, through panchayats, the right to information, social audit etc., have been made available. The analysis also reveals that high participation does not necessarily lead to responsive governance in and of itself. International benchmarks show that the factors that make participation meaningful—civil liberties, independent institutions and the free flow of information—have come under pressure, and the local mechanisms of participation function unevenly due to poor devolution and a lack of social inclusion and enforcement. The overarching question in the paper is thus qualified: participation has grown, but it does not lead to accountable governance. Stability and consolidation of democratic institutions that bridge the gap between citizens and decisionmakers, safeguarding civic space and giving voice to the least powerful will be critical for the deepening of Indian democracy. Primary surveys and state-level comparisons could be used to better understand participatory arrangements and their conditions of effectiveness.

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