SUSTAINANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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Abstract

A question that is often asked is whether India has the 'right' qualities for a democratic regime to function effectively. Is Indian democracy sustainable? Does the country have enough middle class, literate, female, and low-caste people in politics, a high enough average income, and so on, to give liberal values buoyancy? Can democracy bring justice, economic growth, and political stability at the same time? In discussing these questions, the issue automatically arises: Is Indian democracy itself creating the preconditions for its own long-term survival? Though India has Its struggles of Poverty, Unemployment, and Population, the progress is commendable. This proves that the democratic form of Government is successful in India.

Keywords

India, Democracy, Sustenance, Mobilization, Poverty.

A question that is often asked is whether India has the 'right' qualities for a democratic regime to function effectively. Is Indian democracy sustainable? Does the country have enough middle class, literate, female, and low-caste people in politics, a high enough average income, and so on, to give liberal values buoyancy? Sometimes researchers and debaters turn the question around and wonder whether India's democracy creates the 'right' conditions in the country for long-term development. When can India create some kind of basic welfare for all its citizens? Can democracy bring justice, economic growth, *and* political stability at the same time? In discussing these questions, the issue automatically arises: Is Indian democracy itself creating the preconditions for its own long-term survival? Despite innumerable administrative failings, low literacy, and poverty, the country has succeeded unusually well in mobilizing its voters. There is in India today a strong popular adherence to the view that the citizens have the right to choose their own leaders. From this point of view, democracy has succeeded extremely well, if India is compared to other countries that were colonized and have long been burdened by poverty.

On the other hand, a high electoral turnout, implying a high degree of political mobilization, in a country still struggling with widespread poverty and a weak or corrupt bureaucracy, is far from unproblematic. Therefore, the aim here is to note some of the specific challenges facing the country, given that we, from a normative standpoint, favor democracy as a form of government.

If one considers that many of those who have become more politically active during the last two decades are motivated by issues relating to ethnicity and religious belonging, it becomes even more urgent to re-examine the problems. There is a risk of erosion and disappearance of political tolerance is strongly polarized societies. Issues relating to tolerance have been intensely debated in 2015, but here we will have a slightly more narrow approach to this topic. By political tolerance is meant here the will and inclination to put up with groups and opinions that we ourselves do not like. If we agree that this aspect is essential to a functioning democracy then we can see the danger manifested in the political climate of India today.

The question to be asked is under what circumstances the mobilization of Indian electorates will have a negative effect on democracy. But as mobilization alone can hardly be said to constitute a problem, we have to see the phenomenon in relation to other factors.

The relationship between democracy and desirable societal development is one of the most intensely discussed issues in the social sciences. When India crops up in this discussion, it is often because examples are found here that turn common

perceptions upside down. For example, the school of modernization may be mentioned, which is based largely on the idea that economic growth is a necessary prerequisite for democracy. It is true that from Independence onwards until the 1980s, the Indian economy did not do well. Economists spoke in deprecating terms of what they called the 'Hindu rate of growth. As long as economic growth was only two or three percent, the broad-based middle class that social scientists asserted was a necessary prerequisite for a democracy was unable to emerge. A weak economy and low literacy levels and the extremely uneven distribution of the few resources that existed, handicapped Indian democracy.

On the plus side, it is most frequently mentioned that it is democracy that has given the country stability and ethnic peace. The reform of the 1950s, involving the reorganization of the states of India to coincide to a considerable extent with linguistic divisions, was particularly conducive to the relatively good outcome. When a country contains so many ethnic groups, languages, religions, social groupings, etc., it is, in theory, impossible for one group to entirely dominate another. But even if the observation deserves consideration, one wonders whether it really can be so simple. Is it a misreading to assume that contradictions in India will solve themselves since no one group, in the long term, can dominate the country alone? We will return to this idea at the end of this chapter and compare it with other conclusions about the patterns of mobilization in India.

It is necessary to raise the question of why during certain periods there has been widespread violence in India where factions have formed on ethnic lines. Atul Kohli in *Democracy and Discontent*, for example, has convincingly shown how the demand for government services in India tends to outstrip the supply. When the gap between supply and demand becomes too wide, there is no longer any room for political tolerance, and the result is often politically motivated violence, insurrection, and sometimes pure ethnic persecution. Soon after Kohli published his book, the occurrence of serious conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the country increased. To some extent, the conflict was fuelled largely by the Hindutva movement. But it also arose from the fact that the state apparatus was weak, politicized, and corrupt, entirely in accordance with Kohli's analysis.

Three factors that can explain this effect on democracy need to be highlighted in this context. The first is that the supply of government services is not always something measurable in such coarse terms as levels of expenditure. If we want to understand the role of the government and of different institutions in how conflicts arise or can be avoided, we have to take note of *the way in which* services are provided. Are government services and provisions fair, clientelistic, efficient,

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complicated, etc.? A weak state apparatus increases the risk of conflict. The important role that the *character* of the government plays in development was stressed by Gunnar Myrdal in *Asian Drama* and subsequently, by a number of experts in development and administration. Here, dysfunctional apparatuses of the state in the developing world are designated 'soft' when weighed down by corruption and clientelism. Going further back in time, the idea that institutions play a role in how a society is shaped, in general, and in determining the degree of political tolerance between the citizens, in particular, was first clearly expressed by the writers of the American Constitution – especially James Madison, who played a key role in formulating the American Declaration of Rights and who made sure that the US Constitution incorporated the principles of 'checks and balances.

The second factor is the role of the political leadership, who plays an important part in determining whether people are mobilized. The third factor is the people themselves. They may be educated, prosperous, well-traveled, and well-informed about political processes. The three factors stated above are important to understand why political mobilization of the population sometimes favors democracy and why it can also turn against democracy. This article is not meant to whip up fear of what in the past – even during the democracy debate of Mill's time in the mid-nineteenth century – was called mob rule. It aims to discuss the real problems that arise when political actors mobilize the masses with a message of intolerance, and democratic institutions cannot protect the rights of the individual.

To sum up, in the very brief exposition of political mobilization in India that follows we shall bear in mind the following actors, which together seem to be having a decisive effect on the outcome for democracy when the population is mobilized.

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