

Democracy and India

Etymologically, the word democracy has a bad flavour about it. It means the rule of the mob and the mob is ignorant and wayward. But in the modern context, it is the most widely accepted form of government. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, it means government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In simple parlance, democracy means that the people have self-rule.

Looks like democracy is of very ancient origin. The primitive people possibly elected the headman that ruled over them. But there is no doubt that there were democratic forms of government in ancient India and the ancient city states of Greece were most of them democracies.

But these 'democracies' did not last long. 'Might is right' is an ancient principle. When a warrior showed military prowess and defeated other, he would easily attain ascendancy over them and make himself their ruler. He might be called king or duke, but his rule would be one-man show. However, it is not possible for one man to exercise complete sovereignty. In some places and in some ages, we have, instead of the rule of one man, rule by a handful of men. Here we have the sovereignty of the upper classes over the common people, the rule of the many by one king or by a few powerful men with king at the helm.

The French Revolution changed all this. It preached the equality and fraternity of men, and it killed the king and the queen, and tried to destroy the aristocracy. It introduced democratic rule in France and the idea spread beyond the boundaries of France until people in other countries had been imbued with the spirit of democracy. The idea of the equality of man was strengthened by the idea of nationalism.

The achievements of democracy are many. It has infused into the common people a sense of responsibility and power. It has enriched the life of the people who take a warm interest in the affairs of their country and of the world. With greater and greater democracy has come greater and greater freedom. Every one is free to express his opinions, and although occasionally there may be limitations on individuals, personal liberty is the goal of democracy, and there is more freedom in democracy than in any other form of government.

Democracy has slowly become universal because it is inevitable. Man is born with an innate tendency to be free, and he cannot help feeling that he should govern himself. He may be more effectively governed by others, but he will say that good government is no substitute for self-government. In actual practice,

democracy has improved the lot of the common man beyond the dreams of his forefathers who lived under kingship of feudalism. The common man is now not only free, but is more educated and wealthier and happier than he used to be in bygone years.

Democracy is leading slowly to socialism. Political equality must be followed by some sort of economic equality. A benevolent monarch may say that he is the first servant of the state, but under kingship and other forms of government in which the common people have no voice, there is bound to exist a great gulf between the rich and the poor, the aristocracy and the common folk. The gap is difficult to bridge.

It is democracy alone which can realize the concept of the welfare state where every person can claim the right to food, to education and to employment. Day by day, through a just distribution of taxes,

Through various welfare measures, the distinction between the rich and the poor is being lessened and the equality of man is being gradually realised.

Democracy is the best form of government so far found, but it is not without its defects and its critics. In olden times when states were small, men would gather in a particular place and decide everything by vote. Here democracy was direct.

But nowadays as the size of states is becoming larger and larger, we have to content ourselves with indirect or representative democracy. We vote for our representatives, and it is they who carry on the government, and the common man relapses into political inactivity. So the vast majority of people who form the electorate are politically active only once in five years or in between or in by-elections. As they have very little to do in matters of government except recording their vote, they have no political experience and become the victims from the platform who may hoodwink them for their own personal gain.

When in 1947 India became free, it formulated its political ideal as a secular parliamentary form of democracy. It was not difficult to introduce democracy into what has been erstwhile British India. It only meant the introduction of adult franchise and the setting up of a democratic machinery of government. The experiment was fraught with practical difficulties. The ideal of secular democracy was put to a severe test in yet another sphere, and here too India has proved her firmness. Much against their will Indian leaders had to accept the partition of India.

The Indian Constitution gives scope to the development of local culture, but every state is, in vital matters, subordinate to the Central Government. A citizen

of India is, first and foremost, a citizen of India, irrespective of race, religion or province, and he is free to culture his local beliefs and follow his own religion. It is this harmonious combination of local attachments and loyalty to the motherland that is the main feature of new India. But rampant corruption has seeped in. For elections to be free and fair, electoral reforms are called for.

How far India will be able to stick to the path of democracy has yet to be seen. If Indians are inspired by a deep patriotism, by a love for mother India, they will be able to steer clear of dangers and pitfalls on the way and build a State in which there will be maximum of strength and maximum of freedom.

Till people are democratic in outlook, democratic in thinking, and democratic in conduct it is not possible for democracy to take

Deep roots and to stabilize. Some Asian countries have no democratic setup. A few European political interpreters expressed doubt about the future of democracy in India. Soon before the 1977 elections, a state of emergency was declared and the freedom of people curtailed. Even after the elections there were dissensions among the ruling party and the government appeared unstable. For the proper working of democracy, there ought to be a healthy Opposition, educated voters, independent judiciary, free press, and moral integrity. It was only during the 1977 general elections that the Opposition's voice was heard.

Indian voters need to be educated. With more than half the population under the poverty line, with so much illiteracy, voters can swing this way or that by money power. The unpredictiveness prevails. However, the last two general elections indicate some progress towards voters political maturity.

Judiciary and Press have been independent since we won freedom from colonial rule, but there have been attempts from time to time at meddling. By and large it is said the freedom is there. These are effective checks on inappropriate governance. One of the serious dangers to the Indian political fabric is the lack of moral integrity on the part of leaders. Defections are there on personal basis or engineered. Many leaders have shown scant regard for their commitment to the people at election time.

Under these circumstances it may seem the future of Indian democracy is bleak. But it may be a hasty inference. Systems take time to stabilize. The experimenting experience may be over. The teething troubles too. Indian culture and civilization has given to the people unbounded patience and co-operation among the people. Democracy may be stable with the passage of time and do the country proud. India has taken her place as the largest democracy of the world. Other countries may emulate.