

CHANGING FACE OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA – ANALYSIS

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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. The notion of democracy is built on the premise that all citizens of a State are equal and that the nation offers an opportunity to all members of the society to participate in the process of self-governance. Democracy, considered by most to be the best way to govern a nation, succeeds only when a full cross section of society takes part in the process in equal measure. This in turn should lead to the common person's participation in the political process of the nation as a normal pattern. In India—the world's largest democracy by population—this two-step process is still falling short with participation of the general public after the completion of the electoral process being negligible and restricted to the elite few. The poorer sections of society are deprived of a voice and do not take part in the governance process till the next democratic elections. In other words, the democratic success of the nation is not shared by all.

Key Words: Democracy, India, Analysis, Trends, Party System.

Introduction:

Since becoming independent from British rule, India has practised democracy, and over the past 70 years, has also adapted the concept to create a uniquely Indian model. The democratic process as practised in India has its advantages and also its share of challenges that make it cumbersome and less than optimal in a number of instances. Ever since the first elections held in 1952, there is no doubt that there has been multi-fold increase in the level of political awareness in the country as a whole. This is a positive move forward in a nation where a large part of the population are still uneducated and live a hand-to-mouth existence. Paradoxically, simultaneous to the increase in political awareness, there is also the increase in the misuse of the electoral system by political parties and politicians to achieve narrow and parochial objectives. Over a period of a few decades the political parties have willingly compromised on values, ethics and morality in order to gain power through the electoral process, laying aside the imperatives of broader national interest. The responsibilities towards the nation at large that should sit heavily on the elected members of parliament does not merit a mention in the priorities of most of the politicians.

Further, the politicians have also been responsible for the use of unaccounted money and the criminalization of politics; and they have promoted and entrenched casteism and communalism within the society, which has led to deep rooted religious and sectarian divide within the nation. In the Indian practice of democracy, value-based politics the mainstay for the well-being of any nation, has been squandered and sacrificed at the altar of power worship. The quest for power has subsumed all altruistic purposes and initiatives.

Objective of the study:

- To study and analyze the existing democratic setup in India.
- To study and analyze various challenges that are being faced by the Indian democratic republic.
- To suggest measures to meet the challenges effectively and help restore Indian democracy in its spirit.

Changing Trends of Indian Democracy

It is an inherent characteristic of politics that its nature will be undergoing a process of continuous change. Indian democracy has also developed its own incremental trends, primarily based on the influence of a pluralistic society with many minorities in terms of religion, caste, and language. The prevailing multi-party system emerged as an anti-dote to the monolithic Congress Party, which was formed out of the independence movement, to fulfil the need for a viable opposition. From the first elections in 1952, the process has become increasingly free and fair, although those attributes have not yet been established across the entire nation. However, the maturing of democratic traditions are visible across the board. To a certain extent the results of the 2014 national elections brought the electoral political evolution full circle. In this election, over 550 million

voters exercised their franchise across 28 States and seven Union Territories. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 282 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), achieving a single-party majority for the first time in three decades. This result was similar to the ones in elections held in the immediate post-independence era, when the Congress held electoral hegemony across the entire nation.

Although the peoples' trust in the Congress Party continued for about 15 years in the post-independence jubilation, by the late 1960s regional and caste-based parties had started to come to power in the states. However, Congress continued to win majority in the Central elections, staying in undisputed power and in control of the nation. By the early 1990s, yet another visible trend had manifested itself in the Indian electoral politics—the politics of coalitions. This was brought on by the regional parties making in-roads into national politics through the election of their representatives into the Central parliament. The result was that truly national parties could not get the majority to claim power and had to rely on these representatives to form government. The era of coalition governments had arrived.

Coalition governments have obvious disadvantages. First, the expansion of the influence of regional parties translated to the decrease in the share of votes for the national parties. This meant that, in extreme cases, the national party did not have any influence or input into state governance. A centralised direction for a concerted national developmental agenda therefore became almost impossible to craft and implement. Second, with a number of regional parties being represented at the Centre, the clear demarcation that had so far existed between national interest and parochial state concerns started to become less marked. National developmental initiatives started to get skewed or stopped altogether by the superimposition of regional or state interests. Third, the formation of the government started to become a political 'circus', which the people of the nation watched with alacrity and disdain. It can be stated that progress as a nation became a low priority in this scramble for power through the grabbing of ministerial berths in return for 'support' in the legislature.

The 2014 voting pattern is indicative of the voter impatience with coalition politics that has delayed, and at times stopped, the implementation of national developmental policies. There is a prevalent feeling of having been 'let-down' by the Central Government. Coalition politics, which came to the fore in the 1980s, almost immediately led to the fragmentation of Central power. Even discounting parties with only one or two elected representatives in the Lok Sabha, there were six 'major' parties in parliament. The 2014 elections brought this number down to three. This change can also be attributed to voter exasperation with minor parties at the Centre, seen as show stoppers in national governance.

Even so, it is not necessary that having come full circle, electoral politics will lapse into a relatively unchanging and stable state. The fundamental characteristic of politics is its inherent need to evolve on a continuous basis.

Analysing the move towards centralisation of power as a trend in Indian political development brings out two disparate but vaguely connected factors. First, it demonstrates the political maturation of the Indian voting public and its understanding of the need to have a strong Central government. Second, regional parties have lost credibility with the public when they are considered for representation at the Centre, even if they have performed well at the State level. Their biased priorities have been viewed as not being in consonance with the overall national interests.

Over a journey of seven decades, Indian democracy has altered in visible ways. For a number of years during the coalition phase of the democratic evolution, parliamentary elections were seen as the sum total of State elections. There was nothing national about the results. Further, the elections were contested on the basis of the Party identity, whether regional or national. The 2014 elections changed this with the introduction of another trend. These elections moved towards being more presidential and the dynamics changed with one individual—in this case Mr Narendra Modi—being projected as the prime ministerial candidate. Even though the incumbent Congress Party did not formally follow the same pattern, by default, the party's Vice President was considered to be the alternative Prime Minister during the canvassing period.

Challenges to Democracy in the Indian Context:

There are few unique challenges to the democratic process in India brought about by its multi-ethnicity, culture, languages, religions and societal make up. While some of the issues are gradually being ironed out, some others are becoming further ingrained in the body politic of the nation and assuming a life and dimension of their own.

1. The Multi-Party System:

India currently has about 730 political parties that are recognized by the Election Commission. The shift from one-party dominance to multi-party competition also leads from cohesion to fragmentation of the fabric of society. The divisiveness that accompanies the establishment of a multi-party system is accentuated since the smaller parties normally represent the vested interests of small and minority groups. The proliferation of political parties invariably leads to coalition governments, at the Centre and a number of States, which cannot be as efficient as a government run by a single party with adequate majority.

In India the rapid movement of the political process towards a multi-party system may have been the result of the inability, brought on by hubris, of the dominant Congress Party to accommodate dissent in the early years of independence. This autocratic tendency continues to haunt the current, now much reduced in stature, Congress Party. The failings of the original Congress Party of the post-independence period created a number of breakaway groups pursuing similar political ideologies.

2. Regional Parties:

The rise of the regional parties in Indian politics coincided with the decline in the influence of national parties, although whether the rise of one was because of the decline of the other cannot be clearly determined. Although the rise of regional parties initially started in the geographically peripheral states, now the phenomenon has spread across the whole nation. The interesting fact is that purely in terms of vote share, the regional parties have claimed between 48 to 50 percent, a figure that has remained fairly steady for the past two or three decades. The gradual centralization that is taking place post the 2014 elections does not seem to have diminished the regional party vote share, although the changes if any would only become visible around the next election cycle. What this does is to skew the ratio of vote share to individual seats, which is dissimilar in different states, and indicates the influence of regional parties on national politics.

The strength of the regional parties is normally derived from an area or a community harbouring a sense of being deprived and not getting a fair deal from the policies of the Central Government. This emotive state is exploited by regional leaders who convert it into vote banks. During the coalition period in Central governance, the regional parties played the role of 'king-makers' even if they held only a few seats in parliament. The fundamental disadvantage of such a situation is that opportunistic alliances to obtain political power could be created, leading to political expediency. On the other hand, the rise to prominence of regional parties in the national political equation has led to a trend of regionalisation of national issues, a direct reflection of the diversity of the Indian political environment. This reverse movement of national issues pervading into regional politics has led to a consolidation of the democratic process even though in a tangential manner. On the whole, the emergence of regional parties and the influence that they bring to bear on national politics has been detrimental to the overall progress of the nation.

3. Communalism in Politics

Communalizing the society was one of the primary methods used by the British to keep the Indian society divided. At independence, the Indian constitution proclaimed the lofty ideal of the country being a secular state that gave the 'right to religious freedom' to all its citizens. That the ideal did not work is obvious from the fact that the entire concept has come full circle with one section of the society now even demanding that the word 'secular' be expunged from the Constitution. In modern India, communal riots are lurking beneath the veneer of peaceful coexistence between different religions and communities. Such riots have become more common in recent times.

The communal divide started on the eve of independence, when the sub-continent was rocked with extreme communal violence in the wake of the partition that created the separate nations of India and Pakistan. The political parties of India are the main culprits in continuing to cater to communal identities in their efforts to create vote banks. In a subtle manner this has created a situation wherein loyalty to one's own religion and community has supplanted the loyalty to the nation in a broad way.

4. Money-power, Corruption and Scandals:

The Indian political scene suffers from a stranglehold of money-power, since unaccounted wealth is used to prop up politicians during the election periods. The election process itself is corrupted in many areas of the process, made so with ease by the use of money to 'buy' votes or even to 'capture' voting booths during the actual elections. The political process has been shown to be intimately connected to corruption across the board, with politicians being the biggest culprits. The other side of the equation is that the financial scams that have involved politicians have neither been

questioned not investigated fully. The common people view this as a travesty but are unable to do anything about it, adding to their frustration regarding the political, governance and democratic processes.

However, the voting public does take corruption in high places into account when the electoral cycle comes around and punish the wrong doers at the ballot box. A graphic example of this was the plight of the Rajeev Gandhi Government, which had for a brief period re-established one-party rule at the Centre. During its tenure, scandals regarding kick-backs in defense equipment procurement surfaced and the large support base that it had enjoyed gradually fell away. The government was voted out of power at the next elections. The average person is intolerant of open corruption in high places that does not seem have any accountability.

The criminalization of politics and the readily visible nexus between politicians and criminals is another aspect that diminishes the status and stature of the parliament. Over the years, many criminals have been elected to parliament and the political class has not initiated any constitutional amendments to remedy this lacuna. Criminals participating in the electoral process and winning seats in the parliament directly questions the legitimacy and veracity of the process. Correcting this anomaly is a major challenge to 'cleaning up' politics and one that should be taken up on priority. However, the criminal-politician nexus makes it difficult for an incumbent government to undertake such an initiative.

Conclusion:

Finally it can be concluded that it is very sad that our democracy after 70 years of independence has given us some challenges. Although political awareness is improving in India, the middle-class remains strangely apathetic to the electoral process, not considering voting as a priority civic duty. There is a visible trend towards cynicism regarding the political process, a belief that nothing will change. In a recent interview, the US Secretary for Defence and former US Marine General James Mattis stated that the biggest threat to a nation emanates from the people's cynicism towards the system that in turn creates spiritual and personal alienation of the people from the community and the government. Since the middle-class also form the most educated segment of society, this attitude can completely distort the election results and create far-reaching impact on the political process. This distortion affects all aspects of the developmental process of the nation further creating glaring areas of discrepancy in the overall development model.

In a mature democracy, elections are contested on issues of national importance and challenges that people face on a daily basis, underpinned by the requirements to ensure the economic stability and prosperity of the nation. In the Indian context, both these factors are only of peripheral interest and the elections are almost always contested on narrow and sectarian issues. This bias has led to India not yet having developed a broadly accepted national identity of its own that can be embraced by people across the entire country. In a cyclical manner, the same drawback of the lack of a recognisable national identity contributes to regional issues being considered more important than national challenges—a self-perpetuating cycle emerges. Extrapolating this situation to the tactical level of politics it can be seen that in the Indian context there are far too many divisive forces in play at the regional, State and local level on a day-to-day basis. They directly influence the electoral and political processes, impinging on the correct practice of democracy. Overcoming such forces is a difficult climb up a mountain of partisan, communal and sectarian opposition.

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