

The Spirit of Democracy: A Field View

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Abstract

Thinking about politics has been a prominent aspect of cultures since ancient times...Aristotle in the Greece, Chanakya in India. It is a natural outgrowth of our wondering about the character of our problems and how they might be alleviated or resolved. From Aristotle's time to the present times, thinkers have grappled with the ethical and practical challenge of how a society composed of formally equal citizens could be ordered so that those having access to more political resources or talent, would not use their advantages to exploit others weaker than themselves. Modern societies are greatly impressed by the idea of democratic governance. Democracy has become the preferred way of governance the world over. Much has been written and debated upon the use of force in the name of restoring democracy. Simply put, democracy is the rule of the people and it is inherent in the idea that people govern themselves. It would be really interesting to see how this idea is actually operationalised. All known human societies are stratified, have some structural arrangement of hierarchy. Inclusiveness in democracy is being emphasized from the various platforms. Does the inherent inequality of a given society get neutralised in democracy or gets reflected in it? This is the moot question which the research paper proposes to explore.

Keywords: Democracy, Hierarchy, Inequality, Inclusiveness

Introduction

No society except the primitive ones could claim equality. How a group of people, the available resources - natural as well as created by man, are to be controlled and managed is the basis of power relations at all levels. As human societies moved from simple to complex state, the divisions of societies on the basis of birth, occupation, wealth, gender etc came into being. And with passing of time, these divisions became consolidated and notions of superiority and inferiority became attached to them. The groups within a society maintained social order as per the agreed values prevalent at any given time.

The present times are celebrated as the most equitable times with regards to the positioning of rulers is concerned. Democracy is a state in which the system of government & sovereignty is in the hands of the people. After the theory of Divine Right was rejected and abandoned by the people, Democracy, propelled by the ideas of liberty, equality & fraternity was accepted as the panacea for checking the inequalities generated by the system. Present day democratic system offers the opportunity to populations to participate in decision making through the right to vote.

Conceptual Construct

Democracy is derived from the Greek words *dēmos* (the people) and *kratia* (rule) and

may be translated literally “the people rule.” Democracy is that system in which the people rule through widespread and effective participation. The extent of participation can be gauged from the absolute number of people who participate politically at various levels - at the level of voters or in the selection of decision makers or being a decision maker. Democracy is a system of participatory community decision making. For participation to be widespread and effective in a community, certain conditions are bound to be related. Community members must be free to participate and must possess a modicum of equality of opportunity to be influential.

“In their original formulation the Greeks divided life into two broad spheres: private and public. The private sphere encompassed life within the household and life related to the material maintenance of existence. It belonged foremost to those without status like women, children and slaves but it belonged also to citizens who needed the necessary reprieve from the strain of public life. Since the private sphere did not provide the opportunity for development, those free men who clung to it were less than poor citizens, they were viewed as basically idiotic. In opposition stood the public sphere, the exclusive realm of citizen action. Man is political and needs the public realm to develop fully. For the Greeks the political was represented in the public, and the public was what related to the polis. The polis certainly was a political order, but it also was a religious and cultural ordering of men as well. In short, the polis was the entire network of factors connecting all who were not confined to the private realm. The political was as immediate as leaving the household and joining in the company of other men as they discussed among themselves the common factors of their lives. Life in the polis was life in common, that is, life in community. Although the actual involvement of citizens in the public realm may have declined in the Greek polis, the political by construction was an integral part of the lives of all citizens.” (Mason, M Ronald, 1982). In the modern version, the political is the civil government, the formal representation of the nation’s interest by those entrusted with the responsibility of creating laws that promote everyone’s interest.

As Alexis de Tocqueville(1899) writes that it is evident to all alike that a great democratic revolution is going on among us; but there are two opinions as to its nature and consequences. For some it seems an accidental happening and there are others who like to believe that it’s quite ancient and traces of it could be found throughout history. According to him the system of governance has evolved to democracy over the time. Earlier the right of governing descended with the family inheritance from generation to generation; force was the only means by which man could retain his power over others. And slowly equality penetrated into the Government through the Church. Clergy started influencing the kings. Over the period of time, as the societies became complex, the governing class had to include people knowledgeable about the social and civil laws. That is how over the period of time the base of the governing class kept on broadening.

Maya Chadda (2000) states that the development of a capitalist economy creates a rival focus of power to the state. Under capitalism, individuals band together to attain political or economic goals. Contestation for power among the traditional authoritarian institutions (monarchy and Church), the emerging centre of power (bourgeoisie) and the increasingly mobilised working class makes power sharing essential for the continued stability of the state. Democracy emerges as the best method of achieving this goal. Popular participation would produce pressure on the state to remove or ameliorate poverty and deprivation. According to her a well organised vibrant civil society is seen to enhance prospects for democracy whereas an entrenched and powerful class of landed and industrial elites is considered a hindrance to democracy.

In 1959, Seymour Martin Lipset¹ made a simple, powerful point: “The more well-to-do a nation, the greater its chances to sustain democracy”. . .and as Fareed Zakaria² notes that after forty years of research, with some caveats and qualifications, his fundamental point still holds.

The problems created by the deep social divisions within many nations is one of the chief threats to Democracy (Glazer, Nathan 2010). She reflects about the divisions which are inherited

and are ineradicable like race, ethnicity, religion, and native language. Poverty and prosperity are also largely inherited, but such distinctions can change over a lifetime. Religious identity is ascribed in nature, a person is born into a family of a certain faith; although in present times there are instances where youngsters are choosing their own faiths. The group identities based on ascription are almost a universal feature of all societies whether tribal or modern, varying in degrees only. With increasing immigration, large refugee flows, and expanded international business and commerce, no country can actually claim to be an homogeneous entity. According to her in "an ideal liberal-democratic world, such divisions should not matter as Liberalism calls for all persons to be treated equally without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, or language. But even democratic liberalism has its problems with these divisions, particularly when those bearing a distinctive identity make claims for their group or demand protections for their religion or culture that in some way violate the equality of persons or individual rights that liberalism entails. Equal treatment for individuals applying may result in an unequal condition for any given group. The debate in the United States over affirmative action centers around this tension between individual and group equality, and the classic arguments for liberal democracy do not give an immediate or obvious solution."

Inherent Divisions

On and off we come across news announcing the list of richest persons, detailing the amount of wealth they have created, the fabulous life styles they maintain, the detailing of their everyday lives et al. The American business magazine Forbes compiles and publishes, annually, the list of the World's Billionaires by documenting the net worth of the wealthiest billionaires in the world. The total net worth of each individual is based on their documented assets and accounting for debt and other factors. Royalty and dictators whose wealth comes from their positions are excluded from these lists. The Table as per Forbes gives an idea about the wealth owned by richest people of the world.

Table I³

Year	Number of billionaires	Group's combined net worth in \$
2023	2,640	\$12.2 trillion
2022	2,668	\$12.7 trillion
2021	2,755	13.1 trillion
2020	2,095	8.0 trillion
2019	2,153	8.7 trillion
2018	2,208	9.1 trillion
2017	2,043	7.7 trillion
2016	1,810	6.5 trillion

Along with the above news we also come across reports about extreme deprivation, extreme poverty in the same social milieu. As per UN "More than 700 million people—or 10 per cent of the global population—still live in extreme poverty, which means they are surviving on less than \$1.90 a day." The impact of COVID-19 has added to the woes of the deprived sections and widened the gulf between the well offs and the deprived ones. "The pandemic has compounded the threats to progress raised by conflict and climate change. Estimates suggest that 2020 saw an increase of between 119 million and 124 million global poor, of whom 60 per cent are in South-east Asia. Based on current projections, the global poverty rate is expected to be 7 per cent (around 600 million people) in 2030, missing the target of eradicating poverty." "The world bank reports on poverty projections suggest that, an additional increase of between 23 million and 35 million in 2021, potentially bringing the total number of new people living in extreme poverty to between 110 million and 150 million."

Poverty is not a standalone problem, its just not only lack of income. It has a range of different socioeconomic dimensions, including: the ability to access services and social protection measures and to express opinions and choice; the power to negotiate; and social status, decent work and opportunities. Poverty is also the root cause of many human rights and labour rights violations. For example, child labour, forced labour and human trafficking are each deeply connected to

poverty. How societies work with such contradictions? And why does the system allow such paradoxes to exist. Is extreme hierarchy a priority for a society? Or is the reason of such contradictions located in the Governance pattern?

The Indian Scene

Indian society is uniquely patterned into hierarchically arranged groups based on structurally unequal and to a great extent, antagonistic groups. The notion of collective superiority of the group is based on a caste, class, gender etc. and irrespective of the basis of their group solidarity, the groups which enjoy superior ranking invariably exploit the weaker ones.

Owing to our unique socio-cultural history, certain sections of society always remained away from the loop of governance and were never provided with an opportunity to participate in the decision making process, in the public sphere. The pattern of governance till very recently was usually aristocratic in character, usually reserved for particular caste groups or ruled by a foreign power. Democratic governance is of recent origin – only after the independence of the country. Taking into account the reigning inequalities in the society, the Constitution of India proclaimed equality for all in the eyes of law. Additionally it provided for certain safeguards for such communities which were hitherto treated unfairly by the system. Independent India opted to be a democratic country. The constitution codifies the spirit of democracy, which guarantees equal status to every citizen irrespective of caste, colour, religion or sex of the individual. To carry forward the spirit of inclusiveness in democracy, provisions were made for reservation of seats for the marginalized sections of society. Alongwith provision of seats for the socially weaker sections of the society, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment ensure presence of 33% women in the rural and urban local level decision making structures.

Analysis & Key Findings

How do democracies manage the divisions? Or, on the contrary, does it have distinctive liabilities in managing plural societies, as every group in a democracy is free to make demands?

- Democratisation is a process of social construction. Democratic traditions all over the world are in a phase wherein they have the support of not only the local populations but also of international agencies. The assertion of democracy as a superior system of governance rests on the belief that the basis of voting choices is the outcome of the rational behaviour of the individual. The traditional system of governance rested on the elites – elites in terms of power, caste, money, other assets etc. “Local elites, through a repertoire of political strategies, seek to manipulate the allocation of resources and to influence the pace and direction of social change.” (Mitra, K. Subrata, 1992). As C Wright Mills observes in the book “The Power Elite” – every epoch selects and forms its own representative political men and constructs prevailing images of them.
- Democracy is a term that is rather loosely used and denotes a variety of meanings. As a consequence of French Revolution, usually we mean to refer it in the political sense, which means that every member of the state has the right to control directly the affairs of the state. Initially when democracy as a concept was introduced, adult suffrage excluded underprivileged & marginalised sections of society. The right to participate in the political democratic process for the Blacks in USA and for women was introduced at a much later date.
- Democracy, by definition indicates the equality of opportunity between individuals and different classes not only political but educational social and economic opportunity. This phase is sometimes called social democracy in a broad way. Nowhere as yet has this form of democracy been completely realised. When we speak of democracy it is usually the political democracy which is being referred to which means democracy as applied to the government or to the State. Real democracy possess the characteristic of participation of all people in all of these relationships.
- As per Gillin, howsoever paradoxical it may seem, the roots of democracy lie in the strug-

gle between the opposing interests. Whether in France or in Britain, the barons became the first champions of Liberty and the harbingers of modern democracy. Conflict of interests of different classes have worked for the enfranchisement of the people. One class extended their franchise to a party from whom they hope to get help in their conflict with the political enemy. In England, one party stood for agricultural workers and the other party to urban inhabitants. The political parties indulge their vote banks and try to elicit their support in the name of race, caste, religion, region. Today in the name of Democracy, political opponents aim to acquire power through the process of winning territorially based competitive elections for legislative and executive offices and in this mechanism of political representation, the central ideas of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizens or forging political consensus through dialogue or devising and implementing public policy that takes the society towards the goals of productive economy and healthy society and in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth, become obscure.

- One expression of this exploitation is in the form of keeping the exploited communities out of the power structures. Observing the Caste system is highly hierarchical in arrangement and the castes placed at the lowest strata suffered from many social disabilities which in turn affected their life chances and opportunities. Despite several indigenous reform movements and outside contacts and interventions, caste as an institution has been remarkably resilient.

Conclusion

In an attempt to ensure the patronage of their support groups the political aspirants sometimes disregard the very spirit of democracy—to attain the cherished ideals and values which ensure well being of all members of society. The

extreme and brazen behaviour displayed by the most powerful world leaders in recent times is a pointer to this fact. The democracy which is being practised today is at a very superficial level. The masses are entrenched in ignorance and are parochially oriented and are thus swayed by the rhetoric of the political aspirants. The vitality of democratic institutions lies with the people, depends upon their awareness levels and their integrity to be able to see beyond the parochial enchantments and illusionments extended by political aspirants. Till we all work for internalising the values of egalitarian and social justice at our individual level and at group level, the political leaders would continue to exploit the system to their advantage and continue to polarise the societies in an unequal way, that benefits few and subjugates many.

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