

Historical Understanding of India's Democracy Promotion Policy towards South Asia

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Abstract- The article attempts to discuss the regional dimension of democracy promotion in India's foreign policy. While there have been many studies on different aspects of his foreign policy, the article attempts to focus the democracy promotion dimension with special reference to South Asia. The major aim is to analyse the changing nature of democracy promotion, after decades of negligence and hesitation. The paper focuses mainly on the first one and decade of twenty-first century. The study concentrates on the changes occurred in the democracy promotion policy of Vajpayee government and Manmohan governments. How much continuities are there or how far has it gone in a distinctive way? These questions will be addressed in the article. As part of this, the foreign policy approach towards South Asian countries except Pakistan will be discussed here. During these years, various democracy related developments such as attempts to make democratic constitution, elections, and unconstitutional expulsion of governments, and illegal arrests and detentions have occurred in the region. Historically seeing, many of these events are directly or indirectly connected to India. New Delhi's response to all these will be analysed. At the theoretical level, the present article attempts to adopt a realist approach to understand the democracy promotion dimension of India's foreign policy towards South Asian countries. With the rise of China, India has largely abandoned its suspicion of United States-led western countries. But this does not mean that the democracy promotion as a project and mission has proved its authenticity and utility before many countries in the global south. India, even today, suspects its fruitfulness in promoting own national interests in the immediate region and beyond. Many of its national interests and bilateral problems has not much relations with democracy in neighbourhood or somewhere else. But it needs a considerable engagement with United States and other democratic countries like Australia to counter the rise of china as a potential challenger. Hence it still retains some stakes in democracy promotion. It represents more continuity than changes. The article moves forward to such a conclusion.

Index Terms- democracy promotion, foreign policy, South Asia, strategic interests,

I. INTRODUCTION

From the analysis of the evolving path of India's revised democracy promotion journey, it is understandable that its corner stone was paved by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the early 2000s and took forward by Manmohan Singh throughout the subsequent

decade. While Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh led their government as a coalition in the absence of absolute majority for their respective political parties, the 2014 election had given clear majority to Bharatiya Janata Party, though there was an alliance called 'National Democratic Alliance'. This victory, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, was generally seen as a pathbreaking event in the political history of India in the last three decades. However, it was evident that the policy initiatives of Prime Minister Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh still act as the basic pillars of India's foreign policy even in the changed context. The major aim of this paper is to analyse the nature of democracy promotion policy of India under the Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh government with a historical focus. what happened to the journey with a renewed attention to democracy promotion, after decades of negligence and hesitation would be discussed in the article. During these years, various democracy related developments such as attempts to make democratic constitution, elections, and unconstitutional expulsion of governments, and illegal arrests and detentions have occurred in the region. Historically seeing, many of these events are directly or indirectly connected to India. New Delhi's response to all these will be analysed.

The article is organised into three sections. In the first part, attempts will be made to understand the changing nature of India's approach towards democracy promotion. The next section discusses the theoretical aspects of the study with a realist perception. In the third part, the state of democracy promotion towards South Asian countries in India's foreign policy up to 2014 with a special focus on the post-2000 period.

II. CHANGING CONTOURS OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND INDIA

Democracy has become the most revered word in the contemporary world. At the same time, attempts to transfer it in various nick names like democracy promotion, democracy support or democracy assistance have ever triggered fear, suspicion and criticism alike. While an encroachment to, and subsequent erosion of, sovereignty frightens many countries, the notion that the entire agenda of democracy promotion is a western design crafted for promoting own interests generate suspicion. All these have resulted in criticism of many kinds. The hesitance to agree upon the concept of democracy promotion and opposition to it was widely portrayed through the prism of a north south divide. However, an international consensus has attained regarding the merits of it, though approaches to be employed are contested.

Regarding this, Mallavarappu (2010) observes that “while there is still much agreement in the West on the desirability of democracy promotion, there is far greater disagreement with regard to how best the objective may and should be achieved” (p. 52). It is in this same context a new group of countries did emerge and garnered notable attention in the international domain. They were variously described as non-western democracies or emerging market democracies. This set of developing countries, that can be termed as emerging-market democracies (EMDs), possess democratic character in domestic political structure and they have sufficient economic might to engage actively in global economic affairs and their economic presence, political influence and foreign policies along with significant importance given to democracy and human rights in it, necessitates a greater attention and analysis (Brookings, 2011). Their rise sparked proactive discussions on many aspects including, their place in the current global order and their willingness to partake on various ongoing global discourse, missions and projects. Kristensen (2015) opines that emerging powers like China, India and Brazil are getting increasing consideration as an element in International Relations (IR) talks. As one among such area of ongoing sector, their likely influences on democracy promotion arena was also underwent discussions and debates. Various scholars have heralded their growing presence. The main reason is that some of the NWDs had emerged as the staunch advocates and strict adherents of democratic rule even while lacking many preconditions.

India has been identified as an emerging democratic power. The successful establishment and maintenance of a democratic system tended to see it as a beacon of democracy and as a model. In spite of enormous challenges, India’s democratic traditions were well rooted (Mehta, 2011). India’s survival in the path of democracy was sharply against the existing notions and theories of successful establishment and running of a democratic mode of governance. Mallavarappu (2010, p.49) says that “India is somewhat uniquely positioned among newly emerged post-colonial states in terms of both constructing and sustaining democracy domestically against a backdrop of considerable economic and social inequalities.” There have been various attempts to map its competency, willingness and capacity to indulge in democracy support activities. Almost all studies have converged on a fact that though there has been a reluctance in the early phases. The faith in democracy as suitable in home has not, however, traditionally replicated in actions when it comes to the demonstrative support for projects of democracy promotion in other countries and such a hesitance was notwithstanding the growing appeals from the United States and European government (Mallavarappu, 2010; Destradi, 2012 &Wagner and Faust, 2010). Wagner and Faust (2010) lists out main reasons as follows. According to them, Indian elites are apprehensive of about losing its face as an advocate of developing countries, and derailing the regional position in case the involvement in democracy promotion is read as intervention. They also point to the anxiety of India of an unwanted exposure of own domestic issues – corruption and clientelism – as the main causes of social exclusion, which may cause a back fire and may be projected as a defect of democracy. The domestic politics of a fractious and contentious nature and a primacy given to own material interests that make a coherent articulation of ideational interests difficult, act as some of the

reasons that hold back India from active democracy promotion (Mehta, 2011)

At the same time, they all have converged on the prevalence of an evolving change in the approach of India in the dawn of twentieth century itself. This shift was appeared in the early years of 21st century and was more visible in the approach towards neighbours. India, as a response for the considerable political changes, inspired by the societal call for democratization, in the neighbourhood along with various other parts in the world, has engaged in tangible support for democracy in the immediate region as well as in international domain and such engagements can be seen as a point to substantiate the general perception that the democracy promotion aspect in India’s foreign policy has underwent a change in the post- Cold War period (Cartwright, 2009).

These notable changes were the needs of the hour and compulsions of the circumstances than any sudden ideational enlightenment. India after coming out of the restraints of cold war politics began to embrace a revamped foreign policy. Its new aspiration transcended the erstwhile dream of becoming and continuing as a mere regional power or from retaining the status as a harbinger of third world rights, to a rising power or a global power at least in some aspects. In order to magnify its role from the regional domain to global level, it became important to be part of global popular discourses and to become active in global projects. Accordingly, on the global stage, India has become more and more vocal in favour of democracy driven by the belief that it can pave a solid basis for international peace and cooperation (Piccone, 2011). In addition to this, the enhanced relations with United States had been perceived as a panacea for various problems. The conclusion of cold war created a limitation for choosing from many to align with and US at the same time did appear as the sole influential power. In such a situation India has to choose a position either to remain suspicious of or to align with US for own benefits. If wanted to come more closer, it was necessary to find common area of work. The end of the Cold War and India’s vulnerable economic situation necessitated a novel approach towards the world’s only remaining superpower (Mazumdar, 2012).

At the leadership level, while the early policies to establish rapport with United States and a changing approach to democracy promotion were formulated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, his successor Manmohan Singh adopted it and carried forward with the same readiness. Manmohan Singh had approached the possibilities of democracy in foreign policy constructively. Raja Mohan (2007; as cited in Cartwright., 2009, p. 404) states that Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had taken an explicitly positive view of democracy by declaring that “liberal democracy is the natural order of political organization in today’s world”. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.” These words of Manmohan Singh are often quoted to denote the general attitude of India towards democracy promotion and the major themes of his approach are seen as preparatory measures to be a global leader with a willingness to endorse democracy while demonstrating the willingness to be projected as a “positive example” or “sought-after teacher,” rather than becoming not proselytizer (Cartwright, 2009, p.419). Such an approach is aimed to switching over to a partner in global matters while simultaneously retaining the traditional position on non-interference and passive assistance.

III. REALIST PERCEPTION AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Contemporary international system is composed of nation-states. Foreign policy in one sense is their communication language. Hence, it is to be handled very carefully. The making and execution of foreign policy is determined by various factors. Social, economic, and political factors interplay at different levels at varying degrees. The national interests need to be protected by the foreign policy. Realism as a theoretical tradition in international relations believes that power is the core of international politics. All states try to maximise power. According to them, the national interest is defined in terms of power. Hence national interest and power are synonymous. Second principle, among Hans J Morgenthau's six principles of political realism, says that the concept of national interest defined in terms of power is the most important foreign policy goal. Here, he portrays foreign policy as the tool to achieve the national interests defined in terms of power. The survival in the system becomes the main goal. For the survival, territorial integrity and autonomy are to be protected. All other interests are only the auxiliaries of the main interest. The questions of ideological commitments become less relevant. Another important observation of neo-realist variant of realism is that states are rational actors. This rationality enables them to devise sound strategies that ensure their prospects for survival. So, all other concepts would naturally be handled rationally for the augmentation of national interests defined in terms of power. So even the most celebrated altruistic goals cannot be viewed from a perspective devoid of a suspicion of containing an agenda for the promotion of national interest.

Democracy promotion, as a main area of international relations, has always generated suspicion in global south. One of the major reasons is that there has been an allegation that it is designed for the advancement of the interests of global north led by United States. Democracy promotion is an area that has been conventionally controlled by the United States and Europe on both the policy and the academic level (Stuenkel, 2016). This perception reiterates the realist stance. Hence, they turned to be suspicious of the agenda of democracy promotion. At the same time given the pressures, emanating from the structural features, staying away from the West, the only visible pole in the current order is also difficult. Realists believe that great powers are the main actors in the anarchic world. When survival become the main goal of a state, it is needed to align with great powers if it ensures that aim. In this way a realist support for allying with great powers can also be seen in the theoretical realm. One of the easiest ways to be linked with great powers is to get involved in major projects advocated by them. As democracy promotion has been identified as such a project, there is a necessity to express own stands of each rising powers on it.

Mallavarappu (2010), while trying to doctrinally interpret various theoretical stances on democracy promotion in India's context, observes "that the realist stance would be one which supports a fair degree of suspicion when it comes to endorsing democracy-promotion projects, while simultaneously not missing an opportunity to consolidate ties with the major powers" (p.56). This means that countries like India will give support to democracy promotion in principle whenever possible without much costs. But they may try to stay away from getting indulged

in outright or any high-profile commitment to it. Mehta (2011) also expresses a similar opinion. According to him, "India will continue to display a strong commitment to democratic ideals, but will do so without making democracy promotion an avowed element of its foreign policy" (p.101). When it comes to India's efforts to support the spread and deepening of democracy in its immediate region, Cartwright (2009) says that "for the most part, its support has been determined by a very "realist" perception of its national interests, rather than an idealistic commitment to democracy per se" (p.20). The historical abstention from the circles of democracy promotion throughout the 20th century was out of suspicion. The changed position in early 2000s was the result of a perceived necessity to ally with United States. Even while made a shift in policy, India hesitated to be an apparent supporter of it.

IV. SOUTH ASIA AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

When we look into the general features India's democracy promotion approach, it is crucial to identify how this has reflected in relations with South Asian countries. While making analysis of changing dimensions of India's democracy promotion, South Asia as a region has often been given great focus. As a reason, we can assume that South Asia is a major sub-system belonging to global south along with the presence of a major emerging democratic power. In addition to this, most of the South Asian countries have underwent, some sort of or another, attempts of democratisation of political system. Maintaining a strategic relation with all neighbours has been a mission of greater importance in India's foreign policy ever since the independence as they are crucial to the economic, political and strategic advancement of the country. The rise of China as one of the undemocratic emerging powers and its growing ambitions in the region has invited an enhanced attention to the region at the global level. It has necessitated a fierce engagement of India. In such a context how far a support for democracy, merely in the name of ideational commitment, is possible is also a reason for giving much focus to the region. The prevailing prominence as a regional power and enhanced relations with western democracies has led to an expectation of a more dedicated work of India in the area of democracy promotion in South Asia. Against this back ground let us move to identify certain visible foreign policy engagements of India, that have some sorts of democracy dimensions, in the south Asian countries. The most notable contribution of India with respect of democracy promotion in South Asia was in Afghanistan as it "has availed significant public support from India for its post-Taliban democracy" (Cartwright, 2009, p 409) There India's activities touched all relevant aspects ranging from material assistance to human security with various projects to revive the crucial sectors such as economy, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, tele communications, education and health. India has actively donated to the multi-donor Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) (Mazumdar, 2014, p.10). There were concentrated works on the construction of Afghan parliament building, training parliamentary members and providing material support during elections in the form of supplying Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and indelible ink aimed to prevent election frauds. India has also expressed its willingness to share its experience with federalism, village-level administration (panchayats), affirmative

action policies (reservations), women's rights, family law, etc., with Afghanistan, if requested (Mazumdar, 2014, p.11).

What would be the factors that prompted India to take an open and active role in the assistance program of Afghanistan? Beyond a mere ideological commitment, there have been identifiable strategic interests in it. The major thing is to counter Pakistan, a conventional enemy in the region. At a more global level, the countering of the re-emergence of religious fundamentalism and its potential alignment with terror outfits in Pakistan also appear as an aim. It would be certainly wrong to view India's assistance to Afghanistan as being motivated solely by democratic idealism as in reality it is largely driven by both a perceived national interest in defending Pakistan's presence, as well as a wish to increase stability in a weak state (Cartwright, 2009).

Ever since the mid-1950s, there have been several domestic attempts to democratise the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal. These attempts, since the very beginning itself, were directly and indirectly influenced by India's democratic credentials. Many of the leaders of Nepali Congress absorbed energy for their political uprising from Indian independence movement and subsequent democratic development to which they came into direct contact during their education and political asylum in India. Both the countries reached into an understanding through the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950 which allowed them to rely each other without any limitations. The open border facilitated free trade and movement of citizens. India had given covert support to the armed rebellion against the undemocratic direct rule of Ranas and King Mahendra in the 1950 – 1951 and in the early 1960s (Destradi, 2012). Even while enjoying the fruits of a cordial and safe relations, ensured through a formal treaty, India was wary of the agenda of Peoples Republic of China in Nepal. When the threat of China became a reality through the 1962 war, India had to change the ongoing program of supporting rebels fighting for democracy. This clearly indicates the priority India has given to regional stability and gains that can be sustained through cordial relations than following self-destructing actions in the name of proving ideological commitments.

The post-2000 periods have witnessed for drastic change in the history of Nepal. There was an end to centuries old monarchy and a triumph of democracy. Those who have studied about India's role in it have acknowledged that it has contributed tremendously to the change occurred during the period of 2005-2008. As Destradi (2012) says the "recent episode, however, seems to indicate that a change in India's approach to democracy promotion has taken place: India played a substantial role in neighbouring Nepal's return to democracy in the years 2005 – 2008" (p.3).

At the same time, the realistic aspects accompanied the democracy support mission in Nepal cannot be overlooked. In addition to a willingness to see a democratic establishment in the neighbourhood and thereby a stable atmosphere, as in the earlier cases, the fear of a Chinese appropriation in case a back track is taking place has also promoted India to hold the traditional grip over the tiny Himalayan state of Nepal during the final phase of the transition. Taking part in a global mission of democratic empowerment enabled India to retain its conventional influence even in the changed environment. Mehta (2011) identifies that India's Nepal policy has ever shown the twin objectives of

promoting democracy and averting any kinds of threat from existing regimes regardless of its nature.

Bhutan was an extra-ordinary all-weather friend of India. India – Bhutan relations, since the beginning of diplomatic relationship in 1968, is seen as one of the most celebrated success stories of India's neighbourhood policy in South Asia, marked by mutual trust and understanding (Nayak, et.,al, 2018). There have always been mild attempts domestically to diminish the power of monarch ever since 1950s. India's response to them was being given very cautiously. The dawn of twenty-first century saw certain intense and sincere endeavours to change the political system of the country. Such experiments continued throughout the decade and beyond. The replacement of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk by his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel who was possessing a western outlook in thought and actions heralded the advent of political changes. Subsequently, there were consecutive elections in 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2013 to the upper house of National Council, to the National Assembly, the lower house, to local bodies and re-election to National Assembly respectively (Mazumdar, 2014, p.12). Perhaps one of the most enthusiastic assistances by India for promoting election, the main component of the procedural democracy, in another country in the twenty first century, took place in Bhutan. These assistances included: enabling mock elections, practical training to organise elections successfully given by Election Commission of India, donation of EVMs, experience sharing to Bhutanese electoral officers, security officers and observers through enabling incoming visits, legal assistance for constitution making and drafting new election bill (Mazumdar, 2014, p.12). While doing all these and admitting as assistance to the growth of democracy, the overwhelming material interests of India in Bhutan cannot be overlooked. Traditionally, Bhutan remained a consistent ally of India despite ever increasing expansion of China. Along with sustaining this support, trade, and energy aspects are also included in India's list of interests.

India had to intervene into the 1971 crisis of Pakistan driven by the East Pakistan's demand for separate nation based on Bengali identity. This resulted in the formation of Bangladesh. According to Mehta (2010), India's 1971-armed intervention in East Pakistan, driven by multiple factors, is generally and rightly considered as one of the world's most successful cases of humanitarian intervention against genocide. The leaders of newly formed country expected and sought immense help from India. Since the very inception India contributed immensely to the economic and political development of the country (Wagner, 2009). The constitution of the country was inspired to emulate Indian model of democracy and secularism. However, this path was being diverted by the adoption of authoritarian and sectarian paths after the demise of the founding leader Sheik Mujibur Rahman. Meanwhile disputes pertaining to land border and water emerged in the bilateral relations. When democracy in its mild form returned in 1990-91, India's relations were becoming inconsistent and unsustainable in between the manipulations and contestations of two dominant political parties, the BNP and AL. In the post-2000 periods, India extended support to Bangladesh in many ways. The major support was in the form economic aid. According Mehta (2011, p.9) "India has actively engaged in supporting Bangladesh in its return to a more robust democracy

through a massive aid program (worth US\$1.5 billion) and several other concessions”.

However, the general tenor of India’s democracy assistance in Bangladesh cannot be treated as consistent despite possessing adequate resources to do so. Most of the time the noble aim of democracy assistance was side-lined by other material interests especially after Bangladesh embraced religious and authoritarian characteristics through a coup in 1975. Highlighting this, Wagner (2009) points out that the ‘questions of democracy or the support of democratic structure only played a role in the bilateral relationship between 1972 and 1975 when India was involved in structuring the political and economic framework for Bangladesh” (p.15). The gradual erosion of the secular nature of the country was being neglected for the sake of healthy relations. Even several mass or known incidents were went unnoticed. As observed ‘it tried to extend the hand of friendship to the government of Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh, overlooking the post-electoral violence committed against the Hindu minorities in 2001.’ (Behuria et al., 2012, p.239).

Since the direct involvement in Sri Lanka in 1987 through IPKF resulted in a disaster, India had abstained from overt actions in the country. It had only limited role in the peace process evolved in the next one decade. Even in the peace process facilitated by Norway that led to the ceasefire in 2002 and the formation of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission in the 1990s, India has not played an official role (Wagner, 2018). However, the emerging strategic environment did not allow it to stay away from taking a clear stand on the issue. Geographical proximity of the island, historical relations and other global pressures including the rise of China and fear of excluding from the team of global norm setters have played behind the seen. Domestic compulsions in the form Tamil discontent in the state of Tamil Nadu also forced to forget the pains of deep political wound suffered in the 1990s. Since 2004 India gradually increased military support to the government in their attempts to get rid of t LTTE. The defeat of LTTE and conclusion of final Eelam War in 2009 was welcomed by India. The termination of long- standing conflict between extremist groups and government in a country would wholeheartedly be welcomed by other democracies. However, as the military actions of Rajapaksa government had triggered suspicion of widespread human rights violations, India didn’t hesitate to criticise that also. In fact, many of the contested topics like constitutional amendments and federalism can’t be fully resolved without recalling India’s past contributions. The approaches of India in the UN forums are also very crucial in the policy of democracy assistance. The policy of simultaneous protection of government from extreme actions and advocating for minority rights has generated some kind of suspicion of having special interests beyond mere interest of democracy promotion. India has tried to avoid an intrusion into Sri Lanka in the name of international R2P provisions and at the same time it has done more than anyone else to safeguard the interests of Tamils. Mehta (2011, p.9) says that “thus while India appears on the one hand to be protecting the Sri Lankan government from stronger international censure, on the other hand New Delhi is the only player that is actively engaged in the rehabilitation of Tamils in northern Sri Lanka.”

The most evident history of democracy- based relations between India and Maldives can be traced back to the 1988 incident in which the former saved the government of Maldives

from a military coup of pro- Tamil dissidents. Since then, there were ever increasing assistance to empower the military strength of the island nation. Apart from strengthening of military force, India’ contribution to electoral sector of the political system of the country during the period was very high. The first democratic election was held in 2008. Mohamed Nasheed, the elected president continued up to 2012. During this occasion India extended support to build up electoral machinery in the country. Apart from this, there were actions for empowering police wing, judiciary and media which are the major pillars of democracy. Former ruler Abdulla Gayoom, in one of his statement in 2018, conceded the role of India in promoting democracy in the country. As a result of Nasheed’s resignation in 2012, the bilateral relations had suffered a setback. After the 2013 election, the victorious Abdulla Yameen moved towards China. This incident hints that the survival of a democratic government in Maldives is more apt for the interests of India and also for the cordial bilateral relations.

V. CONCLUSION

Attempts to transfer democracy through such processes as democracy promotion, democracy support or democracy assistance have ever triggered controversies. It is in this context a new group of countries did emerge and garnered notable attention in the international domain. They were varyingly described as non-western democracies or emerging market democracies. India has been seen identified as an emerging democratic power. The successful establishment and maintenance of a democratic system domestically tended to see it as a beacon of democracy and a model in many quarters. There have been various attempts to map its competency, willingness and capacity to indulge democracy support activities. Almost all studies have converged on a fact that though there has been a reluctance in the early phases. At the same time, they all have converged on the prevalence of an evolving change in the approach of India in the dawn of twentieth century itself. At the leadership level, while the early policies to establish rapport with United States and a changing approach to democracy promotion were formulated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, his successor Manmohan Singh adopted it and carried forward with the same readiness. While making analysis of changing dimensions of India’s democracy promotion, South Asia as a region has often been given great focus.

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