

Democracy in India—Its Foundation in Cultural Pluralism

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The success of democracy in India is frequently attributed to the British influence. Britain ruled India for some 200 years, roughly 1757 to 1947. The British democratic influence is certainly there but so is the influence of the Indian tradition of debate, discussion and pluralism embedded in its culture. Britain ruled a number of countries for an extended period. Democracy succeeded only in a few of the colonies, among these India. India's record in maintaining democratic institutions in the developing world is unmatched, so far.

I am well aware of the many problems that beset Indian democracy in the 21st century: criminalization of politics, corruption at the highest levels of government, breakdown of law and order, unstable multi-party governance, ill-principled political parties, and the electorate divided along religious, regional and caste lines. Further, pollution is rampant, city streets are littered, and a large section of the population grinds in poverty.

Despite these massive problems, democratic institutions are reasonably well established in India. Free and competitive elections produce a change in government, not force. Military has stayed out of politics; the judiciary (although under strain) is independent and assertive; the press is un-trampled; and civil liberties exist. The 2014 and 2019 elections brought to office Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); Modi rose from poverty to power.

Democracy succeeded in India because it is implanted on fertile soil. I describe here the importance of debate, discussion and cultural pluralism as sources for democracy in India.

The Vedic Period

The history of debate can be traced to the earliest scripture in India, the Vedas. The creation hymn in the *Rig Veda* (10:129) asks: "whence it all came; how creation happened?" The answer provided in is not dogmatic but tentative. Note especially the last stanza in the following hymn.

At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness.
All this was only un-illuminated water.

That One which came to be, enclosed in nothing,
arose at last, born of the power of heat.

In the beginning desire descended on it—
that was the primal seed, born of the mind.

But, after all, who knows, and who can say

whence it all came, and how creation
happened?

The gods themselves are later than creation,
so who knows truly whence it has arisen?

Whence all creation had its origin,

He, whether he fashioned it or whether he did
not,
He, who surveys it all from highest heaven,
He knows—or maybe even he does not know.

--*Rig Veda* 10:129, adapted from: A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That
was India*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1967, pp 247-48

The Bhagavad Gita is among the most revered Hindu scripture. The Bhagavad Gita is not a monologue or a sermon but a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna questions the wisdom of engaging in a war that will surely destroy most combatants. He asks: what is the meaning of victory when those you love will likely perish? Krishna encourages Arjuna to join the battle, offering several arguments. Arjuna must follow his duty as a Kshatriya warrior; to avoid battle would bring shame. Then the two opposing armies were already arrayed against each other on the field. The battle cannot be stopped. Right and justice are on Arjuna's side. He must stand firm. Slain, he will gain heaven; victorious, he will enjoy the earth. Only after several arguments back and forth, does Arjuna pick up his bow and fight.

In the concluding portion of the Gita, Krishna says: I have described to you what is just and that which is not. Consider these points carefully. "Now, do as you wish."

Some of the Upanishads are records of debates among religious disputants. Sage Yagnavalkya's debates against his opponents are recorded in the *Brihad-aranyaka* Upanishad, for example.

Adi Shankaracharya, born in 788, generally regarded as the founder of modern Hinduism, preached *advaita*, non-dualistic philosophy. The world is not separate from God. God is manifested in each and every particle in the universe. Shankaracharya traveled the length and breadth of India debating with Buddhist, Jain and Hindu monks of different persuasion. Through his argument, not through armed struggle, did he win India for Hinduism.

Small scale violence among different religious sects did occur in ancient India, but it pales in comparison with the religiously inspired violence elsewhere in the world. The history of violence in Christianity and Islam is a long tale of woe. Early India is free of large scale religious violence.

Ramayana: The premier Hindu epic *Ramayana* carries forward the tradition of debate. Prince Rama is ordered to spend 14 years in wilderness by the reigning monarch Dasarath, acting under the influence of his queen, Kaikeyi. Javali (also spelled Jabali), a Minister at the

court, seeks to persuade Prince Rama to disobey his father's command. Forsake empty arguments about *dharma* and filial obligation. Take the throne, and dislodge your weak father.

Come and be crowned in the prosperous city of Ayodhya, thy locks unbound; the Capital awaits thee. Taste the royal luxuries worthy of thee, O Mighty Prince.

I pity those who give themselves up especially to that which is meritorious, disregarding their own interest;

Pious men say, the 8th day should be given up to sacrifices for the spirits of our ancestors. The food that is offered is wasted. Can the dead eat? If that which is eaten here could enter the body of another, then let a sacrifice be offered for those who are setting out on a distant journey and they will not need any provisions!

The Books were all written by leamed men for the sake of inducing others to give in charity. Their doctrine is: distribute gifts, perform *yagnas*, give away your wealth; renounce the world.

O Sagacious Prince, there is no world but this; let this thought be absorbed by thee. Concern yourself with what is evident and turn thy back on what is beyond our knowledge. Take the crown.

--*The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Translated by Hari Prasad Shastri, Ch 108, paraphrased.

Prince Rama rejects Javali's counsel as short-sighted and ill-conceived. "If I behaved selfishly, people would do the same." *Yatha Raja, tatha praja*-- As the king, so the public. Rama rejects Javali's arguments and accepts exile in the forest for 14 years.

Women. Women argued and participated in debates. Four examples are cited here.

1. Gargi, a strong woman, questions the much esteemed Sage Yagnavalkya in one of the debates among religious luminaries. Note her opening combative words.

O Yagnavalkya, as the son of a warrior from Kasi or Videha might string his loosened bow and with two deadly arrows in his hand rise to give battle, even so have I risen to fight thee with two questions. Answer my questions. --*The Upanishads*, Translated by Swami Prabhavananda

Only after the questions were answered to her satisfaction, did Gargi hold her peace.

2. Rama prepares to be exiled to the forest for 14 years, as mentioned previously. His wife Sita wishes to accompany him into the forest. Rama seeks to dissuade her. The forest is a terrible place, teeming with poisonous reptiles and flesh-eating demons

(Rakshasas). Sita would be safer and happier to stay behind in the palace. So argues Rama.

Sita rejects Rama's arguments. She uses strong language to upbraid her husband. She calls Rama "a woman with the body of a man," for willing to abandon her to others.

Taking you as his son-in-law, what did my father, the king of Mithila, recognize in you: "a woman with the body of a man."

On what grounds are you inclined to desert me, exclusively devoted as I am to you. I will not cast my eyes even in thought on anyone else but you.

How do you, like a man who lives by his wife, intend to deliver me to others, your chaste wife, who was married to you as a virgin, and has lived with you for a long time.

---Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, Gita Press, Ayodhyakand, Canto 30: 3,5,7,8; slightly rephrased.

3. In the *Mahabharata* epic, Prince Yudhisthira loses his wife Draupadi in a gambling match of dice. He lost her in a wager after he had lost himself. Draupadi is dragged to the court by the winning party, the Kauravas. For the insult meted to her, she attacks the silence of the ruling princes gathered at the court, including the revered elder statesman Bhisma. She argues that her husband could not have lost her in the game after he had lost his own person. She poses this question.

In this great assembly, I see great people, the elders of the great House of the Kurus, reputed for the dharma, righteous conduct. Here I have been humiliated and dragged to the court by evil men, pulling at my hair. Yet, you all are silent. My husbands are powerless to intervene. Where has dharma fled?

I ask you this question: did my husband Yudhisthira lose me before or after he lost himself in the game. If he lost himself first, he was not a free man and he had no right to wager me.

The elder statesman Bhisma replied "I am indeed at a loss to give a proper answer to your question. A man cannot gamble something after he has lost his own person. According to this principle, Yudhisthira had no right to place you as a bet after he had wagered his own person and lost. But then there is this to consider. A man has right over his wife whether he is free or not. Accordingly, I cannot say definitely whether you are a free person or not.

--*Mahabharata*, by Kamala Subramaniam, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2001, Ch 13, paraphrased.

4. Among the noted women poets in middle years in India include: Andal, Mirabai, Mahadevi, and Lalla Ded. Mirabai, although a princess, was a rebel. She fought against the strictures of her royal household. She danced and sang in public places, contrary to royal etiquette. Her devotional hymns are sung in India to this day. Mira is a symbol of female liberation. See more at:
<http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/heroine12.html>

Ashoka and Akbar

Emperor Ashoka ruled in India in the 3rd century BC. He did much to spread Buddhism in India and beyond. He encouraged debate to resolve differences among the several Buddhist orders. Three Buddhist councils were held during his reign. Ashoka codified debating rules, much like the present Robert's Rules of Order. See Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*, 2005, on this point.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar (1550s) was religiously quite liberal. Religious debates among luminaries were held at his court. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Jesuits, and Zoroastrians participated in these debates. Emperor Akbar's tolerant attitude toward different religions is legendary. He broke away from Muslim orthodoxy.

In his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), Dr. Amartya Sen suggests that Islam was the source for Akbar's pluralistic religious philosophy. Such is not the case. Akbar had given up on Islam. Akbar adopted many un-Islamic rules of conduct, such as bowing to the sun, wearing at various times on his forehead the Tilak (a Hindu religious symbol) and a sacred thread on his wrist (*rakhi*). The Islamic clergy did not give him a Muslim burial upon his death. Akbar was born a Muslim but he did not die a Muslim. Akbar was of the view that Islam was a spent force and that it would decline in the year 1,000 of the Islamic calendar, i.e. in the 17th century. Akbar was precocious in this assessment. Islam did decline and lost its luster in the 17th century. Maharaja Shivaji defeated Mughal generals in 1660. Muslims lost at Vienna in 1683, turning the tide against Islam in Europe.

--See accounts of Akbar's religious views and practices recorded by Abdal Badauni, who lived and wrote at the great emperor's court. *History of India: The Mohammedan Period as Described by its Own Historians*, Vol. V, Ed by A. V. Williams Jackson, 1907.

Secularism in Ancient India

The separation of Church and the State called secularism is rightly praised as a Western practice. Secularism took birth in Europe after the 30-year religious war, 1618-1648. The 30-year War between Catholics and Protestants wrought much havoc in Europe. The peace of Westphalia (1648) separated Church from the State and gave birth to secularism.

Secularism in India has ancient roots. It is not a Western import. The Vedas declare: “*Ekam sat, viprah bahuda vadanti*”—Truth is one; the sages call it by various names. Three major religions were prominent in ancient India: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Atheists and agnostics were also present. The Charvaka School and the Lokayats represented the atheistic tradition in India. Different religions did not fight in India. There may have been skirmishes, but no large scale warfare.

A smaller number of Jews, Parsees and Christians also found home in India. Jews entered India soon after the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 70 A. D. Parsees entered India in the 7th century after their homeland (Persia) was overrun by Islam. A small number of Muslim merchants from Arabia also settled in South India in the 7th C.

Thus, Jews, Christians and Muslims have lived peacefully in India since ancient times. Jews have suffered much in history both under Christianity and under Islam, but not in India. Dr. Nathan Katz tells us: “The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora.” See his: *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Univ. of California Press, 2000, p. 4).

In short, pluralism and tolerance of diversity are abiding features of the Indian tradition. Calling Hindus “communal” or anti-secular is plainly wrong.

Polytheism and Monotheism

Monotheism is the belief that there is only One God (usually male) to the exclusion of others. Polytheism in contrast is the idea that the One Divine manifests in many forms, both male and female. At the heart of polytheism is the simple notion that different people have different religious needs and that there are different methods of worship. Polytheism is open-minded and easy going.

Hinduism, Buddhism and native traditions around the globe may be called polytheistic. Polytheism nurtures cultural pluralism.

Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, are monotheistic: there is One God and one correct method of worship. There are strict do’s and do not’s. Christianity and Islam unleashed much violence in their history. The Inquisition (1200-1600) unleashed ferocity in Europe and especially in Spain. Islam outdid Christianity in unleashing violence: millions perished; kafir temples were looted and then destroyed. In India alone some 6,000 Hindu and Buddhist temples were turned to rubble. As recently as 2000, the tall Bamian Buddha statues in Afghanistan were dynamited by the Taliban. History continues.

Things have improved in the Western world, thanks to the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. The old order of dogma gave way to reason. The Church lost its pre-eminence. The Enlightenment philosophy led directly to the American and French Revolutions, which in turn led to the establishment of democratic institutions.

Islam has not been so lucky. The bloodiest acts of violence in the name of religion come from Islam. Jonathan Kirsch writes:

The men who hijacked and crashed four civilian airliners were inspired to sacrifice their own lives, and to take the lives of several thousand “infidels,” because they had embraced the simple but terrifying logic that lies at the heart of monotheism: if there is one god, if there is only one right way to worship that god, then there is only one fitting punishment for failing to do so—death.

--See Jonathan Kirsch, *God against the Gods: the History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism*, 2004. P. 2.

The pluralistic Indian tradition has much to commend itself. Prof Sheldon Pollock of Columbia University agrees.

“The classicity of Indian philosophy lies precisely in the development of reasoned argument. . . For classical India, pluralism itself became something of an ultimate value. A verse composed by the great eleventh-century philosopher king, Bhoja of Dhar, offers a perfect encapsulation: ‘Learn Buddhism, behave like a Jain, follow Vedic norms, and meditate on Shiva.’

Conclusion

A history of debate and cultural pluralism are India’s abiding features. These features provide certain assurance that democratic institutions stand on a firm foundation in the nation.

References

1. The description of the history of debate in India in this essay is derived in part from Amartya Sen’s book, *The Argumentative Indian*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
2. India’s caste system is also a source of cultural pluralism. See my essay titled: “India’s Caste System and American Pluralism,” at www.uwf.edu/lgoel
3. Sheldon Pollock: “The alternative classicism of classical India,” in *Seminar Magazine* (Delhi) July 2015.