The Democratization of Democracy

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The basic theme of the Indian constitution is democracy based on recognition of traditional multi-cultural practices, respect for human values and the building of institutions and a legal framework. This process is aimed at conserving and facilitating the integration of a diverse people into a vibrant democratic mosaic.

There are strong provisions on fundamental rights which ensure affirmative action for marginalized people, norms of institutional setup and functioning, including that of parliament, state assemblies and the judiciary, devolution of power between the union and state governments and also ways to conserve and promote a range of socio-cultural practices.

Except for the dreaded and widely-condemned emergency period of 1975–77, Indian democracy has moved relatively smoothly. Elections have been held on time with large voter turnouts. Eligible voters in this country of over 1.3 billion people are now using electronic voting machines. Political parties have upheld the people's verdict. Issues related to communalism, caste violence, gender discrimination, economic deprivation, regional imbalance, human rights violations, corruption, conflicts and instability in places like Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast have been at the forefront of national discourse and debate.

Institutions and commissions have been set up to look into these particular issues on a long-term basis. The constitution has been amended several times to address some of these cases more effectively. Scores of legislations have been put in place to give legal teeth to state-led efforts to correct the situation. There has been a tremendous civil society response to these issues.

However, the core development agenda of all political parties have been largely overshadowed by a discourse on what kind of democracy is fit for India. While the Chinese make steady headway in delivering services to the poorest of the poor and in remote areas under a political system that is widely perceived as being anti-democratic, the poor in India are still struggling to meet their basic needs in a rambunctious democracy. There is an unending debate about which comes first: democracy or development?

The Challenges Ahead

The Indian democracy has formidable challenges before it. There have been constant threats to democratic institutions from within the state and outside. There are new sets of non-traditional challenges at the local, national and regional levels, that require new interventions. At the very local level, the most fundamental link between democracy, development and participation of the community is the delivery mechanism. The entire delivery system however is in deep confusion and great stress today. It has tended to become accountable to none, and responsible to nothing. The challenge is magnified because of the higher expectations generated by ongoing reforms and the liberalization process.

How to ensure that higher economic growth trickles down to those lower on the income ladder? What should be the mechanism for this trickle-down? No one seems to have a clue. Well-intended national projects have failed to reach the rural masses.

The most recent example is the "Swachh Bharat Yojana (Clean India Project)" launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This single initiative if implemented effectively could have transformed India into a global entity with a cascading effect on education, health, development and orientation of the younger generation of Indians. But it has largely failed because the implementation agencies were the same old unaccountable government entities. Schools, colleges, universities, communities, NGOs, cultural and social institutions, or the private sector would have implemented it much more effectively. Alas, they figured nowhere.

The critical question of an effective delivery mechanism has not been seriously addressed. The fallout of market-led reforms and the newer varieties of development interventions increasingly requires an altogether new or parallel system for delivery of services.

In fact, the bureaucracy itself has become the main hurdle for delivery of goods and services to the poor. There is much less accountability, horrendous leakages and no capacity-building. At the same time, there have been negligible efforts to empower the grass roots and the downtrodden across anti-poverty interventions.

One of the available alternatives is to effectively decentralize and devolve as per the provisions of the 73rd and 74th amendments of the constitution on *Panchayati raj and urban governance*. States like Kerala, Tripura and Madhya Pradesh have done fairly well in this mission to empower the people at the grass roots.

There are two main challenges in injecting democracy at the grass roots. First, the empowerment and participation of local people and their ability to handle the activities so far run by the governmental machinery largely depend on their capacity, institutional infrastructure and most importantly integrity in taking collective responsibility. For instance, running a health centre or making people to pay for electricity and water, or deciding on sharing common property resources need knowledge, capacity and basic administrative acumen. This is particularly so when there is a new legal regime to handle these affairs.

The more serious question is how to isolate some vocal and active sections of the grass roots that have joined the larger corruption dynamics practiced in the past. This requires constant training and capacity-building of people at the grass roots in every sphere of development and institutional management. If this does not happen and if the experiment fails, it will be the centralized bureaucracy and previous stakeholders who are going to say "we told you so" and take back whatever decision-making power has been devolved. This reversal is going to be very costly and a major setback to the consolidation of democracy in the country.

Second, India's ongoing devolution process is fraught with a silent but strong backlash from elected representatives in both the national parliament and the state assemblies. On the one hand, they cannot oppose such measures and have to legislate, knowing fully well that it could affect their vote banks by allowing new leadership at the community level.

Such steady decentralization could open a number of power centers within one constituency, which elected representatives had never faced in the past. This means tough individual accountability and a critical scrutiny of elected representatives at the micro level. It also implies that performance would be the key to sending a representative at any level rather than other widely practiced ascriptions like caste, religion and other socio-economic-cultural considerations. Nothing could be more difficult than such close accountability. This apprehension could ultimately derail the decentralization process making it halting and half-

hearted as has been seen in some states. The upshot is that "participation" (a crucial element in the sustenance of democracy) will be eroded.

We must therefore discard the notion that empowerment of village folks will lead to the dis-empowerment of politicians and bureaucracy. We will have to change this unexplained and unreasonable mind set which has led districts like Darjeeling to not have local elections now for two decades, even though it has one of the oldest municipalities in India dating back to 1850. Democratization of democracy is therefore the only way out of this morass which has led to deprivation, lack of accountability and failure of delivery.

Darjeeling Tea Garden Children in village cultural program

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