

Indian democracy: The hidden secrets

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Abstract

Democracy is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people." -Abraham Lincoln Democracy means rule by the people to ensure that every citizen takes part in the decision making process either directly or indirectly through elected representatives. India is the largest democracy in the world. In the last more than 6 decades it has worked successfully well to some extent. But in modern India it has to face many challenges that need to be tackled in order to ensure true democracy. These challenges may include: social and economic inequalities, poverty and unemployment, Illiteracy and ignorance, casteism, communalism, population explosion, regionalism, corruption and terrorism, etc. India needs to develop new proposals to reform democracy. Law plays important role in political reformation and may help to prevent wrong practices and encourage good ones. But mere legal changes alone do not help as the changes in laws may sometimes prove counterproductive and may result into negative impact on society. Therefore, the best laws empower people to carry out democratic reforms. The Right to Information Act is the best example that serves as a watchdog against abuse of democratic principles. The challenges to the democracy may be tackled by way of movements of activist or by the politically conscious citizens. Some of the measures that can be taken to sustain a true parliamentary democracy in India include: achieving 100% literacy; educating the masses about democratic rights; ensuring better protection of fundamental rights, and to ensure freedom of press, etc. In this paper, the author has attempted to study and analyze the existing democratic setup in India and suggest necessary reforms in order to ensure a sustainable democracy in India.

Keywords: democracy, RTI, justice

Introduction

The social scene in India has been manifested by some high features of achievements and the low depths of retreat from the ideals which the nation set before itself. The difference in the social sector is that the lower depths eclipse the high features and the future prospects are not very bright. India's tragedy is the breach of the social contract embodied in the Constitution. A yawning gap between legal and formal equality on the one hand and widening real inequalities and disparities on the other is staring at the face of the nation today. On the traditional structure of inequality between men and women, upper and lower castes and urban and rural population, is superimposed a new divide between those who have benefited from the lop-sided development process and those who have been left behind and marginalized by this process. The target groups of social integration policy (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) experienced considerable improvement in their educational and cultural, but not their economic situation.

Inequity of Women

There can be no proper social development unless women become equal and active participants in the development process. Unfortunately, in India discrimination against women has been formalized through a plethora of customs, norms and practices to protect a highly resilient patriarchal system. Until 1975, the emphasis was on legislative measures to confer rights to women. But they remained ineffective as they were not extended to all communities, most women remained unaware of their

new rights, and the infrastructure and social milieu to enforce them were not created. The vast majority of women also remained untouched by efforts to provide them access to education and professional services. In fact, in the area of education inequality has widened day by day. Nothing was done to attack patriarchy. The process of economic and political transformation in fact strengthened and reinforced it. The continuing discrimination against women was reflected in the declining share of women in the population.

In the 70s, the women's movement experienced considerable development. It became active in different arenas of India's complex social system and in the domains of politics and culture, extending its agenda beyond its original limited focus on education, health and employment. Moreover the situation of children in India is not a good reflection on Indian society. The mortality rate of children under five years - even though it has declined substantially - is higher in India than in most Third World countries. Female child mortality exceeds male child mortality. Access of girls to basic health care, education and nutrition is much less than that of boys. Child labor is widespread and many children are bonded. A large number of bonded children and those under other forms of forced labor are subjected to torture and other abuses.

Poor Social Services

The Indian government is constitutionally obliged to provide the minimum necessary services in areas of education, health and housing. But in each of them it is

still far from meeting its obligation to the people. In spite of remarkable achievements in the fields of education and health, India's position is extremely poor as compared with other Third World countries. Per-capita expenditure on health, education and housing in India is one of the lowest in the world and is going down in real terms. High school enrollment rates are marred by equally high drop-out rates. Almost half of the Indian population is still illiterate; India harbors the largest mass of illiterate population in the world. The rural female illiteracy ratio is even close to 70 %. However, a sample survey taken a couple of 2 years ago shows that since the 1991 census the literacy rate has climbed up by about 10 % in the country as a whole. The conditions of drinking water supply, drainage, sewerage and garbage disposal, are abysmally poor all over the country. Large parts of urban conglomerates have been converted into slums. Epidemics like plague, cholera, tuberculosis and malaria have returned or become more widespread. They are posing a serious problem.

Food Security: Enigmatic Success

India has no doubt been successful in preventing starvation deaths, a phenomenon which frequently visited the Indian population. Domestic production of food-grains and other necessities have recorded an impressive increase and near self-sufficiency have been reached in food production. The real prices of food-grains have remained stable mainly on account of state intervention. The Integrated Rural Development Program and poverty alleviation programs have helped increase the real incomes of poor households and given them productive assets. The public distribution system, in spite of all its short-comings, has enhanced the food security of a large number of poor and middle-class families. However, all these achievements were not sufficient to eliminate large-scale poverty in India.

Growing Democracy But Always Under Strain

The two biggest achievements of India soon after independence were the recovery from the trauma of partition and the assimilation of the Princely States. The partition was followed by the largest movement of refugees in human history. It goes to the credit of the then Government of India to have sheltered and eventually rehabilitated some 20 million refugees from Pakistan. Similarly, the merger into the Indian Union of some 600 Princely States which were given the freedom to join either India or Pakistan or even declare independence was a remarkable display of vision, foresight and negotiating skill of the Indian leadership of the time.

Democracy: A Miracle

However, the most remarkable achievement of India in the political field has been its 70 year old democracy. To have run the largest democracy in the world, in a society that is linguistically, culturally, religiously and ethnically the most heterogeneous and complex one in the world, is a real tribute to the genius of the Indian people. Democracy in India has stood the test of time and is going to endure. The Indian electorate has cast its votes

well and wisely, even though almost half of it is illiterate. The governments of the day have not, with a few odd exceptions, been able to influence election outcomes by using state power. They have more often been defeated than returned back to power.

Democracy has brought about significant changes in the social structure and, in the process, has also been responsible for maintaining social cohesion and national unity. But for democracy, India would have disintegrated long time ago. And by far the most effective remedy for some of the acute current societal problems lies in more democracy. The democratic process has brought about a shift of political power from the middle and higher castes and classes of urban society to backward classes who are now the politically most influential ones in the country. They have won reservations for themselves in legislatures and government services as were accorded to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes after independence through Constitutional provisions. Indeed, there are few examples in recent history of such a conspicuous shift of political power, involving such a huge mass of population, taking place in such a short period of time almost without any violence and in a democratic way. This is one more example of the miracles that democracy can create.

Decentralization: Still a Mirage

Indian federalism was, from the very beginning, tilted towards a strong central government. The fathers of the Indian Constitution had deliberately gone about establishing a unitary form of government within the framework of a federal structure. With the passage of time, the federal character of the state got further diluted, with the Central Government acquiring more and more power. The accentuation of regional disparities and interpersonal and inter-class/community inequalities during the process of development, among others, gave rise to demands for decentralization and self-governance. These were viewed by the ruling elite at the Center as disruptive and met by a further strengthening of the central power structure. This process took the most rampant form during the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The result was the weakening or paralysis of a whole set of institutions in the country which were intended to hold the balance between the Center and the State Governments. As a reaction to this drift towards centralization, demands have been raised for restoring the balance struck in the Constitution, for greater devolution of functions, and particularly of finances, to the states, for the creation of new states, and for devolution at the grass-roots level. Among these, the demand for the creation of new states may respond to aspirations of ethnic identity, but not to the need for further devolution. What is needed is the devolution of much greater authority and power to the existing federating units or the states. In addition, in order to safeguard the integrity of the Union, it may become necessary to concede far reaching measures of autonomy to certain states, particularly the state of Jammu and Kashmir and some of the North-Eastern states.

The argument that nothing by way of greater devolution can be conceded to one state without conceding the same

to the other states has no legal validity and, if accepted, can engulf the Union in much deeper crisis. If India is to avoid the fate of some erstwhile federal states (USSR, Yugoslavia), it is essential to grant far-reaching and variable degrees of autonomy to different states. In fact, insurgency has been going on for several years in the North-Eastern states. And the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been under the grip of cross-border terrorism and militant violence and destruction for well over a decade. This is already undermining the unity and integrity of the nation. The best unit of devolution is the village. This is where decentralization can really be put to work and make a difference in the development process. A major step in this direction was taken with the passage in the Indian Parliament of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. They made regular elections to village Panchayats and municipal civic bodies mandatory. Besides, they gave them extensive powers of taxation and administration. These amendments have, in fact, created a third tier of democracy in India. But unfortunately, the Panchayati Raj system has not gathered the momentum it should have. The elections to the Panchayats were unduly delayed by several states. In one state, they have still not taken place. There has been very little devolution of finances to the local level. The entire set of legislations, rules and regulations which are weighed heavily in favor of the Union and the states are yet to be revamped. Besides, the huge task of training thousands of local-level leaders who are to contest for elections to the local bodies is yet to be accomplished.

The Peril of Hindu Communalism

The Constitutional provisions on the protection of minorities have been observed more in breach than compliance. The beginning of the 1980s can very well be regarded as the end of the brief era of secularism in Indian history as it was shaped by the leaders of the nation's modern renaissance. There is no sign of any determined and viable effort to resurrect the secularist movement. Instead, there is an ongoing drift towards Hindu communalism. During the 1980s, Hindu communalism acquired altogether new dimensions. Communal riots became more frequent, better planned and more violent. Not principles but political expediency dictated the policies of major political parties on communal issues. In an effort to woo alternately the Hindu and the Muslim votes, the ruling Congress Party made a series of concessions to communal elements. This process culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid when the Government decided to remain a silent spectator. A spate of communal riots followed this shameful incident. The communal situation in the country has undergone a qualitative change after the Ayodhya incident. A feeling of mistrust and fear has spread among the more than 100 million Indian Muslims. This is a standing threat to national cohesion and unity. Political parties have staged a cozy retreat to a business-as-usual stance and the Government has not made any worthwhile effort to win back the confidence of the Muslim minority. In the meantime, there have also been several well-planned and orchestrated attacks on the places of

worships and dwellings of the Christian minority and the present age is no exception.

Corruption and Mayhem

The biggest failure of India as an independent nation has been in the realm of governance. There is an all-round decline of values, a pervasive loss of accountability and unfettered opportunity to criminals. Corruption is rampant both in high places - Ministers and senior bureaucrats - and at lower level. This has distorted democracy and is proving a drag on the process of development. The rule of law in the country is in a dire state. Political patronage has eroded rules and regulation. Those with power and their clientele prosper, and the ordinary citizens, particularly the poor and marginalized, suffer. It has become extremely difficult for ordinary citizens to claim their normal entitlement of wages, allowances and public services. The connection between politicians and criminals has been documented in government reports.

Uncertain Journey

It is extremely difficult to predict the prospects for India in the 21st century. Some indicators, particularly the growth in GNP, exports and the literacy rate, would show India in the next twenty years as one of the four economically most powerful nations in the world, scoring high also on several social parameters. However taking into account the all-pervasive failure on the social front and the sad state of governance with sloppy economic decisions, it is very difficult to subscribe to such an optimistic view of India's prospects. One should rather expect that in a situation of large scale poverty and social deprivation the free play of market forces will bring more misery and accentuate inequalities. It is unrealistic to believe that the Indian economy will be pulled up by the purchasing power of the middle class. Firstly, the size of this middle class, which is estimated to be 300 million, is often exaggerated and so is their purchasing power. Secondly, the demands of the remaining 700 million people, most of whom are deprived, would drain out the resources of the economy, making it very difficult to sustain or expand production to meet the demands of the middle class. In a democracy, there are limits to the extent that 700 million people can be ignored. The success of any development strategy depends upon the fulfillment of minimum social conditions. Among them are near universal literacy and access of all citizens to basic health services. The earlier Nehru-Mahalanobis strategy of development failed because it was not able to create these minimum social conditions. In their absence, the present development strategy based on the free play of market forces is also likely to come a cropper. Experience in other parts of the world has shown that free-market reforms have yielded the desired results only in countries where these social conditions were created before the launching of economic reforms.

So, in the next few decades, the Indian economy and society are likely to continue on their unpredictable path, surprising the world with spectacular performances in some sectors and during some years and disappointing it with failure to achieve even the minimum standards

under certain indicators. It is to be expected that the social fabric of the nation will come under greater strain and its national unity under greater threat. The only chance for India to emerge as a leading nation in the world is the arrival on the scene of another savior like Mahatma Gandhi and of the kind of leadership that India was blessed with during the time of the freedom movement.

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