

Democracy for Social Transformation

Democracy is under scrutiny.

There is growing disillusionment with prevailing models of democracy, in particular, representative democracy. The tendency towards autocracy and fascism is not just seen in national institutions. The practice of democracy and the representative character of its processes bring dilemmas of effectiveness and sustainability especially for grassroots level institutions.

The practice of participation on the other hand brings its own set of problems that need to be dealt with. It is fine at the grassroots level, and very effective for constant face-to-face transactions, even though this also has its problems. But when we scale up, we have a problem with participative processes at regional and national levels.

Along with it, there are the slowly emerging aspirations for what Rajni Kothari calls "genuine democracy", as an instrument of transformative politics.

Rajni Kothari pleads for the re-conception of democracy, not as a prescription and 'road-map', but as a concerted search for meaningful practice at all levels of society. In fact, he talks of democracy as an emancipatory ethic of the whole of society, as refashioning the whole of human enterprise.

In a new book, Democracy in India, Niraja Gopal Jayal presents several essays on development and democracy which are integral to the project of modernising the Indian State. Civil Society should bridge the gap between formal structures of governance and necessary conditions for the realisation of "substantive" democracy. The most important challenge is the project of Hindutva, which is seeking to redefine democracy in majoritarian terms, exposing the tenuous character of Indian Pluralism.

Beyond Democracy by Rajni Kothari. Asian Exchange, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2001/Vol.18 No.1, 2002, pp 13. [ELDOC6006732]

Exploring Democracy by Ashutosh Kumar. Economic & Political Weekly, Vol 38, No 11, March 15-21, 2003.
<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.5610> [C.ELDOC6006803]

Beyond Democracy

by Rajni Kothari



Democracy by itself does not promote either equality or justice, only logical axioms like *equality before law*. In practice, it is found to live side by side with high levels of inequality, poverty in the midst of opulence and ill-treatment of a wide variety of *minorities* for whom there is little by way of *compensatory justice*.

This has proved especially pertinent under corporate capitalism of the late 20th century. The high degrees of inequalities will exist in reality as long as the democratic state is structurally operating in the framework of capitalism, which it is in spite of democracy's ideological intent to contain the capitalist thrust.

... democracy can survive only by striking roots in a direct form. It is secured not by great leaders but by competent, responsible citizens. *Effective dictatorships require great leaders. Effective democracies need great citizens.*

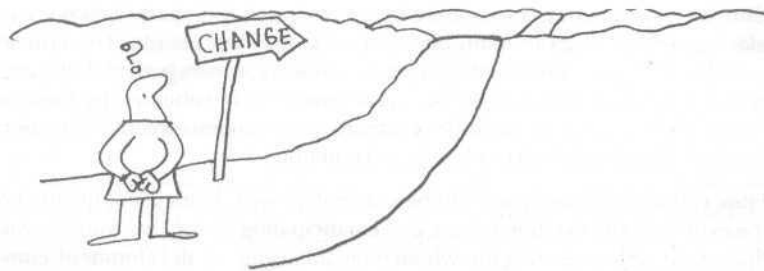
Movement for creating emancipatory democracy

There is emerging a newly inspired appeal for transformative politics of which democracy could well become a legitimate instrument.

In the face of a growing disillusionment with prevailing models of democracy, in particular representative democracy, aspirations are slowly emerging for what could be called *genuine* democracy (which in the present context becomes *direct democracy* based on various degrees of self-rule, self-governance and self-determination). Yet genuine democracy is still in the realm of aspirations and expectations; much of what is desired has not yet been realised, not at any rate in full measure.

This conception of democracy which is based on an ethical imperative towards world transformation, calls for a new breed of intellectuals and activists to begin with. It arises from the core of an idealistic middle class (one hopes that such a core still exists) and moves towards larger and ever-enlarging struggles of the mass of the people in country after country, and ultimately engulfs the world as a whole. Just the opposite of the neo-liberal model of globalisation, it produces instead an authentic *global* upsurge of 'peoples, communities, and ecologies'. Moving beyond the so-called *new social movements* of environment, women, tribals, *backwards* and through them all castes and classes, it is a movement that is deeply rooted in the whole of civil society.

The status quo is still very much intact. The cracks that are emerging in it are still of a transitional type. They are yet to indicate a clear direction with a lasting imprint. All the same, the *transitions* have begun to make themselves felt. There can be no denying that something 'new' seems to be in the offing. It is uncertain, and cannot be brushed aside as mere dreams and utopias. We are at least at the crossroads even if the path which we are likely to traverse is as yet uncertain.



In these transitions, the *uncertainty* is so full of not just ambivalence and ambiguities but pitfalls, dilemmas and growing contradictions that we seem to be unsure of facing up to it and dealing with it.

It is not just the era (or age) of uncertainty but the *aura* of uncertainty (which threatens to become even a cult of uncertainty) that we need to get into and unravel. It is precisely the unraveling of this new *aura* that will help us come to grips with the most challenging of all intellectual issues in the modern era.

Era of uncertainty

This state of uncertainty does not necessarily amount to a state of despair, an end to all hope and the acceptance of a pessimistic future. The uncertainty only pronounces a lack of clear affirmation of hope and a positive view of emerging prospects for humanity and its future. I would in fact go further. This state of uncertainty could be taken up as a challenge to once again turn things around and regain a feeling of hope, of recreating it, of reaffirming an optimistic state of affairs.

Uncertainty only indicates an absence of certitude. It does not betray an entirely negative outlook. It could well be seen as a challenge to both imagination and praxis. Indeed it is a challenge to conceive a better prospect for both humanity and the planet as a whole than was the case before things began to become uncertain or ambivalent.

In fact, an era of uncertainty ought not to be taken as one of despair and disappointment. It could well indicate a kind of *crossroads* from where new beginnings could be initiated.

Emancipation and democracy

Currently, democracy seems to be better equipped to impart legitimacy to elected regimes than to fulfill basic aspirations of the people. The crucial question that has been emerging over the last several years both globally and within individual nation-states is: What prospects/ possibilities are there of democracy leading to people's emancipation/ empowerment/ liberation from the shackles of both modernity and tradition?

How is human emancipation to be conceptualised? As focusing mainly on the exploited and excluded strata, and **emancipating** them? This would mean that one is only repeating the whole mental baggage of **development-cum-democracy**. In my view emancipation needs to be conceived in comprehensive and holistic terms, reaching out from each individual (including individuals in the established social strata) to wider and wider *cycles* of classes and communities. Emancipation is a deeper, and deeply rooted process of change, mobilisation and transformation.

The whole of society has to be emancipated and that emancipation is basically a *state of being* which applies to all. I should like to add here that it is of particular relevance for the middle class, at one time considered the torch-bearers of *Swaraj*, along various dimensions - not just political - and entails egalitarian restructuring of civil society, and thereby a comprehensive model of equity, justice and emancipation.

On the road to development, on the one side we have the dominant model of economic development and its trickle down perspective vis-a-vis the poorer countries and the mass of the people generally. On the other, there is the trickle up model of catching up with the richer and more affluent countries. These trickles converge to a *catching up* syndrome of development - both for the poorer social strata and for the poorer nations and states. For these classes and systems to resume the idea of emancipation will call for a major ideological remodelling towards transformative politics, economics, environment and culture.

Emancipation will involve taking into its purview the whole series of problem encounters facing humankind in its present condition, dealing as adequately as possible with poverty, inequity, injustice, erosion of basic resources (both natural and human) and the ethnic, ecological and civilisational dimensions of that condition. *It is a concern about nothing short of refashioning the whole of the human enterprise* (and through its reach and spread, diverse other species and life-engaging terrains of livelihood); **in short, restructuring of life on this planet.**

Ideological restructuring

Seen from a variety of thresholds, the ethics of emancipation necessarily calls for a major shift in ideas, institution-building and political engagement. The three of them together provide a powerful normative thrust, almost a kind of catharsis that ranges from individual selves to community structures to national and international alignments of both mutative and paradigmatic kinds.

In reaction, we are producing a model of secular fundamentalism of the 'modernist' type (to be distinguished from the fundamentalism of the communal, religious and so-called *casteist* varieties). I am not inclined to be overtaken by the myth of moving (switching) from an undefined and undifferentiated modernity to some sweeping idea of an equally undefined and undifferentiated tradition.

I see the **emergence of an ideology of collective resurgence**, drawing all the time on the micro and intermediate thresholds of which one notices several thousand at work; and taking off from there towards a *macro* systemic change; taking us beyond both *development* and *democracy*, into a whole new era of liberation, both in the socio-political arena as well as in the psycho-cultural and civilisational contours, which must ultimately be the antennas of emancipation.

The ideological challenge is probably the most pervasive and multidimensional of all. We happen to be facing a major intellectual - and hence ideological - vacuum. Neither the Liberal nor the Marxist nor in many ways even the Gandhian or the still deeper spiritual ideological conceptions provides us with a workable model of fundamental change. For change to be truly far-reaching and fundamental one needs to delve deep into the psychic, cultural and existential arenas of human striving.

Such a comprehensive interface of issues and problem encounters is not limited to the issue of poverty. This becomes evident even in dealing with poverty - for one is up against almost the full canvas of human concerns. The emergence of an iniquitous and unjust, an increasingly polarised, social order is in fact what one is up against.

Implications for 'emancipation and democracy'

The challenge is to keep alive the flame of hope and resurgence and to continue to offer ideological streams to the stirring and struggling segments of the masses of the public. The latter - the dalits, the tribals, the women, the aspiring youth - are no doubt to be the principal authors of the slowly emerging *movement* for democracy. They would also be the ones to ground it within the still larger movement for Emancipation. Yet there will still be need for democratic and human rights *movements* consisting of activists, intellectuals and a whole array of individuals and communities that are beginning to experience a new upsurge of catharsis, producing in the process a variety of changes that will lead in course of time both to a *crisis of change* and a *challenge of change*. ▶



Exploring Democracy

by Ashutosh Kumar



Democracy in India edited by Niraja Gopal Jayal; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001; pp 571, Rs 750. [CED Ref: B.Q11.J.1]

It is now 2500 years since the advent of democracy in the Greek city states. At the same time we are witnessing the arrival of the *third wave of democracy* in the aftermath of the collapse of communism in Europe. With the processes of globalisation and localisation overwhelming *the global village*, democracy as a form of *good governance* is increasingly being viewed as procedurally the best way of arriving at decisions that not only take everyone's interest into account but are equally binding on all of them. As a result it is the democratic part of liberal democracy, ie, a set of procedures and the representative institutions, that is being more emphasised than its liberal component which is equality, freedom, tolerance and accountability. This is the basic contention of the editor of the book under review who in her brilliant introduction **privileges the substantive form of democracy over its procedural [or formal] form.**

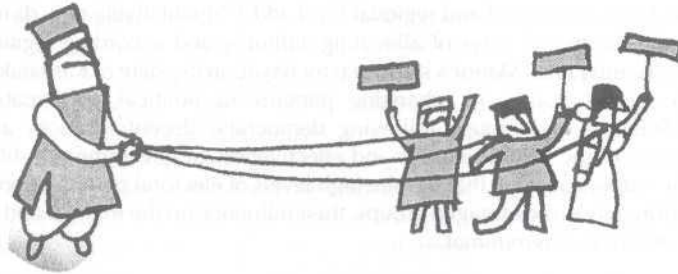
Making an attempt to *prefigure* post-colonial democracy, *the papers in the first part of the book argue that the representative institutions of India today have their origins in the form of colonial legacy.* James Chiriyankandath refers to the Government of India Acts to show how they gradually increased the democratic representation of the Indians (based on limited voting rights) in colonial governance. ... On the flip side he traces the prevalence of electoral mobilisation on the basis of caste, religion and region especially in post-Bluestar, Mandal and Mandir India to the colonial "legacy of separate representation and the recognition, by the state, of social groups on the basis of caste and religion".

The separate electoral representation, argues David Washbrook, also laid the foundation of the Nehruvian idea that "the members of civil society could only represent sectional interests, and the state alone could represent the whole of society". He also traces the origin of the idea that the "real function of representation is advisory, while the task of policy formulation is best left to

the bureaucracy and the judiciary" in the late colonial rhetoric of democracy and development.

The second part of the book has papers exploring the relationship between democracy and the state. The common argument has been that for the success of democracy an effective state is required "to underwrite democratic arrangements" as well as a strong civil society that could save the citizens from the "potential tyrannies of the state". Rajni Kothari in his article, for example, argues that the greatest significance of Indian democracy has been the fact that it has survived and endured despite lacking the essential pre-requisites of a democracy, ie, literacy, industrialisation, and lack of democratic history at the time of decolonisation. The emergence of a populist and personalised polity, according to Atul Kohli, has been among the recent occurrences leading to what he famously calls the *crisis of governability*. This weakening of state institutions in the face of the process of the deepening of democracy also constitutes the theme of the paper by Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph. While taking up pressure groups as the unit of their analysis they analyse the nature of Indian political economy primarily in terms of a conflict between, and the alternating dominance of, a *demand polity* in which the citizens' demands expressed as electoral pressure dominate over the state, and a *command polity* where the state's hegemony prevails over the citizenry. Jayal's paper is concerned with the study of what she calls the *foundational* principles of Indian democracy, namely, development, welfare and secularism. She argues on the basis of her concrete studies that there has been an incongruity between the procedural and substantive aspects of Indian democracy.

The third part of the book has papers arguing in favour of a strong civil society in order to bridge the gap between the formal and substantive aspects of Indian democracy by broadening and deepening it. It is in this context that the new social movements have come under larger theoretical inquiry. Pramod Parajuli notes in his paper how the feminist, ecological, and indigenous peoples' movements have taken up the rights of women, dalits, tribals and minorities besides promoting a sustainable pattern of development. In the process an alternative model of governance based on *consultative and participatory* social relations and indigenous knowledge is receiving the attention of the people. The agenda of *bringing the people back in* also figures in the writings of Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen who demonstrate the significance of public action, both collaborative and adversarial, in preventing famine. Sudipta Kaviraj in his paper argues that democracy is central to an understanding of the popular culture grounded in



the principle of equality and disowning of the inherited hierarchies. The popular culture of democracy also comes across in the accounts of elections by Walter Hauser and Wendy Singer. As for the diversity of popular cultures in Indian civil society Arend Lijphart insists in his paper that India is "an impressive confirming case" for consociational theory as it fulfils all the four conditions, ie, government by grand coalition in which all the ethnic groups are represented; cultural autonomy for such groups; proportional representation in politics and the civil service, and minority vetoes on issues concerning minority rights and autonomy.

The fourth part of the volume consists of papers focusing on the nature of the political economy of development in India. Deepak Nayyar's paper brings out the inherent tension between the market economy [that tends to exclude the masses] being introduced in India and the ever-widening base of its democracy. It thus further erodes the capacity of the state to mediate the increasing conflict between the market and democracy. The paper by Pranab Bardhan focuses on the political sociology and economy of the liberalisation policies. He refers to the two parallel trends in Indian politics showing an increasing shift of political power from the centre to the states as well as from the upper castes to the backward and lower castes. These developments have brought the 'turmoil from below' accentuating the conflicts within the 'dominant coalition' consisting of the industrial capitalist class, the rich farmers, and the professionals in the public sector. Moreover, they have also resulted in the erosion of earlier practices by which decision-making on economic management and public administration was institutionally insulated from the imperatives of day to day politics.

The fifth part of the book consists of two papers dealing with the dynamics of Indian democracy at the grassroots level. Subrata Mitra in his paper takes a case study of the assembly elections in a village of north India to show that

elections at the local and regional level add a “qualitatively new dimension to the traditional ways of allocating authority and according legitimacy”. Crook and James Manor’s study of panchayats in the state of Karnataka takes up related issues, ie, changing patterns of political participation by individuals and groups following democratic decentralisation; and the impact of the responsiveness and effectiveness of government institutions. The authors observe that despite high levels of electoral participation by the historically disadvantaged groups, their influence on the mandal and district council remains minimal.

Part six of the book deals with the future of Indian democracy. The emergence of the dalits and Hindutva as major political phenomena can be considered a departure from the historical past of hierarchical but pluralist India. Gail Omvedt in her overview of dalit politics, from Phule through Ambedkar to now BSP, draws attention to the complete neglect of gender as well as environmental and alternative development issues. Finally the paper by Christopher Jafferlot takes a look at the Hindu nationalist conception of democracy.

A reading of these essays makes one realise that the idea of democracy has become embedded in the Indian political imagination notwithstanding the still deeply hierarchical, agrarian, feudal, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of Indian society. Most third world democracies, on the other hand, have had a chequered career compared to their Indian counterpart in terms of political participation and contestation.

The reading, however, as the editor admits herself, also raises many questions concerning Indian democracy, leaving some of them unanswered. Why is the said deepening of democracy not being reflected in public policies? Why has the democratic base of Indian democratic leadership increased only in sociological and not in economic terms? Has there really been an anti-market streak in Indian political culture with the prevalence of Gandhian values and emphasis on group equity and rights? Are democracy and development compatible? Can democracy and the market coexist without an effective state?

Well, the questions are unending. One can read and reread these scholarly articles, among the most significant ones written over the last decade by leading social scientists, for possible answers. ▶

While Indian democracy today is, in institutional terms, fairly well secured, it remains embattled by forces both external and internal. Internally, the most important challenge is the project of Hindutva, seeking to redefine democracy in emphatically majoritarian terms, exposing the tenuous character of Indian pluralism. Internally it also continues to be faced by the enduring challenge of creating a more equal society, and reducing the vast economic disparities that are being accentuated by the process of globalisation. That process of course represents the major external challenge, seeking to legislate global regimes in such matters as trade, environmental regulation, and intellectual property. Accompanying these are the attempts to lay down global standards for 'good governance', and to forge networks between non-governmental organisations for the creation of a 'transnational' civil society.

Extract from Introduction: Situating Indian Democracy. Pg 44 of Democracy in India

There are many who have been looking for sources of substantive democracy within tradition. JP spoke of the self-governing village community, Gandhiji of networks of village republics governed by Panchayats, Vinoba Bhave of Lokniti as opposed to Rajniti. The RSS while speaking of Ram Rajya, and decentralised janpadas, uses its "dharmasatta" (religious authority) to mold the Hindu majority into one vote bank making it unbeatable – a kind of a majoritarian hegemony.

In a true democracy, one accepts a majority decision when it is a result of different elements coming together on that decision, not when it is a continuously organised stream of assertion of one group, which is riding roughshod over other minority groups. The same is the case in decisions relating to globalisation, where the centralised capitalist economy which includes today's media, has decided that economic globalisation is the prescription for development.

Given this situation, what does working for substantive democracy involve?

