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ON

DEMOCRACIES ON THE EDGE: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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In Mathew 4:4, Jesus was said to have answered that “man shall not live on bread alone”. Jesus sermonised that man lives by the word of God. A renowned Hindu philosopher, sage Aurobindo exhorted that every living creature longs for freedom. Historically, all human effort has been for freedom from bondages of all kinds – economic, political and social.

It was man’s yearning for freedom that gave birth to democratic polity centuries ago in the Greek city states like Athens. “Will of the Demos – people” was considered paramount leading to the evolution of democracy as a form of governance.

Democracies evolved over centuries after the initial experiments in Greek city states. The Athenians got together in a stadium and unanimously declared death punishment to Socrates in one of the earliest expressions of democratic polity. From that phase of anarchic democracy to today’s liberal democracy, democracies have matured into more structured forms of government “by the people, of the people, and for the people”.

Democracies have provided much deserved freedoms and rights to humans to pursue their personal, professional and societal existence. They also provided political rights to choose and change leaders as and when they feel necessary.

The phrases that we hear today like “democratic recession” or “democratic backsliding” or “democratic deficit” denote challenges being faced by those freedoms. Rise of authoritarian regimes and strong leader politics is causing anxiety to many that the institution of democracy itself is crumbling.

How serious and real is that concern?

It is never the case that democracies were perfect. One statesman in India described democracy as the second best form of government. “The best form is yet to be invented”, he quipped.

Democracies have their own weaknesses and deficiencies. The oldest democracy to free its people from monarchy and aristocracy was Great Britain. However, its democratic institutions have become a source of instability today. In the last 7 years, there were as many governments in UK, with two ministries lasting for just 40 days each.

The first democracy to be born from a popular revolution was that of France. It was also the first democracy to codify fundamental human rights. Yet, it faces a major conflict within today, with an unstable political arrangement that is perpetually pulled in different directions.

In the US, long and unresolved grievances of the Black Minority, that led to massive rioting across the country during the “Black Lives Matter movement”, highlight the woes of its democracy. The Capitol

rioting on January 6, 2021, which was variously described as an insurrection or a coup, exposed the ugly underbelly of the American polity.

Although more than 230-years old, the American constitutional polity consistently demonstrated undemocratic streaks. Fathers of the American Constitution in 1789 hardly wanted a full-fledged democracy. Voting rights were denied to large sections of the American society, and slavery was upheld. Only after two centuries and struggles and sacrifices of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr did the Blacks secure full political rights.

America's constitution has provisions that betray undemocratic characteristics. At least 5 times in recent history, the Presidential candidates that got highest number of votes were denied office due to a weird system of electoral college. The US Senate, a powerful organ of the Congress, is technically an undemocratic institution. Wyoming with half a million population sends as many senators as California with 80 times more population.

This history is important to recall while discussing about the current challenges that democracies are facing. Because the credibility of the argument suffers when democracy is used more as a stick to beat the political adversaries than to bring in a genuine reform.

There is no denying that democratic polity in different parts of the world is undergoing a transition. The liberal democratic order that was vigorously promoted 1990s onwards is facing a challenge with the rise of illiberal regimes across the globe. Increasingly, rights and freedoms of citizens are seeing erosion. Independence of media, judiciary and academia is under threat. Political opposition, an important constituent in a successful democracy, is viciously curbed and oppressed.

What makes the scenario worse is the ideological justification that such anti-democratic and authoritarian regimes peddle in the name of "Anti-West" rhetoric. Authoritarian regimes have a tendency to use West as a red herring in their pursuit for absolute power and suppression of dissent and democratic freedoms. Such forces, whether undemocratic political leaders or cruel dictators or ruthless military juntas – from North Korea to Myanmar to Syria to Yemen – have strong backers from the powerful, yet authoritarian regimes like China, which dream of building a world order based on their own illiberal conceptions.

For facing this challenge, first and foremost is to stop using democracy as a political weapon. Authoritarians across the world got their oxygen partly from the omissions and commissions of the Western powers in the last two decades in the name of the so-called "democracy project". American and European powers used democracy argument to topple regimes that were not to their liking. Waging wars in the name of "bringing democracy" led to erosion of credibility of the institution itself. What those countries got in the end was not a stable democracy but dystopian economies and ineffective political regimes. Instead of democracy, they ended up having absolute anarchy.

It is important to understand that democracy is not just a political system, but a political culture. Nurturing that culture requires appreciation of societal mores, national histories and civilisational experiences. In a country like Afghanistan, the Loya Jirga – or the "Great Council" of the elders of hundreds of different tribes, may be a version of democracy.

In all this crisis and confusion, India stands out as a beacon of democracy. India is the world's largest and most successful democracy. Baseless criticisms apart, India presents a model that can be described as a "Dharmocracy" – the Indian version of democracy. Popular involvement and participation in the nation's governance is unique in Indian experience. Dozens of governmental programs – from

cleanliness drive to skilling of youths to start up and digitisation campaigns – are all run with massive popular initiatives.

Corona crisis has brought out the best side of India's democratic glory. It was people's initiatives that took care of feeding, sheltering and extending medical help of 1.4 billion Indians. India's vaccine story is not only historic but also inspiring.

Bottom up democracy, where power is decentralised and delegated to the lowest units called the Village Panchayats is an important characteristic of Indian democracy. India's age-old tradition nurtured countless grassroots institutions of religious and social groups that took care of the welfare and well-being of the people with or without governmental involvement. It led to the idea of "minimum government – Maximum governance", which is at the core of Dharmocracy.

The current world order is facing multiple challenges. The world is witnessing not only multipolarity, with many countries and minilaterals emerging as important poles, but also moving into a phase that can be described as "heteropolarity. In a heteropolar order, not only states, but non-state actors like multinational corporations, big-tech companies, non-governmental organisations, religious and spiritual gurus and even terrorist outfits have emerged powerful enough to defy sovereign authority of nations. Newer challenges like climate change, pandemics, illegal migrations, AI-driven technologies, and woke ideologies are threatening the future of our civilisations.

In this scenario, there is a general urge among the people of many countries for a strong and determined leadership to secure their sovereign national interests. Not every strong leader should be seen as a threat to democracy. The world needs leaders today that are strong enough to not only protect their countries and populations but also work with others to mitigate the challenges together.

What is at stake today is not just the future of democracy alone, but the future of mankind itself.