



## INDIA'S DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDE: THE RISE OF ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

*India, which has been considered the largest democracy in the world, is experiencing a rather subtle but systematic process of democratic backsliding. In the past ten years, the centralisation of executive power, politicisation of parliamentary institutions, stifling of civil rights and freedoms and the emergence of Hindu-majoritarian politics have gradually turned the Indian liberal democratic model into an electoral dictatorship. With the help of evidence from Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project and the Economist Intelligence Unit, this paper has placed the experience of India within the broader international pattern of democratic backsliding. It examines the loss of institutional checks and balances, the assault on the media and civil society, and the ideological integration of Hindu nationalism. The paper will conclude that regression in India has not involved the official abandonment of democracy but the process of the inside-out transformation, which is the constitutional manipulation and populist justification.*

**Keywords:** Democratic Backsliding, Electoral Autocracy, Civil Liberties, Institutional Erosion, Hindu Nationalism, Authoritarianism, India.

### INTRODUCTION

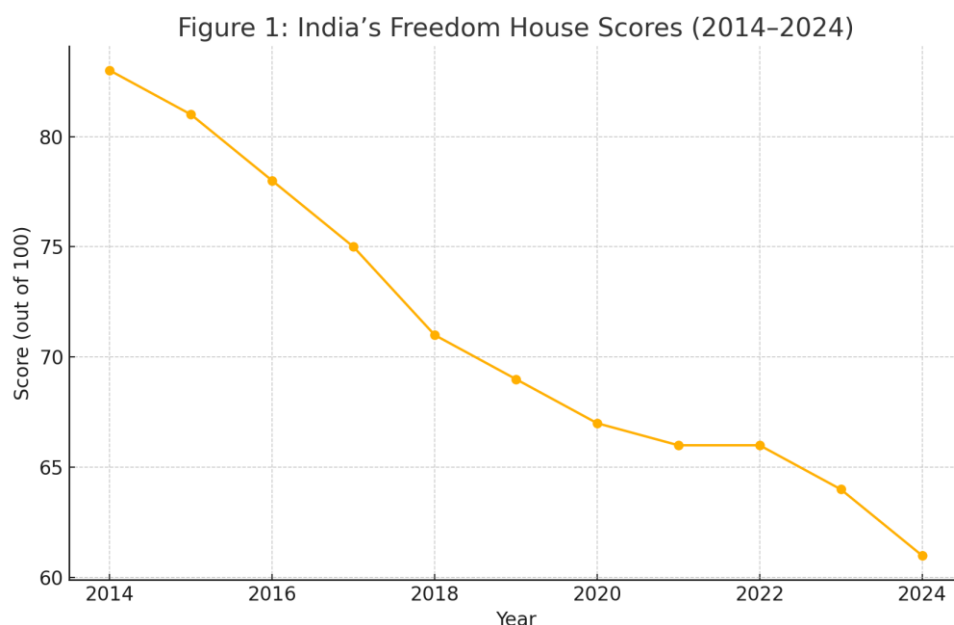
Democracy in India was an experiment in pluralist long-term constitutional morality. Periodic elections, judicial review and free press were institutionalised by the framers of the 1950 Constitution to protect against tyranny. These institutions have been able to withstand political turbulence over the decades; the Emergency of 1975, coalition instability in the 1990s and economic liberalisation post 1991 without experiencing much democratic discontinuity.

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Since 2014, however, a gradual yet radical change in the way Indian democracy operates has been observed. The fact that decision-making is centralised by the government, the personification of leadership in the hands of only one person, and the inferiority of independent institutions to partisan interests, is a fundamental change. It is not a coup or an open dictatorship, as in this case, the process works within the law, by majoritarian electoral triumphs, constitutional norms made to order, and the use of nationalist discourse that equates dissent with disloyalty.

These trends reflect the trends being experienced in the world in the twenty-first century. Democracies do not fall in one day; they have been undermined by elected leaders like those in Hungary, Turkey and Brazil. In both, populist governments undermined institutional restraints and still had an electoral appearance, which political scientists call electoral autocracy. The course followed by India is therefore a continuation of a wider democratic recession.



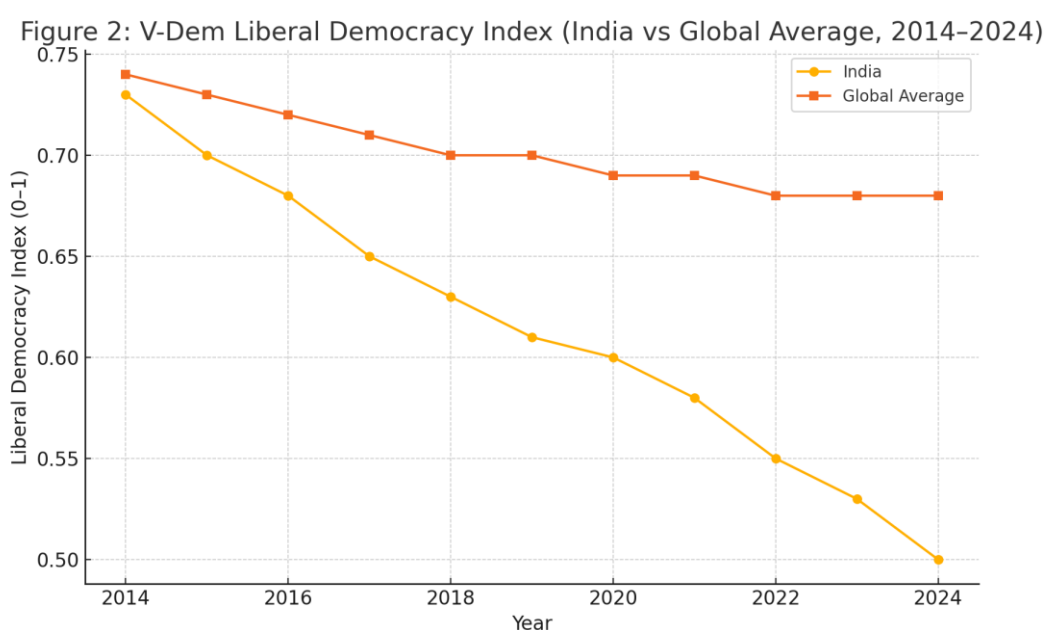
## THE CHARACTER OF MODERN DECADENCE: INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The world is experiencing a backsliding to democracy due to the emergence of democratic leaders who purport to represent the people against cosmopolitan forces or elite forces. These

rulers use institutions, such as courts, parliaments, and media regulation, to maintain their position of power. They do not suspend the constitutions but seize them.<sup>1</sup>

India fits this typology. According to the V-Dem Institute (2023), India is no longer a liberal but an electoral democracy, with drastic declines in judicial independence, freedom of expression, and autonomy of the civil-society.<sup>2</sup> Freedom House (2024) rates India as partly free with 61 out of a hundred points, as compared to 83 in 2014.<sup>3</sup> According to the Intelligence Unit of The Economist (2024), India is a flawed democracy.<sup>4</sup>

This regression is not a vacuum that can be taken out of the world's currents. Polarisation through digital propaganda and concentration of executive power, as well as delegitimisation of opponents as anti-national, are strategies Orbán of Hungary and Erdoğan of Turkey use. The spread of such strategies across democracies shows that institutional setups cannot protect democracy unless the society is devoted to pluralism.



<sup>1</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: India* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024* (London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024)

## **CHECKS AND BALANCES- DEMOCRATIC CHECKS AND BALANCES HAVE BEEN ERODED**

**Characteristics of Decline:** The architecture of the founding of India was based on institutional counterparts, executive accountability to Parliament, judicial independence, and devolution of power. Their systematic weakening has occurred in recent years. Decision-making is centralised in the Prime Minister's office that does not involve the use of cabinet and parliamentary committees. The Enforcement Directorate (ED), central bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Income Tax Department have been deployed disproportionately against opposition leaders and non-governmental organisations that are dissenting.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the organisational machine of the ruling party controls electoral discourse with the help of social media and the social-media and state.

## **CONTROL OVER THE JUDICIARY AND LEGAL SYSTEM IS AT THE LEVEL**

The courts, which have traditionally been a citadel of rights, have been found wanting, bordering on deference. Constitutional issues such as the cancellation of the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir that have been pending for a long time, and the Citizenship Amendment Act, are still pending. Long-term delays destroy the trust in justice being impartial. The blend of powers has also been eroded by the executive control over the process of judicial appointments by the opaque collegium system and the effect of this system on the post-retirement job.

In the meantime, there is the expansive application of coercive laws, namely: the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), the sedition clauses of the Indian Penal Code, and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. Such activists as Sudha Bharadwaj and such journalists as Siddique Kappan have been held under such acts for long periods without being convicted. Such partial prosecution is a deterrent to dissent and turns the tools of the law into weapons of politics.

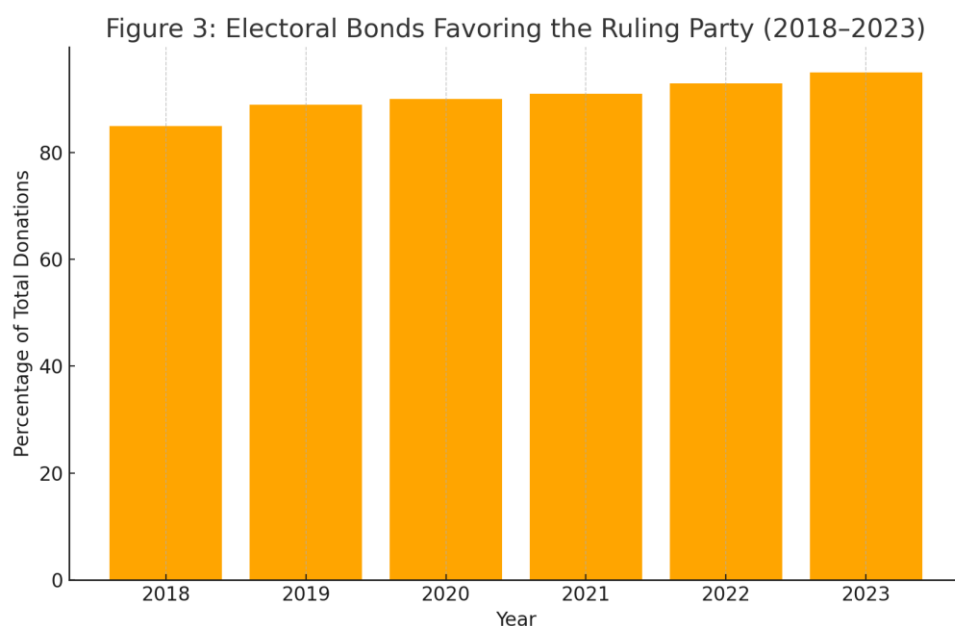
## **UNDERMINING OF THE LEGISLATURE**

Parliament, which was a strong debating house in the days of India, has grown marginalised. The duration of the sessions has reduced by half to below 60 days in 2023, compared to 90

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<sup>5</sup> Milan Vaishnav, *Democratic Erosion in the World's Largest Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022)

days in 2010. Money bills are passed to bypass the Rajya Sabha. This weakness in democracy was revealed in the 2020 farm-law episode, when huge legislation was enacted without committee hearings and repealed after mass protests. Opposition MPs have frequently been suspended because they have called to seek an account on potentially sensitive matters like the Pegasus spyware scandal or the Adani stock-manipulation scandal.<sup>6</sup>



## RESTRICTION OF THE MEDIA AND THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Indian democracy was, at one time, characterised by a plural press. A shrinking press freedom is currently one of the most obvious signs of retrogression. Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranks India 161st of 180 countries in the list, worse than even certain hybrid regimes.<sup>7</sup> The industrial groups that own media conglomerates and have state contacts control the television news, thus establishing a sycophantic atmosphere. Those journalists who are critical of policy are labelled, charged with sedition or trolled by organised troll networks.

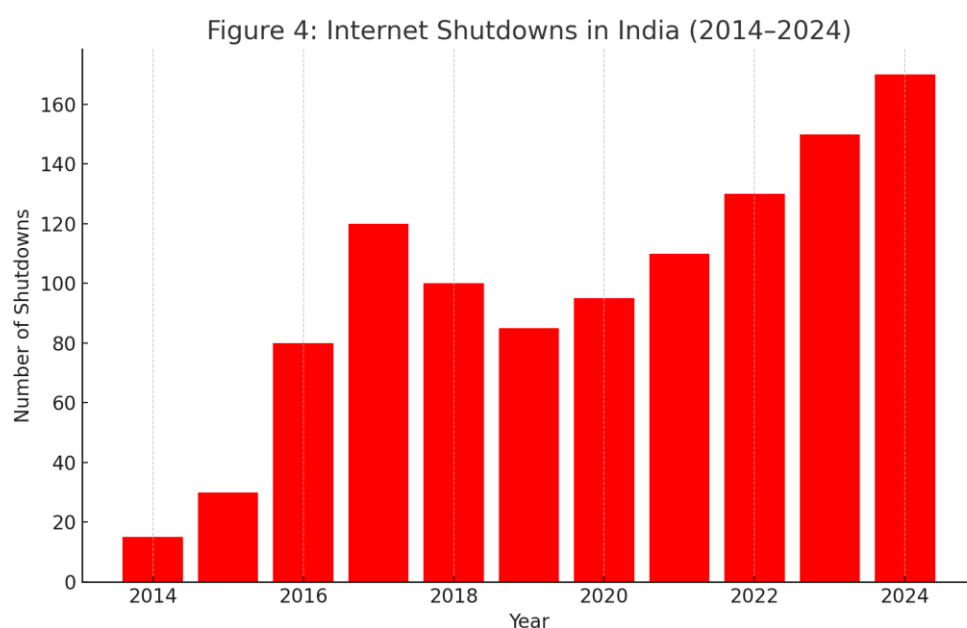
Repression is enhanced by technology. Not a single country has ordered more internet shutdowns than India: over 700 since 2014, and usually on pretexts of national security, though in many cases an unsuccessful attempt to silence protestant speech. The Information Technology Rules of the government of 2021 require programs to take down content that is

<sup>6</sup> “Declining Productivity: Is the Indian Parliament losing its edge?”, *Civildaily*, 24 Apr 2025

<sup>7</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2024)

offensive within 36 hours, and this will grant state agencies an overall ban on censorship. Mistrust is increased by the revelations of surveillance, including the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and opposition leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The net outcome is a weakened civil society, whereby self-censorship is promoted by fear of being punished. Such a reduction of free speech makes the republic hollow because citizens cannot make informed consent due to a lack of information.<sup>9</sup>



## LOSS OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Democratic accountability is based on transparency and healthy competition. With the introduction of electronic bonds in 2018, this has virtually legalised the anonymous political contribution. According to the reports by the Association of Democratic Reforms (2023), about 95 per cent of bond contributions were biased toward the ruling party, which gives it an unparalleled financial advantage.<sup>10</sup>

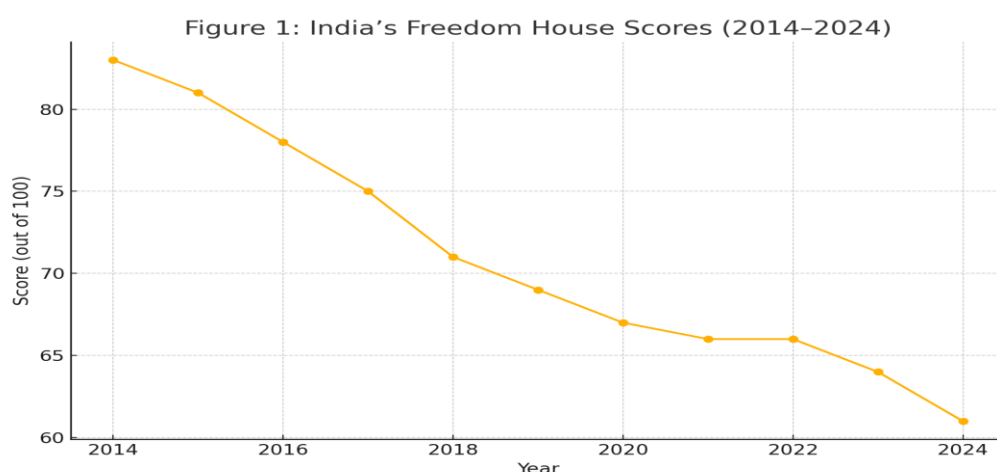
At the same time, the neutrality of the Election Commission has also been questioned. It has been concerned by the poor timekeeping of its state elections and also by its laxity concerning

<sup>8</sup> The Indian Express, “India saw 84 internet shutdowns in 2024, more than any other democracy: Report”, The Indian Express, 25 February 2025

<sup>9</sup> Karan Thapar, *The Decline of Independent Media in India* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2022)

<sup>10</sup> Association for Democratic Reforms, *Analysis of Electoral Bonds Data* (New Delhi: Association for Democratic Reforms, 2023)

the breaking of campaign-code by leaders of the ruling party.<sup>11</sup> States under the resources of the opposition are under constant pressure from the intervention of centrally appointed governors and politically-related investigations. Under the FCRA Act, civil-society groups that criticise the government have been forced to have their foreign-funding licenses suspended, and this inhibits independent advocacy. These trends all result in what scholars call asymmetric electoral competition- when elections continue, yet fairness is lost. Voters have the right to choose, but the meaningful alternatives are undermined by manipulating the structure.



## EMERGENCY OF HINDU NATIONALISM AND POPULIST SPEECHES

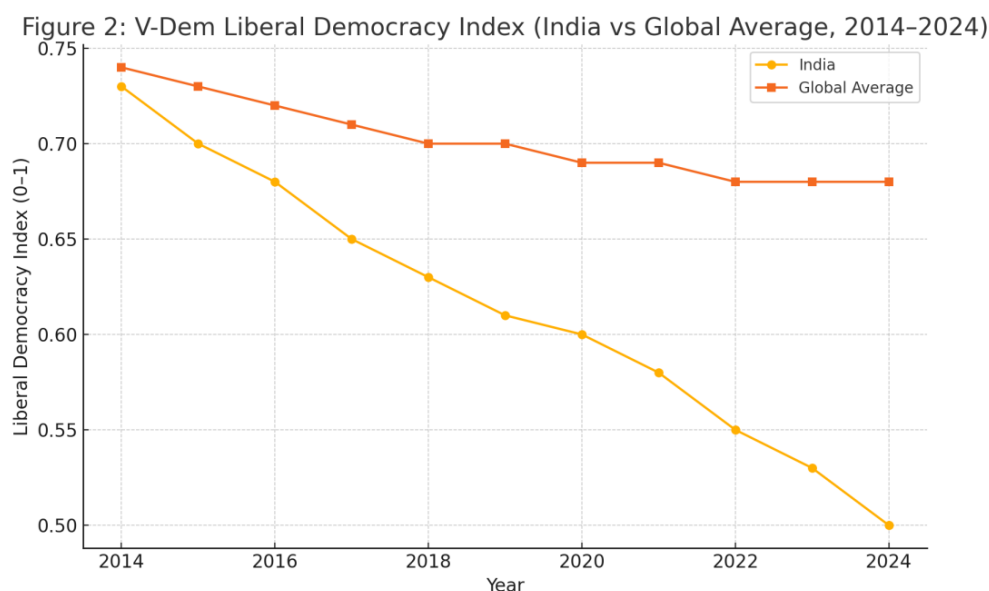
Hindu nationalism is at the very centre of the ideological shift in India. The vision of the nation promoted by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its parent organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is based on Hindutva, or cultural homogeneity and revivalist pride. This structure reinscribes citizenship in terms of religion, which marginalises the minorities.

This change can be seen in such policies as the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and the proposed National Register of Citizens. Although the CAA facilitates the process of acquiring citizenship by non-Muslim refugees of the adjacent states, it discriminates against Muslims implicitly, which is unjustified according to secular constitutionality. In 2019/20, mass protests were carried out in most parts of India, spearheaded by women and students, who were suppressed by heavy policing and bans on the internet.

<sup>11</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024: India (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2024)

These policies are strengthened by populist rhetoric. The language of politics is becoming more and more equated with the form of criticism of government policy, with betrayal of the nation. Journalists, academics and NGOs have been branded as being anti-national or urban Naxal by the social-media campaigns. This labelling creates polarization to society and disenfranchisement of pluralistic dialogue, which is the lifeline of democracy.

Welfare politics is also transformed into Hindu-majoritarian populism. The image of the Prime Minister is often associated with the development of government schemes where personal loyalty, as opposed to institutional loyalty, is created. The BJP has been able to penetrate this ideology throughout the bureaucracy and the civil society due to the strong organisational synergy of the two institutions, i.e., the BJP and the RSS.<sup>12</sup>



## INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL EXTERNALITIES

The negative outcome of democracy in India has external effects. Being the anchor of the Global South and a G20 and Quad member, the moral authority of India has traditionally been based on its democratic credentials. The fact that Freedom House, V-Dem and RSF issue downgrades has weakened its soft power and credibility in promoting democratic ideals to other countries internationally.<sup>13</sup> There is a growing trend among Western partners of

<sup>12</sup> Walter Anderson and Shridhar Damle, *The RSS and the Making of the Hindu Nation* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019)

<sup>13</sup> C. Raja Mohan, *India's Soft Power and Its Erosion in the Global South* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2023)

employing the principle of pragmatism as a way of balancing their interests in strategies with the issue of democracies.

Polarisation, within a nation, undermines societal cohesion. There is an increased religious vigilantism and hate crime against minorities and federal friction between the Centre and opposition-dominated states. There are economic consequences: the confidence of investors decreases when the indicators of the rule of law decline, and creative industries are victimised by censorship.

Nonetheless, India has the potential to be democratic. Enduring civic engagement is manifested in high voter turnout, strong regional parties, and a vibrant judiciary at lower levels. The grassroots movements, such as protests by farmers, environmental movements, women's groups, and others, still insist on having agency in democracy, and this demonstrates that backsliding is not linear or irreversible.

## CONCLUSION

The backsliding of democracy in India is not a sudden fall but a planned change in the governance order. India classifies its political trajectory as an electoral autocracy or hybrid regime following Narendra Modi's election in 2014, according to a variety of democracy projects as of 2021. This classification measures a democratic decline. A hybrid regime exists in a region between full democracy and full autocracy. The government believes in maintaining a legal facade of democracy by achieving the principle to talk democratically and walk autocratically by relying on fully legal harassment of the opposition. With majoritarian legitimisation, institutional seizure and suppression of dissent, there has arisen an electoral autocracy that upholds elections, but empties their content.

To change this trend, the following reforms are necessary:

**Institutional Autonomy:** Strengthen the autonomy of the Election Commission, judiciary, and media regulatory institutions by appointing them transparently and supervising them.

**Legal Protections:** Examine extreme legislations like UAPA and PMLA in order to make them compliant with constitutional freedoms.

**Transparency in Money:** Cancel shrouded electoral bonds and establish transparency in political donations.

**Media Pluralism:** Facilitate decentralised media, community-based journalism, and apply anti-monopoly principles in media ownership.

**Civic Education:** Reprove investments in secularism, tolerance, and constitutional literacy among the young people.

The preservation of Indian democracy, in the end, is not about the way it has been designed but rather about civic virtue, the desire of people to practice pluralism, to challenge authority and to demand accountability. The Constitution can only assure political equality when the citizens develop a democratic temper, as Ambedkar cautioned in 1949. The next decade will be the one where India will start to understand whether it will renew that promise or not, and keep on the track of the managed democracy.

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