

# DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

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## STATE OF DEMOCRACY DESERT OF DESPAIR AND OASES OF HOPE

### **The Concept**

DEMOCRACY DEFIES precise definition. It has been variously defined. It has meant different things to different people. It has functioned differently in different socio-political climes and times. Also, it has many variants. But, this much can be definitely agreed—that democracy is a system of governance based on popular will. In a democracy, the people are the masters. They are supreme and are supposed to govern themselves through the representatives they elect, under a system they choose. The most oft-quoted definition of democracy attributed to Abraham Lincoln describes it as the government of the people, by the people, for the people. But, Baba Saheb Ambedkar, speaking in the Constituent Assembly once said that a time could come when we may get so fed up with the vagaries of democracy that we may only want democracy for the people and may not be bothered whether it was of, or by the people.

Winston Churchill said that democracy was the worst form of government except that there was no better known to men. The fact is that democracy is not a finished product. It is a dynamic process. In the history of democracy world over, there never has been a fully developed or perfect democracy. It is always developing, always in the making. On this road, there is no journey's end. In every country, democratic institutions have to rise from its own soil, to suit its own

environs and societal needs. Also, the criteria for measuring the success of democracy has to be different and largely country-specific.

Mere outward trappings of a liberal framework of democratic institutions, a charter of fundamental human rights and periodical elections may mean little unless they lead to real participatory role of citizenry in decision-making processes, clean and people-friendly governance and all inclusive growth. Transcending political rhetoric, electoral sloganeering and mountebankery, *Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas* has got to be the essential goal for any really functioning vibrant democracy. Ideally, five indicators can be flagged as a criteria for measuring the state of democracy:

- Level of citizens' participation in the governance process.
- Free and fair elections of representatives on the basis of equality of rights for electors.
- Citizen-centric governance with full transparency, responsiveness and accountability of government functionaries to the people, with government officers functioning as servants of the people and not their masters.
- Active and alert civil society.
- Preservation of the Rule of Law, equality of citizens, dignity of the individual and agenda of all inclusive growth.

The last century closed with what was considered to be a world-wide triumph for democracy. But, what has passed of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought to light a whole new series of challenges calling for a re-

examination of the state of democracy, globally. We, in India are very fond of bragging about our democracy being the largest, and among the few functioning democracies in the world. We were very fortunate in having, during the freedom struggle and early decades thereafter, leadership of some of the tallest men and women endowed with sagacity of mind, nobility of character and devotion to the nation and democratic norms.

Our founding fathers, in the name of 'We, the people of India' decided to constitute India into a 'Sovereign Democratic Republic' thereby laying down the fundamental principles that all sovereign powers vested in the people, that the people of India were one indivisible, that all the citizens of India were equal in the eyes of law, that there was no privileged class and that the people were to govern themselves through their elected representatives in Parliament and State Legislatures and the democracy had to above all assure the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation.

Also, democracy conceived in merely political terms meant the right of every citizen to freely vote at periodic elections. The 'one man, one vote' principle applied in all democratic elections emanated from the recognition of equal rights of all men. For our founding fathers, however, democracy did not mean merely political democracy or the people's right to periodically vote to elect their representatives. Right to vote for a hungry and illiterate man without clothing and shelter meant little. Ambedkar said:

We do not want merely to lay down a mechanism to enable people to come and capture power. The Constitution also wishes to lay down an ideal before those who would be forming the government. That ideal is of economic democracy.

For Ambedkar, social and economic democracy was the real aim and ultimate goal. Parliamentary democracy was meaningless unless it was geared to achieving the real goal of economic democracy.

Jawaharlal Nehru had observed later:

*We have definitely accepted the democratic process. Why have we accepted it? Well, for a variety of reasons. Because we think that in the final analysis it promoted the growth of human beings and of society; because, as we have said in our Constitution, we attach great value to individual freedom; because we want the creative and the adventurous spirit of man to grow.*

The end was a good life for the individual which must include a certain satisfaction of the essential economic needs. Only in the measure that democracy succeeds in solving the economic problems, does it succeed even in the political field. If the economic problems are not solved, then the political structure tends to weaken and crack up.

Therefore, from political democracy, we must progress to economic democracy which means 'working for a certain measure of well-being for all'.

## Achievements

The early decades after independence were the most eventful. The nation faced a succession of grave crises, internal and external threats, natural and man-made calamities and challenges of terrifying magnitude. Some temporary aberrations like the 19 months of internal emergency apart, whatever problems we faced were resolved within the democratic framework of constitutionalism. India had to its credit many achievements. On the political plane, we were able to bring about and maintain the unity and integrity of post-partition India, and to preserve freedom and democracy. Representative institutions thrived and we remained a vibrant democratic polity.

Indian democracy was widely hailed as the most stable in South Asia—the only one where the democratic system and the Constitution has stood the test of time and has endured and functioned. Despite once being labeled as a ‘soft state’ or a ‘functioning anarchy’ by Galbraith and Myrdal, the performance of India’s democratic institutions have been widely acknowledged as the best in what continues to be called ‘the third world’.

There was some effort to give more space, voice, powers and responsibilities to local self-governing institutions through poverty alleviation, rural development and employment generation programmes, more particularly directed toward the underprivileged. Panchayati Raj institutions played a substantial role in several of these programmes. For example, the *Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana*, *Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana*, *Indira Awaas Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana*,

*Credit Cum Subsidy Scheme, Samagra Awaas Yojana, Innovative Scheme For Housing And Habitat Development And Rural Building Centres, Annapurna Scheme, Watershed Development Programmes, Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme, Central Rural Sanitation Programme, Swajaldhara Programme* etc. This was undoubtedly an impressive array of programmes to address the interests and needs of the underprivileged common man. On the whole, we can certainly take great pride in asserting that there is enough to showcase the long strides from representative to participatory democracy and to democratic governance with considerable space for the voice and interests of the common man.

Indisputably, the Judiciary has remained independent, the press free and civil authority supreme. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments gave constitutional status to local self-government institutions of Panchayats and Nagar Palikas, moving closer to making Indian democracy more participatory by providing Gram Sabhas, compulsory periodic elections and representation of women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It is unique in the history of democratic parliaments anywhere to have 3.6 million elected representatives—more than a million of them women—as active participants in governance.

Every time during the sixteen general elections for Lok Sabha and the few hundred for State Assemblies, people have exercised their franchise to elect the legislatures and the governments of their choice and given ample evidence of their inherent and innate democratic qualities. With every election, the base of democracy widened and nation building and development continued to be attempted through democratic mobilisation. By now, there have been several instances of

peaceful, constitutional transfer of power between political parties or alliances and societal classes both at the Union and State levels. It speaks volumes for the strength and resilience of the Indian democracy that more than once the mightiest have been overthrown by the people through the power of the ballot, and that we have remained an agile democratic polity pulsating with life and energy. Some classic examples are the post-Emergency rout of Indira Gandhi and her Congress party and more recently the decisive overthrow of the Sonia-Manmohan Singh regime. Indian democracy can be proud of where it has reached. But, there is a flip side to it too.

### **Failures**

It is a myth that we adopted the British system of parliamentary democracy. Actually, we only continued the colonial model as it was developed by the British in India for ruling over us. The result was continuance of the colonial system of administration, colonial laws and the old relationship between the rulers and the ruled. We did not, in effect, become citizens of a sovereign nation or the ultimate masters in a democratic polity. We continued to be treated as subjects. In this context, two lines of Akbar Allahabadi may be apt:

*Mujhe nafrat nahin thi Angrej ki surat se  
Nafrat thi to uske tarj-e hukumat se.*

The poet did not hate the face of the English men, what he did hate was the system of their rule. On independence, the masters changed from one set to another but the system remained the same.

*Hukmaran badal gaye, tarj-e hukumat vahi raha.*

There was a wide gulf between the conceptual and the factual, between the rhetoric and the real. Many of the programmes for the poor were totally meaningless and actually often turned out to be anti-poor. Notwithstanding the lofty norms of democratic governance, the poor and the marginalised did not have the means to assert their legitimate authority against their exploiters and usurpers. Also, how could we ensure that the stigma of being the depressed and underprivileged did not become a matter of privileged status, sought in perpetuity or a vested interest was not created in permanently remaining maimed and disabled to continue to be entitled to the support of crutches for all times. Ambedkar stood for a classless and casteless society and was opposed to 'reservations in perpetuity' and to the stigma of the depressed, Dalit or Scheduled Caste becoming permanent.

The large number of poverty alleviation programmes and projects eventually consumed a sizeable portion of the national and State budgets but the results on the ground were most disappointing. It was often asked, where had all the money gone? Rajiv Gandhi was often cited for admitting that of every rupee sanctioned for the poor, hardly 15 paisa reached the poor. Most of the money doled out in the name of various schemes for the poor and the large subsidies under different heads ended up enriching the corrupt functionaries, business persons, middlemen, officials and politicians. No wonder, despite all our pro-poor pontifications, India's position in the UNDP



human development index remains one of the lowest. The really poor and deprived hardly benefited from relief funds released in their name or from poverty alleviation programmes. Even when some benefits did reach their categories, most of it would be cornered largely by the privileged amongst them or by the middlemen.

The few prospered at the cost of the many. The rich became far richer and the gulf between them and the poor widened. Consumerism and ostentatious display of affluence generated fresh tensions from those deprived of a share in the cake of development. Democracy became subservient to big business and mafia gangs of smugglers and criminals. Money and success at any cost became the supreme values.

The proclaimed ideals of economic democracy, distributive justice and inclusive growth became casualties. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts failed to transfer real power to the grassroots in many States with the MPs and MLAs treating the new emerging leadership—particularly from the otherwise marginalised sections like women and SC/STs—as rival centres posing threats to their leadership. More particularly, if we look at the ten year period just preceding the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, it would be very difficult to feel proud. For, there was enough to put Indian democracy to shame.

Public thinking stood badly battered by the unprecedented spate of scams and scandals of horrendous magnitude and there was almost total governance deficit on all fronts.

One cannot underestimate the negative impact-potential of the scams which overshadowed all the great achievements as also the new challenges confronting Indian politics. Faith of the people in the quality, integrity and efficiency of the rulers was seriously eroded. The disconnect and alienation between the people and the politicians had assumed alarming proportions. There could be no greater challenge to democracy than a situation where the people had lost faith in their representatives. Representative parliamentary institutions threatened to become dysfunctional. Functionaries of the state became self-serving and unaccountable. Those expected to be defenders became destroyers.

*Rakshak hi bhakshak ho gaye.*

There was a steep fall in the standards of conduct in public life and administration. There was a crisis of character and values in politics and public administration. Instead of being a government of the people, by the people and for the people, Union and State governments seemed to have become governments of the corrupt, by the corrupt and for the corrupt. What we witnessed was naked politics of loot. It was a clear case of democracy degenerating into kleptocracy. Not only did the many scams involve alleged swindling of billions of rupees of public money by people in high places, but these also had the effect of eroding the credibility of all the known institutional pillars of democracy and good governance. Disappointment was not only with those in power but also with the system.

*Khwab men bhi na socha thaa hamne kabhi  
Yeh alam bhi chaman pe gujar jayega  
Bagban chhin lenge libase bahar aur  
Phulon ka chehra utar jayega.*

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