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Understanding and practicing Indian democracy

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Abstract
Democracy as a political philosophy and system has become the dominant universal aspiration irrespective of whether it is the best form or not. But, recall the famous dictum of Churchill from a speech on November 11, 1947 [1], 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' Since 1947, Democracy has evolved, taken several incarnations and has not been replaced by any better system yet. So, for now it remains the most accepted form of politics.

Keywords: Democracy, political philosophy, politics

Introduction
Having said that, one has to admit, democracy is also a confused, complicated and an extensive political process. We do need to examine democracy with a calm, and clarity of mind. I say this, as in any discussion on democracy, mainly amongst academics, and so-called independent intellectuals, there is good deal of frustration on how democracy is not working, no optimistic focus on how it is still intact, and how it survives and how it can be progressed. The tone of the intellectuals in the recently concluded international Seminar [2], in Hyderabad on 'Deepening Democracy' largely reflected this cynicism. To be sure, such despondency emanates from wrong perception, a default understanding and a faulty assessment. My attention in this essay is on dealing with the fault-lines in the understanding of our democracy.

Perceptions of Democracy
People tend to view a democracy in a country in comparison to other democracies mainly those of the UK and other Europeans countries, and USA. This is a wrong premise. John Keane, professor at the University of West minister in UK, and an authority on democracy, writes in his seminal work, 'The life and Death of Democracy' [3] that "the history of democracy must itself be democratized [4]." Keane is impatient with the Euro-American lineage of democracy, and brings out its global roots.

Our default perception of the exclusive lineage of democracy from Athens to West Minister to Capitol Hill makes us uncomfortable with our own democratic roots and traditions. There is no simple standard or a model in democracy. In fact, David Held talks about several models of democracy [5]. In the contemporary politics, one finds bewildering varieties of democracies. To name the popular ones, they are: representatives, Participatory, Liberal, Deliberative, Electoral, Popular, Consociational, peoples, Centralized, decentralized, Federal. Even religion and ethnicity prefix democracy in the political lexicon and practice, such as Islamic democracy, Christian democracy, and ethnic democracy and so on. David Taylor of SOAS, London, wondered in a seminar, if Indian democracy survives because of its multiple ethnicities [6].

So in such a plethora of democracies, how does one make a correct evaluation? First, we need to have correct perceptions, most democracies are indigenized, we need to see each democracy including our own in its individual profile and performance, albeit testing it against the basics of democracy, that are universally applicable and acceptable. Second, we need to accept and formulate various definitions of democracy, drawing from multiple traditions and practices. The Economic Intelligence Unit, of the Economist, London follows one to classify democracies in the world into – fair, fragile, failed and hybrid etc, [7] there could be other such formats.

The types of democracies instigate different perceptions from its practitioners and observers. Just a couple of perceptions will tell us how democracy is subject to different interpretations. For instance, one of the accepted organizing principles of democracy is the rule of majority, and this is what Eugene Victor Debs, an American Union leader, one of the founding

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member of International Labour Union said, "When great changes occur in history, when great principles are involved, as a rule, the majority is wrong" [8]. Look at another perception. Westerners have wondered how India's more than half a billion people can vote a stable government to power; can participate in regular elections, when most of them are uneducated [9]. Robert Bianco a television critique in US again has this to say, 'we once worried that democracy could not survive if uneducated populace knew too little. Now we worry if it can survive us knowing too much."10 So the perceptions of democracy vary even greater than the types of democracies.

Understanding Democracy
Whatever may the form of democracy, there are certain basic tenets which define it anywhere. A broad working definition could be that democracy is interplay between individuals; institutions and processes in any society. In the interplay, there could be room for conflicts, democracy moderates, regulates or mitigates those conflicts. In other words, democracy is a universal formula to validate or legitimate the institutions and processes in the political system of any society. Out of such definitions, certain key tenets are established as the bases of democracy; majority rule – In any legislature, the majority party is supposed to represent a greater number of people, so it has the right to rule. But, in the evolution of the concept, rights of minorities have to be honored and protected-freedom of expression, speech and the press – this is central to a democracy system. Every citizen has the freedom to express his/her views, unless that right, of course, tramples on someone else's. A free media is another important pillar of democracy. Similar is the freedom of religion and belief, equality before the law or rule of law is another tenet, of course, now, the equal treatment is extended to equal opportunity as well.

The others are: respect for constitution, an independent judiciary, an institutional system of checks and balances, so that no institution can override others and subvert the system; the separation of power between the legislature, judiciary and executive has to be maintained. All these values can be grouped into two broad principles, one popular control over decisions makers, and second, the equality of all in exercising that control. But we need certain mediating value to play these principles out; such as participation, accountability, transparency and so on, which these days constitute good governance.

Democracy Assessment
A periodic assessment of democracy is essential for two reasons. Democracy is a political -system –at- work, it is never finished, it is in constant evolution. An assessment will show which aspects of democracy can be consolidated, which new ones could be introduced.
Secondly, it will help introduce correctives into the democratic system and inform the citizens of what reforms are being brought in, and how they are working out in practice. There could be several methods used for assessing democratic functioning. One method developed by International Democracy and Electoral Assistance, (IDEA) Stockholm, consisted of the following tools; clarity of principles, comprehensiveness of a democratic framework, country flexibility of assessment, and country ownership of the assessment process etc. The first three tools are self-explanatory; the last one needs to be understood. The last tool is based on the" assumption that right people to assess a country's democracy are its own citizens, rather than outsiders sitting in judgment upon it" [11]. Another innovative tool for assessment was shared by Hamid Ansari, honorable vice-president of India in his presidential address on 2nd February 2011 at Durga Das Basu centenary celebrations [12]. He suggested that the assessment of democracy is to be done in two segments that relates to hardware and software of democratic tenets and process.

Hardware and Software
Hardware of democracy is institutions, mechanism, procedures in a parliamentary democracy. From 1950, since India became a republic, India has assiduously developed its institutions and procedures. In fact, its constitutional provisions have been progressive than those of many of the so-called advanced democracies. The institutions have developed vertically as well as horizontally- vertically down to villages, as a part of decentralisation process, creating "gram sabha" an executive arm of the local governments. Horizontally- we have created new states, set up Committee on Centre-state relations, Federalism by sharing powers between the Centre and the states. Many observers agree that Indian democracy has the right form or structure. It is the substance, which Ansari calls software that needs to be developed and consolidated. On the software, the assessment could be done by measuring representativeness, responsibility and responsiveness of the hardware. This corresponds to the evolution of democracies, as John Keane traced, from Assembly democracy in Athens, to representative democracies in modern Europe, and now the monitory democracy [13]. This again may correspond to what some would call-from representative, to participatory to inclusive [14].
Ansari, perhaps, from his own experience as the chairman of Rajya Sabha talks of responsibility of institutions and of those who run it.
He says," the legislature has become the site of adversarial combat rather than deliberative clarity. Consequently, disruptive adjournments have become the main tool of parliamentary opposition, rather than reasoned argument." [15] Truly, there are quite a few distortions and deficits in the use of the hardware. With the fast rising information tools and the networks like face book, wikileaks, internet etc. such distortions get exposed too soon. Thus, the civil society has become vibrant and vocal, and even, businesses are also expressing their opinion openly on governance. Hence the institutions or hardwares like Legislatures, Executive, and Courts have to be extra-vigilant.
What is happening in the Middle East is one such example of civil society coming out on to the streets to demand democracy. Soli Sorabji in his column in Indian Express said "what is happending in the streets of Cairo could happen in India as well demanding better governance and responsible behaviour on the part of leaders". I had written in Janata, Bombay, many times about the needless controversy on JPC which stalled the Parliament for the whole of the last session in 2011. Our Parliamentarians need to be reminded of the strongest admonition by Oliver Cromwell who dismissed the rump Parliament, and said, "have you not defiled this sacred place, and turned the Lord's temple into a den of thieves, by your immoral principles and wicked practices? You who are grown

intolerably odious to the whole nation; you were deputed here by the people to get grievances redressed, are yourselves gone! So, Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!" Such a scenario of people taking the Cromwellian call and booting the Parliamentarians out is not totally improbable. Therefore, each country needs to develop their own software commensurate with their culture and political system. These softwares should contribute to the growth of a new political culture that conduce democracy- such respect for law and the constitution, respect for others, inclination to debate and discuss not disrupt.

The way Ahead

Democracy is here to stay. There is no better alternative in horizon. We need to appreciate our gains and make up for the deficits. Improving democratic functioning is a continuous process anywhere in the world. In order to build democracy we need to recognize and factor both the opposing instincts in human beings- the good and the bad. Karl Paul Reinhold Neibuhr, writing in 'The children of Light and the Children of Darkness', said, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary". So it is us who make and unmake democracy.

To reiterate, Indian democracy is perceived to be the biggest democracy in the world, where as the British is the oldest and the American the greatest [16]. Although, Indian democracy began with the universal suffrage, women remained underrepresented in politics. This is gender inequality which in Indian society is a major problem. While women's relatively weaker status hinders their political representation, their engagement in democratic political process alleviates their weaknesses.

The attempt at securing the quota for women should correct this problem. Arguably, the Quota politics may not be the best strategy for promoting gender equality. There are complaints that quota compromises efficiency and the talent gets squeezed out in the process. There are evidences to support this contention, undeserving candidates getting precedence by virtue of the quota over their peers more efficient and qualified than them. This is the case in some highly technical sectors, if not all. There are also equally tangible evidences to the contrary, when candidates have been given a level playing field, they have excelled. This year, the civil service topper came from the quota category. A doctor from reserved quota successfully operated on a senior politician. Therefore, casting the controversy away, let us accept that in an inequitous society, enabling the people from weaker sectors to compete with others on a level playing field is the demand of social justice. And providing for quotas is one of the actions the state could take, which may be called positive discrimination [17].

Second, conflicts between castes, ethnic and religious groups are a recurring phenomenon in Indian politics. Social diversities tend to deflect democratic process when they get party politicized or are used as subjects of party political mobilization. In fact, people's vulnerability to mobilization on the basis of inherent identities does not help the democratic process. In recent years, several local and regional parties are using this strategy more and more threatening revivalism in Indian society. Third problem in Indian democracy is the weakness of the formal institutions; Indian democracy is more a process in continuous evolution,

than a given structure. The process needs to be formalized as it evolves, so that people have reference points to act and negotiate in politics. Fourth, Indian Democracy tends to be an end itself. The focus on leaders and citizens is on maintaining the democratic politics, not using it to deliver social and national objectives. Fifth, Democracy has been state and authority-driven although in theory citizens are the custodians. This is not so simple in Indian case or for that matter, in many developing countries. The Indian society is driven by leaders and inspired by charisma etc. So the role and nature of leadership in Indian politics is critical while the process is inclusive to allow every citizen to participate. Sixth, democratic practice has to be global in outlook. Occurences in any country is influenced by developments elsewhere in the world. There is no escaping the external influence in explosion of information networks and breath-taking expansion of the media. So, any isolationist or ostrich-like approach is not going to work. Seventh, people have to begin to set the agenda based on their needs. Politicians attempt to divert the attention by emotionalizing the electorate where rational thinking is gets suppressed and the real issues relegated to the back burner.

So our constant attempts should be to make democracy, in practical sense, a right of every citizen, make democracy deliver, and make decision-making global in outlook. If democracy has to deliver in the present context, the decisions of the politicians have to be global in their vision and implications. Without doubt, the decisions will be influenced by global developments in an integrating world.

We must address the problems of effectiveness of Indian democracy in dealing with poverty and marginalization of vast number of people. Although the essence of democracy is freedom and that was our guiding principle in our fight against British colonialism, democracy is untenable without equality and inclusion of the weak and marginalized. Mahatma Gandhi had said on many occasions that freedom would have no meaning unless it delivered the three fundamentals of development-bread, clothes and shelter. We must establish the interface between democracy and development. In development process, there are issues of inequities, marginalization and deprivations – all these can be addressed by making democracy inclusive and participatory.

Leadership will have to make democracy effective; institutions will be made stronger by enhancing their functioning, and civil society should be made more effective and vibrant by engaging with the government and businesses. It is the individuals (more so leaderts), institutions and processes that will make democracy a more effective political framework.

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16. This is a popular journalistic assertion based on prima-facie facts, India is the most populous country among those practicing democracy, America is the superpower with a huge freedom of expression, and Britain signed the magna carta, libertatum 'a charter of rights', supposed to be the basis of democracy way back in 1215.
17. Americans prefer to use 'affirmative action' in lieu of positive discrimination. Many believe that discrimination is unfair and illegal even if it is meant to be positive. We should instead, use positive action which is intednded to alleviate the symptoms of normal discrimination and/or disadvantage. However, the debate over semantics will continue. Each country can use methods appropriate to their contexts.