

Challenges Faced by Indian Democracy

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Introduction

Democracy is almost a perfect system in which common people can play an important role directly or indirectly. India is a democratic state. It is the largest democracy in the world. Democracy has many features and characteristics (rule of law, equality, justice, transparency, accountability, promoting individual rights and liberties, etc.). India is also trying to follow these features or characteristics. Democracy is gradually changing its nature day by day. Democracy in present era is not same as it was before. Democracy is redefining its definition. The democracy of India is also changing and facing many problems and challenges. Democracy is a form of government in which people either directly or indirectly participate in the decision-making process through a system of representation involving periodically held free elections. The Democracy of India is considered as the largest democracy in the world. In a democracy, authority is enjoyed by the people or their representatives and people are the final authority in every field of system of governance. However, in modern India, democracy has faced a lot of challenges like social and economic inequalities, poverty and unemployment, Illiteracy, Casteism, communalism, corruption, terrorism, population explosion. It is required to be addressed to sustain true parliamentary democracy in India. This paper tries to examine and analyse the existing democratic system in India & its implication towards the democratic system of the world. It also suggests certain possible measures or institutional reforms in order to ensure a healthy and sustainable democracy for India. I would like to discuss mainly the problems and challenges with some examples that Indian democracy is facing.

The objective of the study

The following are some objectives of the study.

- a.To study the Indian system of democratic governance and its implications to the world democratic system
- b.To study the major issues or challenges being faced by the Indian democratic setup
- c.To suggest possible measures to response to the challenges effectively and help to restore the Indian democratic system healthier and more sustainable

India has changed a lot. Yet, there are various challenges that the country faces in terms of fulfilment of expectations of various sections of society. The challenges come both from prevailing domestic and international conditions as well as lack of adequate prerequisites for a smooth functioning of democracy.

Illiteracy

Illiteracy among people was a matter of grave concern for the successful functioning of democracy in India on the eve of independence and it still continues to be a major challenge. The level of education of citizens is a key to both the successful functioning of democracy and socio-economic development of the country. Perhaps, more importantly, it is an essential condition for human dignity. But the state of formal literacy was almost dismal when India achieved independence. The literacy rate in 1951 was mere 18.33 percent and female literacy was negligible with 8.9 percent. It was feared by many that the citizens would not be able to play their roles effectively and

exercise their right to vote meaningfully which is an individual's expression of the power of the people. This apprehension has been proved wrong by the Indian electorate over the years. In spite of a substantial number of them being illiterates, they have demonstrated maturity in the exercise of their right to vote on more than one occasion thus resulting peaceful transfer of political power since independence.

The Indian National Congress under the leadership of Ms. Indira Gandhi was very popular and powerful during the early part of 1970s. But in 1977's general election, the people of India rejected her primarily because of the misuse of power during emergency in 1975-1977 and provided an opportunity to the first non-Congress government at the Centre in form of the Janata Party. After that, there have been changes in the governments both at the Centre and in the States almost regularly. Literacy is necessary not simply for enabling citizens to participate in elections and exercise their right to vote effectively, it has other important implications as well. Literacy enables citizens to be aware of various issues, problems, demands, and interests in the country. It also makes them conscious of the principles of liberty and equality of all and ensures that the representatives elected by them truly represent all the interests in the society. If the children have access to basic education, the problem of illiteracy can be checked. Recently, the Right to Education is provided as a fundamental right.

Poverty

It is generally said that for a hungry person right to vote does not have any meaning. For him or her the first requirement is food. Therefore, poverty is considered as the greatest bane of democracy. It is the root cause of all kinds of deprivations and inequalities. It is the state of denial of opportunities to people to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. India inherited poverty from the long exploitative British colonial rule, but it continues to be one of the gravest problems today. Even now a considerable proportion of Indian population lives below poverty line, called BPL. The poverty line means an income level below which human beings cannot provide for their basic necessities of food, much less for clothes and shelter. The governmental definition of poverty line during the 1960s sought to measure the extent of poverty on the amount of income required to purchase a barest minimum desirable food having nutritional standards of caloric intake by a person. According to it, in Indian conditions, a person in rural areas needs an average of 2400 calories per day and in urban areas an average of 2100 calories per day in order to keep himself above the poverty line.

During the 1990s non-food items like clothes, employment, shelter, education, etc. got included in the definition of poverty. Poverty in the contemporary phase is linked with systemic deprivation of rights. It is also associated with the notion of Human Development Index (HDI) as championed by Mabud-ul-Haq and Amartya Sen. Viewed from the HDI perspective, the definition of poverty also includes socio-economic-political and human rights issues under its ambit. The persisting phenomenon of poverty is attributed to many factors, one of which is mass unemployment and under-employment. A large number of people in rural areas do not have regular and adequate work. In urban areas also the number of educated unemployed is very high. The growing population is regarded as a reason for poverty, though population is considered as the greatest resource in the country. The process of economic development has not been able to ensure social justice and gap between rich and poor has not been bridged. Because of all this, poverty continues to remain a great challenge to Indian democracy.

Gender Discrimination

Discrimination against girls and women exists in every walk of life. Gender equality is one of the basic principles of democracy. The Constitution of India enjoins upon the State to ensure that men and women are treated as equals and there is no discrimination against women. Fundamental Rights and Fundamental Duties as well as the Directive

Principles of State Policy make these intentions very clear. But the discrimination against females continues to be a fact of life. It is clearly reflected in the sex ratio, child sex ratio and maternal mortality rate. The number of females in comparison to males has been declining ever since 1901. In 1901, the sex ratio was 972 females per 1000 males. It came down to 927 females per 1000 males in 1991. According to 2011 Census it is 940 females per 1000 males which is still very unfavourable to females.

In some of the States, the 2011 Census reported a very low sex ratio of 877 females per 1000 males (Haryana), the lowest being 618 in Daman & Diu and 866 in the NCT of Delhi. The child sex ratio is a matter of greater concern. According to 2011 Census, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) in India is only 914 female children per 1000 male children. This is lower than the 2001 Census which reported child sex ratio of 927 female children per 1000 male children. It has been declining because of several factors, like the prevailing preference for male child, discriminatory treatment against the girl child right after birth, and the increasing incidence of female infanticides and female foeticides. By using technology, people are forcing mothers to get the fetus of a female child aborted. The infant mortality rate among girl children is high, as compared to that among boy children. Besides these demographic indicators, gender discrimination is very much apparent in the context of economic and social development. The female literacy rate in India in 2011 is 65.46 percent, whereas the male literacy rate is 82.14 percent. Females are discriminated in respect of both employment and their representation in public life.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, 1993 that provided 33 percent reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions, Municipalities and Municipal Corporations, have facilitated the course of political empowerment of women. However, traditionally women have been subordinated in the society, which restricts their participation in every field. This has been true for women belonging to more or less all classes and communities. 4. Casteism, Communalism, Religious Fundamentalism

Casteism:

The caste system which presumably originated in the division of labour in the ancient society has become a more or less rigid group classification, based on birth. The most detrimental and inhuman aspect of the caste system is the practice of untouchability which is continuing in spite of the constitutional ban imposed on it. This has led to segregation of so called low castes or 'Dalits', depriving them of education and other social benefits. The Dalits have been typically performing menial labour and some of the hardest physical work in society. Casteism has played a negative role even in the democratic political processes. In fact, casteism has become notorious as a strategy of exploitation of caste consciousness for narrow political gains. The caste system acts against the roots of democracy. The democratic facilities - like fundamental rights relating to equality, freedom of speech, expression and association, participation in the electoral process, free media and press, and even legislative forums - are misused for maintaining caste identity. Casteism has also been contributing towards continuation of socio-economic inequalities. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the backward classes have suffered down the ages from socio-economic deprivations. There are enormous inequalities in the society which are posing serious challenge to Indian democracy. What is more alarming is the mixing of caste and politics resulting into 'politicisation of caste' and 'casteisation of politics' in contemporary Indian polity which has become a grave challenge to our democracy. Despite the era of liberalisation and globalisation caste consciousness has not been eroded in our society and castes are being increasingly used as vote bank politics.

Communalism:

Communalism and religious fundamentalism have acquired a very dangerous form and alarming proportion in India. They disrupt the pattern of co-existence in our multi-religious society. Communalism is an affront to India's nationalist identity and a tragic setback to its evolving secular culture. It is subversive of our democratic political stability and destroyer of our glorious heritage of humanism and composite culture. Quite often, communalism is wrongly used as a synonym for religion or conservatism. Adherence to a religion or attachment to a religious community is not communalism.

Although conservatism represents social backwardness, it does not mean communalism either. Communalism is an ideology of political allegiance to a religious community. It uses one religious community against other communities and perceives other religious communities as its enemies. It is opposed to secularism and even humanism. One of the manifestations of communalism is communal riots. In recent past also, communalism has proved to be a great threat to our social and political life on several occasions.

Religious Fundamentalism: Religious fundamentalism also reinforces communalists in exploiting both religion and politics. Fundamentalism acts as an ideology which advocates a return to orthodoxy and a strict compliance to the fundamental tenets of religion. Religious fundamentalists vehemently oppose progressive reforms in order to establish their exclusive control on their respective communities.

Regionalism

Indian democracy has also been struggling with regionalism which is primarily an outcome of regional disparities and imbalances in development. India is a plural country with diversities of religions, languages, communities, tribes and cultures. A number of cultural and linguistic groups are concentrated in certain territorial segments. Although development process in the country aims at growth and development of all regions, the regional disparities and imbalances in terms of differences in per-capita income, literacy rates, state of health and educational infrastructure and services, population situation and levels of industrial and agricultural development continue to exist.

Existence and continuation of regional inequalities both among States and within a State create a feeling of neglect, deprivation and discrimination. This situation has led to regionalism manifested in demands for creation of new States, autonomy or more powers to States or even secession from the country. It is true that regionalism and sub-regionalism are unavoidable in a vast and plural country like India. It is not always correct to consider every attempt to support or defend regional or sub-regional interests as divisive, fissiparous and unpatriotic. The problem begins when these interests are politicised and regional movements are promoted for ulterior political motives. Such unhealthy regional or sub-regional patriotism is cancerous and disruptive. The continuing regional imbalances have given rise to militant movements in certain parts of our country. Separatist demands in Jammu and Kashmir or by ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) in Assam or by different groups in the North-Eastern region are matters of grave concern for Indian polity. Corruption in public life has been a major concern in India. In 2011, India was ranked 95 of 183 countries defined as corrupt in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

Corruption is rampant in all walks of life, be it land and property, health, education, commerce and industry, agriculture, transport, police, armed forces, even religious institutions or places of spiritual pursuits. Corruption continues to exist in covert and overt ways at all three levels - political, bureaucratic and corporate

sector. One can see the nexus between the politicians, the bureaucrats and the industrialists which has resulted into corruption and corrupt practices. Corruption in electoral processes and bribing of voters who participate in elections at different levels has now become a common practice. In recent years, various scams have been coming out in our country in quick succession. Corruption is a sign of political instability and institutional decay, challenging seriously the validity and propriety of governance.

Criminalisation of Politics

In recent years, criminalisation of politics in India has become a debatable issue. There have been allegations that there are some elements in politics who do not have faith in democratic values and practices. They indulge in violence and take refuge in other unhealthy, undemocratic methods to win elections. This is not a healthy trend in politics and there is an urgent need to apply serious check on such tendencies. Criminalisation of politics is the very negation of democratic values and has no place in a democratic set up. Democracy can be strengthened by adopting and promoting democratic values and shunning criminal activities. Recently, the judiciary, while taking a serious note of criminal tendencies in politics, has showed signs of adopting remedial measures to apply a serious check on such elements. The Central government and many State governments have been taking steps to address this issue effectively. This is a matter of great satisfaction and a healthy sign for the successful functioning of democracy in India.

Political Violence

Use of violence for political end is dangerous for the existence of any system. India has been witnessing various forms of violence. Communal violence, caste violence and political violence in general have attained serious proportion. Communal riots are engineered by vested interests for political, religious and economic reasons. Caste violence in various shapes has been increasing. Despite agricultural development, abolition of zamindari system, and developments like green revolution and white revolution, there are still powerful feudal elements in the society. A serious conflict of interests has emerged between higher and middle castes and this has led to aggressive competition for political power which many a time leads to violence. Another aspect of caste violence is the backlash of the higher castes against the growing awareness and assertion of their rights by the Dalits and lower castes, particularly the Scheduled Castes and the backward castes. During elections, violence is being adopted either to mobilise voters or to prevent them from exercising their right to vote. Moreover, violence has been associated with demands for separate States, reorganisation of States or adjustment of State boundaries. Violence has also been used quite frequently during industrial strikes, farmers' movements, and students' agitations.

Weakness and shortcomings of Indian democracy

- In India, women constitute 50% of the total population. But in State assemblies and Parliament, they do not even enjoy complete 10% representation. It is no surprise that topics like rape, domestic violence, etc. are not dealt with as an urgent matter of discussion.
- Tax is paid by only 1% of the total population in a nation of 1.24 billion people. However, 15% of the population is liable for paying taxes.
- India is a country of 28 states and 8 union territories with a population of 124 crore people with numerous languages. Whereas, the United States has 50 states for a population of 34 crore people.

- Approximately 60,000 cases are pending in the Supreme Court, 42 lakh cases are pending in different High Courts, and 2.7 crore cases pending in District and Subordinate Courts. There are not enough judges and it has a faulty, and slow justice system.
- GDP of our country has increased about 50% but children below the age of 5 years are still malnourished.
- Currently, more than 260 million farmers are protesting against the farm bills enacted but the farmer's protest is continuously failing Indian democracy as no decision has been undertaken on the government's part.
- People of our country are still living in poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment.
- Approximately 60% of the total population has no access to sanitization.
- Institutional changes do not accompany economic development.
- Approximately 35% of the total population lives in poverty.
- There is not even 6% women representation in governance.
- Our society clutched into socio-economic inequalities.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be said that though India is considered as one of the largest democracy in the world, but in practice, there are various emerging challenges or issues that are responsible for creating obstacles in the smooth functioning of the democratic republic of India. However, it is a matter of discussion that despite the elapse of seventy-two years of independence since 1947, there is a lot of illiteracy, corruption, terrorist and Maoist activities in India which threatened the backbone of democratic governance. In the modern world, every democracy has faced many economic, social, religious and political problems. These problems can be solved by the cooperation of the people. Further, a democracy can flourish only if there is no big gap between the thinking of the people and of the government & when there is a spirit of cooperation between them. Due to the corruption and self-interest of the politicians, the faiths of the voters have diminished towards democracy. Though, we are the members of the largest democratic country of the world which ensures equal rights and duties to its citizens. So, it is the supreme duty of the politicians, governments and the peoples to make the collective efforts & actively participate in the functioning of the government and make their country perfect. The Right to Information Act must be properly implemented throughout the country and acts should serve as a watchdog against the abuse of democratic principles in India. The challenges to democracy may be tackled by the way of political consciousness and educating the peoples about the Democratic right, duties and values.

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