



Ideological Polarization and Democratic Fatigue in Contemporary India: Patterns, Implications, and Future Directions

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Abstract

This article examines the growing intersection of ideological polarization, democratic fatigue, and external-economic influences in contemporary India. As the world's largest democracy, India's political and social landscape reflects both the vitality and strain of pluralism. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from political science, sociology, and media studies, the analysis explores competing ideological narratives. It discusses how left-right partisanship, religious and linguistic cleavages are reshaping public discourse and institutional trust. Empirical data from surveys, election studies, and policy reports reveal increasing voter cynicism, declining faith in institutions, and heightened affective polarization within both traditional and digital spaces. The study argues that while ideological diversity can enrich democratic deliberation, sustained polarization risks fragmenting civic cohesion and undermining the credibility of governance. External factors such as information manipulation, cyber interference, and concentrated media ownership further complicate the domestic landscape by amplifying selective narratives and fostering public distrust. Yet, the article also identifies resilience factors, judicial independence, civil society activism, and youth engagement that continue to uphold democratic continuity. Looking forward, three possible trajectories are proposed: democratic deepening, intensified fatigue, and a hybrid outcome where formal democracy persists amid social division. The discussion underscores the need for renewed civic education, media literacy, and inclusive institutional reform to ensure that India's ideological diversity remains a source of democratic strength rather than fragmentation.

Keywords: *Civic Engagement; Democratic Fatigue; Governance; Ideological Polarization; India; Media Influence; Political Trust*

1. Introduction

India's democracy is often described as a paradox of endurance and strain. As one of the world's most populous, multilingual, and multicultural societies, it has sustained a democratic framework for more than seven decades while accommodating extraordinary diversity. Yet beneath this institutional continuity lies a deepening ideological polarization that increasingly shapes political behavior, public discourse, and the functioning of democratic institutions. In recent years, polarization has come to define

India's political and social climate. It manifests in electoral alignments, digital communication patterns, and competing narratives of nationalism and secularism.

The diversity that once symbolized India's democratic strength is now becoming a fault line. The Constitution envisioned pluralism and deliberative engagement as the foundation of citizenship, but these ideals face mounting challenges from identity politics and populist mobilization. Scholars such as Mohanty (2016) have noted that the Indian state operates within a complex tension between justice, democracy, and structural inequality. It makes the country vulnerable to ideological contestation when governance is mediated through uneven institutions. This structural ambivalence often produces what, in my opinion is *democratic fatigue*, which refers to a set of attitudes and behaviors that include declining trust in political and civic institutions, growing cynicism about political actors. Empirical studies support this diagnosis. Motiram & Sarma (2014) demonstrate that since the 1990s, India has witnessed a steady rise in multidimensional polarization, not only in economic terms but also across caste, regional, and rural-urban lines. Their research shows that economic growth has coincided with deep social segmentation, producing both relative deprivation and intensified group identity. Polarization, therefore, is not only ideological but also structural, rooted in the uneven outcomes of liberalization and globalization. The political system mirrors this complexity: ideological divisions between secular and nationalist visions, between welfare and market orientations, or between centralization and federal autonomy, increasingly shape electoral rhetoric and legislative behavior.

Media ecosystems have amplified these divides. Digital communication platforms, while democratizing expression, have also created fragmented public spheres. Studies such as Dash et al., (2021) reveal that political influencers with partisan leanings gain disproportionate visibility, encouraging echo chambers and emotional mobilization rather than deliberative exchange. Similarly, Mitra & Das (2025) show that algorithmic curation on social networks reinforces belief divisions, making ideological engagement increasingly insular. These studies suggest that India's digital sphere has become a terrain of political competition where ideological loyalties are constantly performed and rewarded. The impact of this mediated polarization extends beyond discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rajan et al. (2024) published a study on politicization and polarization in Indian news coverage. It found that while political messaging intensified around health measures and accountability, polarization fluctuated across issues, illustrating that media-driven division is neither uniform nor static. Such findings highlight that polarization in India is multidimensional; it varies by topic, platform, and audience, suggesting a dynamic relationship between ideology and communication rather than a single, unidirectional process.

At the level of political thought, nationalism continues to serve as both a unifying narrative and a divisive force. Tharoor (2021) argues that contemporary Indian politics has witnessed the moral inversion of nationalism, from an inclusive civic project to a majoritarian identity framework. The symbolic politics of heritage, religion, and security has become central to electoral strategy, often framing dissent as disloyalty. This trend resonates with global patterns of populist resurgence, yet India's case is distinct in its fusion of cultural revivalism with digital populism, a hybrid that simultaneously invokes tradition and technology. Academic perspectives on Indian democracy underscore both resilience and fragility. DeSouza, et al. (2022) situates India's current phase within a longer historical continuum, arguing that democratic norms persist even amid institutional strain. The contributors show that while local governance, activism, and judicial interventions often mitigate authoritarian tendencies, the overall system exhibits growing ambivalence between formal participation and substantive inclusion. This ambivalence is central to understanding "democratic fatigue," a phenomenon marked not by overt collapse but by disillusionment, polarization, and performative participation.

Economic and foreign policy dynamics further complicate this picture. India's integration into global markets has strengthened its geopolitical standing but also exposed it to ideological realignments. Competing narratives of nationalism and globalization, or of economic sovereignty and digital

dependency, reflect broader anxieties about identity and autonomy in a post-liberal world. These tensions are visible in domestic debates over foreign funding, technology regulation, and cultural influence, each of which becomes a proxy battleground for ideological legitimacy. As a result, polarization extends beyond the political arena into questions of knowledge, expertise, and belonging.

This research therefore aims to analyze the evolving patterns and implications of ideological polarization in contemporary India, exploring how these dynamics contribute to democratic fatigue and institutional transformation. It adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on recent scholarship, media discourse, and case-based evidence to unpack how polarization operates across political, social, and communicative domains. The objective is not merely to document division but to interpret its mechanisms, how ideology is constructed, circulated, and internalized in everyday democratic practice.

By combining theoretical insight with empirical observation, the discussion situates India within a global context where democracies face the paradox of simultaneous expansion and exhaustion. As DeSouza et al. (2022) suggest, the endurance of Indian democracy rests not only on its constitutional framework but also on its capacity for critical self-renewal. Understanding polarization as both a symptom and a driver of democratic fatigue enables a more nuanced reading of India's political future, one that acknowledges its resilience while confronting its vulnerabilities.

2. Ideological Polarization

In recent years, ideological polarization has emerged as one of the most defining features of India's democratic discourse. It manifests not only in electoral competition but also in everyday social interactions, media consumption, and identity formation. Understanding its conceptual roots and varied expressions is essential to assess how polarization influences governance, civic engagement, and institutional stability in a plural society like India.

2.1 Definition and Theoretical Framing

Ideological polarization refers to the increasing divergence of political attitudes, beliefs, and identities. Sometimes, it expresses opposing lines which leads to minimal overlap or shared values between groups (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). It is not simply disagreement; it includes affective elements, how groups perceive one another and identity anchoring, where political affiliation becomes central to an individual's self-concept (Mitra & Das, 2025). Theoretical models distinguish between *issue polarization* (differences in policy preferences), *affective polarization* (mutual distrust and negative affect toward opposing groups), and *identity polarization* (where political identities coalesce with religious, linguistic, or cultural identities). At the same time, McCoy et al. (2018) argue that this phenomenon represents a global challenge to democratic resilience, as polarization tends to undermine shared norms of civility and pluralism.

In the Indian context, ideological polarization must be understood through both historical legacies (caste, religion, colonialism, regional identities) and institutional drivers (federal structure, electoral incentives, and media). Mohanty (2016) argues that the Indian state's structure always contained a tension between universal constitutional promises and uneven implementation, especially of justice and equality. This structural mismatch creates fertile ground for polarization when groups perceive that the system privileges some identities over others DeSouza, et al. (2022) frames polarization as part of a dynamic: where democratic norms such as deliberation, dissent, and contestation are simultaneously preserved and strained, often unevenly across India's many regions and communities. As Sunstein (2017) explains, online "echo chambers" allow users to self-select information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs,

thereby reinforcing confirmation bias. This pattern is visible across Indian social media, where political discourse increasingly mirrors the global trend toward affective partisanship.

Theoretical framings from political psychology underscore that polarization is self-reinforcing. Once political identity becomes a primary lens through which social reality is interpreted, evidential asymmetry, confirmation bias, and selective exposure become common. Digital media accelerates these processes through algorithmic filtering and social clustering (Mitra & Das, 2025), while electoral systems that reward loyalty over policy nuance tend to amplify confrontational rhetoric.

2.2 Manifestations in Politics, Society, and Media

In Politics: The evolution of India's party system since the 1990s has deepened ideological differentiation between political actors (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Their empirical analysis shows that Indian voters increasingly identify along cultural and religious lines rather than economic class, which aligns with Jaffrelot's (2021) observation that Hindu nationalism has reshaped India's democratic ethos into an "ethnic democracy." At the same time, regional political cultures retain strong countercurrents of pluralism. State-level politics often complicate national ideological narratives, highlighting India's enduring subnational diversity. Electoral competition in India has seen more frequent deployment of identity-based mobilization, religion, caste, region, as political cues. Political parties increasingly frame platforms in terms not only of policy prescriptions (development, welfare, and infrastructure) but also who belongs and who doesn't. Rhetoric around "national identity," "tradition," or "ritual purity" has become more central in manifestos and campaign speeches. The 2019 and 2024 national election cycles illustrate this: major parties not only target developmental promises but also devote considerable strategic resources to cultural symbolism, communal appeals, and identity narratives (Tharoor, 2021).

In Society: Polarization in politics seeps into social life. Neighborhoods, social groups, even families increasingly see divisions. Instances of social hostility, harassment, and hate speech, exclusion against religious or linguistic minor communities have become more visible in public forums. For instance, the rise in hate speech incidents reflects how societal polarization is not limited to political campaigns but affects everyday senses of safety and belonging (Singh, 2025). Regional and linguistic cleavages remain strong. States with distinct languages (Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Karnataka) have maintained robust political culture centered around regional identity. These regional identities often intersect with national identity debates, sometimes in cooperation, sometimes in contention. Caste remains another deeply embedded axis of identity. Even as political parties attempt to build broad coalitions, caste alignment and regional caste politics continue to structure voter preferences and organizational loyalties (Motiram & Sarma, 2014).

In Media: The media ecosystem amplifies, mediates, and sometimes mitigates polarization. Traditional print and television media have shown increasing partisanship, aligning with political ideologies and catering to segmented audiences. Digital and social media are especially potent vectors of amplification. Dash et al. (2021) find that during political crises in India, influencers with overt partisan alignments attract more engagement and play a central role in framing issues in identity terms. Mitra & Das (2025) show that algorithmic curation on platforms causes exposure bias, users are more likely to see content aligning with their existing affiliations, which reinforces polarization. Even neutral or policy-oriented news often gets interpreted through polarized lenses depending on which outlet publishes it.

Moreover, social media allows for "parallel publics" that develop their own narratives, facts, and historical interpretations. Disagreements over history (e.g., colonial era, Partition, inter-religious conflicts) or scientific issues (for instance, COVID-19 and vaccine discourse) become markers of identity, rather than simply matters of evidence or policy. The study on COVID-19 coverage illustrates that

politicization of health messaging increased polarization: sources trusted by one bloc were distrusted by another, even when data was clear, demonstrating the power of framing and identity over facts.

2.3 Empirical Evidence: Election Data, Surveys, Social Media Trends, Regional and Linguistic Cleavages

Election Data and Voting Behavior: Data from the 2019 and 2024 national elections show shifts in vote shares tightly aligned with identity markers. For example, in constituencies with mixed religious or caste compositions, turnout and vote margins increasingly correspond with how parties mobilize along minority identity categories or promises of cultural protection. Surveys indicate that voters often prioritize identity narratives (nationalism, religion, regional pride) over policy detail in campaign materials (DeSouza, et al., 2022).

Survey research also reveals declining trust in political institutions and processes among certain groups. For example, national surveys carried out in 2022-23 show that respondents from religious minority communities or from economically marginalized castes report lower trust in parliament, media, and law enforcement, compared to majority or upper-caste respondents. These trust deficits are associated with perceptions of bias in enforcement of law, unequal access to welfare benefits, or neglect in infrastructure development.

Social Media Trends: Studies of social media usage patterns show that users are clustering into ideological enclaves. Mitra & Das (2025) used network analysis to map exposure biases: users preferring content aligned with one major political ideology saw far fewer “cross-cutting” messages. Dash et al. (2021) observed that influencers with strong partisan profiles (whether religious, regional, or nationalist) tend to have high reach and engagement, thereby shaping public discourse more than moderate or centrist voices. The algorithms reward emotionally charged content, which often aligns with polarized identity speech. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation or contested scientific claims spread differentially across ideological groups.

Regional and Linguistic Cleavages: India’s regionally diverse states continue to assert local identities: Tamil Nadu’s linguistic nationalism, West Bengal’s political culture distinct from the Hindi-belt, Punjab’s religious and cultural distinctiveness, and Kashmir’s unique political dynamics are just a few examples. These cleavages are not merely symbolic; they influence political alignments, policy preferences, and expectations of governance. Motiram & Sarma (2014) discuss how regional inequality differences in infrastructure, educationally, health correlates with stronger regional political identity. When citizens perceive that national policies do not address regional disparities, regional identity becomes a lens for judging national political actors.

2.4 Positive and Negative Effects of Ideological Polarization

While much public discourse treats polarization as inherently harmful, scholarly literature presents a more nuanced view. Polarization can, under certain conditions, invigorate democratic life by widening participation, clarifying ideological alternatives, and compelling institutions to respond to neglected voices. Yet, when polarization hardens into affective hostility or identity-driven exclusion, it can weaken civic trust and distort policy priorities. In India’s context, where diversity is a democratic foundation, the challenge lies in balancing the productive dimensions of ideological competition with the risks of entrenched division. The following discussion outlines both the constructive and adverse consequences of polarization in contemporary Indian democracy.

2.4.1 Positive Effects:

2.4.1.1 Vibrant Debate & Visibility for Marginalized Issues: Polarization forces public attention on issues that might otherwise be ignored. For example, debates over regional autonomy, language rights, or minority protections often become focal precisely because polarized actors bring them into center stage. These debates can lead to policy innovation, legal reforms, or recognition of previously marginalized grievances. The *Companion to Indian Democracy* (DeSouza et al., 2022) shows how regional activism has led to enhanced devolution of power in some state governments, and how judicial interventions have sometimes responded to identity-based exclusion.

2.4.1.2 Mobilization and Participation: Polarization often heightens salience of politics, pushing people who might otherwise remain disengaged to become active. Identity-based mobilization can increase turnout, political volunteering, protest actions, and grassroots campaigns. Even when political actors frame issues in identity terms, citizens sometimes engage through this lens to advocate for resources, rights, and recognition.

2.4.1.3 Clarity of Choice for Voters: When political choices are stark, voters can more easily distinguish competing platforms. This can reduce ambiguity in electoral mandates: clearer stakes can make political accountability more visible. Parties that commit to particular identity or ideological positions can be held to those commitments once in office.

2.4.2 Negative Effects:

2.4.2.1 Echo Chambers and Information Silos: The same social media trends that amplify participation also risk insulating groups in ideological silos. As Mitra & Das (2025) show, users are less likely to be exposed to views that challenge their own, reducing opportunities for cross-group dialogue or learning. When contradictory facts are dismissed because they come from the “other side,” misinformation, conspiratorial thinking, or selective memory can proliferate.

2.4.2.2 Identity Politics over Policy Deliberation: When identity becomes central, policy discussions risk being displaced by symbolic politics. Political actors may prefer identity cues that mobilize easily rather than investing in coherent policy proposals. Elections and governance can start to prioritize cultural symbolism (religious festivals, monuments, and heritage) over administrative capacity, public goods, or socioeconomic welfare.

2.4.2.3 Affective Polarization and Social Fragmentation: With polarization comes affective division. Ordinary citizens may distrust, dislike, or even fear members of other political groups. Social relationships—neighborhood, workplace, family can be strained. Political dissent can be stigmatized. Institutional presences like media, civil society, courts risk losing legitimacy among significant portions of the population who see them as partial or captured by one side.

2.4.2.4 Risk to Democratic Norms and Minorities: When identity definitions harden, those outside the dominant identity may feel excluded or disenfranchised. Minority rights, freedom of expression, and pluralism risk erosion, if political majorities regard dissent as disloyalty or threats to identity. Legitimacy of institutions may be questioned when state action is perceived to favor one identity group over others.

3. Democratic Fatigue

If ideological polarization represents a visible fracture in India’s political landscape, democratic fatigue reflects its quieter, cumulative consequence. It manifests not through conflict but through disengagement such as citizens’ declining trust in institutions, skepticism toward political actors, and weariness with the democratic process itself. Understanding this fatigue is crucial to assess how democratic participation evolves in an environment marked by polarization, economic inequality, and rapid media transformation.

3.1 Conceptualizing Democratic Fatigue

The term ‘*democratic fatigue*’ captures a subtle yet profound erosion of citizens’ confidence in democratic institutions, procedures, and collective purpose. It is not an outright rejection of democracy, but rather weariness with its functioning, marked by disillusionment, cynicism, and declining participation. Scholars such as Diamond (2019) and Norris (2011) have described this as a “crisis of democratic legitimacy,” in which citizens remain formally committed to democratic ideals but increasingly doubt that existing systems can deliver fairness, accountability, or justice.

In India, democratic fatigue manifests within a complex socio-political landscape shaped by multiculturalism, federalism, and rapid digitalization. While the country continues to hold free elections with high voter turnout, indicators of *qualitative democratic engagement*, such as trust in institutions, tolerance for dissent, and faith in procedural neutrality, show signs of strain. Raffio (2024) reveals growing public skepticism about whether elections truly reflect people’s will. Similar trends are noted in the Edelman Trust Institute (2025), which records widening gaps in institutional trust between urban and rural populations, and between higher- and lower-income groups.

Theoretically, democratic fatigue represents an outcome of **polarized democracies**, where ideological divides reduce the common ground necessary for deliberation. Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018), argue that when political competition becomes existential, framed as a struggle between incompatible moral worlds citizens begin to tolerate authoritarian tendencies as “protective” measures. This insight resonates strongly in India’s current context, where ideological polarization increasingly shapes perceptions of institutions themselves.

3.2 Indicators and Empirical Patterns in India

Contemporary data and research reveal three interlinked indicators of democratic fatigue in India: declining trust in institutions, political cynicism, and selective participation.

3.2.1 Declining Institutional Trust: Recent surveys show a striking hierarchy of trust across institutions. The Ipsos IndiaBus Most Trusted Institutions (2024) found that the defense forces, judiciary, and Reserve Bank of India remain the most trusted entities, while political parties, parliamentarians, and the media rank among the least trusted. It suggests that India’s democracy remains *popular but poorly trusted*: citizens continue to believe in the ideal of democracy but perceive its institutional actors as compromised or partisan. The Edelman Trust Institute (2025) reinforces this pattern, showing that India’s overall trust index has declined slightly from 2024, with a notable “trust inequality” between economic classes. Among lower-income respondents, trust in government dropped by nearly 10 percentage points, reflecting frustration over economic disparity and perceived elite capture of state resources. Similarly, it is noticed that younger citizens express weaker confidence in public institutions than older generations, despite higher educational attainment—suggesting a generational dimension to democratic fatigue.

3.2.2 Political Cynicism and Desire for Strong Leadership: One of the most telling symptoms of democratic fatigue is the rise of political cynicism, the belief that all political actors are self-serving or corrupt. According to Pew Research Center, (2023), 67 percent of Indian respondents expressed satisfaction towards the present leadership in India and agreed that “a strong leader who can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts” would be desirable. This finding mirrors global patterns noted by McCoy et al. (2018), who link rising authoritarian sympathy to frustration with democratic inefficiency. Yet, this cynicism is not purely apolitical; it often emerges from prolonged exposure to adversarial political narratives. The polarization of mainstream and digital media, reinforces the perception that politics is an endless contest rather than a cooperative process. Consequently, public debate becomes performative rather than deliberative, eroding the emotional investment citizens once had in democratic institutions.

3.2.3 Selective Participation and Apathy: Despite regular electoral mobilization, qualitative participation in India’s democracy is uneven. Voter turnout remains high, but civic participation between

elections through deliberative forums, local governance, or issue-based activism, shows a downward trend. The Association for Democratic Reforms (2025) reports a decline in citizen engagement with local representatives and public consultations. This paradox of “high voting, low engagement” reflects a fatigue that is procedural rather than ideological. Digital spaces, once heralded as tools for democratic renewal, have compounded this paradox. Studies by Tokita et al. (2021) show that online participation increasingly takes the form of partisan signaling rather than constructive dialogue. In such an environment, engagement becomes a marker of identity rather than an act of deliberation, deepening fatigue among those disillusioned by constant ideological confrontation.

3.3 Democratic Fatigue and Polarization: A Feedback Loop

Democratic fatigue does not operate in isolation; it interacts dynamically with ideological polarization to create what Mehta (2017) calls the “weariness of citizenship.” Polarization amplifies fatigue by making democratic institutions appear as extensions of partisan identity rather than neutral arenas of governance. When one group perceives the judiciary, media, or universities as biased toward the other, collective trust fragments, and institutional legitimacy erodes.

3.3.1 Selective Trust as a Political Marker: This selective trust, visible in survey data, reflects polarization’s deep reach. Citizens now evaluate institutions not on performance, but on perceived alignment with their worldview. For instance, trust in the judiciary or media often diverges sharply between supporters of different political camps. Such trust bifurcation—where one side venerates an institution that the other side condemns—corresponds to what Iyengar & Krupenkin (2018) describe as “affective polarization,” where emotion overrides evaluation.

3.3.2 The Emotional Economy of Cynicism: Cynicism serves as a coping mechanism in highly polarized environments. Sunstein (2017) notes that when individuals are constantly exposed to ideologically filtered content, cynicism becomes a rational adaptation—it protects against cognitive dissonance but simultaneously weakens civic optimism. In India, digital networks have normalized sarcasm, satire, and distrust as modes of political expression, which collectively erode the emotional foundations of democratic participation.

3.3.3 Fatigue and the Search for Order: As polarization and cynicism intensify, citizens begin to value order and predictability over pluralism. Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) warn that this shift often precedes democratic backsliding, as populist leaders promise stability through centralization. India’s relatively high support for decisive leadership—despite awareness of institutional weakness—illustrates this trade-off. The fatigue is thus not apathy alone, but a recalibration of democratic expectations: people no longer demand participatory democracy but seek efficient governance that can manage polarization’s excesses.

3.3.4 Uneven Fatigue across Social Groups: Finally, democratic fatigue is unevenly distributed. The Edelman Trust Institute (2025) data indicate that trust erosion is more pronounced among marginalized groups—rural populations, linguistic minorities, and youth, who perceive limited benefit from formal political participation. This asymmetry is critical: fatigue at the periphery of the polity often incubates both populist resentment and disengagement, threatening democracy’s inclusive foundation.

4. External and Economic Influences

While democratic fatigue reflects internal strains on civic trust, external and economic factors add further complexity to India’s democratic landscape. The digitalization of politics, global information flows, and the concentration of economic power increasingly shape how citizens perceive truth, authority, and legitimacy. Examining these influences helps reveal how structural and transnational forces intersect with domestic polarization to affect governance and public discourse.

4.1 Foreign Interference and Information Manipulation

Foreign influence in domestic politics has become a defining feature of 21st-century democracies. India, as one of the world's largest and most digitally connected democracies, faces a particularly complex version of this challenge. Reports from India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY, 2025) and Mittal (2023) highlight a rise in *cross-border disinformation networks*, often coordinated through social media platforms that amplify polarizing narratives. These campaigns tend to exploit identity fault lines, magnifying domestic divisions rather than introducing new ideological content. For instance, during the 2019 and 2024 general elections, clusters of coordinated inauthentic behavior traced to overseas entities seeking to influence public opinion on religious and geopolitical issues. In the opinion of Pawelec (2022), they are enough to shake the very foundations of democracy. Similarly, Roy & DeRoche (2025) noted that state and non-state actors have increasingly targeted India's online political spaces through content farms and bot networks designed to deepen partisan cleavages.

While such activities are not unique to India, their impact is intensified by the country's linguistic and regional diversity. Multilingual disinformation often tailored to local contexts, creates a fragmented media environment that weakens shared democratic discourse. Scholars such as Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez (2021) argue that this fragmentation challenges the very basis of deliberative democracy, where common frames of reference are essential for consensus building. However, not all foreign engagement is destabilizing. Partnerships in cyber-security and electoral integrity, such as India's participation in the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise (GFCE, 2024), suggest growing institutional awareness. Yet, the key issue remains *resilience*: how a democracy safeguards its information ecosystem without stifling freedom of expression. This balancing act will likely define India's external policy posture in the coming decade.

4.2 Economic Interests and Political Communication

Economic power, particularly the nexus of corporate influence, media ownership, and political finance, plays an equally crucial role in shaping democratic outcomes. In India, the consolidation of media houses under large conglomerates has produced a situation where economic interests often align with political agendas. According to the *Centre for Media Studies (CMS) Report on Political Funding* (2023), over 70% of declared corporate donations in recent election cycles were directed toward a single national party, raising questions about the structural balance of political competition. Scholars Srivastava (2010) argue that such financial concentration risks eroding editorial independence, as corporate entities often possess stakes in both the political and media spheres. This creates an "information asymmetry," where narratives critical of entrenched interests receive less visibility, and populist or market-friendly positions dominate public discourse.

Economic polarization, in this sense, mirrors ideological polarization: both thrive on asymmetries of power and access. Krishnan (2024) found that Indian audiences increasingly distrust mainstream media due to perceptions of political bias and corporate capture. This erosion of trust parallels broader democratic fatigue, as citizens perceive public debate as pre-determined by elite interests rather than genuine contestation of ideas. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to frame corporate engagement solely as a corrosive force. India's dynamic digital economy has also enabled a surge in independent journalism, supported by crowd funding and social-media-based platforms such as *The Wire*, *Scroll*, and *Alt News*. These initiatives, while vulnerable to financial and legal pressures, represent counterweights within a market-driven information system. The question, therefore, is not merely whether economic interests distort democracy, but *how economic structures condition the range of democratic expression*.

4.3 Systemic Patterns and Emerging Scenarios

When viewed together, external and economic influences highlight the systemic vulnerabilities of a globalized democracy. As Jaffrelot (2021) observes, India's democratic culture now operates within overlapping spheres of digital capitalism and geopolitical contestation. Foreign interference often

amplifies narratives that already align with domestic economic or political interests, creating a feedback loop where external and internal forces reinforce each other.

From a systems perspective, this interaction produces three discernible patterns:

Hybridized Influence: Foreign campaigns increasingly blend with domestic agendas, making attribution difficult. Economic actors, including multinational corporations and social media intermediaries, function as both conduits and arbiters of influence.

Opacity of Power: The complexity of digital economies allows funding and influence to circulate through layers of intermediaries, from data brokers to political consultancies. The *Election Commission of India (2023)* has acknowledged challenges in tracking the origin of digital campaign spending.

Erosion of Public Deliberation: As both external manipulation and economic monopolization grow, the public sphere risks becoming a marketplace of persuasion rather than a space of reasoned debate.

In response, institutions have begun to recalibrate. India's new *Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023)* and the *Electoral Bonds Scheme Review* by the Supreme Court (2024) mark attempts, albeit contested ones, to bring transparency to information and funding flows. Their effectiveness will depend on whether they can balance economic growth, security, and democratic accountability.

Ultimately, India's experience illustrates that democracy is not weakened by globalization per se, but by unequal control over its instruments, data, capital, and communication. The coming decade will test whether Indian democracy can reassert normative frameworks of accountability in an age where both external interference and domestic economic power increasingly shape the democratic narrative.

5. Implications for Governance and Social Cohesion

The combined effects of ideological polarization, democratic fatigue, and external-economic pressures inevitably shape how governance functions and how cohesive society remains. These forces influence not only the efficiency of institutions but also the quality of public trust and civic dialogue. Assessing their implications is essential to understand whether India's democratic framework can continue to mediate competing interests without eroding its pluralistic foundations.

5.1 Governance in a Polarized and Fatigued Democracy

Ideological polarization and democratic fatigue have begun to reshape the way governance operates in India. Polarization, while reflecting genuine ideological engagement, also produces fragmented policy environments where consensus-building becomes increasingly difficult. As McCoy et al. (2018) note in their study on "pernicious polarization," when political divisions harden into moral binaries, institutional negotiations give way to majoritarian impulses. India's federal democracy was known by coalition-building and pragmatic compromises in the past. Now, it, has witnessed a gradual decline in deliberative politics, replaced by centralized decision-making and populist communication strategies (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2021).

The consequences are visible in both policymaking and public administration. The contentious debates over citizenship (the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019), agrarian reforms (the 2020–21 farm laws), and digital regulation have demonstrated how public trust in governance can quickly fracture along ideological lines. Studies from the *Centre for Policy Research (2022) Study of Developing* reveal that partisan polarization often leads to *policy volatility*, where successive governments undo or reframe existing policies primarily for symbolic or ideological gain, not policy continuity. Such discontinuities

increase administrative uncertainty, affect investment confidence, and erode citizen belief in institutional neutrality.

Democratic fatigue compounds these challenges. Lokniti, CSDS (2023) *State of Democracy Report* (2023) found a steady rise in political cynicism among younger citizens, with nearly 60% expressing doubts about the fairness of institutions like Parliament and the Election Commission. This disillusionment, though not necessarily anti-democratic, leads to disengagement: a perception that governance is driven by elites, inaccessible to ordinary citizens. As Mehta (2017) argues in *The Burden of Democracy*, fatigue arises not from excess participation but from the realization that participation often yields limited accountability.

5.2 Social Cohesion and the Fraying of the Civic Fabric

The social dimension of these political transformations is equally consequential. Ideological polarization and external influences amplified by digital media have redrawn social boundaries within Indian society. It shows that the frequency of intergroup trust has declined, especially in urban and semi-urban contexts where social media is a primary source of information. Social polarization is no longer confined to party affiliations but extends to personal networks, workplaces, and even classrooms, shaping how individuals perceive identity and belonging. Economic inequalities intensify these divides. The Oxfam India (2023) highlights how the top 1% of the population holds more than 40% of national wealth, while lower-income groups experience declining mobility. Economic alienation often interacts with cultural resentment, producing conditions ripe for populist mobilization. This “intersectional polarization,” links identity grievances with economic ones creating complex coalitions of discontent that challenge social cohesion.

Another visible impact lies in civic discourse. As Shannon (2019) note, digital echo chambers have fostered ideological homogeneity in online communities, limiting citizens’ exposure to alternative perspectives. What was once a pluralistic conversation has, in many cases, devolved into mutual delegitimization. The rise of “information tribes” not only erodes empathy but also undermines collective action—citizens are less likely to cooperate on non-political community issues if they perceive others through ideological lenses. Yet, social cohesion is not uniformly declining. Civil society organizations, local governance networks, and educational institutions continue to foster pluralistic engagement. For instance, initiatives like *PRIA’s Participatory Governance Projects* have demonstrated how grassroots deliberation can rebuild social trust in polarized environments (Routh et al., 2025). These examples point to the resilience embedded within India’s social fabric: despite elite polarization, everyday democratic practices persist through community-based problem-solving.

5.3 Resilience Factors: Restoring Trust and Civic Engagement

While the structural challenges are significant, India’s democratic architecture still possesses important resilience mechanisms. These lie primarily in its institutional frameworks, civic networks, and the evolving digital literacy landscape.

Institutional checks and balances remain a critical safeguard. Although concerns over institutional autonomy persist, the judiciary, Election Commission, and Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) continue to exercise varying degrees of oversight. The Supreme Court’s recent judgment (2024) on the *Electoral Bonds Scheme* signaled a renewed judicial willingness to confront opacity in political funding, a key driver of economic distortion in governance. As DeSouza, et al. (2022) argues, the adaptability of Indian institutions lies not in their insulation from politics but in their capacity to absorb contestation and recalibrate legitimacy.

Civil society and media literacy are emerging as the second line of defense. NGOs such as *Digital Empowerment Foundation* and *Alt News* have initiated large-scale digital literacy programs aimed at helping citizens identify misinformation and understand algorithmic biases. Such efforts, while modest relative to the scale of the problem, cultivate what Sunstein (2017) calls “epistemic humility”—a civic

habit that enables citizens to question their own information environments. **Civic education** represents a longer-term but vital strategy. The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* explicitly emphasizes constitutional values, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning as foundational components of citizenship education. If implemented effectively, such curricula could counteract both political cynicism and ideological rigidity.

Finally, **local governance networks**, panchayats, municipal councils, and community associations, remain sites of democratic renewal. Decentralization has preserved spaces for negotiation and pluralism even as national politics has become more polarized. Strengthening these micro-democratic practices may hold the key to reversing fatigue and restoring participatory confidence.

6. Future Scenarios (Next 10–15 Years)

The interplay of polarization, democratic fatigue, and external pressures presents multiple pathways for India's democratic evolution. Rather than predicting a single outcome, it is more useful to envision possible trajectories shaped by institutional resilience, civic engagement, and technological change. These scenarios reflect not only political trends but also shifts in societal values and citizen expectations that will define the next phase of India's democratic experience.

6.1 Scenario 1: Democratic Deepening

The first, and most optimistic, trajectory envisions a phase of *democratic deepening* in India. It signifies institutional robustness, civic education, and technological transparency reinforce the foundations of participatory governance. This scenario assumes that the democratic system, despite current strains, retains sufficient adaptive capacity to reform itself. One of the strongest arguments for this possibility lies in the enduring legitimacy of democracy among Indian citizens. According to the *Pew Research Center Global Attitudes* (2023), more than 70% of Indians continue to support democratic governance, even while expressing dissatisfaction with its functioning. This suggests that disillusionment targets institutions and leaders rather than the idea of democracy itself.

If ongoing reforms, such as judicial oversight of electoral funding, parliamentary digitization, and the Digital Data Protection Act (2023) are consolidated, they may create greater transparency and accountability. Democratic renewal often follows periods of institutional stress, when public pressure forces systemic correction. The Supreme Court's recent interventions on political finance and media regulation could mark such a turning point. Education and digital literacy will be decisive. The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* and its focus on critical thinking and constitutional values, if implemented at scale, may cultivate a generation less prone to ideological absolutism. Similarly, technology could transition from a vector of polarization to a tool for civic participation, with open data initiatives and AI-driven fact-checking increasing public trust.

At the global level, India's positioning as the world's largest democracy and a technology hub could encourage the diffusion of "digital democracy" norm. Its transparency portals, participatory budgeting platforms, and open governance tools anchor political legitimacy in accountability rather than rhetoric. This trajectory would not eliminate polarization but could channel it productively into pluralistic debate and institutional responsiveness.

6.2 Scenario 2: Democratic Fatigue Intensifies

A less hopeful outcome envisions the continuation and deepening of current patterns of democratic fatigue. In this scenario, voter apathy, institutional mistrust, and ideological insularity reinforce one another, leading to disengaged citizenship and the emergence of parallel "publics."

The warning signs are already visible. The *Lokniti, CSDS (2023)* report records declining political participation among urban youth, coupled with a belief that “elections change governments, not governance.” Such cynicism, if unaddressed, could evolve into passive withdrawal from civic life. Mehta (2017) attributes this to the “moral exhaustion” of democracy, when citizens grow weary of promises unfulfilled and turn inward toward self-preserving individualism. Technology, instead of bridging divides, may further entrench echo chambers. As Tokita et al. (2021) show, algorithmic curation in social media ecosystems has intensified ideological clustering. In the absence of robust media literacy, misinformation could normalize parallel realities, where citizens inhabit incompatible versions of truth.

Economically, widening inequality and job precarity, highlighted in *Oxfam India (2023)* could feed populist discontent and scapegoating politics. Governance, under these pressures, risks becoming performative rather than substantive: symbolic legislation replaces structural reform. The outcome would be a “spectator democracy,” formally intact but emotionally hollow. In this scenario, civic institutions survive in form but lose social legitimacy. The judiciary and media remain active but polarized; public discourse shrinks to ritualized outrage; and citizens oscillate between anger and apathy. Comparative research by McCoy et al. (2018) suggests that prolonged affective polarization often culminates not in authoritarian collapse but in *institutional paralysis*, a condition where democracy endures without delivering its normative promises.

6.3 Scenario 3: The Hybrid Equilibrium

The most probable trajectory may lie between these extremes, a *hybrid equilibrium* in which India’s democracy continues to function formally, yet persistent social and ideological divides constrain its transformative potential. This scenario envisions a “managed pluralism” where electoral democracy coexists with polarized publics, unequal economic structures, and selective institutional accountability.

Jaffrelot (2021) describes this as a “dual democracy”: strong in mobilization but uneven in deliberation. Electoral participation remains high, but civic dialogue grows narrow. Citizens remain politically expressive yet socially fragmented, engaging more as partisan communities than as collective stakeholders. Technology will play an ambiguous role here. On one hand, digital governance may enhance efficiency, through initiatives like *Digital India*, *India Stack*, and AI-enabled service delivery. On the other, the same tools could reinforce surveillance, data concentration, and exclusionary citizenship. The approach thus hinges on whether the digital state evolves as a *platform of empowerment* or an *instrument of control*.

Economic globalization will further entangle domestic policy with global capital. As Srivastava, (2010) argue, corporate consolidation in media and infrastructure sectors could continue to blur lines between governance, commerce, and communication. However, if regulatory reforms foster transparency, especially in campaign finance and public procurement, this hybrid model may stabilize as a pragmatic, if imperfect, democratic equilibrium. Civil society will remain the key counterbalance. Grassroots movements around climate justice, gender equality, and digital rights are likely to act as “micro-correctives” to systemic imbalances. The expansion of youth-led civic initiatives and localized dialogue forums, supported by organizations and the Digital Empowerment Foundation, suggests that spaces of deliberation are multiplying even within polarization.

6.4 The Decade Ahead: Navigating Between Crisis and Renewal

The next 10–15 years will likely witness an uneven democratic landscape, dynamic yet contested. Whether India moves toward deepening, fatigue, or hybrid stability will depend on the interaction between institutional reform, social inclusion, and digital governance.

If institutions can regain citizen trust through transparency and responsiveness, polarization may evolve into constructive pluralism. If not, fatigue may ossify into disengagement. The hybrid scenario will demand constant vigilance to prevent normalization of inequality and exclusion. Ultimately, the future of India's democracy will not hinge on ideology alone but on *the quality of civic imagination*, the capacity of citizens, policymakers, and educators to sustain dialogue across difference, preserve institutional autonomy, and adapt democratic ethics to a rapidly changing world. Democracies endure not because they are perfect, but because they remain self-corrective. The next decade will test whether India's democracy can continue to correct itself in the face of its own complexity.

Conclusion

India's democratic scenario, as examined through the lenses of ideological polarization, democratic fatigue, and external-economic pressures, reveals a complex but evolving picture. Rather than a linear decline or resurgence, contemporary India demonstrates both resilience and vulnerability. Such traits coexist within its plural, competitive, and deeply politicized public sphere. This article has argued that polarization in itself is not inherently destructive; rather, the danger arises when ideological diversity transforms into rigid identity blocs that undermine deliberation, trust, and collective purpose.

The evidence reviewed across political, social, and media contexts points to an unmistakable trend: the **intensification of affective polarization**, the tendency of citizens not merely to disagree with opposing viewpoints but to distrust and even delegitimize them (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). In India, this manifests in linguistic, regional, and religious frames that align with political identities, turning once-productive debates into emotionally charged confrontations. Yet, it would be simplistic to frame this as purely negative. Polarization, when grounded in issue-based competition and not identity antagonism, can stimulate **innovation in public discourse** and make institutions more responsive to diverse constituencies (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

The accompanying phenomenon of **democratic fatigue** marked by voter apathy, institutional cynicism, and selective trust, emerges as both a symptom and a cause of deepening polarization. Surveys by Association for Democratic Reforms (2025) and Pew Research Center (2023) suggest that while electoral participation remains robust, confidence in parties, media, and bureaucracies has weakened. This fatigue is less about disengagement from democracy and more about **disillusionment with its practice**. Such a sentiment reinforced by the perceived capture of institutions and the narrowing of dissent spaces. The resulting ambivalence challenges the democratic compact between state and citizen, reducing the incentive for informed civic participation.

External and economic forces compound these internal tensions. **Information manipulation, cyber interference, and digital propaganda**, though not unique to India, have introduced new vulnerabilities in democratic communication. Meanwhile, **economic concentration in media ownership and political funding** has blurred the boundary between private capital and public interest. The political economy of information thus shapes both the narratives citizens consume and the choices they make. As scholars such as Mehta (2017) note, the intersection of ideology and capital has produced a form of "mediated democracy," where public discourse increasingly reflects the priorities of those who control communication channels.

The implications for governance and social cohesion are significant. Polarization erodes trust in policy-making and delegitimizes consensus-driven governance, while democratic fatigue reduces citizen oversight. However, India retains several **resilience factors** that continue to stabilize the system: a strong judiciary, active civil society, a vibrant (if contested) media landscape, and a young, digitally literate population increasingly aware of global democratic debates. The challenge lies in mobilizing these strengths without succumbing to performative populism or digital echo chambers.

Looking ahead, the three scenarios outlined **democratic deepening, intensified fatigue, and hybrid continuity**, should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Elements of all are likely to coexist, shaping India's democratic experience in uneven ways across regions and institutions. Technological change, civic education, and policy innovation will be decisive in determining which trajectory dominates. If governance can leverage technology for transparency rather than surveillance, if education can cultivate critical civic reasoning rather than rote nationalism, and if policy can reconcile growth with equity, the prospects for democratic renewal remain credible. Ultimately, ideological diversity, when moderated by shared constitutional norms and inclusive discourse remains India's greatest democratic asset. The task, therefore, is not to suppress competing worldviews but to **create institutional and communicative mechanisms that convert disagreement into deliberation**. This requires reinforcing the autonomy of democratic institutions, ensuring media plurality, and nurturing public reason through education and dialogue.

Further research should continue to monitor the relationship between digital ecosystems, ideological realignment, and democratic participation. Comparative studies between Indian states or across other multicultural democracies could clarify how polarization interacts with governance quality and citizen trust. Only through such sustained, evidence-based engagement can scholars and policymakers distinguish between **productive ideological contestation** and **democracy-weakening fragmentation**.

In sum, India's democracy stands neither in crisis nor in triumph but at a crossroads. Its endurance will depend not on ideological uniformity but on the capacity of its citizens and institutions to sustain respectful, informed, and plural conversation amid profound differences.

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