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India as “The mother of democracy”: From Sindhu-Saraswati civilization to present day

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Abstract

Democracy is a dynamic concept and has a long tradition. Since the ancient times, there has been a narrative in the west that the idea of democracy originated in some of the ancient Greek city-states, mainly in Athens. But now India has seriously challenged the western narrative on the roots of democratic traditions and claimed that she is “the mother of democracy” and her democratic culture is much older than the Greeks. In the Indian sub-continent, democracy is an age-old concept going back to thousands of years. The democratic ethos of India state that democracy includes the core values of harmony, freedom of choices, freedom to hold multiple ideas, acceptability, equality, governance for the welfare of the people and inclusivity in a society. The Rigveda and the Atharvaveda, world’s earliest texts, mention about the existence of the representative entities like the Sabha (assembly of elders), Samiti (assembly of common folk) and Sansad (Parliament). India’s two great epics “the Ramayan” and “the Mahabharat” also state about the involvement of the people in decision-making process. In such a background, the present paper attempts to trace the historical evidences that enable India to claim herself not just “the oldest democracy” but also “the mother of democracy”.

Keywords: Democracy, mother of democracy, ancient Greece, Sindhu-Saraswati civilization

Introduction

In the recent past, nearly four years back, a big debate regarding the roots of democracy has emerged among the Western scholars and the Indian scholars. The debate has started from the high-level segment of the 76th Session of UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September, 2021 where the Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India has had a great tradition of democracy going back to thousands of years and claimed India is the “Mother of Democracy”. He also said that India is the best example of a “Vibrant Democracy” as it has dozens of languages, hundreds of dialects, different lifestyles and cuisines. These statements of PM Modi have challenged the western narrative on the origin of democracy that the Athenian democracy (direct democracy) that originated in the 6th century BCE is not older than Indian democracy. Rather the democratic traditions of India are much older than the ancient Greeks. Nearly after one year of Prime Minister Modi’s address at the UNGA, in November, 2022 a book titled “India: The Mother of Democracy” prepared and published by the Indian Council of Historical Research (An Autonomous Body Under the Ministry of Education, Government of India) was released by the Union Education and Skill Development Minister Shri Dharmendra Pradhan, showcasing the democratic ethos ingrained in Indian sub-continent since the dawn of civilization. This book is a land mark based on evidences of the roots and ideals of democracy in India. In fact, this work has challenged the western narrative.

In a virtual address to the Second Summit for Democracy co-hosted by the United States, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea and Zambia on 29th March, 2023, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed that India is indeed the “Moher of Democracy”, citing the Mahabharata, the Vedas and all historical references. On 15th August, 2023, in his address at Red Fort in New Delhi, on the occasion of 77th Independence Day of India, the PM Modi reiterated the claim that India is the “Mother of Democracy”. In his speech the PM Modi mentioned about three Ds of India: Democracy, Demography and Diversity. According to him, this trinity has the potential to fulfill every dream of India.

During the 18th G20 (Group of 20) Leaders' Summit held at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi from September 9-10, 2023, India's narrative on the roots of democracy was showcased by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India through a curated exhibition on 'Bharat: The Mother of Democracy'. The curated exhibition displayed the democratic traditions and cultures of India going back to the Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization. In this G 20 Summit, India claimed that she has an age-old democratic culture. In fact, the democratic ethos of India state that democracy includes the core values of harmony, freedom of choices, freedom to hold multiple ideas, acceptability, equality, governance for the welfare of the people and inclusivity in a society and allows its common citizens to lead a quality as well as dignified life. The Rigveda and the Atharvaveda, world's earliest sacred texts, mention about the existence of the representative entities like the Sabha (assembly of elders), Samiti (assembly of common folk) and Sansad (Parliament). India's two great epics "the Ramayan" and "the Mahabharat" also state about the involvement of the people in decision-making process. There are also textual instances in India that the power of authority to rule is earned through merit or through common consensus, not through hereditary. There has been constant discourses on the legitimacy of the voter in various democratic entities like the Parishad and the Samiti. Democracy in India is truly a festive declaration of veracity, cooperation, collaboration, peace, sympathy and collective strength of the people.

During the 9th P20 Summit (G20 Parliamentary Speakers' Summit) hosted by New Delhi in October, 2023, the Prime Minister Modi said India is not only known as the "Mother of Democracy" but is also the largest democracy in the world. He informed to the representatives of different Parliaments from around the world that assemblies and committees have found a mention in the Vedas and the scriptures (five-thousand-year-old texts). He said about a 9th Century inscription in Tamil Nadu that elaborates upon the rules and the codes of village legislatures. The Prime Minister Modi also spoke them about the Anubhav Mantapa tradition in India where people from every caste, creed, and religion were encouraged to have their free expressions and thoughts on different philosophical, religious and social issues. The Anubhav Mantapa initiated by Jagatguru Basweshwara makes India proud even today. Moreover, the PM Modi underlined that India's journey from five-thousand-year-old scriptures till now is a heritage of the parliamentary traditions not only for India but also the entire world.

In the third Summit for Democracy held from 18th to 20th March, 2024 in Seoul, the Republic of Korea, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi reiterated the deep-rooted commitment of India to democracy, speaking India has an ancient and unbroken culture of democracy. The democratic culture has been the lifeblood of the Indian civilization. He asserted that "consensus-building, open dialogue and free discussion have resonated throughout the history of India. Moreover, the PM Modi cited some examples of contributions of India to the global democracy, including the legislative measures for women's reservation, poverty alleviation efforts and international aid during the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the 75th Republic Day Parade 2024, a Tableau on theme 'Bharat: Mother of Democracy' was showcased by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, symbolizing the rich democratic heritage and tradition of the country. In fact, the theme revolved around two things like;

"Viksit Bharat" and "Loktantra Ki Matruka", underscoring the role of India as a nurturer of democracy.

Speaking in the 118th Episode of "Mann Ki Baat" in January, 2025, the Prime Minister Modi highlighted the importance of the National Voters' Day (25th January) in the following words "this day is so important for us because on this day the Election Commission was established. The makers of the constitution have accorded a very important place to the Election Commission in the constitution and equally to the participation of the people in democracy. When the first general elections were conducted in India during 1951-52, some people were doubtful about the survival of democracy in the country. However, our democratic system proved all the apprehensions wrong. After all, India is the mother of Democracy".

Also, during the recent 76th Republic Day Parade 2025, with the tableaux theme "Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas" (Golden India: Heritage and Development), the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi reiterated that India is truly the "Mother of Democracy".

Democratic ethos in India since the ancient times

India's claim as the "Mother of Democracy" would be sounder and more credible, if we consider thousands of years old democratic culture, traditions, practices and institutions in India, going back to the Sindhu Saraswati Civilization. For our understanding we can classify the democratic ethos of India into five phases as follows;

- Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization to Mahabharat (6000 BCE to 1100 BCE)
- Mahajanapada and Ganatantra to Emperor Ashoka (7th & 8th Century BCE to 3rd Century BCE)
- Fa Hsien to Uthiramerur (5th Century CE to 919 CE)
- Philosophical Foundations to Chhatrapati Shivaji (12th Century CE to 17th Century CE)
- The Constitution of India and the Elections in the Modern India (19th Century CE to 2024)

Sindhu-Saraswati civilization to Mahabharat (6000 BCE TO 1100 BCE)

- **Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization (6000 BCE to 2000 BCE):** The Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization was in the North-Western parts of Indian subcontinent (present day India, Pakistan and Afghanistan) dating back to 6000 BCE to 2000 BCE. It was the region where major rivers like Sindhu, Vitasta (Jhelum), Asikni (Chenab), Parushni (Ravi), Vipasha (Beas) and Shutudri (Sutlej) flowed. It was the most advanced civilization among all its contemporary civilizations, with highly developed agriculture, architecture, trade and urbanization in addition to advanced pottery and usage of script. There is an archaeological finding from the Sindhu-Saraswati Civilization namely a sculpture of the Dancing Girl (Discovered by the British Archaeologist Ernest McKay in 1926). The girl stands confident, self-assured, independent and liberated, looking at the world eye-to-eye. She wears jewelry on her body, which is much similar worn everyday by the women in the western parts of India.

- **Public Participation in the Vedic Era (6000 BCE to 1100 BCE):** We know in India we have four Vedas like the Rigveda, the Atharvaveda, the Samveda and the Yajurveda. These Vedas convey an entire civilizational value system encompassing the political, societal and educational principles. During the Vedic period there

was public participation through the democratic institutions like Sabha (assembly of elders), Samiti (assembly of common folk) and Sansad (Parliament). Particularly, in the Rigveda we find frequent mention of the ancient democratic institutions.

- **Democratic Governance in the Ramayana (Beyond 2000 BCE):** In fact, in India the governance for the welfare of the common people was the central feature of all thought and action since the time immemorial. The Ramayan (the great epic of India) has the provision of democratic governance. For instance, when there was the need of a new king in the ancient kingdom of Ayodhya, the Old King Dasaratha required the approval of his council of ministers and the representatives of the people. It was unanimously confirmed by all Rama as the choice of the people after the detailed consultations with all the sections of the society. Moreover, the Ramayan is a living guide not only for India but also for many parts of the world. The Ram-Rajya (the rule of the Lord Rama) has become the epitome of an ideal government. In the Ram-Rajya, people lived secure and prosperous lives knowing that their welfare was paramount to the ruler they had chosen.
- **Democratic Ideals in the Mahabharata (Beyond 1100 BCE):** The Mahabharat, another great epic of India, tells us so many democratic ideals. According to the Mahabharat, democracy means doing things right for the people. The epic has in its sweep, ethics, morality, societal norms and governance. The most important section of the epic is the advice given by patriarch Bhishma to Yudhishtira also called Dharmaraja (his grand-nephew and the eldest among five the Pandavas) on the battlefield of Kurukshetra on the canons of good governance. The essence of the dharma of a king is to secure prosperity and happiness of his subjects. The Bhagavad Gita consists of 700/745 verses in the Mahabharat. In fact, it is one of the oldest instructions on the duties and responsibilities of civilized beings.

Mahajanapada and Ganatantra to Kautilya and Arthashastra (7th & 8th century BCE to 3rd century BCE)

- **Collective Rule of the People (7th and 8th Century BCE):** There was provisions of people's participation in governance and decision-making in India. It was the hallmark of the Indian governance system. Depending on the local contexts, there were two system of governance under the Mahajanapada. There were fifteen (15) Kingships ruled by the King with the help of the council of ministers. There were ten (10) Ganatantra or Republics (state run by the people). In these Republics, the Ganapramukh (Head) was elected by the people. In India we have various ancient texts like Ashtadhyayi, Mahavagga, Digha Nikaya, Acharangasutra and Bhagvatisutra that highlight 'Loktantrik' (governance by elected representatives), institutions like Gana (assembly), Puga (group), Nigama (corporation) and Janapada (realm).
- **Pluralism and Toleration (Since 650 BCE):** Jainism (one of the oldest belief systems in the world) teaches us both pluralism and toleration. The pervence of Jainism can be traced back to as early as the 7th century BCE. The co-existence and toleration are the two key principles of democracy, which naturally flow from this

pluralistic vision of Jainism. Moreover, Jainism envisions a world of peaceful co-existence. In India, peaceful co-existence is a way of life practiced even today.

- **Compassion and Equality (Since 500 BCE):** It is Buddhism that teaches us the importance of both compassion and equality. In India, Buddha Sangha was the earliest example of democratic practices. In the 5th century BCE, Goutam Buddha had established the Buddha Sangha for those people who wished to embrace monkhood and live a religious life. The Buddha Sangha has been the custodian of the Buddhist doctrines and democratic traditions, encouraging open discussions debates and deliberations. In Buddhism we find election system practiced by the Monks for choosing their leaders, deciding important questions and formulating their laws. All the decisions were taken by the majority. The voting was by means of whispering in the ear or by the secret ballot. Above all, the principles of Buddhism continue to influence the spread of the democratic ethos in India.
- **The People's Leader (Since 500 BCE):** In the early India, we had a culture of participation of people in the governance system. When the people were threatened by an anarchic situation, an election was called to choose a leader called the Mahasammata (the Great Elect). There was the great hall of the people where the election was conducted. The King was chosen by the whole people for their protection. The King had to rule in their name and the state was called Ganarajya (people's state). In fact, it was Buddhism that influenced a good number of rulers. The democratic ethos practiced in Buddhism got transferred to the kingdoms.
- **The King serves the people (350-275 BCE):** The king has to serve the people, not to rule them is a democratic ideal of India. Democracy is all about serving the people first. In this connection, Chanakya (Kautilya), the chief adviser and the prime minister to both the emperors like Chandragupta and his son Bindusara, in his classic the Arthashastra (one of the first treaties of the world concerning governance) has rightly said that "in the happiness of the people lies the happiness of the ruler and in the welfare of the people lies the welfare of the ruler. There is nothing called beneficial to the ruler which pleases him alone, but to him, beneficial is that which pleases the common people".
- **No man is superior to another (300 BCE):** The most important tenets of democracy are equality and freedom. The Greek ambassador to the Mauryan Court Megasthenes had observed the democratic ethos in India in the 4th Century. According to him, "most of the cities had a democratic form of governance". The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus had also observed the democratic ethos in the following words, "of several remarkable customs prevalent among the Indians, there is one which may be regarded as truly admirable that no one among them shall be slave to another under any circumstances". Moreover, the slavery system had its roots in the west and was abolished formally only 150 years back in the world. In India, the system had never taken its roots. In fact, no democracy can be successful where the slavery system exists.
- **People's Welfare (265 – 238 BCE):** A state can be said a democracy where people have equal rights and

respects safeguarded by law. In this connection, Mauryan emperor Ashoka's state can be taken as an example. The Emperor Ashoka's state had people-oriented governance. In his state there was a systematic election of the ministers at every five years. The ideologies of peace, welfare and universal brotherhood of Ashoka have been preserved in the form of his edicts across the Indian Sub-continent. Moreover, India's national emblem is derived from Ashoka's capital (the Sarnath Lion Capital)

Fa Hsien to Uthiramerur (5TH Century CE TO 919 CE)

- **Culture of Service and respect to the People (5th Century CE):** In a democracy, the officers are vested with power to serve the people. The culture of service and respect to the people were core values in India. It impressed the foreign travelers who came to India centuries ago. In the 5th Century it was observed by the Chinese Monk Fa Hsien. During his travel to India Fa Hsien had noted the Rule of Law and the public welfare works. In this regard, he had written: "Everywhere, in all parts of India, the kings took off their crowns out of respect and offered food to the monks their own hands. The king did not sit on a chair in the presence of the headman".
- **People's power to elect and to replace (9th Century CE):** In India, a ruler is chosen not by birth or coercion but by the will of the people. It is the democratic principle that India has had throughout its history. In this connection, the Khalimpura Copperplate Inscriptions says us how the King Gopala was elected by the people in order to change an unfit ruler : " His son was the crest-jewel of the heads of rulers, the glorious Gopala, whom the elements of the state take the hand of Fortune, to put an end to disorder and Matsya Naya-law of the big fish swallowing the small fishes". Besides, there are so many historical references of the people choosing their king. For example, Rudradaman I, the king Kharevala and even the pillar of Samudragupta of the golden Gupta era of India, at Prayagraj in Uttarpradesh talk about the similar democratic principles.
- **Merchant Guilds and Democratic Administration (876 CE):** In a democratic state, the people have the right to elect their rulers and to hold them accountable for administration. This democratic ethos is often manifested throughout India as a multi-layered system including the merchant-guilds (Shreni Sangha), town administration (Nigam) and Shreshthi (heads of an association) governing towns and villages. In this connection, the Vaillabhattasvamin Temple Inscriptions states how Sri Gopagiri, present day Gwalior, was ruled by the Kottapala (Chief of the Fort), Sri Bhojadeva Alla and the commander of the fort, Tattaka. Moreover, the city was ruled by the merchant Vavviyaka and the trader Ichchhuvaka with the help of the members of the Board.
- **Democratic Elections and Local-governance (919 CE):** In the town of Uthiramerur, located in the deep South India, there are the inscriptions on the walls of a temple from a thousand years, established by the ruler Parantaka Chola I, stand testimony to the practice of the democratic elections and local-self-governance. Moreover, the inscriptions mention about the eligibility criteria to select candidates like (a) from age and

income requirements to qualifications.; (b) the method to carry out fair elections- from writing the name on a Kudav Ollai (Palm leaf) to putting it into an earthen pot tied with a cloth, the ballot box, to picking of the palm leaf by a young child for verification. In this way, the candidates were selected to different affairs of the village.

Philosophical foundations to Chhatrapati Shivaji (12th century CE to 17th century CE)

- **Democratic-Spiritual-Social Ethos (1100 -1500 CE):** Equality is the soul of democracy. Many Indian philosophers, saints and poets have recognized it and preached its significance over the centuries. In this connection, here are some examples: According to Swami Ramanujacharya ; "All are equal in the eyes of God" ; To Saint Basavanna, "Consider everyone equal to attain inner and outer purity" ; To Saint Ravidas,"There is no difference between me and you just like water and waves" ; To Poetess Lal Ded, "The spiritual light that shines within me is in fact everywhere" ; To Srimanta Sankardev, "Devotion is above caste, creed and knowledge of the scriptures" ; and To Guru Nanak Dev, " Those who look upon all with equality, recognize Rama in each soul, and sing the praises of Hari, obtain the most exalted and acclaimed status".
- **The power of participation (14th-16th Century CE):** Consent of the people is the foundation of any democratic state. In South India, Vijayanagar is the best example of responsive government, democratic ethos and trade linkages throughout the world. Krishna Raya the greatest king of this empire believed in the power of participatory governance. In fact, King Raya ruled his empire with great efficiency with the consent of his Amarnayakas (Governors) and their representatives. He was in favor of self-governance and for this he divided his empire into madalams (provinces), nadus (districts) and sthlas (sub-districts) The grama (village) was the basic unit of political organization. He had a larger assembly of Amarnayakas and also a smaller council of experts for advising him on the most administrative decisions. Above all, Vijayanagar was the example of a state, which worked for the benefits of the people.
- **Understanding Monarch (1556-1605 CE):** Good administration is that which embraces welfare for all, regardless of religion. The third Mughal Padishah Akbar had such a democratic administration. He introduced the doctrine of "Sulh-i-Kul" i.e.' universal peace'. In fact, it was a tool against the religious discriminations. He propounded a new syncretic religion called the "Din-i-Ilahi" or "Divine Faith" for the establishment of a harmonious society. The 'Ibadat Khana' (House of Worship) was also established by him, where wise men from different sects met and debated. There was a group of nine wise people called 'Navaratna', which served his counsellors, while implementing his pro-people schemes. Moreover, the democratic ideas of the Mughal Padishah Akbar were unusual and way ahead of its time.
- **Democratic Legacy of a Legend (1630-1680 CE):** In a democratic state, the representatives are aware of their duties and the people have the opportunity to enjoy equal rights. Such kind of governance was found in the great Maratha Empire in India established by

Chhatrapati Shivaji. There was found the governance of decentralization in his empire when on his coronation he appointed Ashta -Pradhan (Eight Ministers). Shivaji clearly stated that even the king could not overrule their counsel. His Agya Patra (Diktat on paper) outlines the duties and responsibilities of the Ashta -Pradhan (Sumantra (Minister), Pandit (Priest), Mantri (Minister), Pradhan Mantri (Prime Minister), Sachiva (Secretary), Amatya (Minister), Pradvivak (Chief Justice) and Pratinidhi (King's representatives). Moreover, Shivaji's legacy of lokatantra or governance by the people was taken forward by his successors.

the constitution of India and the elections in the modern India (19th century CE TO 2024)

- **The Constitution of India (1947 Onwards):** The Constitution of India, the longest written constitution of the world, is the supreme law of the land. It outlines a modern democratic republic, while retaining the aspects of the past democratic models from our rich heritage. It was framed by the Constituent Assembly of India, comprising 389 members (with 15 women representatives) from diverse backgrounds, with Dr. B.R Ambedkar as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee. The Constitution of India was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 26th November, 1949 and came into force on 26th January, 1950 with 395 Articles, divided into 22 Parts and 08 Schedules. Now the Constitution contains 468 Articles, grouped into 25 Parts and 12 Schedules and has been amended for 106 times, in consonance with changing needs and times. There were different sources of legislation from where the makers of the Constitution borrowed important features. The sources of previous legislation are like the Government of India Act 1858, the Indian Councils Acts of 1861, 1892 and 1909, the Government of India Acts 1919 and 1935 and the Indian Independent Act 1947. The Constitution of India establishes the three pillars of governance like the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary, defining the powers, responsibilities and relationships of each pillar. India follows a three-tier system of governance: the Union Government, the State Governments and the Local Self-Government All citizens are equal. They enjoying equal rights, protection and universal adult suffrage. Above all, over the last seven decades, the Constitution has guided the nation through numerous political, social and economic transformations, ensuring the core principles of the governance of India like justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.
- **Peaceful Transfers of Power (1952-2024):** Ever since its independence India has witnessed peaceful transfers of power through 18 national elections, over 400 state elections and over a million elections to the local self-governments. In fact, in India democracy thrives from the village governance to the national level governance. Hence, it is rightly said that the democratic ethos in India has been a part of the people for millennia.
- **A Festival of Democracy (National Elections of 2024):** There are so many festivals in India and democracy is one of them. The festival of democracy is about elections. The latest national elections (18th General Elections to the Lok Sabha) were conducted in India from 19th April to 1st June, 2024 in seven phases, in order to elect all 543 Lok Sabha MPs. There were

131 reserved MP seats for the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. The results of the world's largest election were announced without errors on 4th -5th June, 2024. Overall, 65.79 % voter turnout at the polling stations recorded in the 2024 General Elections. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Bharatiya Janata Party secured 293 seats (including BJP's 240 seats), while the opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) won 234 seats, including Indian National Congress's 99 seats. Shri Narendra Modi took the oath of office and secrecy as the Prime Minister of India for the third consecutive term on 9th June, 2024. In the 2024 General Elections, there were also Legislative Assembly elections in four states like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Millions of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) were used for conducting the simultaneous general elections. India is the most populous country in the world with over 1.4 billion people and 969 million people were eligible to vote in the 2024 General Elections, equivalent to 70 percent of the total demography, with an increase of 150 million people from the 2019 General Elections. In fact, the successful carrying out of these seven phases of the simultaneous general elections was a testament to the dedication of voters, political parties, candidates, election personnel and security forces. Their collective efforts ensured the democratic process was upheld and strengthened. Despite so many challenges, the active participation of the electorate heightened the resilience and vibrancy of the democratic system of India. Moreover, the 2024 General Elections have exemplified the strength of the democratic processes and the importance of the civic responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above discussion, starting from the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly in September, 2021 to the 76th Republic Day Parade 2025, manifests that the honorable Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi has unraveled the ancient roots of democratic heritage, traditions, values and practices of the land supported by the research and archeological findings and claimed several times that India, not the West, is the "Mother of Democracy", thus countering the western narrative on the roots of democracy. Furthermore, the study finds that Indian democracy has a remarkable continuity since the Sindhu Saraswati Civilization to the modern time.

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