

Theme VI : Democracy

Understanding Democracy

Meaning of democracy :

A famous political philosopher of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, stated, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible and man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary." This statement highlights why democracy is both desirable and essential.

Democracy is one of the most widely accepted forms of government in the contemporary world. What makes democracy so popular? To answer this we must understand what democracy truly means and examine whether it is indeed best form of government capable of meeting the challenges of modern society. Many definitions of 'democracy' have been given by eminent authorities on the subject. The term 'democracy' was coined in ancient Athens in fifth century BCE. It originated from the Greek word 'demokratia'. The components of the word are 'demos' people; 'kratos' power. Thus, democracy means "rule by the people."

Democracy in Athens is the earliest example of the system and it corresponds to some of the modern ideas about democratic rule. The entire adult male population of Athens could vote, whether they were poor or rich did not matter. All Athenian male citizens were free to vote and speak in the Assembly. Athenians did not vote for representatives but made decisions directly. The simplest definition of democracy is that "Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people." This can be achieved by implementing a system of voting in which the majority of people rule, either directly or indirectly through elected representatives. Elections are necessary and basic condition of democracy. In fact, voting by all adults is the main feature which separates democracy from other forms of government, for example, a monarchy.

Former President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln, defined democracy as "the government of the people, by the people, for the people." This definition emphasises participation, representation, and welfare of the people.

History shows that elections alone are not sufficient to ensure democracy. A dictator, like Hitler or Mussolini, may have been elected by the people at some stage, but once he starts acting in a manner in which his policies are not meant for the welfare of the people, the government ceases to be democratic.

What Constitutes the People :

What do we understand by the word people? The Greeks did not give the voting rights to women, slaves, or foreigners therefore, it was not universal franchise. Switzerland granted women the right to vote at the federal level in 1971. It practises direct democracy through referendums and popular initiatives, though not all government decisions are decided directly by citizens. In a vast and populous country like India it is not practical to adopt direct democracy at the national level; therefore, India follows representative democracy. In parliamentary democracies, decisions are generally taken by the majority of elected representatives, while ensuring protection of minority rights.

Every government imposes certain restrictions on people who can be elected. Some restrictions on age of maturity are also needed. Thus, the word people excludes certain groups, e.g., those below 18 years, or people who may be criminals. Above all no government can possibly ensure that the opinion of every elected representative shall be incorporated in all government legislations.

Roots of democracy in india :

India has a long history of democratic practices that developed long before the rise of modern democracies worldwide. These early traditions laid the foundation for ideas such as participation, consultation, and collective decision-making, which continue to shape present-day democracy in India.

Vedic society displayed certain consultative features, though it was not democratic in the modern sense. They believed in shared decision-making and the active participation of people in governance. Institutions such as Sabhas and Samitis functioned as early democratic bodies where power rested with the people. Authority was neither centralised nor hereditary. It was based on government by participation. Brotherhood of mankind, expressed through the principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, meaning that the world is one family, formed the moral foundation of Aryan democracy.

During the Vedic period, assemblies such as the Sabha and Samiti played an important role in governance. These bodies discussed public matters and advised the king, showing that rulers did not enjoy absolute power and were expected to consult the people.



Between 600 BCE and 400 BCE, many large kingdoms and republics known as Mahajanapadas emerged in northern India. Some of these, such as the Vajjis, followed a republican system of government. In these states, rulers were not hereditary but were chosen through election. Governance was based on collective decision-making, with discussions and debates playing an important role.

The Vajji confederacy is especially known for its democratic traditions. The Buddhist text Mahaparinibbana Sutta describes the Vajjis as a well-organised republic with strong community rule. It praises them for holding regular assemblies, making decisions through mutual agreement, and ensuring fair representation. The Sakya Republic also followed democratic practices. The head of the Sakya clan, known as the Raja, was elected by an assembly of elders. The leader was selected through discussion among elders, reflecting collective decision-making within the ruling group.

The Panchayat system forms the foundation of modern Indian democracy, but its origins go back thousands of years. The word 'Panchayat' is derived from 'panch', meaning five, and refers to a council of five respected elders chosen by the community. This system was democratic in nature because the members were selected by the people and were responsible to them. The Panchayat played an important role in village life by taking key decisions, settling disputes, and delivering justice, thus managing the daily affairs of the community.

Archaeological evidence from Lothal indicates advanced civic administration; however, there is no clear proof of elected councils or democratic institutions.

At the local level, village councils or Panchayats managed administration, justice, and welfare. This system encouraged people's participation and decentralisation of power, which remains an important feature of Indian democracy even today.

The Gupta Empire is often described as the Golden Age of India. This period saw great progress in art, science, and literature, as well as in ideas related to governance and public life. Administration during the Gupta period was marked by a high degree of decentralisation and local self-government. Village councils, known as Sabhas, played an important role in managing local affairs and delivering justice. These councils were made up of local landowners and merchants chosen by the community, and they functioned independently, making decisions that affected the daily lives of the people.

These early democratic traditions influenced modern democracy in many ways. They promoted people's participation in governance, inspired institutions of local self-government, and encouraged respect for discussion and consensus. Thus, modern Indian democracy is deeply rooted in India's own historical experience rather than being entirely adopted from other countries.

Features of democracy :

Final decision by elected representatives : In a democracy the final decision-making authority rests with elected representatives, but it must function within the limits of the Constitution and is subject to judicial review.

Free and fair elections : A democracy must be based on a free and fair election where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing.

- (i) First, voters must be honestly counted (a proper census).
- (ii) Voters should vote freely without any kind of pressure from those in power.
- (iii) Voters should have the right to choose freely from among those competing in the elections.
- (iv) Elections should be held regularly and be strictly impartial. In India the Election Commission of India ensures free and fair elections.

Universal suffrage : All adults have the right to vote in the elections irrespective of their colour, caste, religion, gender, etc. In a democracy each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

DID YOU KNOW? In India, people got the right to vote in 1950, when the Constitution of India came into force on 26 January 1950. From the beginning, India adopted Universal Adult Franchise, which meant that every citizen aged 21 years and above had the right to vote, regardless of caste, religion, gender, or wealth. Later, in 1988, the 61st Constitutional Amendment Act reduced the voting age from 21 years to 18 years.

Freedom of expression : Citizens should have the right to express their opinion without any fear. They should be allowed to discuss the policies of the government. They can also demonstrate, criticise, organise meetings or campaign on public issues.

Freedom to form associations : Citizens have the right to form associations, unions, and political parties, and to join or leave them freely, subject to legal restrictions in the interest of public order and national security.

DID YOU KNOW? Right to Information (RTI) Act was passed by Indian Parliament on 15 June 2005 and came fully into force on 12 October 2005. Every-day over 4800 RTI applications are filed. Under the provisions of this Act, any citizen of India may request information from a public authority (a body of government or "instrumentality of the State") which is required to reply expeditiously or within thirty

Freedom of culture and religion : A democracy allows people to follow their own beliefs and faith. People can openly and freely follow any religion, and speak their own language. The rights of the minorities should not be in any way less than those of the majority.

Individual freedoms : In a democracy, citizens enjoy personal freedoms such as freedom of movement, residence, occupation, and education. However, these freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions in the interest of public order, morality, and national security.

Rule of law : In a democracy, the rule of law prevails. No individual or authority is above the law. The police and military function under civilian control. The judiciary is independent, protects the rights of the individuals and its decisions are respected by the government. Thus, a democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizens' rights.

- All of the above are the minimum necessary features of any country aspiring to be called a democratic country. In a democracy, "The will of the people is the basis of the government." It is expressed by universal and equal suffrage through secret vote.
- Democracy demands accountability from all organs of government-the legislature, executive and judiciary-within the framework of the Constitution.

The absence of any of these basic features reveals whether a country, claiming to be democratic, is really democratic or not. It is easy to see that no country enjoys all the rights needed in a democracy or has institutions which work with equal effectiveness. No country provides unlimited freedoms. Even advanced democracies such as France and the United States impose certain legal restrictions to maintain public order and security. There are certain defects common to all forms of government. They arise because of certain inherent and instinctive weaknesses in human nature.

Types of democracy :

Direct versus Representative Democracy

In ancient Greece, particularly Athens, adult male citizens directly participated in discussions and decisionmaking, while women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded. But in many vast, modern countries direct democracy is impossible. The vast population cannot collect at one place, for example it is just impossible for almost 1 billion voters of India, to find a place where 50 to 60 thousand people can assemble for discussion.

- People engaged in different occupations or businesses cannot meet at the same time. Direct participation was possible in small countries with a few occupations.
- A system of representation had to be devised so that there could be a popular government. In this system people elect their representatives who make the laws and supervise the functioning of the government.
- So what is the difference? Is it still a democratic system? Yes it is, because in representative democracy, people are the supreme authority. People choose their government by electing their representatives. Elected representatives exercise power on people's behalf. They remain in power as long as they enjoy the confidence of the people and can be removed through periodic elections.
- Some critics of democracy think that representative democracy is not a true democracy. How can a handful of representatives speak for the interests and personal views of the country's citizens? Is this criticism justified?

Democratic system in the world :

Most democracies today follow the system of representative democracy, in which citizens elect their representatives to govern on their behalf. However, democracies do not function in the same way everywhere. There are two main forms of representative democracy.

(a) Parliamentary Democracy :

Parliamentary democracy is a system of government in which the executive derives its authority from the legislature and remains accountable to it. The members of the executive are also part of the legislature. The head of the government, usually the Prime Minister, is chosen from the majority party or coalition in the legislature. The Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers are responsible for implementing government policies.

The Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the legislature, which makes the government accountable for its actions. India has a bicameral legislature made up of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. In our country, the Council of Ministers can continue working as long as they have the confidence of the Lok Sabha. In this form of government, citizens elect the members of the legislature. Elected members become the ministers (part of the executive). In a parliamentary system, there is a close relationship between the executive and legislative branches, with the executive being dependent on the confidence of the legislature.

In this system, the President is the formal or nominal head of the executive, while the Prime Minister is the real head of the government. The President represents the State, but the Prime Minister is responsible for running the government and managing its day-to-day affairs. Countries with parliamentary systems include India, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Canada.



(b) Presidential Democracy :

The presidential form of government is based on the principle of separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. Under this system, the executive is independent of the control of the legislature.

In the presidential form of government, the head of the State is also the real executive head. The President directly exercises executive powers and does not function merely as a nominal authority. This system is based on the principle of separation of powers, in which the executive, legislature, and judiciary work independently. The executive is not responsible to the legislature and cannot dissolve it, while the judiciary remains independent of both the executive and the legislature.

At the same time, the system follows the principle of checks and balances. Although the three organs of government are separate, they keep a check on one another to prevent misuse of power. The President holds significant executive authority but these powers are limited by constitutional provisions and checks and balances. Another important feature of the presidential system is that political homogeneity is not essential. Members of the cabinet do not have to belong to the same political party as the President. At present, countries like the USA, Brazil, etc are having presidential form of government. Sri Lanka has semi-presidential system not a purely presidential or purely parliamentary.

Alternatives to Democracy :

Monarchy is the rule by one person. In ancient times it was the most common form of government in the state. He combined in himself the functions of the military commander, the lawmaker, the executive officer of the state and also the judge.

Under Absolute Monarchy, the king is the government, and his authority is unlimited. Most monarchies are hereditary. Before the revolution, the Czars were absolute rulers of Russia. Some monarchs claimed they got their authority directly from God (the Divine Right Theory). They claimed they were answerable to God and not to their subjects.

Saudi Arabia :

Saudi Arabia has been ruled by the Saudi royal family since 1932, when the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established. It is an example of an absolute Monarchy. All powers lie in the hands of the Saudi royal family. All the ministers and members belong to the royal family.

The power of the monarch is regarded as legitimate based on the right of birth.

Constitutional Monarchy :

The United Kingdom is a typical example of constitutional monarchy. There is the king or the queen as the Head of the State but the sovereign does not exercise any real authority. The monarch in the United Kingdom performs largely ceremonial functions and acts on the advice of the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. Actually in U.K. representative democracy prevails. People elect their representatives to the parliament and they govern on their behalf.

Dictatorship:

Under dictatorship, the governments is not accountable to the people and may disregard public opinion. Power is concentrated in the hands of one person or a small group. All benefits are enjoyed by those in power and people who support the rulers. The poor and the weak suffer as they are excluded from the benefits.

Idi Amin became the ruler of Uganda in 1971 after a military coup. During his rule 300,000 Ugandans lost their lives and he forced the Indian minority to leave Uganda. His reign was ended after an invasion by Tanzanian forces aided by Ugandan exiles in 1979.

Under military dictatorships, power is concentrated in the hands of military leaders, and political opposition is often suppressed. Those in power amass wealth illegally. Limited freedom of speech in such regimes often reduces public accountability and criticism of government policies. They do not fear any opposition and, therefore do not fear losing in elections.

Theocracy :

Iran is an Islamic Republic that combines elements of theocracy and democracy. Iran has elected institutions (President, Parliament) along with religious oversight. In a revolution overthrew the Shah of Persia and installed a religious government. The government is made up of majority religion, i.e., Islam. Civil laws are made to conform to the religious teachings of Islam. The highest authority is the Supreme Leader who is an Ayatollah.

Democracy has proved itself superior to both monarchy and the government of one or a few.

Democracy also has a built-in mechanism to see that rulers do not go astray. Regular and periodical elections give the people a chance to discard people who have a bad record.

Democracy provides mechanisms such as elections and reservations (in countries like India) to enhance representation of minority sections. It is thus superior to all other forms of government.

Why Democracy has Spread :

Democracy promises equality to all. Every citizen has a right to vote contest elections and become an elected representative.

In non-democratic governments those in power do not want to give it up. They resist attempts to wrest power from their hands. To have a democratic government people have to struggle for it, as they did in Poland during the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. Various social groups including workers, students, and civil society organisations have played important roles in democratic movements.

Democracy has also spread because of three major events :

(i) Second World War (ii) Decolonisation (iii) Collapse of the Soviet Union.

These three historical factors started a chain of events world-wide which helped boost democracy. There were other, internal forces and conditions that were conducive for the spread of democracy.

Challenges of democracy :

Democracy may be the best form of government but it has to face many problems.

- Wide gaps between rich and poor allow the wealthy to dominate politics, often leading to exploitation of underprivileged voters.
- The increasing gap, the growing economic inequality has an adverse impact on politics. Policy-makers may sometimes prioritise the interests of influential economic groups over those of weaker sections. The poor are not given enough attention, their grievances are not properly addressed.
- Economic inequalities have an adverse effect on elections. People with money have more chances of winning elections. More and more money is being spent on elections - on campaigning, publicity, etc. Huge contributions are made to the election campaigns. People who make the contributions expect favours from the parties and leaders they help. The ordinary citizens cannot do this.

Voters may face coercion or intimidation during elections. How can people, elected by corrupt means, be true representatives of the people? Democracies have been harmed by the practice of corruption, inefficiency and negligence.

These factors lead people to lose interest in democracy. People start losing confidence in democratic political institutions. Many people have lost faith in political parties and many do not trust government officials. But still the majority of people, two-third, think that a democratic political system is best suitable to our country. They feel that democratic institutions are not working properly and are dissatisfied with the present state of affairs.

- The need of the hour is to establish a healthy democracy based on a democratic society. Correct democratic values have to be taught and imbibed at the grassroot levels - beginning with family, friends and neighbourhood.
- All out effort should be made to root out corruption from public dealings and choose a government which is sensitive to the needs of the people.
- Last of all, the voters must realise how important it is to exercise their voting rights. It is in their hands to elect representatives who can govern with integrity, commitment and ability.
- In the end we can conclude that democracy cannot find immediate solutions to all problems. In countries like India, with a large and diverse population and significant socio-economic challenges, fulfilling public expectations can be complex. But democracy is still a better form of government. It is because of the values a democratic government stands for. These values are freedom, equality and justice. It is upto us to consolidate democracy so that these values are realised in society.