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Debating Democracy in India: The Rise of Populism and the Death of Public Morality in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the fate of the democratic tradition in the 21st century, in light of the rise of the new right political position in many post-colonial countries in South Asia, with a special focus on India. It argues that India's long nurturing of the democratic tradition led to the proper establishment of an 'agonistic tradition' (Chantal Mouffe et al) that encouraged the lively encounter of different political positions in the public domain and simultaneously emphasized the rise of essentialist politics (Spivak et al) to fulfil the promise of equality and a truly sovereign populous. However, limited political alternatives, the merging of left and right-wing politics in India on issues of development and urbanisation in the last two decades, have sadly left the political domain succumb to forces of global capitalism that rule out the possibility of exploring alternative ways of reviving democratic practices in tackling issues of economic or political nature. This has further crippled the public domain with the disintegration of objective reasoning (from the critical theory tradition) and a total lack of accountability in political action over the last couple of decades. The paper intends to highlight some examples to augment this claim while attempting to offer possible solutions like cultural revivalism that might inject public consciousness with a new sense of objectivism and the need for mutual consultation in countering the emergence of 'solitarism' (Amartya Sen et al) and hyper individualism that allows for the circulation of dangerous political positions that seem to threaten the future fate of democracy and liberalism in India.

Keywords: agonistic politics; cultural revivalism; Indian essentialism; objective reasoning; solitarist identity