



DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE AGE OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION: CHALLENGES TO INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

***Lokesha M K**

**Associate Professor, Department of political science, GFGC K.R. Pura, Bengaluru -36*

ABSTRACT

Political polarization has become a major challenge for contemporary democracies. India provides an especially important case because democratic competition operates within a society marked by deep linguistic, religious, caste, regional, economic and ideological diversity. This paper examines how polarization affects democratic resilience, institutions and governance in India. Using a qualitative and analytical design based on constitutional literature, scholarly research, parliamentary data and institutional reports, it focuses on Parliament, elections, political parties, federal relations, the judiciary, media, civil society and digital political communication. The paper distinguishes legitimate democratic disagreement from destructive polarization, arguing that polarization becomes institutionally dangerous when partisan or identity-based attachments weaken acceptance of political opponents, procedural rules and institutional legitimacy. Parliamentary evidence illustrates concerns about deliberative depth: PRS Legislative Research reports that only 16% of Bills in the 17th Lok Sabha were referred to committees, while 35% were passed with less than one hour of discussion in the Lok Sabha. At the same time, India's electoral scale, constitutional framework, federal diversity and continuing political competition demonstrate substantial capacities for democratic adaptation. The study concludes that resilience requires more than regular elections. It depends on institutional autonomy, parliamentary scrutiny, cooperative federalism, political pluralism, responsible digital communication, civic education and the continued acceptance of constitutional procedures by both governments and oppositions.

Keywords: *democratic resilience; political polarization; Indian democracy; Parliament; federalism; governance; social media; constitutional institutions*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's democratic experience remains one of the most significant cases in comparative politics. Since the Constitution came into force in 1950, political authority has been organized through universal adult franchise, representative institutions, parliamentary government, federalism, judicial review and periodic elections. The endurance of these arrangements in an exceptionally diverse society demonstrates an important capacity for democratic accommodation.

Yet democratic resilience cannot be measured by electoral continuity alone. A resilient democracy also requires institutions capable of processing disagreement, governments that remain accountable, opposition parties that can perform legitimate scrutiny, and citizens who continue to regard constitutional procedures as binding even when political outcomes are unwelcome. Political polarization therefore raises a central question for India: can intense competition remain compatible with institutional trust, pluralism and effective governance?

Political disagreement is not itself a democratic pathology. Ideological differences and organized political competition give voters meaningful alternatives. The difficulty arises when disagreement becomes affective and exclusionary: opponents are treated not simply as wrong but as illegitimate, disloyal or outside the acceptable political community. In such circumstances, compromise becomes costly, institutional decisions are judged primarily through partisan identity, and political communication increasingly rewards confrontation.

This paper studies polarization as an institutional problem rather than merely an electoral phenomenon. It argues that India's democratic resilience depends on the capacity to transform social and political conflict into constitutionally regulated competition. The analysis pays particular attention to Parliament, elections, parties, federalism, the judiciary, media and digital communication.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM, OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The central research problem is: How does contemporary political polarization influence the resilience of democratic institutions and the quality of governance in India? The paper pursues five objectives: to identify major dimensions of polarization; explain its relationship with democratic resilience; assess its effects on core institutions; examine the role of digital political communication; and identify measures that can strengthen constitutional and deliberative capacities.

The study asks: (1) What are the principal forms and drivers of polarization in India? (2) How does polarization affect institutional functioning and legitimacy? (3) How do digital platforms reshape political division? (4) What are the consequences for federal and administrative governance? and (5) Which reforms can strengthen resilience without suppressing legitimate political competition?

3. METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. It draws on books and peer-reviewed scholarship on Indian democracy, official constitutional and electoral materials, parliamentary research and relevant studies of digital politics. The approach is interpretative: it does not attempt to construct a new numerical polarization index. Instead, it examines how political divisions interact with institutional procedures, democratic norms and governance.

A limitation of this approach is that polarization is difficult to reduce to a single observable variable. Ideological distance, partisan attachment, social identity and affective hostility may move differently across regions and periods. Accordingly, the paper avoids treating India as politically homogeneous and uses the concept principally to analyze institutional pressures.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Democratic resilience refers to the capacity of a democratic system to absorb political stress while retaining constitutional government, meaningful competition, civil and political freedoms, institutional accountability and peaceful mechanisms for resolving conflict. Resilience therefore combines formal institutions with informal norms such as restraint, tolerance, acceptance of opposition and respect for procedural limits.

Three forms of polarization are analytically useful. Ideological polarization describes increasing distance between political positions. Partisan polarization occurs when party identity becomes a dominant lens for interpreting events and institutions. Affective polarization goes further by producing distrust or hostility toward supporters of opposing parties or political camps. The last form is particularly consequential because democracy requires adversaries to recognize one another as legitimate participants.

India's social complexity means that polarization can be layered across religion, caste, region, language, nationalism, class and party identification. Chhibber and Verma (2018) demonstrate the continuing importance of ideology and identity in the evolution of India's party system, while Kothari's (1970) classic account highlights

how political competition historically operated through accommodation and an expanding structure of participation. Contemporary resilience must similarly be understood as the ability to institutionalize conflict rather than eliminate it.

5. PARLIAMENT AND DELIBERATIVE CAPACITY

Parliament is the principal national arena in which disagreement should be converted into legislation, accountability and public reasoning. Its democratic function extends beyond passing Bills: Question Hour, committee scrutiny, budget discussion, motions and opposition interventions create mechanisms through which executive action can be examined.

Recent parliamentary data provide grounds for concern about deliberative depth. PRS Legislative Research reports that during the 17th Lok Sabha, 58% of Bills were passed within two weeks of introduction, 35% were passed with less than an hour of discussion in the Lok Sabha, and only 16% were referred to committees for detailed scrutiny (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). These figures do not prove that polarization alone caused reduced scrutiny, but they show why institutional procedures that enable cross-party examination matter in an adversarial environment.

A governing majority has a democratic mandate to legislate, while the opposition has a constitutional and political responsibility to scrutinize. Resilience requires both roles. Stronger committee referral, adequate time between introduction and passage, predictable parliamentary calendars and protection of substantive debate can reduce the pressure to treat every legislative disagreement as a winner-takes-all contest.

6. ELECTIONS, PARTIES AND POLITICAL COMPETITION

India's regular and highly competitive elections remain a foundational source of democratic legitimacy. Elections allow citizens to replace governments, reward performance and express regional as well as national preferences. Political parties aggregate interests and provide the organizational infrastructure for this competition.

Polarization becomes problematic when election campaigns rely excessively on identity antagonism, misinformation or permanent mobilization. In such conditions, the distinction between campaigning and governing can narrow, and post-election cooperation becomes more difficult. Parties also shape democratic culture internally: candidate selection, leadership structures, consultation and tolerance of dissent influence how political competition is practiced beyond the party organization.

The appropriate democratic response is not to reduce electoral competition but to deepen fair competition. Transparent political finance, enforceable campaign rules, timely disclosure, responsible rhetoric and stronger internal deliberation can help ensure that electoral victory determines who governs without determining who is considered a legitimate member of the political community.

7. FEDERALISM AS A MECHANISM OF RESILIENCE

Federalism is one of India's most important mechanisms for accommodating territorial and political diversity. State governments provide arenas in which regional parties, linguistic interests and locally distinctive political preferences can obtain representation. This dispersal of authority can act as a democratic safety valve by preventing national politics from becoming the only meaningful site of competition.

Polarization can nevertheless strain federal relations when disputes over governors, fiscal transfers, centrally sponsored programmes, investigative agencies, legislation or administrative jurisdiction become inseparable from party rivalry. Conflict between levels of government is normal in a federation; permanent institutional hostility is not.

Cooperative federalism should therefore be understood as structured disagreement rather than political uniformity. Regular use of intergovernmental forums, transparent fiscal consultation and clearer conventions in constitutionally sensitive areas can help preserve working relationships between governments led by competing parties.

8. JUDICIARY AND CONSTITUTIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The judiciary, Election Commission, constitutional offices and other oversight bodies depend on both legal authority and public confidence. Polarized politics can produce selective institutional trust: citizens may praise an institution when a decision favours their political preference and question its legitimacy when the outcome changes.

Such reactions are not unique to India, but they create a serious resilience problem because institutions cannot perform stabilizing functions if every decision is interpreted solely through partisan advantage. Institutional independence must therefore be accompanied by transparent procedures, reasoned decisions, consistent standards and credible accountability. The objective is not to shield institutions from criticism; democratic criticism is

legitimate. Rather, institutional design should make it easier for citizens to distinguish evidence-based criticism from partisan delegitimation.

9. MEDIA, SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL POLARIZATION

India's communication environment has been transformed by television, online news, messaging applications and social-media platforms. Digital networks have lowered barriers to political participation, enabled rapid communication between leaders and citizens, and expanded access to competing sources of information.

The same environment can intensify polarization. Research on Indian political discourse on Twitter has found that influential users often engage with political crises in partisan ways and that polarized influencers can receive greater retweeting and follower rewards (Dash et al., 2021). This suggests that platform incentives can amplify politically divisive communication even without a centralized actor directing it.

Generative artificial intelligence further increases the challenge by lowering the cost of producing convincing synthetic text, audio and visual material. A democratic response must balance integrity with freedom of expression. Media literacy, transparent political advertising, disclosure of synthetic campaign material, credible fact-checking and proportionate platform accountability are preferable to broad restrictions that could themselves weaken open political debate.

10. CIVIL SOCIETY, CITIZENSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Democratic resilience extends beyond state institutions. Universities, professional associations, civil-society organizations, journalists and community groups can create spaces where political differences are examined rather than merely mobilized. Constitutional literacy and critical media skills are especially important in a political environment where emotionally framed information circulates rapidly.

Polarization also affects governance. Complex policy problems often require continuity across administrations, cooperation among levels of government and consultation with affected groups. When policy questions become symbols of partisan identity, evidence may be discounted according to its political source. This can reduce compromise, weaken long-term planning and make administrative coordination more difficult.

At the same time, vigorous political competition can improve governance by exposing failures and generating alternatives. The policy objective is therefore not depolarization at any cost. It is to maintain institutional rules that channel disagreement into scrutiny, accountability and peaceful policy change.

11. DISCUSSION AND MAJOR FINDINGS

Five findings emerge. First, Indian polarization is multidimensional and cannot be explained through party competition alone. Social identity, ideology, regional interests and digital communication frequently overlap. Second, polarization becomes democratically dangerous when it changes attitudes toward procedures and opponents, not simply when policy preferences diverge.

Third, constitutional design by itself is insufficient. Informal democratic norms—restraint, mutual toleration, willingness to deliberate and acceptance of legitimate opposition—shape whether institutions can perform their formal functions. Fourth, digital communication has simultaneously democratized political expression and strengthened incentives for rapid, emotionally charged and partisan messaging.

Fifth, India retains substantial sources of resilience: electoral competition, a federal structure that distributes political authority, constitutional courts, parliamentary institutions, a large civil society and a deeply established practice of mass electoral participation. The central challenge is to reinforce these capacities so that political conflict remains bounded by constitutional rules.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen parliamentary scrutiny by increasing the routine referral of significant Bills to committees and allowing adequate time for examination before final passage.
- Protect the operational autonomy and transparency of constitutional and statutory institutions through predictable procedures, reasoned decisions and clear appointment and accountability standards.
- Deepen cooperative federalism through regular Union-State consultation and greater institutional use of intergovernmental forums for disputes involving shared responsibilities.
- Improve transparency in political finance, campaigning and digital political advertising so that citizens can identify the source and sponsorship of political messages.
- Develop media and AI literacy programmes in universities, colleges and civic institutions, with emphasis on source verification, manipulated media and responsible political engagement.
- Encourage political parties to strengthen internal consultation, issue-based debate and democratic candidate-selection practices.
- Create more structured cross-party spaces—especially parliamentary committees and all-party consultations—where negotiation can continue outside the incentives of mass political spectacle.

- Preserve pluralism and constitutional equality as core democratic resources. Resilience depends on citizens and political groups believing that electoral defeat does not remove their legitimate place within the constitutional order.

13. CONCLUSION

Political polarization is a serious but manageable challenge for Indian democracy. Disagreement is not evidence of democratic failure; it is an unavoidable feature of a plural society. The critical distinction is between disagreement that remains constitutionally organized and polarization that weakens mutual legitimacy, institutional trust and willingness to accept procedural constraints.

India's democratic resilience rests on more than the regular conduct of elections. It depends on Parliament's deliberative capacity, credible institutions, judicial and constitutional checks, federal accommodation, responsible political parties, an open information environment and citizens capable of engaging political difference without converting it into exclusion.

The sustainable response to polarization is therefore neither enforced consensus nor suppression of contentious politics. It is stronger democratic institutionalization. When governments can govern, oppositions can scrutinize, institutions can act independently, States can negotiate with the Union, and citizens can contest political ideas within a shared constitutional framework, political conflict can remain a source of democratic accountability rather than institutional erosion.

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