

# Indian Democracy

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## Essay No. 01

Synopsis: Democracy is a political set-up in which public is the ultimate power. India is a democratic country based on the system of adult franchise and indirect participation by the people in the government. All people are equal before law in India. It is a democratic ideal based on equality of opportunity. India is a democratic and welfare state which implies reasonably good quality of life for its citizens. But in this respect India has failed. Indian democracy's economic and social contents have not been realized yet and there is a lot of poverty, illiteracy, hunger and deprivation. Elections in India are not as free, fair and fearless as they ought to be. There is an urgent need of electoral reforms.

According to Abraham Lincoln democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. In other words, the ultimate power rests with the people who form the electorate to elect their representatives. Thus, the sovereignty lies in the people and is manifested through their opinion and will. It is a political set-up by consent of the voters. In a genuine democracy, the consent of the people is active and effective. People exercise this consent from time to time indirectly through their elected representatives. The consent given to the representatives to govern and make laws can be withdrawn by the people when they so desire.

India is a democratic country. Here the will and consent of the majority prevail. It is a government in which each and every individual has some participation, some share. Democracy provides for the expression and development of the individuals. Every individual here has the freedom to realize his intellectual, economical and spiritual potentials to the maximum. This means that Indian democracy is a political arrangement with particular economic, social and political approach.

In India everybody is equal before law. Each and every human being is guaranteed freedom to develop himself to the fullest possible extent without any hindrance. Equality is the essence of democracy and all the citizens have equality of opportunity but it never means regimentation and rigid uniformity. And this lends variety, diversity and plurality in unity. As a nation India is one but as individuals the citizens are free to follow their own individual faith, religion, desires and ways of life. It means individual diversities and national unity and integrity are not incompatible but rather complementary.

The economic aspect of democracy means that each and every citizen is made to live a good and meaningful life with at least minimum needs of life easily available. Democracy means bringing the gap between the rich and the poor and raising the standard of living of the masses. True democracy implies that nobody goes to bed hungry, that he has at least simple roof over his head and clothes to cover his body. These are the ideals of democracy, challenges which should be faced and met.

Defection and desertion is another great danger to Indian democracy. Political leaders without policies programmed, principles and moral values often change their loyalties from one faction to another for petty personal and party gains and destabilize the governments and balance of power. Such unscrupulous leaders do not hesitate to cause split in their political parties to grab power with the help of other political factions with whom they have no harmony, understanding or policy accord at all. Such unholy alliances and strange bed-fellowship have abnormally increased in recent years.

Criminalization of politics poses a great danger to our democracy. Politicians in high places and positions have nexus with criminals, mafias, and antisocial elements and use them blatantly against their adversaries. Political murders, kidnappings, abductions and threats have become very common. They indulge in buying of the votes, threatening the voters, booth-capturing, violence, shooting and killing during the election and in such a situation democracy becomes a sheer mockery. Election Commission should curb some of these evils effectively. There should be transparency in election-funding, electioneering and expenditure of the candidates. Often the party in power misuses electronic media for electioneering purpose. All these evils should be checked and eliminated.

Essay No. 02

## **Democracy**

Since the days of Aristotle, democracy has been the ideal of political philosophers. Since the French Revolution, government of the people, by the people and for the people through their chosen representatives, has been the ideal form of government for all nations. Democracy, according to George Bernard Shaw is “a social order aiming at the greatest available welfare for the population and not for a class”.

The origin of democracy may be traced to remote period of human history. The Vedic king in ancient India was controlled by Sabha and Samiti. Moreover, the village republics of the ancient India were in essence democratic. There was a

system of electing an executive responsible to Panchayat and liable to be recalled at any time. In ancient Greece and Rome reference is made to magistracies replacing the king. In the age of Pericles, Government was run by popular assemblies. In the time of Plato and Aristotle, the direct democracy of Greece had won glory. Thus, democratic idea is not a new idea, but it has assimilated a tremendous political sanction in the modern times.

Democracy can be direct as well as indirect. Direct democracy implies that every citizen has a say in the affairs of his country. In ancient Greece, this form of Government prevailed to a great extent. In those days, there were city-states. All the people could assemble in a place and could debate the issues at leisure and then decide them through a show of hands. The casting of votes thus presented no problem. Things have undergone a radical change. In the modern times, the States have grown in size, becoming so vast that direct democracy has to take the recourse to indirect democracy, that is, Government by means of the elected representatives and not through direct methods.

The chief merit of democracy is that it is based upon the principles of consent and equality. Will, not force, is the basis of State. Government subsists on the co-operation and consent of the governed, all of whom are equal. Democracy thus rejects the aristocratic canon: "Some are born to rule and others to obey". It grants no special privilege to an individual and upholds the dignity of the common man. Distinctions of caste, creed, colour or sex do not deprive anyone of his 'natural right'.

Another important aspect of democracy is that it flourishes on the food of debates and discussion. It upholds the principle of liberty. The democratic slogan is "liberty, equality and fraternity". Freedom of thought, expression and association are thus basic postulates of democracy. People can freely criticize the government and use all peaceful and legitimate means to change it, if it does not reflect their wishes.

On the other hand, if we compare democracy with dictatorship—its greatest rival—we find that democracy is better form of government. Dictatorships are modern version of monarchy. Difference of opinion, freedom of speech, and even the development of individual freedom are the things that are greatly hampered under a dictatorship. There is a regimentation of society and the dictator is all in all. The dictator subordinates the individual to the State and the State in his own will.

Both democracy and dictatorship may degenerate. But it is easier for the latter to develop into autocracy, than for the former to degenerate into mob rule. Besides, the aggressive nationalism, which dictatorship glorifies, is a challenge to internationalism, and a menace to the world peace.

Orthodox democracy has proved itself miserably unequal to the requirements of a modern State. The need is to modify the traditional institutions of democracy to suit present day conditions. The inefficiency of democracy first became noticeable in its economic aspect. One of the most important problems for democracies, therefore, is to manage their economic system in such a way, as to ensure for everybody a reasonably high standard of living, coupled with a reasonable amount of security and liberty.

Essay No. 03

### Democracy in India

It is commonly believed that democracy has taken firm roots in the Indian soil. Whereas in neighbouring countries which got freedom at the same time or later, have not so far been able to have a democratic set-up, in India, successive elections held have proved the point, more conspicuously when we know that there emerged governments of different hues right from the so-called dynastic Congress to the heterogeneous and then the so called saffron or saffronized BJP and again the Congress, now perhaps with a “human face” under the ablest of the able Manmohan Singh.

The maturity of the Indian voter can be judged from just one single instance. When P.V. Narasimha Rao turned to the masses for a mandate for a second term, he was dead sure of the success of the Congress at the hustings. The main arguments of the Congress in its favour were the boosting up of economy, introduction of the policy of liberalization, reform in the social sector, reasonably good performance of the party in the assembly elections preceding the Lok Sabha elections, etc. All this was backed up by a wide coverage over the TV and other media means.

The Congress leaders led by Mr. Rao forgot that all the propaganda regarding achievements could not wash away the black spots like securities scam, the hawala scam, the telecom scam, the sugar scam, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, etc. from the people’s mind.

Moreover, really it was the middle class besides the elitist class that benefited from the reforms, if any, and neither the elitist class nor the middle class deliverable. Both of them are clever enough to reap the full benefit of an offering and then look to the other side for an even greater benefit. Thus, they are adept in the art of extracting more and more concessions from all the governments that intrinsically depend and survive on their money and mercy. It was in judging the views of such classes that Mr. Rao failed and the result was a humiliating debacle for the Congress and a virtual political eclipse for Mr. Rao himself.

When India attained Independence and had to decide about the kind of government, the example of federal America was there before

the Indian leaders. Indian polity was a motley of diverse religious linguistic, societal and geographical entities. So, the federal system could provide the best answer to Indian necessities. It was very wisely realized by our forefathers and Constitution makers that such a vast country as India could not be governed effectively from a single all-powerful Centre. It was for this reason that in spite of adopting the Parliamentary democracy after the British model, India went in for the federal system which was more akin to the American system.

In a confederation, the partners can dissolve themselves at will The Soviet Union was based on the power of secession at will and some of the states finally seceded from the partnership. India could not afford to have such a system. India adopted the American federal system according to which the states cannot secede from the Union of States Moreover with numerous regional, linguistic, religious and other disparities, and bearing in mind the past history of India where diversity rather than unity had been the rule, India had to have a strong Centre with states having no power to secede from the federal system.

In order to bind the states into an everlasting union and define powers of the union and the states separately, and to enshrine rights and duties of citizens and to earmark all matters pertaining to governance, India adopted a written Constitution on. Since the Union had to be made more powerful than the states a concurrent list overriding the state list was also envisaged.

The Constitution was made binding on all concerned and its interpretational power was assigned to the independent judiciary, the Supreme Court to be precise. The executive, the legislature and the judiciary were assigned separate tasks and given necessary powers.

To make democracy a success, the Constitution provided for an Election Commission to arrange and supervise independent, free and fair elections. In earlier decades the Election Commission only acted as a sleeping partner or played second fiddle to the ruling party. T.N. Seshan was the first Chief Election Commissioner who asserted his powers and rights as allotted to him by the Constitution. Thereafter, his successors M.S. Gill, Lyngdoh, and Mr. T.S. Krishnamurthy by and large followed in his footsteps and that perhaps even more strictly. The Election Commission got a shot in the arm when the Supreme Court declared that it could assert all its overwhelming powers during election times. One great achievement of the Election Commission was the holding of free and fair elections in Jammu and Kashmir. A challenging situation for the Election Commission arose when the Supreme Court asked it to monitor and control all the

political advertisements to curb mutual mudslinging by political parties, and the Election Commission rose to the occasion and effectively proved its worth and efficiency.

The Indian federal system is fully democratic in nature. That signifies the dual purpose of highly democratic commitment of the Constitution fathers as well as the lucid expression of the fact that all the states in the Indian Union had the full and true consent of their people in joining the Union and making it what it is in nature with the states, dependency in certain matters on the Union Government and the like.

The Indian Constitution fathers preferred the parliamentary system to the presidential system. In the presidential system, the president becomes all-powerful for the fixed term. Moreover, in his election, it was perhaps suspected that the religious, regional or casteistic considerations might also overweight at some moment in history. This is almost impossible in the parliamentary system wherein the government is actually run by the cabinet and parliament and not just the Prime Minister. The latter is dependent totally or greatly on his colleagues and most of all on the directly elected parliament, the lower house (Lok Sabha) to be precise, and in case of any vagrancy a no-confidence motion can be brought against him which can end his rule in a moment.

During the first three decades after Independence, there remained a one party rule at the centre and mostly in states. This brought to focus the detestable term “dynastic rule.” It was, however, by stages that a change began to evolve and gather volume. First started a kind of revolt and then split in the ruling Congress and then other parties began to emerge as being powerful at the centre. There was a time when hung parliaments became the rule rather than the exception. One extremely important feature was the emergence of regional parties.

This scenario shaped itself into coalition Governments at the Centre when diverse parties came closer to forming a ruling coalition. At the earlier stages, it seemed something bizarre and aberrant if non-functional and non-workable. “Aya Ram and Gaya Ram” became the order of the day. Then came the Anti-Defection Law to provide stability to the ruling party or coalition government, as the constant change of parties by the members resulted in non-implementation of any developmental process and projects which affected adversely the lives of Indian citizens and led to discontent and disillusion among the masses. Surprisingly, just as votes were bought by candidates for election to legislatures, votes were bought by the ruling parties to defeat no-confidence motions or rain supremacy by a particular party in the legislature.

For a few years in the later 1960s, then in late 1970s' and in 1980s, for quite some time no single party could form a government at the Centre. Since the Constitution prohibits President's rule at the Centre, the only option available to political parties was the formation of a coalition government. But, most often due to internal differences and pressures, these governments fell quickly like a house of cards. There seemed to be a sort of domino effect in states, as it became a fashion to demand the kind of government in states as existed or came into power at the Centre.

Fortunately for India and for the Indian democracy, the coalition system began to evolve itself till it became as it was then termed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee: "The dharma of coalitions." When the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was formed at the Centre with diverse parties that many characterized as a mere conglomeration, few had a firm faith in its being successful for a long time. No doubt, it had to face many storms when some forces like those controlled by Jayalalitha, Mamta Banerjee and others tried to browbeat it. But the coalition steered its way out and proved a success, delivering the goods no worse if not better than ever before.

As a matter of fact formation for certain policies of the NDA coalition government had already been laid by the earlier governments, most prominently by the Congress government of Narasimha Rao in early 1990s. Manmohan Singh the then Finance Minister of India had already initiated the process of globalisation, liberalization, privatisation, disinvestment and the like.

It was fortunate for India that Jawahar Lal Nehru had laid the foundations for heavy industry, non-alignment, nuclear and space research and such other policies, which proved useful to India in the latter years. Later, Narsimha Rao too made it a point to steer clear of the duopolistic cold war between the western and soviet blocks and he was successful in his endeavour.

Another important feature that emerged was the passage of 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, which led to decentralization of powers right down to the village. Great efforts were made to empower and energize village panchayat and other bodies that were assigned both rights (powers) and duties for development. Women were empowered, partially at least, when they were allotted constituencies for legislature and municipal elections and the election of at least one woman panch was a must. We must bear in mind that democracy at the grass-roots through the panchayati system is of paramount importance. A peculiar situation arose a few years ago, when the Punjab and Haryana High Court had to express its opinion on this point, which also explains the constitutional importance of Panchayats as the foundation of democracy.

We know that the panchayati system in varied forms was there even in ancient India. Not only this, even Sabhas and Samitis were there which were concerned with not just dispensing justice to people but also doing other works for the welfare of the villagers but also advising them, kings and providing them guidance.

We sometimes learn certain Village Panchayats (for example, Khap Panchayats, most prominently in Haryana) taking some strange decisions in certain matters as inter-caste and inter-community matters, elopements, religious matters, etc. where some people, especially women are sometimes subjected to humiliation and even molestation or naked parades etc. This is, indeed, inhuman in the modern age. But all this takes place because of lack of awakening, enlightenment and proper level of literacy among the members of the panchayats. So, when panchayats are being given increasingly more powers, their doses of learning and knowing to the levels of modern awakening; culture and civilization should also be enhanced correspondingly. Till then, the concerned legal powers must restrain them from resorting to bizarre methods.

In any case, the significance of the panchayati system which can play a pivotal role in the upliftment of villagers and the whole country in the long run cannot be ruled out. In this connection the court's observation deserves attention.

In the elections to State Assembly held in Punjab in February, 2002, the SAD (Shiromani Akali Dal Badal Group) was defeated and the Congress party won the elections and formed the government at State level. The elections to the Panchayats had been held in July, 1998 and the first meeting of the Panchayats was held in August, 1998. Accordingly, the full term of five years of the Panchayats in Punjab was to end in August, 2003.

As the Congress won the elections in the State Assembly and Lok Sabha seats in Punjab in 2002, the Congress wanted that the elections in Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads should be held soon.

The government's decision to hold elections to the Village Panchayats was challenged by the Punjabi Panchayati Union. Disposing of this petition, the Punjab and Haryana High Court ruled as under "There is no general power with the government for the dissolution of the Panchayats prior to the expiry of the prescribed term of five years:

"The panchayats can be dissolved before the expiry of five years only in accordance with the law, if any, promulgated by the State. The most powerful observations of the High Court were as under:



“A majority of our people live in the villages. They constitute the strength of our nation. The Panchayats are the symbol of democracy at the grass-root level. These are to democracy what primary schools are to education. A weak baby seldom grows into a healthy youth. A child who makes a bad beginning shall never grow up into a good and responsible adult. The tradition that we establish at the level of the Village Panchayats shall be the index for the elections to the state legislative assemblies and Parliament. “We cannot pollute the panchayats by acting on the consideration of party politics. Strengthening the institution of Panchayats by observance of the letter and spirit of law alone can ensure lasting gains and give firm roots to a government by and for the people”.

One great bane of the Indian democratic system has, however, been the politician-bureaucrat-industrialist nexus. The image of politicians has been as bad as it could be. Most of the people are convinced that most of the politicians are corrupt to the core. This is what the emergence of so many scams tells them. To name only a few scams — The Bofors scam, the housing scam, the fodder scam, the telecom scam, the petrol pump scam, etc. The amount of Rs. 2 crore which is given to MPs for development purposes is hardly ever used by them for the right cause. People’s loss of faith in their leaders is certainly a cause of concern. Otherwise the major strength and success of Indian democracy cannot be doubted.

There is another face of the Indian democracy which we see. As the elections of 2004 have revealed and as we could gather from the pre-poll scenario, in spite of our claim that democracy has taken firm roots in the Indian soil, what we have in politics in India is the politics of absurdity. It is sheer opportunism that is at work. All the principles, morals, convictions and ideologies have been thrown to the winds. The aim of each candidate is to evolve winning permutations for polls. There are no scruples left in politics. The individual members shift loyalties as cows and horses shift masters.

In such a scenario, the voter is in a great dilemma. He does not know whom to vote. He is at a loss to choose between an individual and an ideology. As a matter of fact sound ideology is essential for a healthy and vibrant democratic system. But the truth is that there is no ideology left in this game.

In this context, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam’s address to the nation two days before the start of the first phase of elections to the Lok Sabha, 2004, must be considered sacred and of paramount importance. One most important factor here was that this was the first time in the democratic history of India that a President should address the voters directly to remind them of their duty to exercise their voting right. And then he asked them to cast their vote “positively”, meaning that they should rise above party politics and refuse by crafty politicians who hold out only false promises.

In his speech broadcast on Doordarshan and All India Radio the President said. " By casting your vote for a candidate who in your opinion can represent you in the Lok Sabha, you are sowing the seeds for the creation of a prosperous India, a happy India, a safe India, a secure India, and above all, an India with nobility." It was clear by what he meant that all the citizens must vote and vote for deserving candidates.

The President's speech was themed "Voting a sacred Mission." He said, "May I remind you that by casting your vote, you will be fulfilling the aspiration of the children and the youth of our nation and creating a powerful system. That will make their dreams a reality."

The President termed franchise "an onerous responsibility that you own to the motherland." "Hence," he said, "exercising your franchise must become a priority activity for you and you should cast your vote positively." According to the President, the activity of franchise demonstrated the equality of every citizen in a democracy.

Meanwhile, according to the eminent political scientist and former Chairman of the National Minorities Linguistic Commission, Mr. H.S. Deol, the Indian coalition politics was devoid of any idealism or dynamism. According to him, political coalitions in the country were driven by the sole objective of capturing power. It was his view that in the existing political system, politicians with gangster-like mentality were flourishing while those with a clean image watched helplessly.

In a really mature democracy, it should not be possible for politicians to sway the voters through false promises, gratification or any other flimsy means. But this is not the case with the Indian voters as yet. The Indian voters can be influenced easily by minor manipulations. This may be due to illiteracy, stark poverty and the like. For whatever reasons this may be possible, this factor undermines the real strength of our democratic set-up. A reader expressed her views in this context in the following ways in a renowned daily:

"Most of the time, we are ever-ready to pay any price for a cause, be it bathing on the ghats of the Ganga or receiving saris, The philanthropic motive behind the distribution of sari is understandable. Providing instant gratification to the people is the pious path adopted by our politicians to prove that they are alive to the problems of the masses. And this mechanism suits them. There is no need to make efforts to realise a literary scheme when distributing free clothes, food or houses among the illiterates brings immediate results.

Never learning from past mistakes is our genetic inheritance. We swarm around politicians, nourishing their careers. No wonder, birthday celebration like these will

persist. And you and I will remain their willing victims. And such is our inner strength that come what may, we would not admit that common sense is not common in a majority of Indians.”

All the negative factors notwithstanding, we must remember that India is still a vibrant, resilient democracy where things like renunciation, secularism, peace and growth through mutual cooperation are cherished. The re-emergence of the Congress at the centre, Sonia Gandhi’s victory and renunciation (or abdication) and Manmohan Singh’s installation as Prime Minister are some of the unforgettable points in India’s recent history.