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## WHITHER DEMOCRACY: A RELOOK AT IDEAL VS. REALITY



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of democracy and why it is difficult to implement despite being a perennially attractive idea since long. The paper thus examines the ideas of liberal and participative democracies, some unresolved debates in democratic theory, and criticisms against democracy. The paper concludes that in light of this the task of political theory and practice is to reinvent what is citizenship and governance and find ways of realizing them in terms of good life for all.

**KEYWORDS :** *Democracy, Ideal, Reality, Debates, Criticisms.*



### INTRODUCTION :

In Greek language, "kratos" means power and "demos" means the people. Thus democracy literally means people's power, i.e. power in the hands of the people as against power based on the whims and fancies of a tyrant or dictator. In politics, i.e. in the affairs of human beings as political animals, democracy refers to a form of government of the people, by the people and for the people in comparison with governments run under monarchs or aristocracies or oligarchies. By way of its

origins, Greek democracy or democracy in Athens is usually discussed and hailed for the way it valued liberalism in terms of complete freedom of speech. In the contemporary context, democracy has been hailed as the most successful idea of the 20th century but that it is an idea that has run into deep trouble over time leaving us at a loss to understand what can be done to revive it or whether it is worthwhile indeed to do so. The disturbing conclusion is echoed in what Prof. Noam Chomsky, a crusader of democracy, had said thus: "Everybody's for democracy in principle. It's only in practice that the thing gives rise to stiff objections." This conclusion suggests that democracy is an ideal and it is an ideal that is impossible to realize in practice.

In the Indian context, we are familiar with the way India has been known as the largest democracy in the world. But lately, it is seen as a liberal democratic experiment in a complete shambles. It is said that a democratic deficit has been growing like a malignant tumour in the Indian body politic for years. This prima facie surprising because we might argue, hey, that we have regular elections; we often replace our rulers; we have free media; our judiciary is independent; and we can move freely in the country and abroad. All this is true but there is a cancer creeping stealthily below

that glowing skin, so to say. For, democracy is only partly about elections. What happens in between is equally important for the health of any nation that wants to remain democratic. That is where three important features of democratic functioning come in, viz., the rule of law; public accountability; and vitally, the inculcation of a liberal spirit infused with tolerance, acceptance of norms of democratic disagreement, and consciousness of the rights and freedoms of others. The adjective “liberal” fundamentally qualifies democracy. In this connection, the very recent incident of the publisher Penguin recalling and pulping copies in India of the American historian Doninger’s book “The Hindus: An Alternative History” due to attack from a Delhi-based group Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samithi, is treated as an illustration of India having become an illiberal democracy by various public intellectuals such as writers, lawyers, university professors and media professionals.

According to these intellectuals, India’s problem now is precisely captured by the oxymoron “illiberal democracy” : “We, or more accurately our politicians, have mastered the art and economics of elections; They know how to acquire power democratically. But, even though liberals had created our Constitution and most early political figures had absorbed the spirit of democratic conduct, a disturbing number of the current crop of politicians, as well as others in public life, have neither any inkling of liberalism nor an understanding of why structured dissent is crucial to democratic functioning. Thus, we have a Parliament that functions sporadically at best. We have an increasing number of political arrivistes who are either thugs and criminals or uninformed fools. We have a police system that is understaffed, corrupt and manipulated. We have a judiciary that is like the iceberg that sank the Titanic; it has a shiny top in the Supreme Court whereas the menace lies below in a dysfunctional court system that mocks the rule of law. And intolerance rears its hood with growing frequency all across the nation.”

Not only in India, worldover as well, democracy has turned out to be a sham.

It is in this milieu that this brief essay addresses the idea of democracy and why it is difficult to implement despite being a perennially attractive idea.

## LIBERAL DEMOCRACY VS. PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY

There are two forms of democracy, viz. direct participatory democracy of the Athenian type of the distant past or liberal democracy or indirect representative democracy which has been the dominant form of democracy in terms its evolution over the 19th and 20th centuries.

“The most celebrated form of direct participatory democracy was the one practiced in the Athenian city-state of ancient Greece during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Athenians prided themselves on the happy versatility of citizens and their ability to perform all tasks of governance, i.e. in enacting, implementing and adjudicating of laws. They met in open assemblies to debate and deliberate on all matters and shared magisterial and judicial offices. All major decisions were made by the assembly to which all citizens belonged. Citizens were also meant to sit on juries and adjudicate on disputes. Offices were filled by either election or draw of lots and no officer was to enjoy perpetual tenure. The idea was to ensure that at least the short-term offices went to as many people as possible. What is remarkable in this model is that it ensured a high level of political accountability and political activity of the citizens.”

The Athenian democracy has been, however, demystified in the sense that it depended on a system of exclusivity and inequality. Only citizens were worthy of the good life and a majority of the population—women, slaves and resident aliens—were kept out of citizenship.

Liberal democracy, on the other hand, in terms of its historical evolution through the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the western countries, is based on the following principles and

understanding. It protects the rights of citizens and safeguards them from the tyranny of state power. It has a core in the doctrine of individualism as follows: "all individuals are free and autonomous, masters of themselves, and makers of their own destiny. Individuals are primarily rational and self-interested beings, intent on pursuing their desires and goals. Each individual has his/her own preferences, values and goals, i.e. his/her own conception of a good life. What individuals require are the basic conditions to pursue these self-defined goals. Liberals identify these conditions as rights, namely, of life, liberty and property, which are fundamental and inviolable in nature. What binds individuals to each other is a common interest in protecting these rights which would allow them the maximum freedom for free exchange among themselves.

Moreover, liberals "make a distinction between the state and civil society or the public and the private life of individuals. The public realm is the realm of politics; this is where they are bound to take collective decisions. The economy, family, associations, etc. are part of the civil society, the realm where individuals interact with each other in the pursuit of their interests. This is the realm of competition, conflict and cooperation among them. It is in order to resolve these conflicts that a regulated framework is required. Thus, the role of the government is to create and maintain a system of individual rights, and undertake activities to that end. The coercive power of the state is required to ensure that individuals in their interaction with each other in a civil society do not encroach on each other's rights. Governments were not meant to arrive at or promote a common good, since individuals do not share a substantive notion of good life. The state is a neutral arbiter; it is not supposed to interfere in the functioning of civil society."

Furthermore, liberals advocate a representative democracy. "The task of governance requires expertise but those in power must be made accountable. Political participation is not considered a good in itself, like in Athenian democracy, but a means to control the government and ensure the protection of individual rights. Through franchise and competitive elections, individuals choose representatives who then form governments on the majority principle. Political decisions can be made only by these representatives, because only they enjoy the consent of the people. This ultimate authority of the people is affirmed, and people can keep a check on the representatives through periodic elections. The powers and tasks of the government are defined through the Constitution, especially by including within the provision of fundamental rights, and through the principle of rule of law and the presence of an independent judiciary. The separation of powers among different branches of government is meant to provide a system of checks and balances, preventing the concentration of power."

It should be noted, with a strong pinch of salt, that even though the model of liberal or representative democracy was based on equality, in early liberal democracies, franchise or political equality was in effect restricted to a few. This eventually changed over the 19th and 20th centuries which were marked by increasing and often violent struggles by the working classes, African American, and women, demanding the extension of suffrage (the right to vote) on the basis of the very ideas of individualism that had been invoked by the propertied male to win freedom from aristocracies and monarchies. It is only with the acceptance of universal adult franchise that liberal democracy acquired its current form.

### SOME UNRESOLVED DEBATES IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

First, there is the issue as to whether democracy can promote substantive equality by removing differences among the people. In other words, can political equality in terms of equal political rights and recognition of citizenship really counter the discrimination people face on account of differences

on the grounds of caste, race, ethnicity, gender and the like? Further, political equality cannot bring about economic equity in the face of power structures and inequity in society. The concept of equality in terms of formal political equality needs to be expanded to cover substantive equality in terms of equality of opportunity and equal treatment of culturally diverse communities.

Secondly, what does representation mean in liberal democracy? Does it mean delegation, i.e. giving voice to the wishes of the electorates of the constituencies of the representatives? Or does that mean the representatives are free to act according to their own judgement in which case what kind of control can people hope to have over their representatives? A view of representation is that people mandate a person or political party to carry out a specific set of policies, and thus direct the government. But in most countries the election manifestos tend to be very general in nature and are not concrete policy documents. This is not all. Elections are fought and won on a variety of grounds as political parties try to incorporate all sections. Political parties, which are the main players in an electoral system, themselves constitute the political elite and are often deliberately vague about policies. Elections are media-orchestrated events. Besides in most countries there is this anomaly that the victorious party that forms a government has most often not secured the majority of votes. There is a mismatch between the number of seats won and the percentage of votes secured by the party. Therefore, how can an election which is the main vehicle of representation ensure an adequate mechanism to convert people's views into policy directives?

Thirdly, In order to ensure that there is a check on representatives, and to prevent abuse of power, there is need for more active citizen involvement. The remedy for bureaucratization, corruption, centralization, lack of transparency, and accountability is sought in participation. But participation is difficult to make it work in a large and diverse society. So, how to combine effectively representative and participatory mechanisms?

Fourthly, Is democracy antithetical to development? It is seen as a luxury that poor countries cannot afford and it is also seen as an impediment to development and as such suspension of democratic rights or political freedoms is desirable. "This is popularly known as the Lee Thesis attributed to Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, who held that the denial of political and civil liberties and a measure of authoritarianism is advantageous to economic growth." This notion that democracy slows economic growth is now popular even as what constitutes development has been a bone of contention. There is no single model of development which is applicable to all. Social and environmental movements assert the need to formulate alternative, people-centred, sustainable models of development.

## CRITICISMS AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Some debates such as above are no wonder continuously bothering us, especially because of the overwhelming understanding that democracy is far more cumbersome form of government than dictatorship.

Today, most of the world's powerful countries, international organizations and political science experts see democracy as a natural choice in comparison to dictatorship. Yet democracy remains a far more complicated form of government as compared to dictatorship.

Some decisions that for the common good of the entire community might require some group of people to make some sacrifice e.g. farmers might have to leave their family land and go to some other place in order to make space available for some new industry. While this new industry can bring prosperity to the whole area and can offer better jobs and standard of living to the farmer's own children, many farmers would be reluctant to leave the land that has been ploughed by their

forefathers, especially if the land is fertile. Convincing them to accept monetary compensation or another piece of land can be a very difficult task in a democracy as compared to a dictatorship. Displacing millions of people for building a dam, as the case when constructing the Three Gorges Dam in China, might have been much more cumbersome in a democracy.

Democratic systems of government generally have an extensive system of election of government. Dictatorships do not need to spend effort in developing and maintaining such processes and are hence free from this hassle. A comparison of recent elections in Zimbabwe with the current ongoing US presidential campaign clearly shows the former to be much simpler than the latter.

Democratic systems by nature prefer to have a system of check and balance so that all power is not rested in one individual. This can sometimes lead to situations where doing any legislation becomes very complex or nearly impossible. In a parliamentary form of government a hung parliament is an example of such complicated scenarios. A dictator can however carry out this action through a decree. The problem faced by Indian government in convincing its coalition partners to accept the nuclear deal with US is an example of such complication.

Democracy can bring even more complications to the developing nations, where resources are scarce and political infrastructure might not be developed enough to help people make the right democratic choice. In order to increase their chances of victory politicians sometimes play up the racial sentiments of a community. Such actions can produce big problems in the long term and can lead to cracks in the social fabrics that can be very complicated to bear for the government.

Many democracies agree to this argument of complexities in a democracy. Hence many democracies provide options whereby head of state or parliament can suspend governments and granting powers to one person or group of people under special situations. During the Second World War, Norwegian parliament dissolved itself and handed over all the powers to the cabinet.

While democracy today appears to be the most popular choice when it comes to choosing a form of government, it brings with it many complications that would be absent in a dictatorship. Making bold decisions for long term prosperity, executing controversial decisions and making bitter choices for the common good can be very complicated processes in a democratic form of government.

Ever since the nations have formed the governments to run them, both the types of governments—democratic and dictatorial-- have come and gone. No single form of government has emerged as a clear better option. Both have had their pros and cons. But the given statement is agreeable since implementation of democracy has been a Herculean task wherever it has been tried. The primary issue with democracy is that every act has to be passed by the representatives of the people. Now in a vast group, every decision will have some opposers to it - some due to ideological differences - hence no major proposals are implemented. For example, big countries like India, have people of different castes, cultures, races, and demographics in the government. Hence different ideologies make it difficult to implement hard decisions.

Another issue with democracy is that it is a form of government which is for the people, by the people and of the people. Since today's ever growing population has created nations with vast number of people, hence these democracies are becoming difficult to be managed properly by the representatives of the people who are answerable to the people for their every single decision. An independent form of government is needed to run these nations successfully.

On the other hand, some may argue that there are examples of big nations being run as democratic countries but the fact is that these nations are facing great difficulties in taking big strides towards development due to their democratic form of government. India, for example, has not been able to implement stern actions which it so badly needed to overcome poverty and over-population.

In sum, democracy might be a favored form of government due to its transparency but it certainly is more cumbersome and poses great challenges in implementing decisions. Dictatorship on the other hand, gives far more freedom and independence to the government. The Chinese model of autocratic governance has therefore become a very attractive alternative to democratic governance. China says its model is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock so characteristic of democracies.

The actual state of affairs with respect to the political institutions of democracy can be such as to create an everwidening schism between the ideal equality and the practice of inequality in the modern world. India is a best example in this regard. Take, for example, Parliament as a political institution in India. These have revealed acute deficiencies in various respects. "Not only has the number and proportion of persons with professional experience and competence declined in the Lok Sabha, the number and proportion of those with real or alleged criminal records has increased. The criminalization of politics has entered the Lok Sabha as well as the Vidhan Sabhas. The disclosed assets of the members of parliament show that at least in one respect, that of wealth, they are far from being representative of the population of a country in which poverty is pervasive and endemic. If one is able to enter Parliament, one's children are unlikely to ever have to live in poverty. The style of functioning has also changed...One may speak of a change from temperate to an intemperate style." The criminal charges against Indian parliamentarians include human trafficking, immigration rackets, embezzlement, rape and even murder.

Consider political parties as another institution in India. One feature of the political parties in India is that the parties are generally woven around their charismatic leaders. These leaders actively play a dominant role and transfer leadership through a dynastic route and as such they tend to adopt autocratic ways. Almost all political parties in India are based not on ideological basis but are formed on the basis of race, religion, language, region, caste, etc. factors and therefore the real issues and problems of the people at large are often neglected. Disparity between the ideologies of the political parties ruling the centre and the state leads to severely skewed allocation of resources between the states and thereby affects their developmental prospects. The narrow focus and votebank politics of most parties, even in the central government and central legislature, sidelines national issues such as economic welfare and national security. Moreover, internal security is also threatened as incidences of political parties instigating and leading violence between two opposing groups of people is a frequent occurrence.

The people in Indian democracy do not fit the people theorized in the model of liberal democracy. Most voters in most countries do not have trust whatsoever in government. The Indian people, the very poor and those in slums, sell their votes for cash. There are instances of villagers as a whole bargaining their votes for cash. The rule of law is not respected by the people. "Let us take other examples. We never hesitate to pay a clerk so that our file can move ahead of others. We never mind to purchase a cinema ticket on black to fulfill our aim to see a film first show-first day! When TTE says that he can give a berth of our choice, we never mind to pay him extra money. When we violate the traffic rule, we try to bribe the policeman less than prescribed fine. Every time we want to purchase favors & only scream of foul play when we fail to auction an action in our favor! Let's take it little further. In recent Parliamentary visual of pepper spray & brandishing knives was harshly criticized by us. But we conveniently forgot that we are champion of hooliganism! Be there an unfortunate accident or some other incident, we exhibit our super capability of vandalism. We immediately set the vehicles on fire, broke the nearby shops, beat some helpless guys (being a part of mob) & either we loot public property or help others to do such looting! A bit further, if we have daughters, we raise our voice against dowry.



In case our son's marriage, we advocate for tradition. Point is very simple, we bear dual character. As long as we don't suffer, we don't mind ways & means that may be unethical, unconstitutional & inhuman. The moment we see our loss, we start screaming on fundamental right, constitutional entitlement & humanistic liberty! When Election commission declares voting schedule, we plan our vacation. Because the voting day is a holiday & should be enjoyed as entertainment day! How can we stand in a queue to vote dirty people? This is against our status & ideology. Thus we remain distanced to dirty work like voting, politics & politicians! But yes as fundamental right we use our freedom to express criticism towards politicians, elected representatives & most importantly the system. We are never interested to realize that what is fundamental right is in fact a fundamental duty & constitutional obligation. Democracy not only gives us right but demand obligations as duty! The constitution makes us master of the democracy. At the same time it vests responsibility on the master to make this democracy function properly. We enjoy the rights & freedoms. But still we never made ourselves accountable to constitution rather we made ourselves as non-participating hard core critic of the same system that makes us masters. Have we thought little differently? If our representatives are corrupt, then some where we too are corrupt. If the system is faulty, some where our intention or deeds are also faulty. If our politicians are irresponsible & not dedicated to the nation, somewhere we too are irresponsible to the democracy & not dedicated to the Constitution! Point is simple. To be in a democracy we need to deserve to be in a democracy. You can't expect everything to be alright & systematic without your participation. A monarchy can run systematically if the king is right. But a democracy can't run righteously if its masters are irresponsible, opportunists & unaccountable. A master with dual character always became liability to his kingdom! Have we ever thought that? No, because we are here just to enjoy our rights & not to fulfill our duties. There is a famous Chinese proverb that goat like people get wolf like rulers. We have been given a democracy because of many sacrifices. Have we ever realized our role in this democracy with respect to those martyrs? No, we always use the name of those martyrs to blame the system, the polity & the politics just ignoring our opportunist escapism from our accountability. India despite being a largest democracy & ancient civilization, we are one of the corrupt, anarchic & irresponsible nation. Do we ever get ourselves accountable for this embarrassment? If not, then we must not deserve to be in a democracy. If yes, then let's start our citizen responsibility, duty & obligation as early as possible!"

## CONCLUSION

Democracy appeals to us with its ideal of people's power and equality but the modern world is ridden with de facto exclusion of most people from governance and equity. There is failure on the part of all the stake holders, the state, the political institutions, the politicians and the people themselves. The task of political theory and practice in this context is to reinvent what is citizenship as a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the state and find ways of realizing that in terms of good life for all. There is academic crisis in theorizing about this leave alone finding out practical political ways of realizing it.

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