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CHALLENGES OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The future of democratic institutions in India has been a subject of apprehensive discussion among political scientists interested in India for at least as many years as India has been a representative democracy. India has been a democracy for over seven decades. Etymologically, democracy means the power of the people. Government of the people, by the people, for the people, is the sovereign definition of democracy. Even if democracy cannot be precisely and comprehensively defined we can recognize it by some of its essential features in action. In India high inequality, massive poverty and a vast informal sector make the challenge of implementing democracy extremely daunting as much as it is highly imperative.



KEYWORDS- Challenges of Indian Democracy , future of democratic institutions , political scientists .

INTRODUCTION :

Democracy is the best form of government ever devised, but this does not mean that every democracy does well in practice. Modern Political scientists viewed democracy with varied angles and expressed their perception accordingly. Elitist theory of democracy, propounded by Mosaka and Parretto, emphasized upon the fact that important decisions are taken by few influential people only. J.A. Schumpeter argued that political leaders in democracy cannot enjoy unlimited power as it is restricted, by the choice of people in election. India, the largest democracy in the world, has historically little back- ground of democracy. In fact, India strayed into democracy as a result of a long association with the British as a part of the British Raj. It under- went myriad adaptations. The social peculiarities of India include such factors as caste, regionalism, language differences and religious pluralism. Social conflict, sometimes violent and at other times dormant, largely formed the background for the transition of democratic institutions in India. The transitory phase is a phase of turmoil, largely a by-product of the attempts at modernisation. In the long run, only a democratic society can have a democratic political system. India has yet to adopt democracy as a way of life. But something can become 'a way of life' only after a long and gradual process involving generations. Nevertheless, despite the numerous trials and tribulations, India has proved to be a shining example of democracy. At least once India escaped the possibility of slipping into authoritarian rule. This was during Mrs. Gandhi's rule. Prime Minister Nehru, in the 1950s and 60s got thumping majorities in the general elections. People reposed total faith in him. Nehru remained a true parliamentarian throughout and sincerely believed in democratic principles.

Commonly democracy is a form of government in which rulers are elected by the people. Elections should be held in a free and fair manner with equal choice and opportunity to all. Democratic rights should not be limited to voting, contesting and forming political parties. Democracy should grant some social and economic rights to the citizens.

The very spirit of power sharing should be extended to power sharing between governments and social groups. Modern democracy should respect the voice of the minority with the majority. The democracy should also extend its scope from mere government and its activities to eliminating discrimination of all kinds. Democracy is also the best form of government on the basis of Accountability, Consultation and Discussion, Accommodates and Social Diversities. Good Democracy is a form of government in which rulers are elected by the people and ensure that every citizen participates in decision making process directly or indirectly through elected representatives in a free and fair manner.

OBJECTIVES:

- + To understand the meaning of democracy.
- + To identify major problems and challenges being faced by Indian democracy.

Methodology

The study is based on descriptive method.

Sources

The study adopted secondary sources: include books, articles, journals and reports.

Democracy

The term 'democracy' comes from the Greek word *demokratia* which means "rule of the people". It was coined from two words: *demos* that means "people" and *Kratos* which refers to "power". That is, in a democracy the power rests with the people. This meaning is based on the experiences of the governments that existed in some of the Greek city-states, notably Athens. And, today also, democracy is defined as a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodic free elections. When you examine the definitions of democracy, as suggested above, you will find that most of those definitions define democracy as a form of government which is run by the elected representatives.

Democracy has been defined in many ways. Bryce believes that "Democracy really means nothing more or less than the rule of the whole people, expressing their Sovereign will by their votes". MacIver observes, "Democracy is not a way of governing, whether by majority or otherwise, but primarily a way of determining, who shall govern, and broadly to what ends".

Principles of Indian democracy:

India is a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, Republic.

(a) Sovereign means an independent nation.

(b) Socialist implies social and economic equality for all Indian citizens. This guarantees equal opportunity and equal social status. The government attempts to reduce economic inequality by reducing concentration of wealth.

(c) Secular implies freedom to choose your religion. The state gives every citizen the right to practice and propagate a religion of his choice, and also right to reject all religions. The state treats all religions as equal and there is no official state religion.

(d) Democratic means the government is a democratically elected, the head of the government (Prime Minister) is elected by the people.

(e) Republic means the head of the state (President) is not a hereditary King or Queen but indirectly elected by the people.

Challenges Faced By the Indian Democracy:

India is a very large country full of diversities – linguistically, culturally, and religiously. At the time of independence it was economically underdeveloped. There were enormous regional disparities, widespread poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and shortage of almost all public welfare means. Citizens had enormous expectations from independence. As mentioned above, 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. These are discussed below.

(a) Poverty

It is generally said that for a hungry person right to vote does not have any meaning. For him/her the first requirement is food. Therefore, poverty is considered as the greatest bane of democracy. It is, in fact, 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. Of course, 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. In fact, 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.

(b) Corruption

Corruption in public life has been a major concern in India. In 2011, India was ranked 95th of 183 countries defined as corrupt in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). In fact, 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 so called 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. The tentacles of corruption have affected all organs of government, including the judiciary. Above all, corruption in electoral processes and bribing of voters who participate in elections at different levels has now become a common practice. Have you or your friends observed this happening during elections in the recent past? In recent years, various scams have been coming out in our country in quick succession. In fact, corruption is a sign of political instability and institutional decay, challenging seriously the validity and propriety of governance. We as citizens should take a vow not to indulge in corrupt practices at any level and contribute in eliminating corruption from our country.

(c) 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. And 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 per cent and female literacy was negligible with 8.9 percent. It was, therefore, 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.

As you also know, this apprehension, however, 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. Universal literacy is therefore a must for the successful functioning of Indian democracy.

(d)Regionalism

Indian democracy has also been struggling with regionalism which is primarily an outcome of regional disparities and imbalances in development. We all know that 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 politicized 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.

(e)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. As a matter of fact, 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.

(f) 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. Have you ever experienced the role of caste in your life and society? You will agree that 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 casteist identity. Casteism has also been contributing towards continuation of socio-economic inequalities. It is true that India has been an unequal society from times immemorial. 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 our society which are posing serious challenge to Indian democracy. What is more alarming is the mixing of caste and politics resulting into 'politicization of caste' and 'casteization of politics' in contemporary Indian polity which has become a grave challenge to our democracy? Despite the era of liberalization and globalization caste consciousness has not been eroded in our society and castes are being increasingly used as vote bank politics.

(g) Gender Discrimination

Discrimination against girls and women exists in every walk of life. You must have had such experiences of prevailing gender inequality in our society and polity. But we know that 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 intensions 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. Females are discriminated in respect of both employment and their representation in public life. No doubt, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, 1993 providing 33 per cent 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. Women Reservation Bill (providing 33 per cent of reservation of women in Parliament) has yet to be passed despite a very low ratio of women in both the Houses of the Parliament. The Women Reservation Bill was meant to increase the proportion of women in Parliament to provide opportunities for equal political participation. While most parties agree on the need for such a Bill, none of them has given it a priority.

(h) Criminalization of Politics

In recent years, criminalization of politics in India has become a debatable issue.

There have been allegations that there are some elements in politics that do not have faith in democratic values and practices. They indulge in violence and take refuge in other unhealthy, undemocratic methods to win elections. Undoubtedly, this is not a healthy trend in politics and there is an urgent need to apply serious check on such tendencies. Criminalization 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 our country. We, as awakened citizens and as voters of the largest democracy in the world, can also contribute by discouraging such persons who have a criminal background, from contesting elections.

(i) Political Violence

Violence has been with us for long, but use of violence for political end is dangerous for the existence of any system. In India we have 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 mobilize voters or to prevent them from exercising their right to vote. Moreover, violence has been associated with demands for separate States, reorganization of States or adjustment of State boundaries. Violence has also been used quite frequently during industrial strikes, farmers’ movements, and students’ agitations.

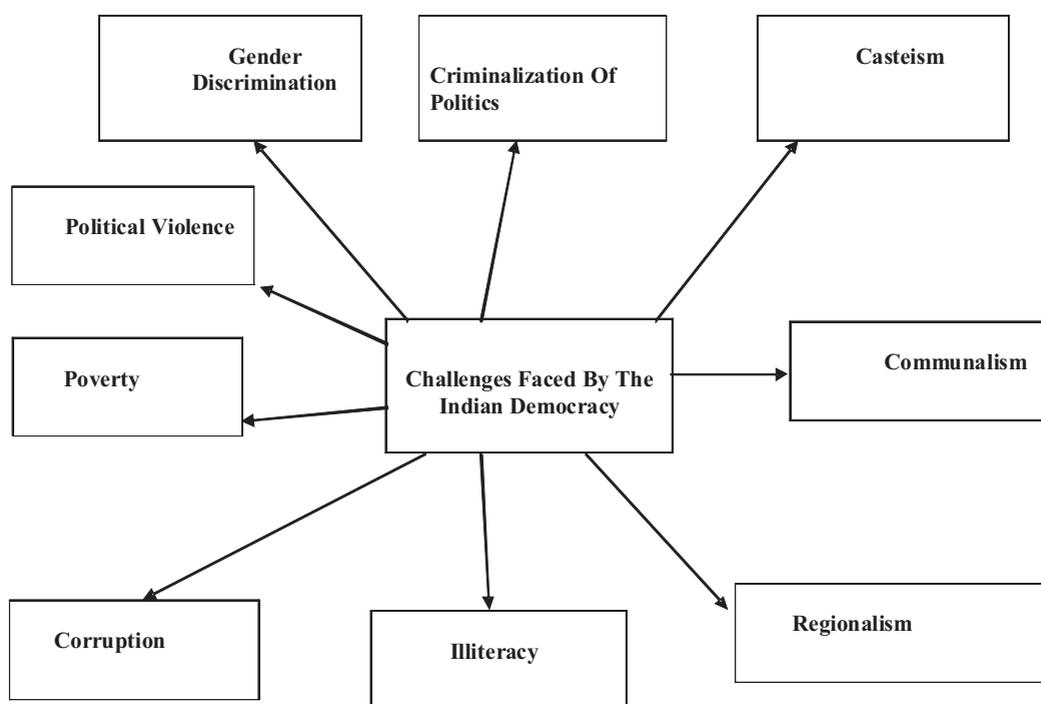


Figure 1. Shows challenges faced by Indian Democracy.

Some Measures for the Strengthening of Democracy:

- (a) Efforts should be made to reduce the social and economic inequalities among the citizens.
- (b) People should be educated. Only educated people can realise the importance of the right to vote and other political rights. They should be politically awakened to elect the right of representatives who are honest, selfless and efficient.
- (c) Democratic values should be cultivated in the families and the society at large. Every citizen should respect the rights and freedom of others.

(d) Use of caste and religion during the elections should be banned. Organisation of political parties on the basis of caste or religion should be checked. Candidates making use of caste or religion during the elections should be disqualified.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted different facts about the various challenges and issues which have faced by Indian democracy from last seven decades. It is thus clear that democracy in India faces certain serious challenges. These are causes of serious concern to all. In fact, the leadership of the freedom movement and especially the framers of the Indian Constitution themselves were very much aware of these issues. They made a number of constitutional provisions to address the same. Since independence governments have taken various measures to respond too many of these challenges. There have been significant improvements in some of these. However, lots still have to be done. For that, efforts have been going on. There is need for collaboration among governmental agencies, political parties, civil society and citizens in general. In the end, the challenges before democracy is a never ending debate, the more one writes or speaks the lesser it will be. So, what is most important is that we should change our attitudes and mindset. We should try to overcome our self-centered nature for the smooth work of democratic form of government in India.

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