



E-ISSN: 2664-603X

P-ISSN: 2664-6021

Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92

IJPSG 2026; 8(1): 62-69

www.journalofpoliticalscience.com

Received: 05-09-2025

Accepted: 07-10-2025

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India's democratic experience and the outcomes of governance: Peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2026.v8.i1a.834>

Abstract

Democracy is frequently evaluated through free & fair elections, equality before the law, constitutional design, involvement in decision making, civil liberties and space to correct mistakes. However, its deeper and more established authority depends on whether it delivers substantial and meaningful outcomes for societies. This paper explore democracy as a system that delivers peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development. With reference to India, the paper explores how democratic governance has functioned both through modern constitutional institutions and through long-standing civilizational traditions of collective decision-making and ethical public life. Drawing upon academic thoughts, governance data, and historical analysis, the study demonstrates that democracy in India has contributed significantly to social stability, political inclusion of marginalized groups, institutional adaptability in times of crisis, and long-term development outcomes. While admitting challenges and democratic stresses, the paper affirm that India's experience offers strong evidence that democracy delivers concrete public goods when institutions are sustained and civic participation remains active.

Keywords: Democracy, governance, ancient India, peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development

Introduction

Democracy is a system of government in which laws, policies, leadership, and major undertakings of a state or other polity are directly or indirectly decided by the "people". The term is derived from the Greek *dēmokratia*, which was coined from *dēmos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule") in the middle of the 5th century bce to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states, notably Athens. (Britannica, 2025) ^[6].

Democracy means freedom of speech, assembly, and religion; equality before the law, and sovereignty in every respect. It is judged by what it delivers in everyday life. People expect democracy to reduce violence, manage social differences, provide voice and dignity, and support economic and social progress. When democracy succeeds in these tasks, it gains legitimacy; when it fails, public trust erodes.

United Nations also said that democracy is its core value. The UN supports democracy by promoting human rights, development, and peace and security. In the 79 years since the UN Charter was signed, the UN has done more to support democracy around the world than any other global organization. The UN promotes good governance, monitors elections, supports civil society to strengthen democratic institutions and accountability, ensures self-determination in decolonized countries, and assists in the drafting of new constitutions in post-conflict nations. (United Nations).

There is a strong bonding between relationship between democratic governance and sustainable development. As it reduces inequity, patriarchy, racism and violence, it brings accountability and inclusivity. When people believes that their governments are failing to deliver, they often change the government. For this reason, all democratic governments have to pursue development.

Democracy is good for economy. Democracies prosper because they are better at ensuring the provision of public goods, including education, public health, and infrastructure.

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Democratic decline is associated with a panoply of economic “bads,” including instability, brain drain, stagnation, and kleptocracy (Williamson, 2024) ^[25].

India presents an important case for studying how democracy’s delivers. Indian democracy is a live model for other developing countries. Seven decades after independence, the Indian democracy continues to shine. India has sustained universal adult franchise, rule of law, and electoral competition for over seventy years under conditions that many scholars once believed were unfavourable to democracy, including widespread poverty, deep social stratification, and immense cultural diversity (Sen, 1999) ^[16].

Indian constitution has played a major role in sustaining democracy by providing fundamental rights, universal suffrage, and independent democratic institutions, establishing a sovereign, secular, socialist, democratic republic, ensuring rule of law, promoting justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, and allowing adaptability through amendments, thus balancing power and protecting diverse citizens. These are the basic pillars for sustainable development and well-being of citizens through a socio-economic transformation.

Democratic traditions of deliberation, consensus-building, and local self-governance can be traced to ancient village assemblies, republican clans, and philosophical traditions that emphasized moral restraint and public accountability (Sen, 2005) ^[17].

This paper shows that democracy in India should be understood as both a modern institutional system and a civilizational practice. By study aims to highlight peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development as democratic deliverables and also seeks to demonstrate that democracy is not only a method of choosing governments but a long-term socio-economic arrangement that ensures development and human well-being.

Literature Review

Earlier studies were on meaning and definitions of democracy, now there is performance-based evaluations of democracies. Early democratic theorists such as Dahl emphasized participation and contestation as features of democracy. Now, scholars began to study whether democratic systems can produce sustainable outcomes compared to authoritarian alternatives.

Many scholars highlighted that democracies are less likely to engage in violent conflict due to rule of law and open door for negotiation. Some scholars also studied that in democratic countries, there is, in large, internal peace due to non-violent paths for grievance redressal through open channels for communications.

The effect of Strong Democracy on economic growth is positive and significant, while that of Weak Democracy is not statistically different from autocracies. The long term positive effect of a strong Democracy is increase in GDP by 35.56%, while it is only 1.22% for a weak democracies (Sima and Huang, 2023) ^[19].

Democracy also ensures equality, protection of rights, governance, freedom of raising voice, participation, and access to public goods (Sen, 1999) ^[16]. Studies show that democracies are more likely to invest in education, health, and social protection due to electoral incentives (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) ^[1].

Democracy holds an important and foundational role in the

Indian context by managing linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity, sovereignty, accountability, social justice and inclusion through policies, offering a level-playing field for political participation, protection of rights & equality and peaceful transfer of power (Sahu, 2024 and Ruud & Heierstad, 2016) ^[15, 14].

Some scholars also highlighted the beauty of democracy is in judicial review, and electoral competition in managing linguistic, regional, and socio-economic diversity (Stepan, Linz, & Yadav, 2011) ^[21].

Reservations, affirmative action, and decentralized governance in expanding participation for marginalized groups, particularly Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women is also a basic feature of Indian democracy (Jaffrelot, 2003) ^[9].

Various scholars have pointed resilience as a key concept in democratic studies due to a global trend of democratic backsliding, political polarization, naxalism, spread of digital misinformation and disinformation, economic and social inequalities, financial problems, climate change, global pandemic, etc (Holloway & Manwaring 2023, Merkel 2025, Bianchi *et al* 2025) ^[7, 12, 3].

It is considered that decisions taken by democratic systems are slower in taking decisions but the decisions taken are acceptable due to transparency, accountability, and responsibility (Boin *et al.*, 2010; Rodrik, 2020) ^[4, 13].

The interconnection between democracy and sustainable development is always discussed. While autocratic or semi-autocratic or military systems can deliver rapid growth but their decisions are not long-lasting and not in favour of whole society. Democratic government’s decisions are generally better, as they ensure all type of developments are inclusive, responsible, and socially accountable (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2022) ^[23, 26]. Because of public awareness, right to ask the questions and legal supervision, the decisions taken by the democratic government ensures long-term sustainable outcomes.

Despite extensive literature, few studies integrate civilizational traditions with contemporary democratic performance. This paper addresses that gap by focussing India’s contemporary democracy within its ancient civilization context.

Research Methodology

This method employed in this study is of qualitative, descriptive, and analytical type to understand how India’s democratic experience has shaped governance outcomes. Study is based on secondary data such as peer-reviewed academic literature, constitutional texts, government reports, and publications by international organizations. In this study, India is selected because democratic institutions in India have functioned very well over time and delivered desired outputs despite democratic longevity, demographic scale & institutional diversity.

The study revolves around four democratic pillars: peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development. These are analysed to show how democratic practices actually work by managing manage conflict, promote inclusion, respond to crises, and support sustainable development. India’s democratic experience on strengthening four pillars is compared in a broader international context to analyse how other countries are doing this. Hence, the study aims to present a balanced, clear, and humane understanding of democracy’s role in shaping peace, inclusion, resilience, and

sustainable development in a large and diverse society like India.

India's Democratic Foundations: Civilizational and Constitutional Dimensions

Democracy is not a modern word for India. Long ago, it was used in the Western countries, ancient India were practising it through collective decision, fairness, and public participation. Because of these strong foundations, today India is not only the world's largest democracy, but also one of the oldest & strongest societies to practice democratic values in everyday governance.

India's democratic system lies on two pillars. The first pillar is the constitutional framework established in 1950, which guarantees universal adult franchise, fundamental rights, separation of powers between Union & States, and an independent judiciary. The second pillar is the legacy of democracy from ancient Indian that values dialogue, collective decision-making, and moral accountability in governance.

India's ancient democratic system was always relied on four basic pillars - peace, inclusion, resilience and sustainable development.

Peace - Earlier Indian democratic believed in peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution. Institutions such as the *Sabha & Samiti* (as early as the Vedic period, around 1500 BCE), *Vajjis & Ganasanghas* (period between 600 BCE and 400 BCE), *Panchamandali* i.e. Panchayats, around 2500 BCE during the Indus Valley civilization, and village councils, from about 415 to 455 CE, were determined on dialogue, debate, and consensus instead of force. Their solution was to handle disagreements through discussion, evident in the *Vajji* assemblies and *Sakya* elections. Regular meetings, respect for elders, and group decision-making significantly lowered the risk of violent conflict thus promoting social harmony. This shows that peace in ancient India was sustained not merely by authority, but by participatory governance and shared responsibility.

Inclusion - Inclusion is the integral part of Ancient Indian democracy. In *Sabha* and *Samiti*, the community members have more participation, similarly republican systems like *Vajjis* and *Sakyas* let people choose their leaders instead of following hereditary rule (Thapar, 2004; Majumdar, 2022) [22, 11]. Through village panchayats, administration remained close to the people. Buddhist texts, particularly the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, highlight respect for women and elders, along with fair representation of all sections of society, as essential elements of a welfare-oriented community (Sharma, 2023) [18]. These practices suggest that in ancient India, rulers valued accountability and inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices and opinions were heard before collective decisions were taken for the well-being of the people.

Resilience - In *Mahajanapada's* consisting of 16 ancient Indian kingdoms, around the 6th century BCE, the power was not ruler-centric rather it was shared among councils, assemblies, and local groups which helped to build resilient nation and society. This setup made it easier for rulers and their advisors and citizens in large to adapt, handle disagreements, and keep running smoothly during political changes. For example, during the Gupta period, village

councils managed taxes, justice, and public works, which strengthened local self-government. By having decision-making across different levels, these beliefs made societies more resilient.

Sustainable Development - There was a system of sustainable development too in ancient India. This system made sure that the people in charge listened to the people and did what was right. They had something called *Panchayats* and village *Sabhas* that took care of the resources solved problems and made sure the community had what it needed (Singh, 2016) [20]. This way sustainable development was fair. The community was happy with it. Some old principles called the *Vajji* principles showed that the people then understood what sustainable development was all about. Rulers knew it was not about money but also about taking care of the society and the culture and making sure everyone was comfortable in all respect (Kosambi, 1965) [10].

Indians always worship and embrace nature. Indian texts such as the *Arthashastra*, *Sathapatha Bhramanas*, *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* etc mention trees, water, animals, land People in those times understand the concepts of environment conservation and maintaining forest ecology; also hymns in the four *Vedas*, *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, reveal full cognizance of the undesirable effects of climate change, distortion in ecological balance, and environmental degradation; and caution against them. This is what sustainable development is and concern for sustainable development.

Though, peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development are new words for contemporary world, but in ancient Indian rulers had adopted and integrated them for their democratic leadership to serve the community in a better way. These shows that when leadership is cooperative, ethical, and participatory, governance naturally fosters harmony, solidarity, versatility, and sustainable progress. This footprint provides a powerful framework for rethinking contemporary democratic leadership in India and beyond.

Democracy and Peace: Contemporary India's Experience

Contemporary India's experience demonstrates how democratic governance has functioned as a key instrument for maintaining peace in a diverse society like India. From the very first general elections in 1951-52, India chose the path of universal adult franchise, ensuring that political participation itself became a peaceful means of expressing social and economic aspirations. The reorganisation of states on linguistic lines in the 1950s is a key example of how India addressed strong identity demands through discussion, constitutional methods, and law-making, rather than prolonged conflict. Similarly, the regular conduct of free and fair elections, peaceful transfer of power at both the Union and state levels, and the independent role of the judiciary in protecting constitutional rights have built public trust in democracy and prevented large-scale political violence.

India's governance since independence also shows how democracy has been used to ensure internal conflicts and promote social peace. The establishment of Panchayati Raj institutions through amendments in the 73rd and 74th

Constitutions gave more power to local communities and brought decision-making closer to ordinary citizens, helping to address grassroots grievances. Negotiations within a constitution limitation can transform armed movements into peaceful political participation, as proved by the Assam, Punjab, Mizoram peace accords. Various welfare schemes such as, land reforms, reservations, employment guarantee, affordable housing, healthcare and rights-based legislations like the Right to Information Act, etc. has ensured peace by promoting inclusion and accountability. Together, these examples show that, despite various challenges, India's democratic system since independence, has steadily offered

institutional and non-violent paths to maintain peace.

Figure 1 highlights the strong link between India's core democratic institutions and the maintenance of peace in the post-independence period. The federal structure of Indian governance has played a responsible role in managing regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity by allowing states to have a political autonomy within the constitutional framework. This flexibility has reduced dissidence and enabled citizen priorities to be addressed through governance instead of conflict, thereby contributing to national unity and internal peace.

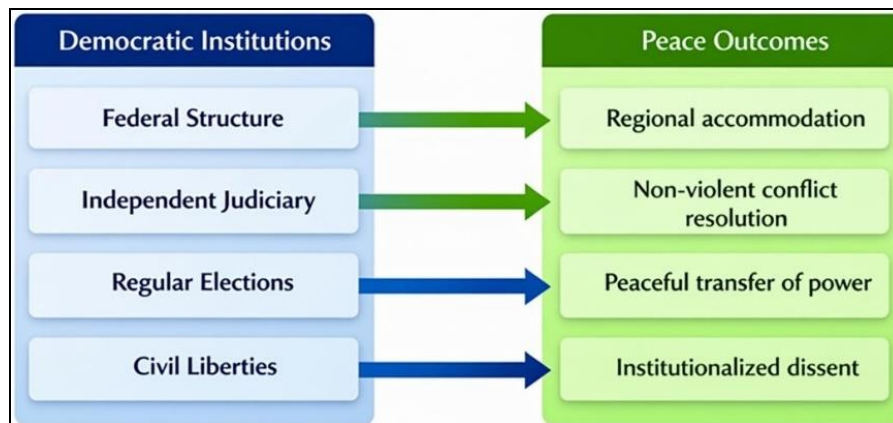


Fig 1: Linkages between democratic institutions and peace outcomes in contemporary India

At the same time, the independent judiciary has offered a reliable, non-violent mechanism for resolving constitutional, political, and social disputes. By offering legal remedies and ensuring the rule of law, courts have reduced the need for extra-constitutional or violent forms of protest. Regular elections further supports peace by allowing orderly and legitimate transfers of power, keeping political competition confined within proper democratic channels. At the same time, the protection of civil liberties, including freedoms of speech, association, and protest has made it possible for dissent to be expressed safely within democratic norms. By giving citizens, an lawful authority to question the system and express grievances, India's democracy has helped transform potential conflict into dialogue, negotiation, and reform, thereby sustaining peace in a complex and plural society.

Democracy and Inclusion: Contemporary India's Experience

Contemporary India's experience reflects how democratic governance has been the main factor in promoting inclusion in a society with deep social, economic, and cultural diversity. Since independence, the Constitution has served as the primary instrument of inclusive governance by guaranteeing equality before law, universal adult franchise, and fundamental rights to all citizens. The deliberate choice to enfranchise every adult from the outset ensured that women, marginalised castes, minorities, and the poor were not gradually incorporated but recognised as equal political participants from the very beginning. This broad-based political inclusion has allowed historically excluded groups to articulate their interests within democratic institutions rather than remaining outside the political system.

Democratic governance in India has also promoted inclusion

through affirmative action and decentralisation. Policies such as reservations in legislatures, public employment, and education for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes have sought to correct structural inequalities and expand access to state resources. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments further strengthened inclusion by empowering local self-government and reserving seats for women and marginalised communities in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. In recent decades, rights-based governance initiatives, among which are the Right to Information Act, employment and food security programmes, and expanded welfare delivery through digital platforms, have sought to make the state more responsive to vulnerable populations. Even though the problem of social inequality persists and access is uneven, India's democratic framework continues to offer institutional pathways for social inclusion, showing how the governance of a diverse society by democratic principles can gradually widen the scope for participation, representation, and opportunity.

Figure 2 shows how democratic governance in India has progressively extended inclusive participation across different social and marginalised groups. The significant increase in women's representation at the grassroots level is reflected after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1993, a major shift toward gender inclusion. It moved beyond the idea of formal equality to ensure that women could take part in decision-making processes, hence increasing their empowerment. This has contributed to the political empowerment of women and, additionally, their changing priorities in health, education, and welfare are now prompting the government to address them more actively.

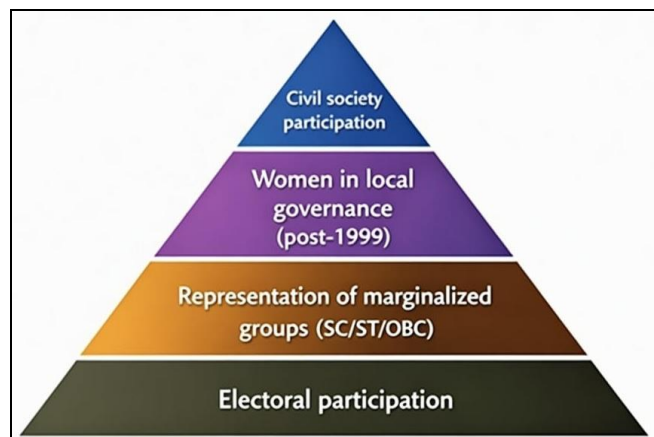


Fig 2: Democratic Pathways to inclusive participation in contemporary India

The systematic representation of the underprivileged groups - especially Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, has given these communities a sustained political voice within legislatures and public institutions. Such measures have certainly contributed to making it easier for the historically underprivileged groups to become a part of democracy, and their feeling of citizenship and belonging. In parallel, the growth of civil society participation has widened democratic engagement beyond elections. Social movements, non-governmental organisations, media, and citizen-led initiatives have created additional platforms for participation, accountability, and dialogue with the state. Together, these developments show that India's democracy has gradually evolved from mere electoral participation to a broader, more inclusive form of governance that encourages active and diverse citizen involvement.

Democracy and Resilience: Contemporary India's Experience

Contemporary India's experience illustrates how that a resilient system has been created through democracy, by enabling the state and society to withstand, adapt to, and recover from diverse challenges. Since independence, India has faced different challenges like wars, economic disturbances, internal conflicts, natural disasters, and public health crises. Despite all these turbulences, India's democracy has been functioning in the same manner. Regular elections, peaceful transfers of power, and respect for constitutional procedures have made it possible to continue governance even during times when uncertainty was surrounding it. Democracy has allowed policy failures and public grievances to overcome through institutional mechanisms such as legislatures, courts, and elections, rather than leading to systemic breakdown.

The interaction between the governance institutions and citizen participation is the source of resilience in India. Federal systems help in flexibility, which allows states to adopt different strategies for dealing with challenges in their area, and through decentralized governance, people can contribute to efforts to rebuild after crises and disaster. Independent judiciary, free media, and active civil society are accountability and institutions learning contributors since they reveal the gaps in governance and advocate for reforms. Gradually, through policy shifts, welfare increase, and administrative reforms, democratic governance has been the one that has allowed the system to evolve in response to

the new demands and the time when it needs to be done has come. However, social inequality and political polarisation are some of the pressures that continue to exist but India's experience demonstrates that resilient governance built on democratic principles is a major asset in the country's stress management thus preserving stability and legitimacy at the same time.

Figure 3 shows how the main parts of India's democratic governance have slowly made the country stronger. The constitution's permanence has made sure that the essential democratic structure stays the same even throughout wars, emergencies, economic reforms, or health problems. This continuity has helped keep the state legitimate and the public's trust, which has allowed it to deal with shocks without breaking down democratic institutions.

India's federal structure has also helped make the country more resilient by giving states the power to come up with context-specific responses to local problems, such as health, catastrophes, or development challenges. Electoral accountability lets people peacefully voice their displeasure and call for policy changes through elections instead of protests. Lastly, independent institutions like the courts, election boards, the media, and audit agencies help institutions learn by enabling them to find mistakes and encouraging reform. These institutions have shown that India's democratic system has been able to keep things stable and make them more resilient to change.

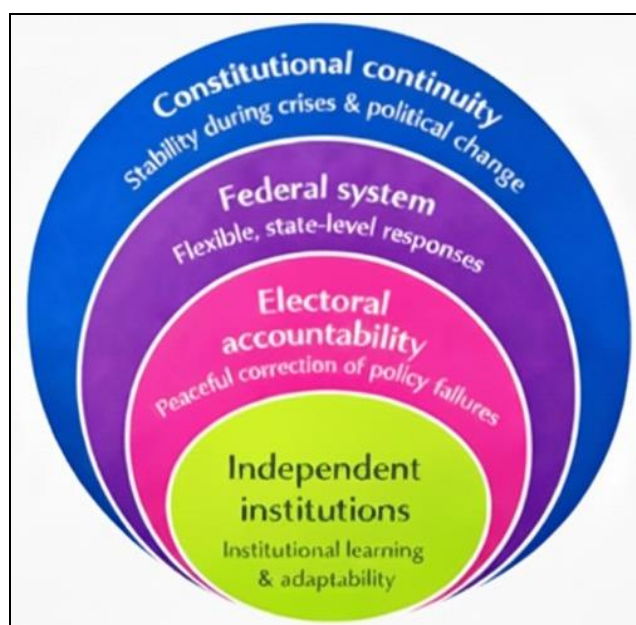


Fig 3: Democratic pathways reinforcing resilience in contemporary India

Democracy and Sustainable Development: Contemporary India's Experience

Contemporary India's experience shows that democratic governance plays a major factor in advancing sustainable development by balancing economic growth, social equity, and environmental responsibility. Since independence, India has followed development within a constitutional and democratic framework that focuses on welfare, inclusion, and accountability. Democratic institutions such as legislatures, courts, and local governments have provided platforms for public debate and policy oversight, helping to ensure that development priorities reflect citizens' needs. Elections and public participation have allowed people to

shape development choices, making sure that growth-oriented policies also address social justice and long-term sustainability.

Democracy has also supported sustainable development in India through decentralisation and rights-based governance. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments strengthened local self-governance, enabling communities to participate in planning and managing resources, particularly in rural development, water management, and sanitation. Legal and policy measures respectfully include environmental regulations, the Right to Information Act, and social welfare programs that have enhanced transparency and accountability within the development processes. Although inequality, resource constraints, and environmental stressors continue to be challenges, democratic governance in India

provides an institutional path for course correction, citizen engagement, and policy adaptation. In this way, contemporary India demonstrates how democracy, when paired with responsive governance, can promote more balanced and sustainable development over time.

Figure 4 shows how democratic governance in India contribute to sustainable development. Decentralised governance, particularly through Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies, has made it possible for citizens to have a direct say in planning, development and the management of natural and public resources. This participation at local-level has improved the magnitude and reach of sustainability of development in various fields such as water, sanitation, rural livelihoods, and local infrastructure.

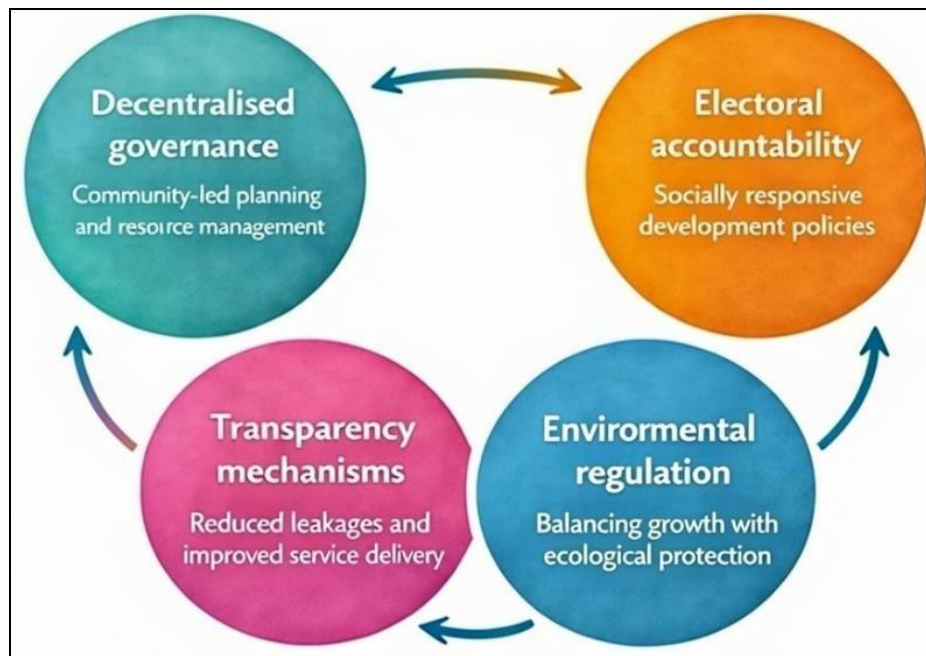


Fig 4: Democratic governance promoting sustainable development end India

Accountable government always try to balance social and other issues by framing policies to handle development, poverty, inequality, and access to fundamental services. Free media and transparency mechanisms, including the Right to Information and social audits, have played a significant role in making accountability stronger by reducing leakages and improving the efficiency of welfare delivery. Environmental regulations and judicial oversight have further strengthened sustainable development by trying to have a balance between economic growth and ecological protection. Together, these democratic governance features demonstrate how India's development path, though uneven

and contested, is still subject to institutional constraints, citizen participation, and long term sustainability concerns. Together, these features of democratic governance show that India's development has involved disagreements and unequal outcomes, but it continues to be shaped and guided by various checks & balances, citizen participation, democratic debate and strong institutions, and long-term sustainability concerns.

Following figure is about democratic governance in contemporary India and its contribution to peace, social inclusion, institutional resilience, and sustainable development.



Fig 5: Democratic governance and sustainable development in contemporary India

Conclusion

This paper has analysed India's democratic experience by shifting focus from theoretical definitions of democracy to its consequential outcomes—peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development. The study, focussing on India as a primary example, has shown that democracy is founded in what it delivers to society over time. India's experience shows that that constitutional institutions and active civic participation can help manage diversity, reduce violent conflict, expand political and social inclusion, adapt to crises, and support long-term development goals.

This study also highlighted that collective decision-making is not new in contemporary constitutional democracy but it continued to flourish as it was practised during ancient India also. Democratic values such as dialogue, consensus, accountability, and ethical governance were not entirely new phrases after independence but were deeply embedded in India's historical practices of sabhas, panchayats, and republican assemblies. This has strengthened democratic legitimacy and social acceptance, allowing institutions to survive despite poverty, inequality, and social fragmentation, which are often considered unfavourable for democratic survival.

The paper also showed that democracy in India has come up with peace by providing non-violent means for conflict resolution through dialogue, judicial review, elections, and civil liberties. It has encouraged inclusion through representation for marginalised groups, expanding women's empowerment, and enabling civil society engagement. Democratic resilience has been evident in India's capacity to absorb shocks like political, economic, social, and environmental, without abandoning constitutional governance. Finally, democratic accountability, decentralisation, and transparency have played an important role in advancing more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes, even if these remain uneven and contested.

At the same time, the study does not state that democracy in India is without challenges. Inequality, social division, policy deficits, and environmental pressures continue to evaluate democratic institutions. However, the main idea remains that democracy provides the institutional space for

self-correction, debate, and reform. Unlike authoritarian systems, democratic governance allows failures to be acknowledged and addressed through peaceful and legitimate means.

In conclusion, other countries which are practising democracy or trying to have democracy can gain from India's experience, which is considered to be largest democracy of the world. Democracy is not just about electing governments, but a long-term system that can foster peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development. When democracy is supported by strong institutions, shared constitutional values, and active citizen participation, it becomes a practical and people-centred system of governance that improves lives over time.

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