

CHALLENGES BEFORE INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Democracy has played a vital role in the story of civilization, helping transform the world from power structures of monarchy, empire, and conquest into popular rule, self-determination, and peaceful co-existence. A direct form of democracy was initially practised in ancient Greece, but there were many slaves in that society, and hardly anyone was a citizen and able to participate. Democracy then vanished until its re-emergence as 'representative democracy' in the late 18th century. Since then, it has been generally understood that modern human history follows a trend towards greater democracy. It is widely accepted that a democratic government is superior to a non-democratic administration because it is more accountable and responds to the needs of the people better than any other type of governance. Second, Consultation and debate are the cornerstones of democracy. A democratic choice always involves a large number of people, conversations, and meetings, and they are able to identify any errors in any decision. Though it takes time, taking time to consider critical decisions minimises the likelihood of making hasty or reckless decisions.

Under this background the constitution of India had started taking its shape and after, a little more than two and half years, on 26th November 1949, the Constituent Assembly of India adopted the Constitution of India, which came into effect from 26th January 1950.

Indian democratic structure is loosely modelled on the British Westminster system. It consists of a president as head of state; an executive headed by the prime minister; a legislature consisting of a parliament with an upper and lower house (the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha); and a judiciary with a supreme court at its head.

India's constitution sets out the country's political code, federal structure, powers of government and guarantees Indians' rights, including the right to equality before the law and freedoms of speech, assembly, movement and others.

The Constitution of India is perhaps the best and the most detailed constitution in the world. But,

the implementation of its ethos is the most challenging task for the respective governments.

India's survival and growth as a nation and a democratic polity, as also the achievement of the national objectives set by the freedom struggle depended on the configuration and development of long-term socio-economic and political forces. But the quality, skills and approach of the political leaders would inevitably play a significant role. An asset for India's early efforts at progress, starting in 1947, was the personal calibre of her leaders. They were dedicated, imaginative and idealistic. They enjoyed tremendous popular support among the people and had the capacity to communicate with them, to enthuse them around a national programme and national goals, to reflect their urges and aspirations, and to provide them with strong leadership.

The leaders had tremendous confidence and faith in the people and therefore in democratic

institutions and depended for their power and legitimacy on them. During the national movement the leaders had also acquired the vast capacity to negotiate and accommodate diverse interests and approaches and to work within a consensual framework. They could take a long-term and all-India view and work through state and local leaders. This high quality of leadership was not confined only to the Congress party.

The conservative Swatantra Party was headed by C. Rajagopalachari, the dissident Congressmen by J.B. Kripalani, the Hindu communalists by Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the non-Congress dalits by B.R. Ambedkar, the Socialists by Acharya Narendra Dev and Jayaprakash Narayan, and the Communists by P.C. Joshi, Ajoy Ghosh and E.M.S. Namboodiripad.ⁱ

India is an incredibly diverse nation with many regional variations, religions and languages. Some external observers of India expected the country would break up as a result. In fact, Congress managed these differences effectively, redrawing state boundaries along linguistic lines and forming a coalition of regional powerbrokers, rather than attempting to impose a centralised state run out of Delhi.

Perhaps the greatest challenge democracy faces in India is that it has failed to deliver the kind of sustained economic development enjoyed by neighbours like China over the last seven decades. It has also failed to eliminate extreme poverty. Democracy based on a pluralist society is the most appropriate polity for India with its wide social and cultural diversity. However, democracy is now under severe strain because of a growing cynicism in society towards democratically elected governments and an erosion of respect for politicians, legislators, and civil servants. It argues that democratic processes in India are “still largely dependent on caste and communal vote banks and criminals”, who contribute black money for the election campaigns of candidates.ⁱⁱ

In 2014, 185 Lok Sabha members (34%) had criminal charges and 112 MP's had serious criminal

charges against them. In 2009, 162 (nearly 30%) out of the 543 Lok Sabha MPs had criminal charges and 14% had serious criminal charges.

There has been considerable development in India since independence, but it has been uneven. True, India has made significant democratic progress; however, after independence, the high ideals that we should have established in this country and society have gone in the exact opposite direction, and corruption, criminalization of politics, economic disparity, majoritarianism, growing centralization, human hatred, and violence, are constantly attacking the roots of democracy. The divisive politics, growing regional identities, caste and religious identities are constantly hammering the roots of democracy.

Low-wage, low-skilled jobs remain the probable form of employment for millions of young Indians, particularly in poorer, populous states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are creating a large population of poor disenchanted voters.

India also faces several demographic challenges. Decades of selective abortion have led to a significant imbalance between males and females. India is currently undergoing a 'demographic dividend' – a rising working age population. However, it is struggling to generate jobs. Unemployment stands at a 40-year high. Finally, population growth has been higher in poorer northern states than in generally better-educated southern states. It has long been theorised that education promotes stable and democratic societies. Research shows that education leads to greater political tolerance, increases the likelihood of political participation and reduces inequality. Education has a key role to play in equipping youth with the knowledge, values, skills and attitudes to understand their rights and empower them to promote just societies. Similarly, education fosters a democratic temper in the minds of people. Democratic values like liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, dignity of individual, co-operation, sharing of responsibility etc.

After India became independent, the constitution committed six fundamental rights, of which one was the Right to Education. It allowed free education for every child up between the age of 6 and 14 years. The education system is mainly divided into pre-primary, primary, elementary and secondary education, which is followed by higher studies.

However, there are many drawbacks and loopholes in this system which if curbed can work for the overall development of the country. Educated elites in more globalised cities like Delhi and Mumbai live completely different lives from India's poorest citizens. Rapidly growing population, shortages of teachers, books, and basic facilities, and insufficient public funds to cover education costs are some of the nation's toughest challenges.

If taken in this background one could argue that the future of democracy in India is not bright. But that is only one side of the picture. There is equally the other side of the picture as well. India is today the biggest democracy of the world. In the country elections have been held several times in every state and for the Lok Sabha. Elections are held for Panchayati Raj Institutions as well. Each election is arousing more and more interest in the people who have started casting their votes. Independence of the judiciary goes a long way in securing the future of parliamentary democracy everywhere, India being no exception to that.

In India it has always been accepted that the judiciary should be free. It should be a watchdog of the rights of the people and hold a balance between the executive and the legislature. An independent judiciary is important for preserving the rule of law and is, therefore, the most important facet of good governance. The judicial system has an important role to play ultimately in ensuring better public governance. The judiciary in India, especially the higher judiciary has been assigned a vital role in various areas like upholding the federal principle, interpretation of the laws made by respective legislatures, testing the validity of such laws and

more importantly in protecting the fundamental rights of the citizens. The Supreme Court stands at the top of the hierarchy of the court constituted under the constitution. It is the final arbiter as to the upholding of the federal principle, the validity of a law or executive action and as to the enforcement of fundamental rights of the citizens. In a welfare state like India the judiciary specially the Apex Court plays an important role. An important issue that has assumed significance in recent times has been the activist role played by the Indian judiciary specially the Supreme Court.

On the whole it can be said that the future of parliamentary democracy in India is quite safe. Both fears and apprehensions of the people that in India experiment of universal adult franchise will not succeed, have not come true. Roger Bernheim has rather rightly pointed out about the future of democracy in India, "The size of the country, languages, the inertia of the Indian mind, the oppressive weight of economic problems by the existing obstacles, measured by all this, the variety of its progress made by the people is tremendous."ⁱⁱⁱ

A close look at the developments in India after independence brings us to the realisation that establishment of democracy – economic development coupled with the idea of distributive justice has transformed a traditional society. The state has been the central instrument of change. Politics has performed the role of an agent in facilitating this transformation. When India set out on its journey as an independent nation, in spite of our claim of being a democratic republic the political participation was constrained by social and economic inequalities. Nevertheless, periodic elections at national, state and local levels have encouraged vigorous participation of traditionally suppressed and deprived sections of society.

It can be said that democracy has proved to be a weapon against the privileges and powers of the few. Social and economic changes have gone a long way in relaxing the grip of rigid hierarchical structures, social discrimination and castism.

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ⁱⁱⁱ "Essay on the Future of Democracy in India", by Kalpana J