Unit II: Political Theory and Practice

Democracy: The concept and Idea

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused in a time when totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships alike have attempted to claim popular support by pinning democratic labels upon themselves. Yet the power of the democratic idea has also evoked some of history's most profound and moving expressions of human will and intellect: from Pericles in ancient Athens to Vaclav Havel in the modern Czech Republic, from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence in 1776 to Andrei Sakharov's last speeches in 1989. In the dictionary definition, democracy "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system." In the phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Freedom and democracy are often used interchangeably, but the two are not synonymous. Democracy is indeed a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but it also consists of a set of practices and procedures that have been moulded through a long, often tortuous history. In short, democracy is the institutionalization of freedom. For this reason, it is possible to identify the time-tested fundamentals of constitutional government, human rights, and equality before the law that any society must possess to be properly called democratic. Democracies fall into two basic categories, direct and representative. In a direct democracy, all citizens, without the intermediary of elected or appointed officials, can participate in making public decisions. Such a system is clearly only practical with relatively small numbers of people--in a community organization or tribal council, for example, or the local unit of a labor union, where members can meet in a single room to discuss issues and arrive at decisions by consensus or majority vote. Ancient Athens, the world's first democracy, managed to practice direct democracy with an assembly that may have numbered as many as 5,000 to 6,000 persons-- perhaps the maximum number that can physically gather in one place and practice direct democracy. Modern society, with its size and complexity, offers few opportunities for direct democracy. Even in the northeastern United States, where the New England town meeting is a hallowed tradition, most communities have grown too large for all the residents to gather in a single location and vote directly on issues that affect their lives. Today, the most common form of democracy, whether for a town of 50,000 or nations of 50 million, is representative democracy,

in which citizens elect officials to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good. In the name of the people, such officials can deliberate on complex public issues in a thoughtful and systematic manner that requires an investment of time and energy that is often impractical for the vast majority of private citizens. How such officials are elected can vary enormously. On the national level, for example, legislators can be chosen from districts that each elect a single representative. Alternatively, under a system of proportional representation, each political party is represented in the legislature according to its percentage of the total vote nationwide. Provincial and local elections can mirror these national models, or choose their representatives more informally through group consensus instead of elections. Whatever the method used, public officials in a representative democracy hold office in the name of the people and remain accountable to the people for their actions.

Majority Rule and Minority Rights

All democracies are systems in which citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule. But rule by the majority is not necessarily democratic: No one, for example, would call a system fair or just that permitted 51 percent of the population to oppress the remaining 49 percent in the name of the majority. In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual human rights that, in turn, serve to protect the rights of minorities-- whether ethnic, religious, or political, or simply the losers in the debate over a piece of controversial legislation. The rights of minorities do not depend upon the goodwill of the majority and cannot be eliminated by majority vote. The rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens. Diane Ravitch, scholar, author, and a former assistant U.S. secretary of education, wrote in a paper for an educational seminar in Poland: "When a representative democracy operates in accordance with a constitution that limits the powers of the government and guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, this form of government is a constitutional democracy. In such a society, the majority rules, and the rights of minorities are protected by law and through the institutionalization of law." These elements define the fundamental elements of all modern democracies, no matter how varied in history, culture, and economy. Despite their enormous differences as nations and societies, the essential elements of constitutional government-- majority rule coupled with individual and minority rights, and the rule of law--can be found in Canada and Costa Rica, France and Botswana, Japan and India.

Democratic Society

Democracy is more than a set of constitutional rules and procedures that determine how a government functions. In a democracy, government is only one element coexisting in a social fabric of many and varied institutions, political parties, organizations, and associations. This diversity is called pluralism, and it assumes that the many organized groups and institutions in a democratic society do not depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy, or authority. Thousands of private organizations operate in a democratic society, some local, some national. Many of them serve a mediating role between individuals and the complex social and governmental institutions of which they are a part, filling roles not given to the government and offering individuals opportunities to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy. These groups represent the interests of their members in a variety of ways--by supporting candidates for public office, debating issues, and trying to influence policy decisions. Through such groups, individuals have an avenue for meaningful participation both in government and in their own communities. The examples are many and varied: charitable organizations and churches, environmental and neighborhood groups, business associations and labor unions. In an authoritarian society, virtually all such organizations would be controlled, licensed, watched, or otherwise accountable to the government. In a democracy, the powers of the government are, by law, clearly defined and sharply limited. As a result, private organizations are free of government control; on the contrary, many of them lobby the government and seek to hold it accountable for its actions. Other groups, concerned with the arts, the practice of religious faith, scholarly research, or other interests, may choose to have little or no contact with the government at all.

In this busy private realm of democratic society, citizens can explore the possibilities of freedom and the responsibilities of self-government--unpressured by the potentially heavy hand of the state.

THE PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY

• Sovereignty of the people.

• Government based upon consent of the governed.

• Majority rule.

• Minority rights.

• Guarantee of basic human rights.

• Free and fair elections.

• Equality before the law.

• Due process of law.

• Constitutional limits on government.

• Social, economic, and political pluralism.

• Values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, and compromise.

The development of democracy:

Ancient history

The ancient Greeks are credited with creating the very first democracy, although there were almost certainly earlier examples of primitive democracy in other parts of the world. The Greek model was established in the 5th century BC, in the city of Athens. Among a sea of autocracies and oligarchies – which were the normal forms of government at the time – Athenian democracy stood out.

However, compared to how we understand democracy today, the Athenian model had two important differences:

1. Theirs was a form of direct democracy – in other words, instead of electing representatives to govern on the people's behalf, "the people" themselves met, discussed questions of government, and then implemented policy.

2. Such a system was possible partly because "the people" was a very limited category. Those who could participate directly were a small part of the population, since women, slaves, aliens – and of course, children – were excluded. The numbers who participated were still far more than in a modern democracy: perhaps 50,000 males engaged directly in politics, out of a population of around 300,000 people.

Democracy in the modern world:

Today there are as many different forms of democracy as there are democratic nations in the world. No two systems are exactly the same and no one system can be taken as a "model".

There are presidential and parliamentary democracies, democracies that are federal or unitary, democracies that use a proportional voting system, and ones that use a majoritarian system, democracies which are also monarchies, and so on.

One thing that unites modern systems of democracy, and which also distinguishes them from the ancient model, is the use of representatives of the people. Instead of taking part directly in law making, modern democracies use elections to select representatives who are sent by the people to govern on their behalf. Such a system is known as representative democracy. It can lay some claim to being "democratic" because it is, at least to some degree, based on the two principles above: equality of all (one person – one vote), and the right of every individual to some degree of personal autonomy.

Deliberative Democracy:

Deliberative democracy can be seen as a part of the agenda of deepening democracy, wherein the public deliberation of citizens forms the basis of legitimate decision-making, with the people participating directly in the deliberations or making of decisions that affect them. Although political theorists have long contended that democracy should not be based merely on voting but also on informed public debate and despite diverse attempts at deliberative democracy having been made in various parts of the world, it is only during the recent decades that such initiatives have gained momentum.

In terms of procedural democracy and the working of democratic institutions, India's record is considered to be noteworthy. However, questions relating to deliberative democracy have come to the fore, particularly in the recent years, with questions of inclusion and equality posing major challenges. The essays in this volume address various dimensions of the issue, ranging from a theoretical conceptualization of deliberative democracy to its role in constitution-making, Gandhian contributions to deliberative democracy, civil society interventions and the role of the media in deliberative processes in India, the participation of new social movements, Dalit and ecological movements, as well as the intricacies of deliberation and decentralization, and issues of development, marginalization and mobilization. The volume facilitates an understanding of the broad contours and evolving nature of democracy in India and how the Indian experience can inform larger debates on deliberative democracy.

Procedural Democracy:

Procedural democracy emphasizes the importance of fair and transparent procedures in decision-making, rather than the outcome of those decisions. This means that in procedural democracy, the focus is on ensuring that every citizen has an equal say in decision-making processes, and that these processes are carried out in an open and transparent manner. Procedural democracy is based on the idea that all citizens have the right to participate in the democratic process, regardless of their individual beliefs or interests.

Critique of procedural democracy:

Procedural democracy has been criticized on several grounds. One critique of procedural democracy is that it places too much emphasis on process at the expense of outcomes. Critics argue that if the outcomes of democratic processes are unjust or unfair, then procedural democracy is not doing its job of protecting citizens' rights and interests. For example, if a procedural democracy allows for discriminatory policies or practices, it fails to protect the rights of minority groups. Another critique of procedural democracy is that it can be easily manipulated by those in power. Because procedural democracy focuses on the process rather than the outcome, those in power can use procedural mechanisms to maintain their power and exclude others from the democratic process. For example, they can manipulate election laws, restrict access to information, or limit the ability of citizens to form political parties or organizations. Furthermore, procedural democracy is often criticized for its failure to address underlying inequalities in society. Procedural democracy assumes that all citizens have equal access to resources and opportunities, which is often not the case in practice. Wealth, education, and social status can all have an impact on an individual's ability to participate in the democratic process. Therefore, critics argue that procedural democracy is insufficient in promoting equality and social justice.