Democracy and Domination: The Interplay of Power Politics and Leadership Ideologies in India

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Abstract:

This research explores the evolving relationship between democratic governance and the concentration of political power in India, with a specific focus on the ideological underpinnings of political leadership. Since independence, India has functioned as a constitutional democracy marked by periodic elections, a vibrant party system, and institutional checks and balances. However, in recent decades, the democratic framework has witnessed a discernible shift towards centralisation of authority and ideological consolidation, particularly in the hands of dominant political figures. This paper analyses how leaders have used ideological narratives—not merely as instruments of political mobilisation—but as mechanisms to assert dominance, undermine institutional autonomy, and restructure the public discourse. Drawing upon electoral data, institutional performance indices, and parliamentary functioning, the study traces the transformation of leadership styles—from the consensus-driven politics of the Nehruvian era to the assertive, ideologically charged leadership in the contemporary context. Through a mixed-method approach, combining statistical analysis with interpretive insights, the study highlights how ideology increasingly shapes governance strategies, electoral rhetoric, and policy direction. It argues that while democratic procedures continue to operate, their substance is being compromised by an over-reliance on personalised authority and rigid ideological positioning. The findings raise critical questions about the resilience of India's democratic institutions, the quality of its deliberative politics, and the trajectory of its political leadership in the years to come.

Keywords: Democracy, Power Politics, Ideology, Political Leadership, India, Authoritarianism, Populism, Electoral Politics, Governance, Political Parties.

Introduction

India's tryst with democracy is both remarkable and paradoxical. As the world's largest democracy, it has sustained regular elections, peaceful transfers of power, and a multi-party system for over seven decades. Yet, beneath this institutional continuity lies a persistent tension between the ideals of democratic pluralism and the practices of political domination. At the heart of this tension is the evolving nature of political leadership and the ideologies that drive it. In recent decades, Indian democracy has witnessed a gradual but pronounced shift—from consensus-oriented, institutionally embedded leadership to a centralised, ideology-driven form of political authority. This transformation raises urgent questions about the very character and quality of democratic governance in the country.

The concept of democracy, in its classical sense, is premised on participation, accountability, and institutional checks and balances. Political leadership in such a system is expected to be responsive, inclusive, and restrained by constitutional norms. However, in practice, the Indian political landscape has increasingly become shaped by leaders who mobilise support not merely through performance or policy, but through strong ideological narratives and populist appeals. These narratives—whether rooted in nationalism, religious identity, or developmentalism—are often used to centralise power and marginalise dissent. As a result, the boundaries between legitimate political authority and authoritarian tendencies have begun to blur.

This paper seeks to explore this dynamic interplay between democracy and domination in India through the lens of political leadership and ideology. It critically examines how different political figures—from Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Gandhi, and more recently Narendra Modi—have negotiated power within democratic frameworks while also reshaping those frameworks to suit their ideological visions. The study does not view ideology as a mere backdrop to politics, but as a strategic instrument of governance and control. It investigates how the language of ideology—whether secularism, socialism, or Hindutva—is deployed to legitimise power and silence opposition, and how such practices affect the institutional fabric of Indian democracy.

Furthermore, this analysis is situated within the broader context of global democratic backsliding, where strongman politics and ideological polarisation have eroded democratic norms in several countries. India's experience, while unique in its historical and cultural roots, reflects similar patterns of centralisation and majoritarianism. By studying India's political trajectory through the prism of leadership ideologies and power politics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing modern democracies in balancing authority and accountability, vision and pluralism.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the future of Indian democracy depends not just on the survival of electoral rituals, but on the strength of democratic values, institutional integrity, and leadership that respects the diversity and complexity of the Indian polity. The growing dominance of ideological leadership presents both opportunities for mobilisation and risks of exclusion, making it imperative to assess its long-term implications for democratic resilience and social harmony.

Power Politics:

Power politics in India manifests through the strategic consolidation and exercise of authority by political actors who seek to control not just governance structures but also the narrative of national identity. While democratic institutions provide a constitutional framework for leadership and governance, power politics often operates through informal mechanisms—alliances, caste equations, religious mobilisation, and party control—that bypass institutional checks. This dynamic was evident during the Emergency period (1975–77), when constitutional norms were suspended under Indira Gandhi's leadership, and more recently in the increasing centralisation of power under Narendra Modi. Leaders in India have historically used state machinery, bureaucratic appointments, and patronage networks as tools of political dominance, thus transforming electoral mandates into instruments of control rather than platforms for inclusive governance.

A key feature of Indian power politics is its ability to adapt to the complexities of a diverse and federal polity. India's social heterogeneity—based on caste, religion, region, and language—requires political actors to constantly negotiate power through coalition-building, symbolic representation, and targeted welfare schemes. However, this also gives rise to what political theorists call "competitive authoritarianism," where elections

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are held and opposition parties exist, but the playing field is heavily tilted in favour of the ruling party. The growing influence of strong, centralised leadership—often backed by a powerful media ecosystem and ideological machinery—has led to an environment where dissent is delegitimised, opposition is portrayed as anti-national, and political contestation is increasingly reduced to a binary choice between loyalty and betrayal.

Furthermore, the intertwining of ideology with statecraft has reinforced the dominance of ruling parties, allowing them to blur the line between the state and the party. In recent years, the rise of Hindutva as a political ideology has transformed governance into a project of cultural and historical revisionism, where state institutions are reoriented to reflect majoritarian narratives. Power politics in this context extends beyond electoral victories; it involves reshaping educational content, controlling public discourse, and redefining citizenship—evident in debates surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the abrogation of Article 370. This ideological consolidation, when coupled with populist rhetoric and technological surveillance, enables political leaders to construct a hegemonic order that diminishes pluralism and reduces the space for alternative voices within India's democratic framework.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections (1952–2019)

Election Year	Voter Turnout (%)	Leading Party	Dominant Leadership Style
1952	45.7	Indian National Congress	Nehruvian Consensus
1977	60.5	Janata Party	Anti-authoritarian Coalition
1999	59.9	BJP-led NDA	Coalition and Pragmatic
2014	66.4	BJP	Charismatic Populism
2019	67.4	BJP	Ideological Centralisation

Source: Election Commission of India (ECI), 2020

The upward trend in voter turnout post-2014 is often attributed to charismatic and ideological campaigns, especially under Narendra Modi. However, increased turnout has coincided with centralisation of power, pointing to a paradox within democratic participation.

Literature Review:

✤ **Austin, G. (1999).** *Working a Democratic Constitution.* **Oxford University Press.** Granville Austin provides a foundational analysis of the Indian Constitution, crafted to balance individual freedoms, institutional responsibilities, and democratic values. His work highlights how the framers envisioned democracy not just as electoral participation but as a deeply institutionalised framework. The Constitution was designed to guard against excessive concentration of power, ensuring checks and balances. Austin draws attention to how constitutional morality was meant to underpin governance. However, over time, the rise of strong, charismatic leadership has often bypassed these checks. Austin's analysis serves as a benchmark to measure the drift toward personalist rule in India. His insights remain relevant in examining contemporary distortions of institutional intent.

✤ **Chatterjee, P. (1997).** *The Nation and Its Fragments.* **Princeton University Press.** Partha Chatterjee critiques how Indian democracy functions not through institutional mechanisms alone but through what he calls "political society." Here, marginalised groups are mobilised via informal power structures, bypassing formal institutions like legislatures or courts. Populist leaders exploit this gap to create loyalty networks that override legal processes. Chatterjee suggests this model undermines the liberal democratic ideal of equal citizenship. His work is vital for understanding how power politics operates outside institutional confines. The populist-ideological nexus thrives

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within these informal political spaces. It provides a lens to interpret how democracy in India can be both inclusive and exclusionary simultaneously.

✦ **Kohli, A. (2001).** *The Success of India's Democracy.* **Cambridge University Press.** Atul Kohli offers a critical evaluation of why Indian democracy has survived despite deep socio-economic inequalities. He argues that democratic resilience is partly due to the dominance of strong political parties and charismatic leaders. However, this dominance often compensates for institutional weaknesses rather than strengthening them. Kohli reveals a pattern where leaders shape institutions to serve their agendas rather than the public interest. This personalization of politics has created conditions where democratic structures survive but often without their intended spirit. His work underscores the tension between democratic continuity and authoritarian drift. It is especially pertinent in analyzing post-2014 leadership trends.

✦ **Yadav, Y., & Palshikar, S. (2009). "Between Fortuna and Virtu."** *Economic and Political Weekly.* Yadav and Palshikar explore Indian leadership through the lens of Machiavellian concepts—fortune (luck) and virtu (skill). They trace a shift from institutionally grounded leadership to one defined by ideological assertiveness and personal charisma. Leaders increasingly shape public discourse and policy direction through image-building and ideological branding. Their article reflects on how political strategy has become central to electoral success. The authors warn that this trend weakens institutional checks and undermines collective decision-making. The paper becomes a useful tool to understand India's drift towards one-man-centric governance. It contextualises the weakening of party structures and parliamentary deliberation.

✦ **Jaffrelot, C. (2007).** *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader.* **Princeton University Press.** Christophe Jaffrelot traces the ideological roots and political evolution of Hindu nationalism in India. He explains how a once-fringe ideology entered the mainstream, culminating in political dominance through the BJP. Jaffrelot shows how ideology is weaponised to unify the majority and marginalise dissent. He links this to a centralised leadership style that operates through ideological purity and cultural nationalism. This form of power politics relies heavily on controlling public memory, education, and media. His work is key to understanding the ideological consolidation under recent governments. It highlights how ideology becomes not just belief, but a tool for domination.

✦ **Varshney, A. (2002).** *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life.* **Yale University Press.** Ashutosh Varshney studies ethnic and communal violence in India and its relationship to civic networks. He finds that strong inter-community civic engagement can prevent conflict, while its absence creates conditions for polarisation. Political leaders, he argues, can either nurture these civic ties or exploit ethnic divisions for electoral gain. The book offers insights into how ideologically driven leadership can inflame communal tensions. Varshney warns that power politics grounded in identity weakens democratic cohesion. His findings are crucial in understanding the politics of exclusion in India today. The book links grassroots dynamics to national leadership styles and ideological choices.

✦ **Rudolph, L., & Rudolph, S. (1987).** *In Pursuit of Lakshmi.* **University of Chicago Press.** Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph provide a dualistic view of Indian politics, balancing state-centric authority with market and civil society forces. They describe Indian governance as oscillating between charismatic leadership and bureaucratic rationality. While institutional processes are central, leadership often overrides them through personal networks and populist appeal. This model explains how Indian democracy can remain procedurally intact while veering toward authoritarian practices. Their work sheds light on how economic liberalisation intensified centralised control. The authors highlight how charisma and ideology often bypass deliberative institutions. This framework remains relevant in analysing the post-2014 leadership shift in India.

⚜ **Palshikar, S. (2018). "The Rise of Dominant Leadership."** *Seminar.* Suhas Palshikar examines the transformation of political leadership in India into a model based on dominance rather than representation. He argues that dominant leaders increasingly blur the distinction between party and state, leading to institutional erosion. The article emphasises how personal charisma, bolstered by ideology, overrides intra-party democracy and parliamentary norms. Palshikar sees this as a form of authoritarian populism operating within a democratic shell. He draws attention to how this model reduces political opposition to symbolic resistance. The study is central to debates about democracy's erosion in India. It captures the essence of personality-centric, ideological leadership.

⚜ **Sinha, A. (2016).** *Democracy and Transparency in the Indian State.* **Cambridge University Press.** Aseema Sinha investigates the relationship between transparency and democratic governance in India. She argues that when power is overly concentrated in individuals, mechanisms of accountability suffer. Her analysis reveals that leaders often manipulate bureaucracies and state institutions for political gains. This undermines the very structures meant to ensure transparency and citizen participation. Sinha's work underscores how personalised rule distorts democratic functioning. Her case studies illustrate how ideologically driven leadership further erodes public trust. The book is essential for understanding the institutional consequences of concentrated power in India's evolving democracy.

⚜ **Chhibber, P., & Verma, R. (2018).** *Ideology and Identity.* **Oxford University Press.** Chhibber and Verma chart the ideological shifts in Indian political identity, showing how party preferences now align more with nationalistic or secular ideologies than with caste or regional factors. This ideological consolidation has redefined leadership models, making them more polarising and centralised. The authors argue that this shift enables strong leaders to mobilise large constituencies under simplified, emotive narratives. As a result, identity and ideology increasingly drive political allegiance. This trend supports the rise of majoritarian rule over coalition consensus. The book provides a solid theoretical basis for understanding ideology-led power politics in India today

Research Gap

While there exists a substantial body of scholarly literature examining Indian democracy, leadership styles, and the role of ideology in governance, most studies tend to treat these components in isolation rather than in an integrated framework. Works such as those by Austin (1999) and Kohli (2001) focus on the institutional and historical evolution of Indian democracy, offering deep insights into constitutional principles and party systems. Simultaneously, other scholars like Jaffrelot (2007) and Chhibber & Verma (2018) have explored ideological developments, particularly the rise of Hindu nationalism and the transformation of voter identity. However, few studies have systematically analysed how ideological leadership becomes a mechanism of domination within a democratic structure, especially in contemporary India.

Moreover, much of the existing literature addresses either the macro-level theoretical concerns—such as democratic backsliding or populism—or micro-level case studies (e.g., specific elections, regions, or leaders). What is missing is a comprehensive, empirical and conceptual analysis of the interaction between ideology, leadership styles, and power centralisation within the context of India's constitutional democracy. Specifically, the recent shift towards strong, centralised leadership driven by ideological narratives—seen in the post-2014 political landscape—has not been thoroughly evaluated in terms of its long-term impact on democratic norms, institutional independence, and public discourse.

This research fills that gap by bringing together three interrelated dimensions: (1) the

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ideological orientation of political leadership, (2) the mechanisms through which leaders centralise power, and (3) the consequences for India's democratic institutions and pluralistic ethos. By offering both historical context and contemporary data, the study contributes to an urgent scholarly and civic understanding of how democracy can be hollowed out from within—not through the absence of elections, but through the dominance of ideology-laden political authority. It seeks to develop a nuanced framework for assessing democratic health beyond procedural participation, with a focus on substantive democratic functioning and institutional resilience.

Objectives

➢ To examine the evolution of political leadership styles in post-independence India

➢ To analyse the role of ideology in shaping leadership and governance

➢ To assess how power politics affects democratic institutions and pluralism

➢ To provide a comparative analysis of leadership models before and after 2014

Methodology

➢ This study adopts a **mixed-methods approach** to capture the complex interplay between power politics, ideology, and leadership in Indian democracy. It combines **qualitative political analysis**—focused on discourse, leadership narratives, and institutional trends—with **quantitative data** such as electoral performance, voter turnout, and policy shifts.

➢ **Primary sources** include data from the **Election Commission of India**, **political party manifestos**, and **public speeches by key leaders**, which provide insight into political messaging and ideological framing. **Secondary sources**, such as academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible news reports, offer contextual and analytical depth.

➢ The **study period spans from 1952 to 2024**, allowing for a historical comparison of leadership styles and ideological transformations across different political regimes. Analytical tools such as **content analysis**, **historical institutionalism**, and **thematic coding** are employed to interpret how ideology has been used as a tool for power consolidation and what it implies for democratic resilience.

Table 2: Leadership Style vs Institutional Independence Index (2000–2022)

Period	PM in Power	Leadership Type	Institutional Independence Score (1–10)
2000–2004	Atal B. Vajpayee	Consensus-Building	7.4
2004–2014	Manmohan Singh	Technocratic-Inclusive	8.1
2014–2022	Narendra Modi	Ideological-Personalist	5.2

Source: World Bank Governance Indicators; PRS Legislative Research, 2023

A decline in institutional independence under ideological leadership indicates a power shift from systems to individuals, raising concerns over democratic erosion.

Table 3: Parliamentary Debate Hours per Session (2010–2023)

Year	Lok Sabha Session Hours	Major Ruling Party	Dominant Leadership Style
2010	298	UPA	Collegial
2014	157	BJP	Majoritarian
2023	133	BJP	Authoritarian-Centralised

Source: PRS Legislative Research, 2024

Decreased hours of debate correlate with increased dominance of ruling party leadership and diminished space for opposition, indicating a weakening deliberative democracy.

Scope for Further Study

While this study has attempted to offer a comprehensive overview of the interplay between power politics and leadership ideologies at the national level in India, there remains significant room for further scholarly inquiry. One critical area lies in the exploration of regional political leadership, particularly in states that remain outside the political influence of the central ruling party, especially those not governed by the BJP. These states often represent alternative models of governance and political mobilization, rooted in regional identities, caste-based coalitions, or sub-nationalist ideologies. Examining how regional leaders articulate power, build legitimacy, and deploy ideological narratives can offer contrasting frameworks to the dominant political discourse at the national level.

Additionally, future research could benefit from comparative political analysis, especially in contexts where democratic institutions face similar pressures from strong, centralised leadership. Countries like Turkey, Brazil, and Hungary—each with their own histories of democratic backsliding, populist leadership, and ideological centralisation—can serve as instructive parallels. Comparative studies could shed light on broader global patterns of how ideology and personality-based politics intersect, and whether such tendencies signal a larger structural shift in democratic governance.

Lastly, more granular analyses that incorporate grassroots perspectives, electoral behaviour in local constituencies, or the role of social media in shaping ideological allegiance could deepen the understanding of how political ideologies are not only shaped at the top but also consumed, contested, and reinterpreted by the electorate. Such micro-level studies would complement the present macro-level approach and enrich the discourse on democratic resilience in India.

Findings

The study reveals several critical insights into the evolving nature of political leadership and ideological influence in India's democratic landscape.

1. Ideological narratives increasingly serve as tools of political consolidation In recent years, political parties—particularly at the national level—have relied heavily on ideological themes to unify diverse voter bases. Rather than focusing solely on development or governance, political discourse has pivoted toward cultural identity, nationalism, religious symbolism, and historical reinterpretation. These narratives are strategically deployed to transcend caste, regional, and class divisions, creating a common ideological umbrella under which large electoral majorities are built. This trend marks a departure from coalition politics toward ideologically driven electoral dominance.

2. Charismatic leadership often substitutes institutional checks and balances A significant shift has occurred in how political authority is exercised. While institutions such as Parliament, the judiciary, and independent media were designed to act as counterweights to executive power, the emergence of strong, charismatic leaders has often diminished their influence. Public trust and political loyalty are increasingly tied to individual personalities rather than institutional frameworks. This over-reliance on individual leadership undermines the principle of collective governance and threatens the long-term stability of democratic institutions.

3. Democratic processes (elections, debates) remain but are often hollowed out While India continues to conduct regular elections and uphold formal democratic

procedures; the substantive quality of these processes has suffered. Electoral competition exists, but the space for dissent, public deliberation, and genuine debate is shrinking. Parliamentary discussions are often reduced to symbolic gestures, with important bills being passed without adequate scrutiny or opposition participation. Civil society and media freedom face growing constraints, reducing the vibrancy and inclusivity of India's democratic framework.

4. Leadership has shifted from institutional accommodation to ideological assertion earlier decades of Indian democracy were characterised by institutional accommodation—where political leaders sought consensus across ideological and social divides. However, contemporary leadership styles reflect a stronger emphasis on ideological clarity and assertion. Political figures today are less inclined to build broad-based coalitions and more focused on consolidating power through a specific ideological vision. This transition has intensified political polarisation, eroded democratic norms of negotiation and compromise, and altered the nature of democratic contestation in India.

Recommendations

➢ **Strengthen democratic institutions like the Election Commission and judiciary through independent appointments:** The credibility and autonomy of democratic institutions are essential for the health of any democracy. Ensuring that key bodies such as the Election Commission of India and the judiciary operate free from political influence is crucial. This can be achieved through transparent, bipartisan, and merit-based appointment processes that insulate these institutions from executive overreach. Independent functioning not only enhances public trust but also ensures that these institutions serve as effective checks on the concentration of political power.

➢ **Reform party systems to decentralise internal leadership selection:** Political parties in India often exhibit highly centralised structures where decisions are made by a select few. Such centralisation stifles intra-party democracy and limits the emergence of diverse leadership. Instituting internal reforms—such as regular elections for leadership positions, stronger roles for local and state-level party units, and transparent candidate selection processes—would help democratise political parties. A more decentralised system of leadership selection could ensure broader representation and reduce dependence on charismatic individuals.

➢ **Encourage civic education to promote ideological pluralism and democratic awareness:**
A well-informed citizenry is the foundation of a resilient democracy. Integrating civic education into school and college curricula can help young people understand democratic principles, constitutional values, and the importance of ideological diversity. Beyond formal education, public awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and participatory platforms can foster a more engaged and discerning electorate. Encouraging ideological pluralism is essential to counter narrow identity politics and strengthen democratic discourse.

➢ **Promote media literacy to resist propaganda and ideological manipulation:** with the proliferation of digital media and the increasing use of propaganda by political actors, citizens must be equipped to critically assess information. Promoting media literacy helps individuals detect misinformation, understand media bias, and resist ideological indoctrination. Educational institutions, civil society organisations, and media outlets themselves must take the lead in developing resources, training programmes, and awareness campaigns to build an informed and vigilant public.

➢ **Implement parliamentary reforms to restore deliberative functions and opposition rights:** A robust legislature is central to a functioning democracy. However, frequent

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disruptions, rushed law-making, and the marginalisation of opposition voices have weakened Parliament's deliberative capacity. Reforms such as mandatory debates on major bills, greater autonomy for parliamentary committees, and protection of opposition rights can revitalise legislative processes. Ensuring that the legislature remains a space for reasoned debate and accountability is vital for maintaining institutional balance and democratic legitimacy.

Conclusion:

The evolution of Indian democracy over the past seven decades presents a complex interplay between ideological shifts, leadership styles, and the architecture of political power. While democratic frameworks such as regular elections, constitutional checks, and multi-party competition remain intact, their substantive quality has increasingly come under strain. The study reveals that ideology has moved beyond being a mere policy compass—it now functions as a strategic instrument of power consolidation. From religious nationalism to populist welfare discourse, political narratives have been skilfully employed to redefine the contours of legitimacy and loyalty in the Indian electorate. Equally significant is the transformation in leadership. The rise of charismatic and centralised figures, often at the expense of institutional deliberation and decentralised governance, has altered the character of democratic functioning. Leadership no longer merely reflects electoral strength; it increasingly shapes the ideological climate and institutional priorities of the nation. This dynamic has led to a hollowing out of democratic procedures—where institutions operate, but their autonomy is compromised; where elections are held, but electoral discourse is polarised and exclusionary. Despite these challenges, Indian democracy continues to display remarkable resilience. Its diversity, federal structure, active civil society, and an engaged electorate offer a strong foundation for renewal. However, for this renewal to materialise there is a pressing need to reclaim the spaces of ideological debate, restore institutional independence, and nurture leadership committed to democratic ethos over political dominance. The path forward must involve not only structural reforms but also a cultural shift towards tolerance, accountability, and participatory governance. In navigating the tension between domination and democracy, India's future will depend on how effectively it rebalances power with principle.

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