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## Democracy and Social Movements: An Overview

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### Abstract

It is a great time to examine relationship between democracy and social movements. Our purpose is to assess the role and significance of social movements in democratic political system. Do the movements strengthen and invigorate democracy? In other words do the movements make democracy more effective to attain its objectives? Or do social movements hamper functioning of democracy?

**Keywords:** Democracy, Ingredients of Democracy, Formal Democracy, Social Transformation

### 1. Introduction:

It is a great time to examine relationship between democracy and social movements. Our purpose is to assess the role and significance of social movements in democratic political system. Do the movements strengthen and invigorate democracy? In other words do the movements make democracy more effective to attain its objectives? Or do social movements hamper functioning of democracy?

### Meaning of Democracy

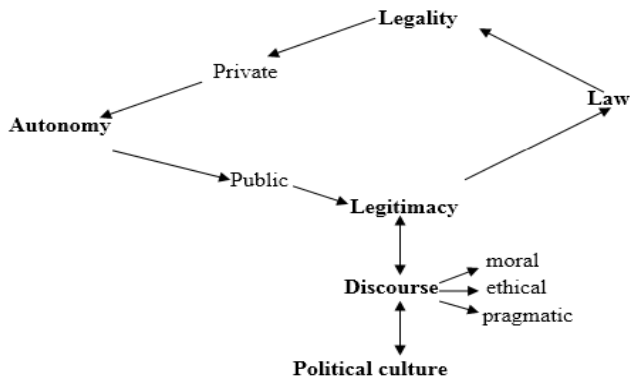
Though democracy is much talked and has become universal aspiration of people, different scholars and political leaders interpret it differently. Some scholars use adjective 'true' before the word democracy. In their opinion the present democracy is not true. If it is not true, why should it be called 'democracy'? The word democracy is often used loosely. Political leaders of different ideologies and missions use the word democracy to suit their actions which include even imprisonment of rivals, genocide of 'other' ethnic community and violation of human rights. Recently the United State of America waged war on Iraq to establish 'democracy' there. Many dictators claim that they were working for democracy — for the welfare of the people. As a result the term creates more fire than heat or adds to confusion in our understanding. Let us see some of the widely use definition:

- "Democracy comes from the Greek words demos meaning 'people' and kiatos meaning authority' or 'power'."
- Democracy is government of the people, for the people and by the people.
- 'The word 'democracy' itself means 'rule by the people'. A democracy is a system where people can change their rulers in a peaceful manner and the government4s given the right to rule because the people say it may.
- ". . . government which is conducted with the freely given consent of the people."
- ". . . a system of government in which supreme authority lies with the people."
- "Rule by the people in a country directly or by representation."
- "The form of government in which political control is exercised by all the people, either directly or through their elected representatives."

In the above definitions 'people' are central in the democratic system. But people are not homogeneous. In a stratified society there are some people who are economically, socially and politically very powerful. And on the other hand, many people are powerless. They depend on the powerful for their economic survival. People of different social and economic strata have different interests. They have different life chances. Their perception of the system differs. In such a stratified and plural society the term 'people' become complex and elusive.

Figure 1 presents the inter-dependence of these crucial aspects of Habermas' theory of democracy

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**Fig 1:** Democracy according to Habermas.

### Ingredients of Democracy

Democracy has three essential and overlapping ingredients. They are: (1) political institutions; (2) political processes, and (3) substantial functioning. In democratic system political institutions such as electoral system and legislature provide scope and necessary mechanism to citizens to participate directly or indirectly in decision making processes. They elect their representatives to from the government which takes decisions on behalf of the people for society as a whole. These representatives execute their decisions through various agencies like bureaucracy, police and military. They enjoy authority over societal resources and their management. When the citizens are not satisfied with their representatives in their functioning, decisions and use of power, people change them and elect other representatives. In that sense people have final authority who should manage the state and society. This is a formal institutional aspect of democracy.

The elected representatives cannot rule society according to their whims. Rule of law is an essential component of the democratic system. That means that the rulers/representatives are not above law. The representatives exercise their power and take decisions within the Constitutional framework — written or by convention that spells out their power and responsibility. In democracy political power of any one institution is not absolute. Different institutions maintain check on each other. It is a system of checks and balances. The rulers are the representatives of the people and are accountable to people for decisions and management of social affairs. Political institutions are mechanism to attain the substantive objectives of the system —serving common good. The functioning of these institutions therefore has to be transparent so that people can judge and differentiate between right and wrong.

Democracy without politics is body without soul. Politics means conflict and struggle of interests and ideologies. Politics is concerned with control over resources, their use and distribution. It involves debates and decisions on identifying priorities in policy making regarding use of resources and generation of surplus. It is a system in which different points of views and ideological formations on societal matters contest with each other. They compete for power and influence political decisions. It involves the process of monitoring political institutions and policy makers as well as the executive.

Mere elections and government of elected representative do not make the political system democratic. Democracy in substance does not mean number game: rule of, for and by majority. It cannot be called democratic system if the government by majority vote prevents dissent and opposition parties or majority wipes out minority communities or prevents them to follow their religion. In democratic system, management or governance is hinged on certain basic moral, social and political principles — not only to protect but also to enlarge secular and humane interests.

Objectives of the political institutions are to cater to the needs and aspirations of the people. It should function and aim at ‘development’ of all; and not one or small section of society. In that sense democratic system in ‘developing’ societies in the Third world, is a process of social transformation so that all citizens can participate in the system with equal capacity. Social and economic equality is therefore the core of effective and viable democracy. Besides other principles and objectives, equality before laws is necessary but not sufficient condition for free and equal participation of all people in decision-making process, particularly those who are at lower and most exploited strata. Inequality in substance hampers effective functioning of the political system. Such a situation has potentiality to reduce democratic institutions as a game of musical chair limited to those who have money and muscle strength. Greater inequality results into lesser possibilities for effective and meaningful participation of the deprived section(s) in political processes. Their vulnerability in social, cultural and economic spheres provides them less space to be equal with those who are in upper echelon in production and reproduction system. Capacity of the powerful to manipulate choices of the vulnerable is related to the extent of gap between the two. Wider inequality tends to provide less opportunity to the deprived for asserting their needs and rights. For the health of the democratic system an ideal of ‘equal capabilities’ needs to be translated into reality. Dr. Ambedkar rightly emphasized before the Constituent Assembly, “We must make our democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one form the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. . . “.

### Limitations of Formal Democracy

Institutions are mechanism to attain certain objectives. Their structures in terms of composition of membership, organizational system locating power and responsibilities and duties, control over resources, procedures for functioning to take decisions and carrying out responsibilities — are formed in context of time and objectives. The institutions that may carry out functions ‘successfully’ at particular point of time may not succeed at different points of time. This might be because the objectives for which the institutions were created, no longer

remain important in the new situations. Or the forces outside the institutions have changed and the institutional mechanism is not able to handle them. For instance, the system of two houses in England played very important role till the mid 20th century not only to keep check on each other but also to maintain certain antiquity in society and get wisdom from aristocratic and professional classes. But over a period of time the upper house becomes redundant and ornamental. Or take another example, two party system which succeeded in accommodating existing interests and providing stability in the early phase of democratic system now fails to represent all the plural and divergent interests that have emerged with further democratization of society. No institutional structure and procedures are foolproof to meet all situations. One, sometimes they are not able to meet the changing situation and may hinder in new circumstances rather than help in attaining the objectives for which they have been created. Two, any institution cannot be perfect to meet all eventualities. Three, institutions may sometimes bog down to procedures and lose sight of the main objectives. Or they remain confining to procedures, which may not be conducive to the objectives. For example, election system is created to meet people's views, expectations and preferences to elect their representatives; but it may not provide opportunity to people to elect such representative who can in true sense represent their hopes. Institutions are important but not always enough in attaining substantial aspect of politics. They provide limited choice to the people. Social movements build pressure on policy makers for reforming institutions, create new institutions, keep check on abuse of power and demonstrate needs and expectations of people. Social movements provide avenue for social transformation, which is the objective of democracy. Moreover, as David Bailey argues that public protests have a certain 'functional utility' even in a parliamentary form of government. They keep the rulers on their toe. They also provide safety valve where people express their grievances. That gives warning to the government against rising dissatisfaction and forces; and leads to take remedial measures. Hence, social movements are complementary to democracy.

### **Democracy and Social Transformation in India**

The functioning of democratic system during the last five decades has brought certain positive transformation in our traditionally hierarchical society. Brahminial framework of social order has been de-legitimized. Rule of law, equal citizenship, social and economic equality have been codified in legal system and are accepted moral principles to be maintained and attained. In the process, political positions are no longer the sole prerogative of upper castes — Brahmins, Rajputs and Baniyas. In several regions their proportion in seat of power has sharply declined. Middle and lower castes have challenged their power. A group though tiny, from the lowest social strata, dalits and tribals has also emerged as political elite and get some share in decision-making of the state. They do play important, sometimes decisive role in formation of government. Similarly women though in a microscopic minority have

also begun to share political power and assert their rights. Thus circle of political elite has enlarged.

One of the most striking positive contributions of the system are that people from lower strata participate in electoral processes and exercise their franchise. They express their needs, expectations, grievances and also anger against those who hold offices and desire for the change. Through their votes they often throw out from power one set of political leaders and parties, and bring others with a hope that the alternative would be better. No one can take electorate for granted as far as holding of power is concerned. In that sense the elected representatives are 'accountable'. They are compelled to take consent of the people at least once in five years. The system has provided a space for dissent and that space is a hope for further transformation. In order to get votes once in five years political leaders do resort to gimmicks and so called 'populist' politics which may be lollipop. A few — handful numbers of people do get some crumbs. This facilitates in perpetuating hope that someday all will get share in benefits and improve their lots.

Democratic system has also created various institutions that to some extent maintain checks on each other. Legal mechanism provides freedom to express opposite views and expose misdeeds of rulers. Pressures on the state are built for accountability of their actions. These provisions and scope for assertion and change by themselves are important, though not sufficient. Legal provisions and institutional mechanism can be subjected to distortion and can be used to subvert democratic space. In fact, institutional ethos and mechanism are increasingly getting eroded for personal power and interests. Democracy has become a game of few irrespective of caste, gender and religion who have or could manipulate muscle and money power to perpetuate their personal interests. For their power they ignore and break all norms of democracy. Criminalization has increased in politics unabated. The present Westminster model of democracy has been manipulated to perpetuate dominance of the propertied classes. It seems whatever changes in society that the present system could bring have reached to plateau and now it moves towards diminishing return.

After fifty years of democratic system only 40 per cent of the population enjoys basic amenities such as potable water, education and health. One fifth of the households still live in a state of 'abject', or a 'moderate' state of deprivation, such as too little drinking water, pucca (brick) house and literacy, not to speak of access to health services. The quality of these services and satisfaction with them are far from being at a desirable level.

In the midst of certain improvements in certain social service sectors there are also some disturbing reversals. Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) has almost stagnated in the last decade. The nutrition level and calorie intake of the poor have decline. Almost 12 million people suffer from Vitamin A deficiency. Nearly fifty per cent of the children in age group of between 0 to 3 years suffer from malnutrition. Wages of the farm and non-farm sector workers in different parts of the country have not increased in correspondence with rising prices. Hence the purchasing capacity of such workers has remained as low as in the 1980s. Despite a surplus of 65 million tons food grains, some 320 million

people go to bed hungry every night. In 2004, deaths from starvation have been reported in several states like Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Inequality across the social occupational groups has not declined; in fact, it has increased during the last decade. Along with this, discrimination based on gender and social status has also increased. There is a striking decline in female-male ratio among children, from 927 girls per 1000 boys (in the 0-6 age group) in 2001 to 914 girls per 1000 boys in 2011. Domestic violence to women shows no sign of decline. The practice of dowry has increased in various social groups where it never existed in the past. Similarly, atrocities against the dalits, tribal and minorities have increased.

Economic growth in industrial sector has been high and has accelerated in the last decades under neo-liberal economy. But high growth rate has not benefited the poor even to meet their basic human needs. It is by and large a jobless growth with increasing dismantling of the organized sector. Markets have not evolved safety networks for the workforce and large section of the population is without social and economic security. The Report on 'Human development in South Asia', points out that overall focus of the Multilateral organizations working in the region is focused more on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and balancing budgets, than on the reduction of poverty. The governments have not adopted job creation as an explicit policy commitment.

During the last five decades of the democratic system many poor have lost their traditional resources of livelihood which used to provide them some relief to cope up with miser. Common resources like common-land, forest and water have been increasingly grabbed by the dominant classes and musclemen. In the name of so-called development the State has also take away from many tribal and non-tribal farmers their land and habitat. The victims have been forced to endorse the decisions of the government. Alternative avenues though sometimes promised have remained on paper or provided to a few. Most of the other victims of the development have been left high and dry. Most of the promises that the Indian Constitution on which Republic is founded have so far remained unfulfilled. Article 21 promises the right to live with dignity. Article 41 directs the State to make effective provisions for securing the Right to work, education and public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. Article 45 also directs the State to provide within a period of 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution. free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14. People vote in every election with the expectation that their representatives would sincerely fulfill these promises.

Ironically, democracy is used to perpetuate power of few to decide the destiny of all. The system has been reduced to electoral engineering that works as a safety valve for vast majority of people to ventilate their grievances and reinforce their faith that something better would be done to them by the new representatives — different political parties. Majority of the people feels helpless as they have no other way but to put faith in the system as they put faith in God — that almighty would improve their lots. The, elected

representatives follow the dicta of the multinational and domestic dominant classes for making economic policy which grabs their traditional sources of livelihood and security

on the one hand and generates more and more unemployment and social insecurity. People have no democratic choice in influencing economic policy of the state. As K.C. Sun in his article in Economic and Political Weekly, has shown with empirical data of 2004 elections that vast majority of the people do not want privatization of health, education, water, forest etc. They demand equitable distribution of assets, secured jobs and share in benefits generated by growth. The present day development model, as C. Douglas Lummis in his book Radical Democracy observes is "antidemocratic in several ways. It is antidemocratic in that it requires kinds, conditions, and amounts of labor that people would never choose- and, historically, never have chose-in a state of freedom. Only by giving a society one or another kind of undemocratic structure can people be made to spend the greater part of their lives labouring 'efficiently' in fields, factories, or offices and handing over the surplus value to capitalists, managers, communist party leaders, or technocrats". Nearly two decades back Rajni Kothari rightly observed: "Today the state is seen to have betrayed masses, as having become a prisoner of the dominant classes and their transnational patrons and as having increasingly turned anti-people. Nor has it provided the sinews of a radical bourgeois transformation from the dynamics of which a revolutionary alternative would emerge. The state in the Third World, despite some valiant efforts by dedicated leaders in a few countries, has degenerated into technocratic machine serving a narrow power group that is kept in power by holders of security men at the top and a regime of repression and terror at the bottom, kept going by millions of hardworking people who must go on producing goods and services for the 'system' for if they did not everything would collapse".

### **Rising Expectations, Frustration and Democratic System**

Number and coverage of social movements in different forms have increased in all societies including in democratic system. This is primarily because the rising aspirations of the people are not adequately met by existing political institutions which are rigid or incompetent. Many scholars such as Huntington, Rajni Kothari and several others observes that as the gap between expectations of people and performance of the system widens mass upsurge in the forms of movements increase. Alain Touraine and Jurgen Habermas argue that democratic system in post-modern society is not able to guarantee individual freedom, equality and fraternity. In the view of these theorists, democracy is degenerating into an authoritarian, technocratic state. The state in turn has become subjugated to market forces. The state's technocracy and the forces of the market thus dominate people. There are no longer workers, but only consumers. The old class of workers has ceased to be a class in production process. Instead people's main social role has become that of consumers. In this role, people are manipulated entirely by the market. For Habermas, social movements are seen as defensive reactions to defend the

public and the private sphere of individuals against the inroads of the state system and market economy.

While highlighting limitations of parliamentary democracy in India A.R. Desai argued in 1960s: "The parliamentary form of government, as a political institutional device, has proved to be inadequate to continue or expand concrete democratic rights of the people. This form, either operates as a shell within which the authority of capital perpetuates itself, obstructing or reducing the opportunities for people to consciously participate in the process of society, or is increasingly transforming itself into a dictatorship, where capital sheds some of its democratic pretensions and rules by open, ruthless dictatorial means. Public protests will continue till people have ended the rule of capital in those countries where it still persists. They will also continue against those bureaucratic totalitarian political regimes where the rule of capital has ended, but where due to certain peculiar historical circumstances Stalinist bureaucratic. Totalitarian political regimes have emerged. The movements and protests of people will continue till adequate political institutional forms for the realization and exercise of concrete democratic rights are found."

Rajni Kothari also believes that 'democracy' in India has become a playground growing corruption, criminalization, repression and intimidation of large masses of the people. "There is discontent and despair in the air—still highly diffused, fragmented and unorganized. But there is a growing awareness of rights, felt politically and expressed politically, and by and large still aimed at the State. Whenever a mechanism of mobilization has become available, this consciousness has found expression often against very heavy odds, against a constellation of interests that are too powerful and complacent to shed (even share) the privileges. At bottom it is consciousness against a paradigm of Society that rests on deliberate indifference to the plight of the impoverished and destitute who are being driven to the threshold of starvation—by the logic of the paradigm itself.' In such a scenario mass mobilization at the grassroots level is both necessary and desirable. Electoral system, political parties and established trade unions do not provide space to the masses to bring social transformation. "In their place there is emerging a new arena of counteraction, of countervailing tendencies, of counter-cultural movements and more generally of a counter-challenge to existing paradigms of thought and action'

### **Movements and Democratisation**

As we have seen above that many scholars believe that social movements play positive role in democracy in different ways. One, social movements are the outcome of people's political consciousness. It is an expression of people's consciousness for asserting their demands two; social movements encourage participation of people on political issues. While articulating agenda of the struggle the leaders discuss/explain various aspects of the issues with the participants. Such processes of discourse also contribute in developing and sharpening consciousness of the people. Political participation and consciousness of the people are backbones of democracy. Third, success and effectiveness of social movements depend on extent of mobilization.

Greater mobilization tends to expand political horizon and lead to further democratization of society. Fourth, Social movements express aspirations, needs and demands of the people who can only assert through collective action and become effective. They keep the policy makers on toe and accountable of their decisions. Fifth, number of social movements influence policy makers and compel them to enact laws to meet their demands — advancing or protect their interests. The followings are illustrations.

### **Independence Period.**

During the 1920s and 1930s there were number of peasants movements in different parts of the country. Some of them were spontaneous of local peasants and some were organized by Kisan Sabha, Gandhians and left parties. These movements were against the landlords demanding land to the tenants/share croppers' tillers. In several places the demand was for abolition of forced labour. Such movements influenced the Congress party, which led the freedom movement. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru observed, "the growth of the National movement under the leadership of the Congress, resulted in the peasant masses joining the Congress and looking to it for relief from their many burdens. This increased the power of the Congress greatly and at the same time it gave it a mass outlook. While the leadership remained middle class, this was tempered by pressure from below, and agrarian and social problems occupied the Congress more and more... The struggle for independence began to mean something much more than political freedom, and social content was given to it". The Congress Manifesto of 1946 declared that "The reform of the land system which was urgently needed in India involves the removal of intermediaries between the peasant and the state". Soon after Independence several state/provincial governments initiated action to enact laws for the abolition of the intermediary interests in land. Zaminadari system, forced labour etc. were made illegal.

However, these laws were not implemented with speed and efficiently in most of the states. By the late 1950s series of poor peasant movements took place in different parts of the country against landlords and rich peasants. Most effective and widespread movement was Naxabari, which began in West Bengal and spread in many parts of the country. In the 1960s socialist and Left parties organized land grab movements. There were also number of grassroots movements of agricultural laborers demanding higher wages and distribution of surplus land. In order to pacify these classes and woo them in elections, Indira Gandhi gave a slogan of "Garibi Hatao"; and formulated number of programmes for eradication of poverty. However, movements of the poor peasants and laborers have not been widespread and strong since 1970s.

In the 1920s Dr. Ambedkar organized number of movements of dalits against untouchability which included temple entry, use of water from public tank, use of public roads etc. In 1930s he launched a movement for separate electorate. Gandhi and Hindus opposed it. Gandhi then went on fast against the demands of dalits. That led to famous Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar. As a result Gandhi had accepted reserved seats and Ambedkar had

accepted a joint electorate. This struggle influenced the later events. M.S. Gore notes. "One wonders whether without the Poona fast and the subsequent emphasis that Gandhi gave to untouchability work, there would have been a sufficient change of opinion by 1947 for the Constituent Assembly to have declared untouchability to stand abolished, to have provided for reserved seats for 'scheduled castes' in the legislatures for a period of ten years to begin with and to have agreed to the provision of special protective measure for them. It is equally possible that without Ambedkar's protest and astute leadership, there would neither have been the Poona fast and pact nor the subsequent churning of public opinion."

One can assess similar kind of impact of movements such as of women, adivasis, organised working class etc. on formation of state policies on different issues. Regional and ethnic movements of Nagas and Mizos, people of Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand etc. resulted into formation of linguistic or ethnic states. The Navnirman movement of 1974 in Gujarat on the issue of corruption in general and of political corruption in particular resulted into the change of the government. The ministers and members of the state assembly were forced to resign.

### **Movements against Democracy**

However, it should be emphasized that all social movements per se do not necessarily lead to more democratization. There are types and types of social movements varying from protest to rebellion and revolutionary; and different movements have different ideologies. History has witnessed in India and elsewhere that some social movements oppose social transformation. They may be called counter-movements. People are mobilized to resist change coming from the oppressed sections of society. Anti-reservation agitation in 1980s is a case in point. The upper caste students were against the reservation for the Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other backward castes. They launched agitation and succeeded to some extent in preventing the government for the implementation of reservation policy for the OBCs. The movement for Ram Janma Bhumi and Hindu Rastra is another example. It may be noted that Hitler, the architect of the National Socialist German Workers' Party mobilized Germans in 1930s against Jews, Communists and liberals. With demagogic virtuosity, he "played on national resentments, feelings of revolt and the desire for strong leadership using all the most modern techniques of mass persuasion to present himself as Germany's redeemer and messianic savior." He then captured power through elections.

Rajni Kothari does not justify all types of 'direct actions'. He said in 1960 that the action is desirable 'only if the political change desired by the group involved in direct action offers a greater scope of political freedom than is offered by the existing political arrangement'. Gandhi who championed 'protest' against injustice and misrule was against violent movements. He warned that ". . . if disobedience is carried out in the style of *dharna*, and not within the framework of *satyagraha*, it may well lead to widespread indifference to legality and lead itself to those

who would use illegal tactics to undermine faith in democratic processes". It may be mentioned that Gandhi withdrew Civil disobedience movement after the Chauri Chaura incident which became violent. He feared that such mob violence might repeat in other places and the Congress was not able to control and direct the masses. Bipan Chandra has recently argued in his book *In the Name of Democracy* (JP movement and Emergency) that JP movement had 'undefined goal, loose organization and confusion in its ideology. JP was not able to provide democratic direction to the movement. "Far from saving democracy, the movement was responsible for actually putting it in danger without leading to any long-term political gains... Emergency brought the country to the verge of long-term dictatorship." In other words social movements without clarity of ideology and organization may prove counter-productive. It can be used by the forces which have no faith in democracy.

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