

Democracy and Institutional Autonomy in India : Balancing Power and Independence

Dr. Sushanta Kumar Singh

Lecturer in Political science, R.K.D.T HS School (Junior College) Budharaja, Sambalpur, Odisha

Abstract: Democracy has emerged as one of the most widely accepted systems of governance in the modern world, emphasizing the rule of the people, equality, and participation. In the Indian context, democracy is deeply rooted in its constitutional framework, which provides for fundamental rights, federalism, judicial independence, and representative governance. This paper examines the evolution of Indian democracy and analyses the role of institutional autonomy in ensuring its effective functioning. It highlights that democracy is not limited to elections alone but also depends on the rule of law, protection of civil liberties, and accountability of institutions. The study further explores the concept of institutional autonomy, distinguishing it from institutional independence, and discusses how administrative and regulatory bodies function within the framework of public law. While India has established several autonomous institutions to balance competing interests and strengthen governance, their effectiveness is often constrained by political interference, lack of functional independence, and structural challenges. Issues such as corruption, pendency of cases in the judiciary, declining media freedom, and the influence of economic and political elites pose serious challenges to democratic functioning. At the same time, the role of civil society, public participation, and awareness remains crucial in sustaining democratic values.

Keywords: Democracy, Institutional Autonomy, Indian Constitution, Judicial Independence, Political Interference, Governance, Civil Liberties, Federalism, Accountability, Public Participation.

Introduction: -

Democracy has become one of the most widely appreciated and positively valued concepts in the modern world. Although in the early nineteenth century it was often viewed negatively and linked with mob rule, by the end of that century it had emerged as a desirable form of governance for all “civilised” nations. Over time, democracy has gained such universal acceptance that even authoritarian regimes tend to claim adherence to it. Today, much like culturally significant values such as patriotism or national pride, democracy is regarded as something inherently good, worth protecting and even sacrificing for (Harrison & Boyd, 2018). At its core, democracy simply means the rule of the people. The term itself originates from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power), indicating that authority rests with the people rather than a single ruler or a small elite group (Kansra, 2013).

A democratic system is built upon the idea of popular sovereignty, often expressed as “We the People,” which is reflected in various forms of political and social participation. Importantly, democracy should not be reduced to the rule of a temporary majority; rather, it must represent the broader will and interests of society. To fully understand democracy, it is necessary to consider its key components. First, democracy requires the rule of law, ensuring that decisions are based on reason and legal principles rather than arbitrary authority. Second, it emphasizes equal respect and dignity for every individual, recognizing the inherent worth of all citizens. Third, it relies on elections as a legitimate means of choosing representatives. The absence of any of these elements weakens the democratic system. Together, these principles provide a comprehensive understanding of how governance can genuinely reflect the will of the people (Kahn, 2024).

The study of Indian democracy has evolved significantly over time. Initially, scholars approached it with curiosity and scepticism, questioning whether democracy could survive in a diverse and developing society like India. However, over the decades, this perspective has shifted toward deeper analysis, comparison, and even attempts to rethink democratic practices. Public opinion in India generally remains supportive of democracy, although it is often accompanied by critical awareness of its limitations. It is also important to note that democratic processes in India did not suddenly begin after independence; rather, they have historical roots extending back to the nineteenth century, when early forms of political participation and representation began to emerge (Deshpande & Palshkar, 2017).

The development of Indian democracy is closely linked to its constitutional framework and continues to evolve in response to changing political conditions. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1950, India was established as a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic. The Constitution introduced essential features such as Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, a federal system, and an independent judiciary, all aimed at maintaining a balance between freedom and social justice as well as unity and diversity. Despite facing serious challenges in its early years—such as the effects of partition, widespread poverty, and low literacy levels—India successfully conducted its first general elections in 1951–52, demonstrating a strong commitment to democratic ideals.

In recent years, particularly after the 2014 general elections, Indian democracy has experienced notable changes. The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi brought significant policy initiatives such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), demonetization, and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. While these reforms aimed at economic and social development, they also generated debates regarding their implementation and broader impact. Additionally, policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the revocation of Article 370 have sparked discussions about federalism, minority rights, and national integration, reflecting shifts in India's political landscape. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the functioning of democratic institutions. Issues related to civil liberties, judicial independence, and media freedom have come under scrutiny, while the rapid expansion of social media has increased both citizen participation and the spread of misinformation and polarization. These trends suggest that Indian democracy is not static but continuously adapting to new challenges while attempting to uphold its foundational principles (Swargiary, 2025).

The significance of democracy can be understood in both instrumental and non-instrumental terms. From a non-instrumental perspective, democracy is valued for its fairness, particularly in allowing majority rule, as well as for fostering meaningful social relationships through participation in decision-making processes. From an instrumental perspective, democracy is appreciated for its practical benefits, such as promoting better governance and accountability, as supported by empirical research. Thus, democracy holds importance not only as a system of governance but also as a framework that enhances both individual dignity and collective well-being (Beckman, 2021). Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to examine the nature and evolution of democracy in India, with particular focus on the role and autonomy of its key institutions, and to assess how effectively these institutions uphold democratic values in the face of contemporary political and social challenges.

Indian Democracy and Institutional Autonomy: -

The idea of institutional autonomy has gained widespread acceptance in modern governance, yet there is no clear consensus on what autonomy actually means or how far it should extend. Different scholars and policymakers interpret autonomy in varying ways, and there is also disagreement regarding how it is achieved, sustained, or limited in practice. The term itself originates from the Greek words *auto* (self) and *nomos* (law), referring to the ability

of a system or institution to govern itself and manage its internal affairs without external interference (Olsen, 2010). In recent decades, especially over the past thirty years, many reforms in the public sector have focused on granting greater independence to administrative bodies by reducing direct control from political institutions and standardised regulatory frameworks.

Institutionalisation plays a key role in this process, as it refers both to the development of stable organisational structures and to the gradual creation of legitimacy and identity within a broader cultural and political context. This process helps institutions gain recognition and authority in society (Olsen, 2009). A related concept is “agencification,” where administrative bodies are positioned at a distance from direct political control. This involves structural changes such as decentralisation, the creation of specialised organisations, and the separation of different roles of the state—such as policymaking, regulation, service provision, and ownership. The aim behind granting autonomy to such institutions is to enable them to function efficiently in the public interest, as defined by the government and legislature. However, it is important to note that these bodies are not completely independent. Their authority is defined within the framework of public law, and governments retain the power to modify their objectives, funding, or even withdraw their autonomy when required (Olsen, 2008).

India, being the world’s largest democracy, offers a significant context for examining institutional autonomy, as it has successfully managed a highly diverse society over several decades. In such a system, the role of institutions, governance mechanisms, and civil society becomes crucial for sustaining democratic values. The Constitution of India has played a central role in maintaining balance and coordination among various institutions, and its strength and adaptability have been widely recognised. However, it is equally important to evaluate how these constitutional ideals are implemented in practice and how effectively autonomous institutions function at the ground level (Yadav, 2020). In this context, it is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of independence and autonomy, which are often used interchangeably but have important differences.

Institutional independence generally refers to a higher degree of freedom, where an institution has assured funding that is not subject to political discretion and where its leadership enjoys a fixed tenure, removable only under specific conditions such as incompetence or misconduct. These features provide a strong foundation for unbiased functioning. Autonomy, on the other hand, may lack one or both of these elements, making institutions more vulnerable to external influence. In India, several institutions have been designed to function with a degree of independence in order to balance competing interests and improve governance. These institutions often act as intermediaries in situations where the state itself may not be fully effective in ensuring fairness and accountability. Their creation reflects the need to address complex governance challenges and enforce transparency in public administration (Raghavan, 2006).

The development of democratic institutions in India has followed a unique path compared to Western democracies. Unlike in the West, where democratic systems evolved gradually through internal social conflicts and reforms, Indian democracy emerged largely as a response to colonial rule. The nationalist movement adopted democratic ideas from colonial powers and adapted them to achieve independence. As a result, the focus was initially more on political freedom than on building strong institutional and socio-economic foundations necessary for sustaining democracy. Consequently, areas such as education, healthcare, and social welfare did not receive adequate attention in the early stages.

Although political leaders, legislators, and members of the judiciary often emphasise their commitment to serving the common people, this rhetoric has its roots in the independence movement and continues to be repeated in public discourse. However, there remains a gap between these ideals and the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, who are sometimes

uncertain about the extent to which democratic promises translate into real benefits. This ongoing tension between democratic principles and practical realities gives Indian democracy its distinct character and continues to shape its institutional development (Kavitha, 2014).

Table 1 highlights the fundamental elements that constitute Indian democracy and links them with the key institutions responsible for their functioning and protection. It shows that Indian democracy is not based on a single authority but operates through a network of interconnected institutions, each playing a specific role. Constitutional supremacy is upheld by the Supreme Court and Parliament, ensuring that all actions remain within the framework of the Constitution. Similarly, the rule of law and judicial independence are maintained by the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, which safeguard equality and justice. The conduct of free and fair elections by the Election Commission of India reflects the democratic principle of popular representation, while the separation of powers among the legislature, executive, and judiciary ensures a system of checks and balances. Federalism, supported by both central and state governments, demonstrates the distribution of power across different levels of governance. At the same time, civil liberties and media freedom emphasize the importance of individual rights and the role of an informed society in sustaining democracy. Furthermore, institutions such as the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), RTI bodies, and Lokpal strengthen accountability and transparency, ensuring that governance remains answerable to the public. Political pluralism, represented by multiple political parties and the electoral system, reflects the diversity of opinions and choices within the country.

Table 1: Core Elements of Indian Democracy and their Institutional Framework

Element of Indian Democracy	Associated Institutions
Constitutional Supremacy	Supreme Court, Parliament
Rule of Law	Judiciary, Law Enforcement Agencies
Free and Fair Elections	Election Commission of India
Separation of Powers	Parliament, Executive, Judiciary
Federalism	Central Government, State Governments
Judicial Independence	Supreme Court, High Courts
Civil Liberties	Judiciary, Civil Society
Media Freedom	Press, Broadcasting Bodies
Accountability & Transparency	CAG, RTI Institutions, Lokpal
Political Pluralism	Political Parties, Electoral System

Source: Author

Institutions play a crucial role in ensuring that democracy functions effectively; however, in the present context, their performance is often affected by several challenges such as corruption, red-tapism, favouritism, nepotism, and dynastic politics. These issues weaken the functioning of governance mechanisms and prevent institutions from fulfilling their responsibilities efficiently. For instance, in the case of the judiciary, a large number of cases remain pending in the High Courts and the Supreme Court, indicating delays in the delivery of justice. Moreover, the functioning of many institutions is significantly influenced by the political executive. It is often observed that some political leaders have criminal backgrounds or are involved in unlawful activities, which further complicates the functioning of democratic institutions. In such situations, the judiciary is sometimes compelled to take a more proactive role, commonly referred to as judicial activism, in order to ensure justice and accountability.

Political interference has emerged as a major obstacle to the effective functioning of institutions in a democratic system. Many political leaders tend to prioritise the interests of

powerful and influential sections of society rather than focusing on the welfare of the general public. This creates an imbalance in governance and affects institutional credibility. For democracy to function properly, it is essential that institutions, especially the judiciary, operate efficiently and independently. With the expansion of democratic governance, several new institutions have been established in India, such as the National Human Rights Commission, the National Commission for Women, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes. The creation of these bodies reflects a positive step toward strengthening democracy and protecting the rights of various sections of society.

However, despite their importance and intended purpose, many of these institutions face limitations in achieving their goals due to lack of true autonomy. Political pressure often restricts their ability to function independently, thereby hindering their effectiveness and slowing their institutional development. This limitation becomes a barrier in realizing the true spirit of democracy. Similarly, many social organisations, including non-governmental organisations and sections of the mass media, have increasingly become influenced by financial interests. As a result, their focus sometimes shifts away from public welfare toward profit-oriented activities. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that not all such organisations function in this manner; there are still several groups that remain committed to serving society and promoting public welfare.

In the contemporary global context, factors such as globalization and the growth of capitalist economic structures also pose challenges to democratic governance. These developments can sometimes influence policy decisions and institutional functioning in ways that may not always align with democratic ideals. Despite these difficulties, democracy continues to survive and operate in many parts of the world, highlighting its resilience and importance. Democratic principles must be upheld and strengthened, as their absence can lead to serious challenges, as seen in some regions of the world. Public opinion is a vital component of democracy; however, it does not always play a decisive role, particularly in societies where a large portion of the population remains illiterate or lacks awareness about democratic processes and current developments. Therefore, merely criticising democratic institutions is not sufficient to achieve the true essence of democracy. Citizens must actively participate and work alongside institutions to uphold democratic values, as the quality of governance ultimately reflects the awareness, participation, and responsibility of the people themselves (Borah, 2020).

Conclusion: -

Democracy in India has evolved through a unique historical and constitutional journey, reflecting both its strengths and inherent challenges. The study shows that while India has developed a strong democratic framework supported by various institutions, the effectiveness of this system largely depends on the autonomy and proper functioning of these institutions. Institutional autonomy remains a critical requirement for maintaining transparency, accountability, and fairness in governance. However, issues such as political interference, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and socio-economic inequalities continue to affect their performance. The paper also highlights that the mere existence of institutions is not sufficient; their independence, integrity, and responsiveness to public needs are equally important. The growing influence of economic interests, globalization, and media dynamics further complicates the functioning of democratic systems. Despite these challenges, Indian democracy has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability over time. Ultimately, the strengthening of democracy in India requires a balanced relationship between institutions, the state, and citizens. Enhancing public awareness, ensuring greater institutional accountability, and protecting the autonomy of key democratic bodies are essential steps toward achieving this goal. Democracy can truly flourish only when both institutions and citizens actively contribute

to upholding its core values of justice, equality, and participation.

References: -

1. Beckman, L. (2021). Democracy. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (pp. 1–22). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.2001>
2. Borah, P. (2020). Theoretical analysis of institutional dimension of Indian democracy. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(1), 9142–9149.
3. Deshpande, R., & Palshikar, S. (2017). Democracy in India. In *Hinduism*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195399318-0190>
4. Harrison, K., & Boyd, T. (2018). Democracy. In *Understanding political ideas and movements* (p. 59). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526137951.00007>
5. Kahn, P. W. (2024). What is democracy? *Public Humanities*, 1, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.17>
6. Kansra, D. (2013). Democracy. In *The Preamble* (pp. 102–135). Universal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
7. Kavitha, A. (2014). A study on democratic institutions of Indian political system in the 21st century. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 1(3), 495–506.
8. Olsen, J. P. (2008, October). *Institutional autonomy and democratic government* (Working Paper No. 20, ARENA Working Paper). Center for European Studies, Oslo.
9. Olsen, J. P. (2009). Democratic government, institutional autonomy and the dynamics of change. *West European Politics*, 32(3), 439–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380902779048>
10. Olsen, J. P. (2010). Democratic government, institutional autonomy and the dynamics of change. *Reencuentro*, 58, 62–77.
11. Raghavan, S. (2006). *Institutional independence in India* (Discussion Paper). CUTS C-CIER, Jaipur.
12. Swargiari, K. (2025). *Democracy in India: Evolution, challenges, and reforms (before and after 2014)* (p. 156). ERA, US.
13. Yadav, A. (2020). Critical assessment of democratic autonomy in India. *Zenodo*, 10(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4323110>