



Democracy - An Evolving Idea

CHAPTER 18



Fig. 18.1: You can vote if you pay taxes



Fig. 18.2: You can vote if you are educated



Fig. 18.3: You cannot vote if you are women

You read about the beginning of democratic government in England, USA, France in the 17th and 18th centuries as well as the most recent movements for democracy in Libya and Myanmar. The evolution of democracy has had many ups and downs. Popular rule was established and then overthrown and monarchies established. Even where popular rule was established, it meant only the participation of a few people in electing the rulers. Slowly, the meaning of democracy broadened and it developed many new layers and shades. At the same time, it has also raised many questions which are not easy to answer. Let us consider some of these questions. Discuss the questions in the class room as well as with your friends and relatives.

Democracy Means Responsible Governments

Democracy means a system in which those in government get their authority from the people and have to answer to the people. This usually happens through the process of leaders being elected by people at definite intervals.

You saw in the case of Libya that ultimate power lay with the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) which was self appointed and not elected by the people or bound by what the people's representatives ordered. There were elected assemblies in Libya but they could not take independent decisions and had to implement the orders given by the RCC. The RCC was not answerable to anyone except itself.

In a democratic country, the power of the elected representatives would be supreme and no one who is not directly elected by the people can exercise any authority over them.

The elected government functionaries are answerable to the people in different ways. First of all, there would be

elected assemblies in which the government functionaries would be asked to explain their work get the plan of work. Secondly, any citizen would have approved a right to demand information about any work done by the government and the government has to disclose

such information. Moreover, after a definite period, elections would be held again and the functionaries will have to seek fresh election from the people. The people can ask them to explain their work and reject them if they are not satisfied with the work.

Democracy is based on equality and inclusiveness: When we say ‘rule of the people’, we mean all people who are adults, whether they are men or women, rich or poor, black or white, Hindus or Christians or Muslims or atheists, whether they speak one language or the other. Democracy took a long time to establish itself. Let us take the right to vote in elections as an indicator. Initially only a few propertied men could participate in the process of voting. Slowly, the right was extended in some countries to even the poor men, then to women and eventually to people of all races and religions. USA allowed white woman to vote only around 1920. The discrimination against Black citizens was removed only in 1965. The first nation to allow voting rights for all groups of people was New Zealand in 1893. In New Zealand women and black people went through great struggle to achieve this. The first large country to give universal voting rights to its citizens was USSR after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Yet, even to this day, many countries make laws which discriminate against some communities:

- Do the millions of poor people really have any control over the functioning of the elected functionaries? Does democracy mean rule by people or merely rule by elected persons? How can people really participate in the working of the government on a day to day basis? Discuss these issues in the class and at home.

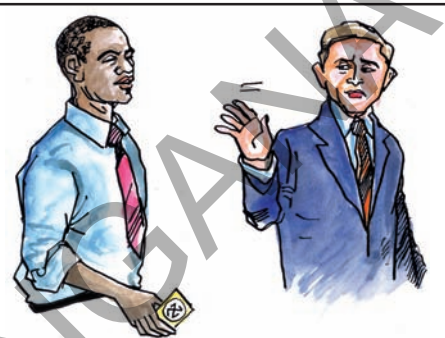


Fig. 18.4: You can't vote because you belong to a different race



Fig. 18.5: You can't vote because you are too young

■ Estonia has made its citizenship rules in such a way that people belonging to Russian minority find it difficult to get the right to vote.

■ In Fiji, the electoral system is such that the vote of an indigenous Fiji has more value than that of an Indian-Fijian. It was from the year 2013 elections that an equal right to vote is being implemented.

Democracy is based on the fundamental principle of political equality and inclusiveness. In a democracy, each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote

must have one value. Our constitution provides universal franchise to all the citizens above 21 years of age.

- Even today, most countries do not give voting powers to people who have migrated from other countries. Actually, millions of people across the world live without these democratic rights simply because the countries they live in treat them as illegal immigrants. This is the plight of South American immigrants in the US or Turkish immigrants in France or Germany. Such immigrants and refugees are found all over the world including India. Should they not be a part of democratic governance? Think of some reason for your answer.

Democracy requires active participation of citizens: Often, democracy is taken to mean only voting in elections and choosing the rulers. However, democracy also means that citizens should participate in the making of policies and laws by the government and implementing them. How can this be done? This is possible when all policies and laws are made after extensive public discussions in which people participate and openly express their needs and views. It also requires that people be involved in effective implementation of the policies and laws – by forming independent citizens committees. This kind of participation of people is not easily achieved. In many countries, even the elected

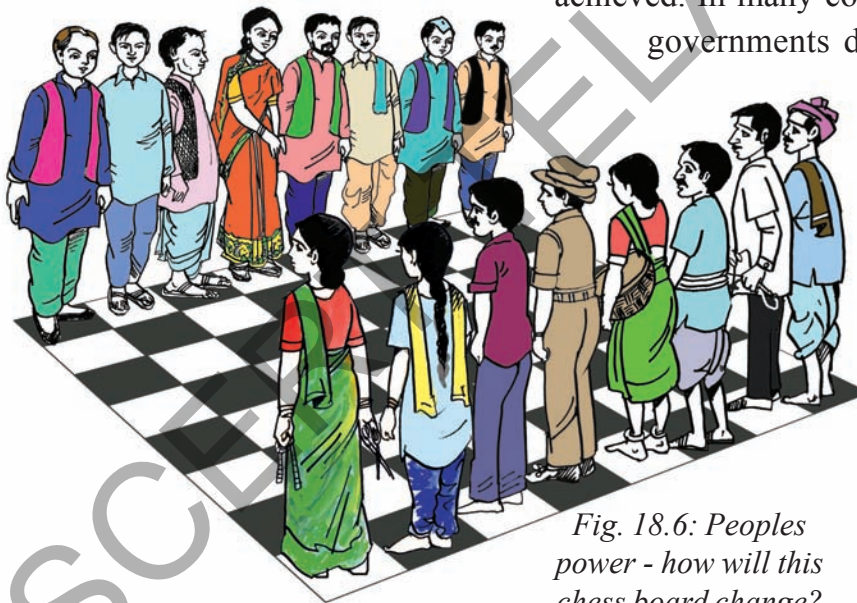


Fig. 18.6: Peoples power - how will this chess board change?

governments do not encourage public participation. The people also do not show active interest in public affairs and remain apathetic. For example, in the much publicised elections for the President of USA in 2012 more than 40% people did not vote at all.

Democracy requires civil liberties: People can participate in decision making only if

they are free to know, discuss, form independent opinions and express them and form associations to press for their views. These are also called civil liberties. However, these rights were not gained by people easily. Governments sought to control free speech, free

- Why don't people want to participate in governance? Is it because of lack of knowledge or lack of interest or a feeling that they don't have a real say in things?

associations and the right of people to know about public affairs. Most government decisions were kept secret from people; the newspapers and books were censored and views that went against the government were not allowed to be published; people were not allowed to form political parties or trade unions or organisations of their choice but only one party or officially sponsored parties were allowed to function. Many of these rights, for example, were not available to the people of the USSR even though there was universal right to vote and periodic elections. That is why they had to put up with one party rule for nearly 60 years. Even today, these rights are not available to people in all countries. Restriction on civil liberties helps governments to remain in power.

Democracy requires equality: We noted earlier that democracy requires political equality – that each person will have one vote. However, for this political

equality to be really effective it also requires equality of social and economic status. If the society is divided into highly unequal classes of

- Many governments give people the civil liberties. But they keep a careful watch on the activities of the citizens by tapping their telephones and letters, spying on them etc. Do you think this is justified?

rich and poor or high castes and low castes, then the political equality will become meaningless. Those with higher status and wealth can easily force the rest to vote according to their choice. In a large number of families, the male heads of family decide for whom everyone in the family, including women, should vote for. In many countries like the USA, most of the media is owned by very rich corporate houses or media barons. They effectively manipulate and influence public opinion by what they highlight and what they block out. The rich and powerful also have immediate access to members of the legislature and ministers and are in a position to influence their policies and programmes.

On the other hand, the poor and illiterate people have no such access to the government circles. Thus, the governments of many of these countries

follow policies which seem to be contradictory to the interests of the poor and in favour of the rich. Thus, it can be said that true democracy cannot be attained unless there is social and economic equality along with political equality.

Table 1: Inequality of Income in Selected Countries

Country	Share of National Income (%)	
	Top 20	Bottom 20
South Africa	64.8	2.9
Brazil	63.0	2.6
USA	50.0	4.0
United Kingdom	34.5	9.6
Denmark	34.5	9.6
Hungary	34.5	10.0

- Why do you think does such high level of inequality persist even where the countries are democratic and government works in the interest of all people?

- If a party is repeatedly voted to power, does it mean that people really want it to come to power, or could it mean that there is no alternative or that people are not allowed to vote for any alternative? Answer on the basis of the following three case studies:
- a. Since its independence in 1930, Mexico holds elections after every six years to elect its President. The country has never been under a military or dictator's rule. But, until 2000, every election was won by a party called PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Opposition parties did contest elections, but never managed to win. The PRI was known to use many unfair means to win elections. Teachers of government schools used to force parents to vote for the PRI.
- b. Zimbabwe attained independence from White minority rule in 1980. Since then, the country has been ruled by ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front), the party that led the freedom struggle. Its leader, Robert Mugabe, has been ruling the country since independence. Elections have been held regularly and are always won by ZANU-PF. President Mugabe is popular but also uses unfair practices in elections. His government has changed the Constitution several times to increase the powers of the President and make him less accountable. Opposition party workers are harassed and their meetings disrupted. There is a law that limits the right to criticise the President. Television and radio are controlled by the government and give only the ruling party's version.
- c. In China, elections are regularly held at intervals of five years for electing the country's parliament, called Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui (National People's Congress). The National People's Congress has the power to appoint the President of the country. It has nearly 3,000 members elected from all over China. Some members are elected by the army. Before contesting elections, a candidate needs the approval of the Chinese Communist Party. Only those who are members of the Chinese Communist Party or eight smaller parties allied to it were allowed to contest elections held in 2002-03. The government is always formed by the Communist Party.

Democracy requires free and fair elections: If people of a country have to really choose the best persons or parties to represent them in the government, then it is very important that free and fair elections take place. That is elections in which any party or individual can compete and no party has any special advantage. In many countries like USSR, Myanmar or Libya, only one or two parties were allowed to compete. As such, people had no choice but to vote for them. Even in other countries, parties in power use government machinery to persuade or force people to vote for them. They also manipulate the election process in such a way as to reject the candidature of opposition candidates, or remove the names of supporters of the opposition from electoral rolls. Holding elections of any kind is not sufficient. The elections must offer a real choice between political alternatives. And it should be possible for people to use this choice to remove the existing rulers if they wish to. If we wish to assess a democracy, it is important to look at the elections. But it is equally important to look before and after the elections.

There should be sufficient room for normal political activity, including political opposition, in the period before elections. This requires that the state should respect civil liberties of the citizens. So, a democracy must be based on a free and fair election.

Democracy requires respect for law and minority opinion:

While democracy implies a popularly elected government, it does not mean rule of popular leaders who do what their supporters want them to do. All democratic governments need to abide by laws and allow independent functioning of the judiciary and the executive officers as laid down in the law. Democracies also need to safeguard the interests of those who hold opinion contrary to the majority of the people. Their right to hold those views, propagate them and persuade people to accept them have to be respected even if the majority doesn't agree with them. The biggest challenge before democracy is to deal with people who hold opinions against democracy itself – those who think that democracy has to be replaced by some kind of dictatorship; those who believe that power should belong only to a particular class of people of a particular religion or race. Should they be allowed to propagate their views? Both these aspects give us another feature of democracy: a democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizens' rights.

Some questions on elections and democracy

Let us take the example of an election in India. Of all the residents in a region, let us assume that 1000 have a right to vote. In any typical election about 60% people go to cast their votes. Thus, we have 600 people voting in an election. Let us assume that there are ten candidates in the election and of these, the winning candidate gets about 250 votes, the second candidate gets 200 votes and the other candidates get about 150 votes. We declare the one with 250 votes the winner. Does he or she really represent the views and interests of the residents of the locality? Actually, he or she only represents one fourth of the voters. Is this a fair democratic arrangement? Can there be better ways of representing the people in decision making bodies?

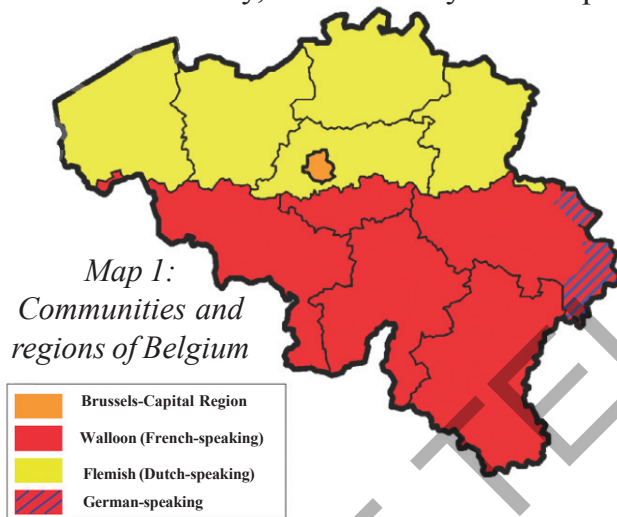
Democracy – Majoritarian Vs Inclusive

Often democracy is taken to mean the rule of the majority. In any country, there will be people of diverse views and cultures. So, differences of opinion are bound to arise. What is the democratic way to settle such differences? We often use the method of deciding by majority – that is, if voting is done, the view point that gets maximum support will be accepted by all. While this is useful in many simple situations, it can be very divisive in complex situations which involve whole communities or classes of people. A simple majoritarian approach may lead to alienation of minority communities. In such situations, it may be more useful to take an inclusive approach which accommodates the needs of both the majority and the minority people. Let us look at two important examples in this regard.

Belgium and Sri Lanka

Belgium is a small country in Europe. Of the country's total population, 59 per cent lives in the Flemish region and speaks Dutch language. Another 40 per cent people live in the Wallonia region and speak French. Remaining one per cent of the Belgians speak German. In the capital city Brussels, 80 per cent people speak French while 20 per cent are Dutch-speaking.

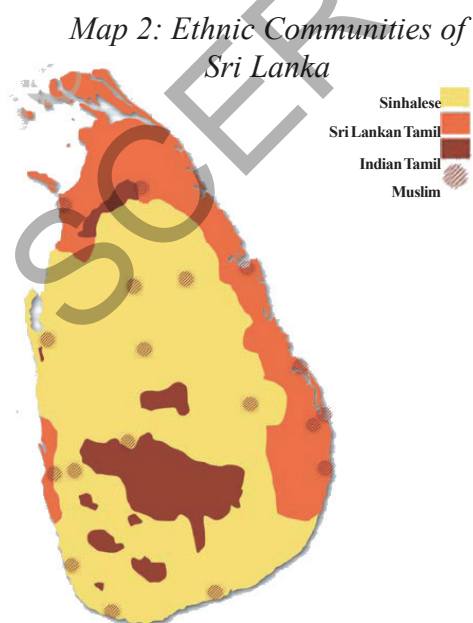
The minority French-speaking community was relatively rich and powerful. This was resented by the Dutch speaking community. This led to tensions between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking communities during the 1950s and 1960s. The tension between the two communities was more acute in Brussels. Brussels presented a special problem: the Dutch-speaking people constituted a majority in the country, but a minority in the capital.



Sri Lanka is an island nation, to the south of India. Sri Lanka too has a diverse population. The major social groups are the Sinhala-speakers (74 per cent) and the Tamil-speakers (18 per cent). Most of the Sinhala-speaking people are Buddhist, while most of the Tamils are Hindus or Muslims.

Should the majority communities views prevail in these two countries? Now, let us look at what happened in both of these countries.

Majoritarianism in Sri Lanka



In Sri Lanka, post its independence in 1948, the leaders of the Sinhala community sought to secure dominance over government by virtue of their majority. As a result, the democratically elected government adopted a series of majoritarian measures to establish Sinhala supremacy.

Sinhala was made the only official language, disregarding Tamil. The governments followed preferential policies that favoured Sinhala applicants for jobs. A new constitution stipulated that the state shall protect and foster Buddhism. All these government measures, coming one after the other, gradually increased the feeling of alienation among the Sri Lankan Tamils. As a result, the relations

between the Sinhala and Tamil communities strained over time. The Sri Lankan Tamils launched parties and struggles for equal status. Autonomy to provinces populated by the Tamils was repeatedly denied. By 1980s, several political organisations were formed demanding an independent Tamil Eelam (state) in northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

The distrust between the two communities turned into widespread conflict. It soon turned into a civil war as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an extremist organisation, established independent rule over some provinces inhabited by Tamils. In the final war, the Sri Lankan army defeated the LTTE. It also established a brutal control over those provinces killing and uprooting thousands of Tamil People. Many families were forced to leave the country as refugees and many more lost their livelihoods. Prior to the civil war, Sri Lanka had an excellent record of economic development, education and health. But the civil war has caused a terrible setback to the social, cultural and economic life of the country.

Accommodation in Belgium

The Belgian leaders took a different path. They recognised the existence of regional differences and cultural diversities. Between 1970 and 1993, they amended their constitution four times so as to work out an arrangement that would enable everyone to live together within the same country. The arrangement they worked out is different from any other country and is very innovative. Here are some of the elements of the Belgian model:

- Constitution prescribes that the number of Dutch and French-speaking ministers shall be equal in the central government. Some special laws require the support of majority of members from each linguistic group. Thus, no single community can make decisions unilaterally.

- Many powers of the central government have been given to state governments of the two regions of the country. The state governments are not subordinate to the Central Government.

- Brussels has a separate government in which both the communities have equal representation. The French-speaking people accepted equal representation in Brussels because the Dutch-speaking community has accepted equal representation in the Central Government.

Apart from the Central and the State Government, there is a third kind of government. This 'community government' is elected by people belonging to one language community – Dutch, French and German-speaking – no matter where they live. This government has the power regarding cultural, educational and language-related issues.

You might find the Belgian model very complicated. But these arrangements have worked well so far. They helped to avoid civil strife between the two major communities and a possible division of the country on linguistic lines. When many countries of Europe came together to form the European Union, Brussels was chosen as its headquarters. This was a great honour for Belgium because of the faith placed in it by the European community and an acknowledgment of Belgium's ability for fair play and justice.

What do we learn from these two stories of Belgium and Sri Lanka? Both are democracies. Yet, they dealt with the question of power sharing differently. In Belgium, the leaders have realised that the unity of the country is possible only by respecting the feelings and interests of different communities and regions. Such a realisation resulted in mutually acceptable arrangements for sharing power. Sri Lanka shows us a contrasting example. It shows us that if a majority community wants to force its dominance over others and refuses to share power, it can undermine the unity of the country and force the country back several hundred years with internal conflicts and civil wars.

Dignity and freedom of the citizens

Democracy stands much superior to any other form of government in promoting dignity and freedom of the individual. Every individual wants to receive respect from fellow beings. Often conflicts arise among individuals because some feel that they are not treated with due respect. The passion for respect and freedom are the basis of democracy. Democracies throughout the world have recognised this, at least in principle. This has been achieved in various degrees in various democracies. For societies which have been built over ago on the basis of subordination and domination, it is not a simple matter to recognise that all individuals are equal.

Take the case of dignity of women. Most societies across the world were historically male dominated societies. Long struggles by women have created some sensitivity today that respect to and equal treatment of women are necessary ingredients of a democratic society. That does not mean that women are actually always treated with respect. But once the principle is recognised, it becomes easier for women to wage a struggle against what is now unacceptable legally and morally. In a non-democratic set up, this unacceptability would not have legal basis because the principle of individual freedom and dignity would not have the legal and moral force there. The same is true of caste inequalities. Democracy in India has strengthened the claims of the disadvantaged and discriminated castes for equal status and equal opportunity. However, there are instances of caste-based inequalities and atrocities even now, but these lack the moral and legal foundations. Perhaps it is this recognition that makes ordinary citizens value their democratic rights.

Expectations from democracy also function as the criteria for judging any democratic country. What is most distinctive about democracy is that its examination never gets over. As democracy passes

one test, it produces another test. As people get some benefits of democracy, they ask for more and want to make democracy even better. That is why, when we ask people about the way democracy functions, they always come up with more expectations and many complaints. The fact that people are complaining is itself a testimony to the success of democracy: it shows that people have developed awareness and the ability to expect and to look critically at power holders and the high and the mighty. A public expression of dissatisfaction with democracy shows the success of the democratic project: it transforms people from the status of a subject into that of a citizen. Most individuals today believe that their vote makes a difference to the way the government is run and to their own self-interest.

- Discuss the solutions given in both the countries to accommodate social, religious and linguistic diversity in them.

Keywords

1. Union of Soviet Socialist Republic or USSR
2. Public discussions
3. Civil liberties
4. Social and economic equality
5. Internal conflicts

Improve your learning

1. How does democracy produce an accountable, responsive and legitimate government?
2. What are the conditions under which democracies accommodate social diversity?
3. Give arguments to support or oppose the following assertions:
 - A. Industrialised countries can afford democracy but poor countries need dictatorship to become rich.
 - B. Democracy can't reduce inequality of income between different citizens.
 - C. Government in poor countries should spend less on poverty reduction, health, education and spend more on industries and infrastructure.
 - D. In democracy, all citizens have one vote, which means that there is absence of any domination and conflict.
4. In the context of assessing democracy, which among the following is odd one out? Democracies need to ensure:

A. free and fair elections	B. dignity of the individual
C. majority rule	D. equal treatment before law
5. Studies on political and social inequalities in democracy show that :

A. democracy and development go together.	B. inequalities exist in democracies.
C. inequalities do not exist under dictatorship.	
D. dictatorship is better than democracy.	



6. Here is some information about six countries. Based on this information, how would you classify each of these countries? Write 'democratic', 'undemocratic' or 'not sure' against each of these.
- Country A:** People who do not accept the country's official religion do not have a right to vote
- Country B:** The same party has been winning elections for the last twenty years
- Country C:** Ruling party has lost in the last elections
- Country D:** The parliament cannot pass a law about the army without the consent of the Chief of Army
- Country E:** The parliament cannot pass a law reducing the powers of the judiciary
- Country F:** All the major economic decisions about the country are taken by officials of the central bank which the ministers cannot change.
7. Each of these statements contains a democratic and an undemocratic element. Write out the two separately for each statement.
- A minister said that some laws have to be passed by the parliament in order to conform to the regulations decided by the World Trade Organisation
 - The Election Commission ordered re-polling in a constituency where large scale rigging was reported
 - Women's representation in the parliament has never reached 10 per cent. This led women's organisations to demand one-third seats for women.
8. Write a response to the following arguments against democracy:
- Army is the most disciplined and corruption-free organisation in the country. Therefore army should rule the country.
 - Rule of the majority means the rule of ignorant people. What we need is the rule of the wise, even if they are in small numbers.
 - If we want religious leaders to guide us in spiritual matters, why not invite them to guide us in politics as well. The country should be ruled by religious leaders.
9. Locate the following countries in the world map.
1. Srilanka 2. Belgium 3. Russia 4. America (USA)
10. Read the first two paragraphs under the subheading 'Dignity and freedom of the citizens' and answer the following question.
Write about the dignity and freedom of the citizens in a democratic country in your own words.
11. What are the reasons for the people to fight for democracy?
12. Give some examples which prove that democracy is practiced in our schools.

Project

Conduct elections in your class to elect class representative with the help of your teacher.