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Q4(a)

The modernization thesis asserts that affluence breeds stable democracy. How do you explain the success of India being the world's largest democracy as an exceptional case?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the main arguments in the debate between the modernisation thesis and the thesis of India as an exceptional democracy
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

Lipset tied stable democracy to wealth and a middle class.

Almond and Verba added civic culture; **Huntington** added institutional order.

India voted before it was rich, which is the exceptional claim.

Kothari and the Rudolphs gave an Indian-path vocabulary.

Emergency and violence show the exception is historical, not magical.

Introduction

Modernisation theory expected stable democracy after wealth, literacy, and a civic culture. India stayed poor, diverse, and electoral. The exceptional-democracy thesis treats that survival as a puzzle that **Lipset**'s correlation does not swallow.

Body

The modernisation thesis

- Seymour Martin **Lipset** linked economic development with democratic legitimacy and a moderating middle class.
- Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's civic culture treated participant orientations as the soil of stable democracy.
- Walt W. Rostow's stages made politics a companion of industrial take-off.
- **Samuel Huntington complicated the story:** mobilisation without institutions brings decay. Even so, the West's sequence remained the implicit template.

Why India looked exceptional

- Universal franchise in 1950 preceded mass prosperity. That reverses the **Lipset** timing.
- Extreme linguistic, religious, and caste diversity should, on many modernisation readings, break a single demos.

- A largely rural, low-income electorate kept choosing governments through the **Election Commission**, courts, and a federal constitution.
- Rajni Kothari's Congress system, the Rudolphs' modernity of tradition, and later Atul Kohli and Ashutosh Varshney treated Indian democracy as a distinct path, not a delayed Europe.

Arguments that dissolve the exception

- India was not the poorest imaginable case in every region; a nationalist elite and the ICS frame were unusual colonial bequests.
- Emergency 1975-77 showed how thin the exception could become.
- State-level authoritarianism, communal violence, and later illiberal talk suggest "exception" was never a guarantee.
- Comparative work on other poor democracies (and on breakdowns) weakens uniqueness.

Arguments that keep a qualified exception

- No other large, poor, federal, multi-religious State has kept competitive national elections for so long.
- Social heterogeneity was organised into parties and reservations rather than into a single racial census State.
- **The puzzle remains for Lipset:** development did not arrive first.

Debate as method

- Exception should mean a challenge to a theory's scope, not a national compliment.
- **Modernisation still explains pressures:** growth, urban middle classes, and media change Indian politics. It does not explain 1952.

Flow diagram

Modernisation Lipset Almond -> Democracy after development

India 1950 franchise -> Exceptional democracy thesis

Exceptional democracy thesis -> Qualifiers Emergency illiberal strain

Democracy after development -> Debate

Exceptional democracy thesis -> Debate

Conclusion

Modernisation theory expected democracy after development and civic culture, in **Lipset's** and Almond's sense. India's early franchise and survival as a poor, plural federation is the exceptional thesis. The Emergency and later strains qualify pride. The debate is whether India refutes **Lipset's** timing or only delays his variables.

Facts & figures

Lipset

Social requisites of democracy: development correlated with democratic stability.

Almond and Verba

The Civic Culture: participant political culture as a support of democracy.

Huntington

Order and institutionalisation as conditions; rapid change can wreck democracy even as society modernises.

Kothari / Rudolphs

Congress system and "modernity of tradition" as Indian answers to the European sequence.

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