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Working of Indian Democracy: Challenges and Opportunities

PAPER PRESENTER

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Ever since the Greek civilization, the general understanding was that democracy is the government in which people rule over them. It is also a government in which everybody has a share. According to constitutional expert Dicey, democracy is a form of government in which the governing body is a comparatively large fraction of the entire nation. Similarly Gettell observed that democracy is that form of government in which the mass of the population possesses the right to share in the exercise of sovereign power. These being the noble features of a democratic system and the countries which boast of being democracies are divided into many incarnations out of which India, though the longest, have one such.

Hearnshaw, in his book "Democracy of the Crossways" said a democratic state, in short, is simply one in which the community as a whole possesses sovereign authority, maintains ultimate control over affairs and determines what sort of governmental machinery shall be set up because democracy as a form of state is not merely a mode of government, but is merely a mode of appointing, controlling and dismissing government. From this statement, it is thus evident that in a democratic state people have the rights to give a shape to the government, to appoint it, and to dismiss it. A new government replaces the old one in an election. People also express their will on important matters through the mass media.

The communists provided a new dimension to the democratic thinking and action. They denied the need of democratic government, but emphasized the necessity of a democratic state. A democratic state to them is only a socialist state in which there should be the dictatorship of the proletariat. They dislike the western system of democracy with its economic and social inequalities where domination is of the capitalist class. But the communist state is not a democratic state where there is only one party and where there is no freedom to form other parties. The dictatorship of the proletariat ultimately becomes the dictatorship of the communist party and the power of the state is exercised only by a few leaders of the party.

Hence, democracy which accords public opinion its rightful place and submits to people’s choice through election is supposed to be the best, provided social equality and economic protection through political process are made available.

India is the largest functioning democracy in the world. It got freedom during the most sensitive period of world history. Two global wars were fought to make the world safe for democracy. In fact, the second global war accelerated the process of freedom from bondage. Though the armed clash was over yet tension was mounting up due to new ideological rivalry between East and West led by the then Soviet Union and the United States of America. The newly founded United Nations grew amidst the cold war between these two groups. Both political and economic crises were mounting up. The colonial powers were getting stiff resistance from the nationalist struggle. At this juncture, India
achieved her independence and adopted a new Constitution which envisaged a parliamentary form of democracy with a federal structure.

According to Sameul Huntington, Indian democracy as an institution was facing few crises at the eve of independence. They were: crises of national integration, crises of identity, crises of participation, crises of penetration and crises of legitimacy. Thus we see the number of challenges, which the newly independent and decolonized India was facing while adopting the system of democracy. The major problems before India were linguistic problems, caste system (which further took a new form of economic class system), poverty and illiteracy. To add to them malnutrition and poor health conditions, poor housing, poor work capability, lack of occupational adaptability and an inadequate level of savings reflected the clear picture of India.

The Constitution makers were influenced and encouraged by the ideals of the freedom struggle and the wisdom based messages of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This led to the birth of the largest Constitution of the world which provided elaborate principles of constitutional democracy and civil, political and socioeconomic rights through the chapters on Fundamental Rights and the directive principles of state policy. The new Constitution became effective on 26 January, 1950. The original concept of Sovereign Democratic Republic was modified into Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic in 1977 by the 42nd Constitution Amendment Act. The Republic has entered into the Seventh decade. Since 1952 periodic elections have been held and at present the Fifteenth Lok Sabha is functioning since May, 2009.

Structurally, the country has grown from 10 states to 28 states with seven Union Territories. The population has grown from 36 crores to 1.2 billion approximately. It has become the sixth largest economy in the world and is rated as a fast growing industrial country. The literacy rate has grown. In order to provide a smooth Constitutional Democracy, the supreme document has been amended more than 110 times. India is a nuclear power and has joined the elite club of space technology acquired countries. Planning in India is a serious exercise. Yet, the country's track record to fight against poverty, illiteracy and corruption are shockingly below the level of expectation. The largest democracy in the world has moved in the direction of instability and a 'crisis of governability' within a period of six decades. The erosion in political order, gradual decline in value system and a deepening social and economic crises have brought the Indian Political System to a crossroads where the people, the real makers of history, are required to take decision about the future course amidst uncertainty.

Many years ago professor Galbraith had described India as “functioning anarchy”, meaning thereby a system in constant turmoil but one that was still holding. As we look around today we are certainly in a state of anarchy but is no longer “functioning” instead, we are in the throes of deep erosion as state and polity. More basic than Galbraith was the Verdict given by Gunnar Myrdal in his `Asian Drama’ in which he had described India as a “soft state” by which he meant a state that was so dominated by vested interests that it had failed to achieve its own ideas of creating a just and egalitarian society.
It is the greatest paradox of the Indian system that in an apparent phase of 'electoral democracy' or of Galbraith's 'functional anarchy' people have reposed their full faith in the democratic process. This is by far the greatest achievement since independence. Indian people have maintained the democratic system.

But the other point in the paradox reflects that while democratic institutions have struck deep roots, the process of democratization of values and faith is lacking. As a result, particularistic perspectives and aggressive pursuit of self interests very often clash with community interest.

India is a plural society. It is a subcontinent. It has seven cultural zones, fifty eight sub-cultural zones. All the eight prominent religions of the world have their followers here. Hinduism, the largest faith in India is a concept and it is not religion in the sense Islam/Christianity is. The language scenario is most complex. Twenty-two languages are recognized in the VIII Schedule as languages of the Union. But the number of languages spoken is very large. Language changes in India every thirty miles. Caste as an ancient institution has many presentations. Both the Backward Class Commissions have found the staggering number unhelpful for smooth public policy intervention to remove distortions and disabilities. Thus, appreciation of diversity and attitude of fellow-feeling can be the best course of action in this country having civilization roots and cultural heritage of its own.

Since India is the largest democracy and the representative democracy is the modern day version both democracy and party system need further analysis in the Indian context. Democracy gets strong roots where its plantation proceeds from social to economic and then to political. In India, instead of social democracy taking strong roots ahead of economic and political democracy, the political democracy arrived earlier. This delayed the other two variants to have safe germination and growth. As long as equality and social justice are not visibly present only voting rights can not change the profile of a society which was under alien control for centuries.

**Functioning of Indian Democracy**

Many scholars compare the status of development and democracy, since independence. Does democracy leads to development or development leads to democracy? This dilemma still remains. India had a firm nationalist base with the strong leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister. But during that time, the members of legislative assembly were elitist. The democracy was functioning smoothly but in their favor because the masses were illiterate. Congress at that time was working for indigenous bourgeoisie. Thus congress became a party of social status quo.

Year 1967 was the turning point when the state parties suddenly came into power. This was a signal of democratization of Indian politics. Due to balance of payment problem, international financial institutions devalued rupee and India started drifting into economic crises. Mrs. Indira Gandhi swept the polls in 1971 elections with the ‘eradicate poverty’ slogans. In 1975 with the misuse of article 356 of Indian constitution, Mrs. Gandhi
declared an emergency in India. Economic crises, formation of Bangladesh and authoritarian rule at the centre weakened Indian democracy. The decision-making roles and powers of the cabinet members and ministers were consequently dissolved and were taken over by Mrs. Gandhi. Though the Panchayati raj system was to democratize the country at the village level but the power was still concentrated at the top of the pyramid.

After the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, there was a sympathy wave for Rajiv Gandhi who attempted to alter India’s development strategies. His motto of liberalization was partially successful but faced numerous obstacles. The country enjoyed the voting rights but the dynasty politics of congress remains till the present day, which makes the representation undemocratic. Not only Gandhi family but most of the MP’s in the Lok Sabha are a son or daughter to a politician.

But after all the turbulent years in India, democracy still exists in its unique forms. Arguably it is the best form of government. Democracy would thus appear differently to different classes of India. To more privilege classes of society it would mean the freedom of enterprise and to the lower orders it would mean equality (at least between communities) and representation. But whatever the contradictions democracy may offers, Indian democracy will continue in spite of its paradoxical and surprising history.

It’s noteworthy that despite everything, India has sustained a fairly stable democracy, while the countries with comparable (and in some cases much less serious) problems have abandoned democracy for authoritarian form of rule. There are many conflicting views on the success and failure of democracy and they all are associated to some ideals. For some an ideal democracy is a construct where people are truly equal citizens, politically engaged with an equal voice, tolerant of each other and where representatives are accountable. On the other hand, scholars have viewed democracy as an institution, which would mean free and fair elections, legislative assembly, and under this understanding India is considered as the largest democracy in the world. But any evaluation of democracy is of course, a combination of both.

Indian state has a deep commitment to democratic system and values as democracy provides impulse towards change and looks at contemporary struggles and movements of the people as a part of the democratic process.

Over the fifteen Lok Sabha elections, popular participation and voter turnout in every election has remained high and stable, with the voter showing no fatigue or withdrawal symptoms. The Indian voter has learnt to punish or reward parties, groups and leaders during the elections, indicating that the level of consciousness of the Indian voter has been completely transformed. It can thus be safely stated that fundamental changes in India will take place only on the basis of power of rising consciousness of the voter and not on the basis of propositions like ‘power flows from the barrel of a gun.’

A competitive multiparty system is considered as the bedrock of representative democracy and it is quite clear that India’s multipolar political system consists both of all-India/national parties like the Congress, the BJP, and the Communists, and powerful
regional and sub-regional parties and groups, all of whom compete for political power. Moreover, the all-India parties, to be successful, have to align with regional parties. No incumbent party can take voter support for granted, evidenced by the frequency with which voters have punished ruling parties for their arrogance or misgovernance. All this needs to be welcomed.

The less discussed analytical question relates to the manner in which these parties or groups are themselves organized and the social goals which they claim to pursue. Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama, among others, claim that democracies have entered the age of ‘End of Ideology’ and that any reference to ideological beliefs of parties is out-of-date and that the only goal worth pursuing is ‘development’ captured best by the rate of growth and accumulation of wealth. In the context of Indian democracy is to be situated because ‘social equality and distribution’ have become dirty words for every political formation and capitalist entrepreneurs, middle class professionals and the czars of real estate have become the new role models of society. The rising rate of growth in the economy has sharpened the levels of social inequality and India is witnessing a rural-urban divide, class-caste divide, and enhanced regional imbalances. In this backdrop of inequality and great social disparities, we see the emergence of many Indias which are in serious conflict on the basis of ‘left outs’ versus ‘the beneficiaries’.

The fundamental question is—Are political parties and leaders at the national or regional levels really worried about the levels of growing social unrest, a consequence of the alarming growth of inequality in society? The answer to this big question is in the negative and can be substantiated by the weak political response to the challenge of inequality. It is uncritically assumed that the regional parties and leaders are more aware than the distant all-India national parties to the actual social discontent which prevails at the grassroots levels in their specific region. The fact is that every regional party is following the same path of economic development which has resulted in the growth of social inequality. Their organizational response to reach the mass of people essentially involves projecting the virtues of the ‘Leader’ and close family members as the sole saviours of the downtrodden. The impact of these leader-based family shops is evident in the way they govern in their region.

Left wing Extremism is the greatest threat to Indian security and democracy. Clearly, the regional/ national parties which are in power in the affected states too fully support the strong police and paramilitary based response of the central government to the Naxal problem, especially in the backward and neglected areas inhabited by poor tribals. This is just one example where the writ of elected representative governments is enforced by well-equipped and trained paramilitary and police forces of the Indian state and draconian laws are enforced in response to the demands of the people. While not an all-India situation, it does show that even as growing social inequity and deprivation has created ‘many Indias’, in as many as nine out of 28 states, the ruling parties survive on the basis of armed might and undemocratic laws.
The model of economic growth has also created a fertile ground for the growth of a communal Sangh Parivar, whose governments in various states are following a policy of ‘open targeting’ of the minority communities and minority cultures.

It is our firm belief that the marginalization of the pro-poor communists in politics is dangerous for Indian democracy. What kind of democracy will we have if the voice of the ‘Wretched of the Earth’ cannot reach the corridors of power? The reference here is not only to the serious electoral setbacks suffered by the communists in the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 or in the state assembly elections of West Bengal in 2011, even the organized working classes and their struggles have become weaker because of caste based and regional fragmentation of the labouring classes in the last two decades. The growing marginalization of the organized communist parties and communist-led all-Indian working classes is a warning signal because the right-wing shift of Indian polity, culture and society is becoming unstoppable in the absence of any countervailing force.

Elections are a necessary but not a sufficient condition to sustain democracy in a society where organized parties have turned their back on the issues of distribution and equality. John Stuart Mill in ‘On Liberty’ warned against privileging ‘empty liberty and an abstract individual’, reminding us that the individual is a real person, and social inequality is palpable. A polity in which unequal distribution of wealth has created ‘plutonomies in which small class fractions control increasingly large portions of wealth’ cannot but prove extremely dangerous for the future of Indian democracy.

When we looks at the Indian Democracy, one feels that something seems to have gone wrong somewhere, and our democracy is not functioning as we would wish or expect. For want of proper education and low percentage of literacy, in the early stages, Indian democracy was 'Buy people', instead of rule 'by the people'. This leads us to question the efficacy of democracy for our country.

There are two factors that militate against the proper functioning of democracy in India. First, success of a rule by the people depends, to a large extent, on an educated electorate. When Disraeli extended the voting right in England, he said. "We must now educate our masters". In India even after sixty four years of independence the minimum education figure has not reached even more than fifty two per cent of the people. As a result, people are easily misled. This can be dangerous for an ignorant and superstitious people.

The second of these factors is the existence of innumerable Parties, most of which have no clear-cut ideology or conception of what they really want.

**Indian Democracy at Crossroads**

Many factors have led to a growing loss of faith and trust of the common men in the credibility of governments. The progressive decline, malfunctioning and corruption in functioning of the executive; the entry of persons of doubtful integrity and even of
criminal background into the political arena, the established role of money and muscle power in the electoral process; the failure of the state legislatures and the parliament to, inter alia, effectively perform their mandated watchdog role over the functioning of the executive; the politicization, casteisation, communalization and corruption of the public services; the operation of criminal nexus network and increasing incidence of subversion and sabotage in various parts of the country; continuing serious failure of the public service delivery organizations to perform satisfactorily; erosion of the integrity of public institutions including universities and centers of higher learning, continuing indifference to ameliorating the lot of the poor, disadvantaged and neglected segments of society has led to the growing conviction that nothing can be got done from any public dealing office unless a person can secure political influence or pay the demanded bribe. This has generated a feeling of helplessness, despair, frustration and cynicism among the public at large.

**Challenges**

India is suffering from number of its old vices like redtapism, cumbersome procedures, undue secrecy, rude, negative and unhelpful attitudes. In recent years these vices have accentuated and new ones have raised their ugly heads. These include high level corruption, nepotism and favoritism. Many audit reports reveal many cases of wasteful expenditure and gross misuse of public money by high dignitaries for vulgar show of power and authority. In poor country like India this is indeed inprensible.

In contemporary phase the Indian democracy facing following challenges:

- The nation is passing through critical times. Indian political system is under severe stain. Faith of the people in the quality, integrity and efficiency of governmental institutions stands seriously eroded. There has been a steep fall in the standards of conduct in public life and administration. There is a crisis of character and values in politics and erosion in public life and administration. Growth of a certain cynicism towards normal democratic processes and erosion in the respect for political parties, politicians, legislators and civil servants, present a disturbing scenario. The source of many of our maladies is in the disregard of the interests of the citizen and the absence of good governance, both at the Union and State levels.

- The increasing disconnect between the people and politics and the visible anger against horrendous levels of corruption and abuse and misuse of state power and authority by the organs of government and their functionaries have led to great dissatisfaction and potential for social turmoil and violence.

- At the core of all the problems is the existing electoral system. Majority of those elected gain entry into the Legislatures with minority of votes cast. The numbers of persons with criminal antecedents entering the Legislatures, through use of money and muscle power, show an alarming increase.

- Apart from transparency, accountability etc., the essential pre-requisites for quality governance is that those elected should be endowed with character and competence and motivated by the spirit of public service.
While campaign for Good Governance would require action on several fronts and involve wide ranging political, administrative, judicial and parliamentary reforms, electoral and political party reforms are the most imperative and deserve the highest priority attention.

The time has come for discussion on core issues of reforms- Representation legitimacy of the elected, high cost of elections, role of money power, corruption, casteism, communalism and crime, non-participation of people in selecting candidates, absence of law for regulation of political parties providing for registration and recognition (& deregistration and derecognition) of National and State parties, internal democracy, audit of accounts etc.

Democratic institutions play vital role in the indoctrination process. They accord meaningful and operational shape to constitutional design and also both mediate the practice of democracy and connect the evolving democratic order to the people. The study of CSDS revealed many things. In South Asia though the democratic institutions enjoy formal sanction, this by itself has failed to ensure that they have come to develop roots in society. One implication is that representative institutions have not only suffered from an erosion of autonomy but enjoy a low level of popular trust, often having to yield significant decision making spaces to non-representative institutions. Paradoxically, the study found that most often when these institutions have successfully guarded and asserted their autonomy, they have tended to become less accountable to the people and are seen as reflecting elite interests. The low and differential level of people's trust in institutions is a constant reminder of the gap between the promise and working of democracy in our society. Though the study was meant for South Asia, India occupied a major and visible space in the study and its findings.

Democracy respects diversity. If the design of the democracy provides spaces for the recognition, inclusion and accommodation of spatial and social diversity, the working of democracy has led to differential achievements of this possibility. The CSDS study found that the dominance of the idea of a homogenous nation-state places limits on the imaginative and political possibilities available for negotiation of democracy with diversity. Despite this the countries in the region have been more successful in the accommodation of spatial diversity. Negotiating social diversities has, however, proved more difficult in the face of the rise of majoritarianism.

Political parties are essential ingredients of a democratic order. Without them the representative character of the order becomes inconceivable. The CSDS study also drew conclusion that political parties play a central role in democratic contestation in South Asia. They are the principal vehicles of mass mobilization. They are most salient site of political attachment and participation. Surprisingly, political parties who play crucial role in democracies do not have internal democracy. They spread the culture of politics instead of playing politics of culture. Criminalization of polities and politicization of criminals have spoiled the party democracy. In India the number of political parties in operation is alarmingly high. In 2009 election 369 political parties contested in the election. In total they fielded 8070 candidates. 333 parties could not secure any seat. Out
of the rest 36 parties, 19 could only get 3 or less number of seats. If this is the level of party participation in Indian democratic election, how can people's choice be ascertained?

In this context, it is not out of the place to refer to the evolution of parties and party system in India. Of the 50 parties that are now recognized as National and State parties, 44 have been founded after Independence. A study done on political parties by K.C.Suri (2004) observed that the plural and federal character of our polity has been asserting itself in the party domain. Suri is of the opinion that party system in India may be viewed broadly as consisting of four phases- Congress consolidation and dominance (1952-67), consolidation of opposition parties and emergence of multiparty system (1967-89) period of flux (1989-98) period of coalition era (1998 till date). Parties all over the world, are known for drawing their support largely from specific social classes. In India, the multi-structured society with different regions at different stages of development, continuous redefining of social relations, the presence of religious minorities in substantial numbers, identities based on caste, the large number of Dalits and the different settings in which the Adivasis live make the picture of party competition and system formation more complex.

During the past six decades, the parties in India have responded to the upsurge of aspirations of people by shaping a welfare state and a participative democracy. Merger and split among political parties being more visible in India have been mainly- due to aspirations of upcoming elites and leadership issues. But in this process the parties which were using money and muscle power to win elections have given safe accommodation to such characters to enter into the deliberative chambers. This trend is on the rise and the democratic process is vitiated when persons with crime record enter into the decision making forums and policy formulation bodies.

In India political parties are criticized for their role. One major complaint against parties is that parties have resorted to populist policies and programmes. Some accuse the parties of indulging in competitive populism.

But, unfortunately the state of the health of democracies in the world today is not bright. Similar is the case of India. The United States is the most affluent democracy and India is the largest democracy. Nepal happens to be the youngest among the democracies. In a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi it was found that though there is strong faith and approval for democracy in South Asia yet the profile of democracy in these countries speak otherwise. There is multiple meaning of democracy in this region. The survey identified six - freedom, justice - welfare, popular rule, elections and parties, peace-security and rule of law features to know the meaning of democracy. Freedom was ahead of justice as the meaning. The others who follow in descending order were popular rule, election and parties, peace-security and rule of law. As against the above South Asian viewpoint, the Indian opinion was Justice-welfare, popular vote, election and parties, freedom, peace-security and rule of law in descending order.
The survey further indicated that the various constitutional designs that embody the South Asian idea of democracy reflect slippage between the promise and the design of democracy. Even as the founding documents have mostly provided for equal citizenship, equal and enforceable rights and a free and accountable system of political competition to elect sovereign governments, notwithstanding occasional lapses and serious lacunae, the aspiration of the wellbeing inducing democracy, constraints of socioeconomic structures and a new regional and global context have produced tensions, creative as well as disruptive, leading to continual demand for redesign and occasions for constitutional subversion. The gathered opinion said - (i) Constitutional designs do not fully embody the promises of democracy (ii) Equal citizenship rights are available, but cannot be enjoyed in full measure, (iii) constitutional provisions for accountability and autonomy have suffered erosion, (iv) centralization is the norm, despite federal and decentralizing provisions, (v) the system of open party political competition faces hurdles in real life, (vi) government organs are largely immune to public security and accountability and (vii) mismatch between meaning and design is a source of disruptive and creative tensions.

The above viewpoints of the South Asian people, more prominently by the Indians, speak loudly about the state of health of democracy. The high hopes of the people are not held in high esteem. When they see progress and development in the neighborhood which are not democracies, their heart burn and they start questioning about their rights and privileges for which they do not get any satisfactory response.

The world today look at the way Indian democratic order is shaping itself in the third millennium. As one of the best electoral democracies, India is respected outside. But the inner story speaks otherwise. Failure of democracy in India can have a spread effect. Hence, the institutions that are essential to strengthen the democracy must look inward and reorder themselves in the larger interest of the people at the global level.

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