

Towards Inclusion and Representation

B.A Honours Political Science (2nd years)



*Bol, ki lab azad hain tere bol, zabaan ab tak teri hai
tera sutvan jism hai tera bol ki jaan ab tak teri hai*
"speak up, for you are free to speak up, for you are a
master of your tongue your sturdy body is yet your
own speak up, for your soul is still yours"

These stirring lines by the era-defining poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz capture the moments of turbulence and the quest for freedom in our neighborhood, Pakistan, in the 1980s, when an authoritarian regime tried to throttle what united Pakistan with several other voices at that time- not just peace and pursuit of nationhood, but for the 'rule by the people.'

This idea of democracy was at the heart of several peoples' movements across boundaries. For them, it was the way that led to the promised land, a place where everyone would live a more dignified and prosperous life. Democracy as a virtue gained even greater acclaim after the end of the Cold War to be embraced by many more nation-states in the coming years.

Three decades on, almost two-thirds of the modern-day nation-states are recognized as liberal democracies by the United Nations. But what comes as a surprise now is the growing discontentment and calls for change in the existing state of affairs. Democracy's vitality is no longer unchallenged. Scholars document a global 'democratic recession', well-encapsulated in an excerpt from the speech of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet:

"... A glance at the state of the world today reveals a grim picture[...] Democracy too is ailing. In 2021, the level of democracy enjoyed globally by the average person was down to 1989 levels[...] And trust in institutions is fading. People feel ignored, like democracy has not fully delivered its promise..."

While such an assertion might bring in some disappointment, it's high time that democracy rediscovers itself, which requires us to dwell upon this idea as an all-pervasive concept, intertwined with all spheres of human endeavor. This article focuses on two domains that find consonance with the deepening of democratic values- inclusion and representation, to breathe new life into the spirit of this idea now transcending the maxim of 'the rule of the people, by the people and for the people.'

The many shades of Democracy

In theory, a democracy is a collective endeavor where a group of individuals participates, directly or through representatives, in decision-making. But it goes beyond this. As the word 'democracy' comes up for discussion, the ideas of equality, liberty, and justice follow. Given the multi-layered nature of this concept, many new dimensions also show up. While speaking of inclusive democracy, we also have in hindsight the principle shift from procedural to substantive justice, and not just political, but also its social, economic, and ecological dimensions.

It is this vibrance of the changing contours of democracy that discussions over the issues that flow from all these dimensions become imperative.

Inclusive democracy is not about votes and constituencies anymore. It now demands better representation of citizens in totality- not just in the political sphere, but also by guaranteeing social and economic equity. Besides, the 21st century presents before us the need for environmental democracy, an idea that is yet to attain a concrete form. As we speak of this, we must seek to democratize not just our societies, but also the history, the language, the culture, the knowledge- anything that needs to be more accommodating of diversity, so that the differences do not lead to divisions. This is not all; democracy as an idea must gain ground not only within the domestic boundaries but also at the global stage of power.

**Inclusive Democracy: the journey
so far, and what is yet to be
achieved**

Democracy, both as an idea and as a process has evolved. While the idea is centuries-old and its roots go back to the city-states of Greece and Janapadas of India, it gained prominence only after the USA became the world's first constitutionally established modern democracy, followed by the UK and the other western regions. As capitalism progressed, so did the rise of the middle class, following which the social struggles for power unfolded. As time passed, these struggles intensified, leading to an overhaul of social hierarchies and the sprouting of democracies. After decolonization escalated, many post-colonial states too followed suit, though not all of them could sustain the process.

As the process of nation-building precipitated, various sections of society received their share of power in the form of their say in the policymaking process. This is how representative democracies grew to dominate the political landscape. While India ensured universal suffrage to guarantee political equality since independence, countries such as the USA saw mass movements demanding both political and social equality. This went on till the end of the 20th century, culminating in a more democratic political order.

While the world has become much more democratic over the last two centuries, the statistics for recent years show that this growth has plummeted.

On the political front, the number of electoral democracies in the world fell from 96 in 2016 to 90 in 2022. There has been a marked surge in polarization and 'autocratization' of democracies such as the US, the UK, and India and a study demonstrates that political divides have become deeper now, than in the last 50 years.

On the social front, democracies have certainly grown more accommodating in the past seven decades. The world saw many firsts when it came to leadership positions. The 117th Congress of the US is the most ethnically and racially diverse in history, with the last decade having the first African-American President and the first Asian-American female Vice President of the States. Likewise, in India, the representation of Dalits and Women has witnessed progress,

President Droupadi Murmu being the first person from the tribal community to hold the office.

Despite such progresses, representation across various genders, races, religions, castes, and regions is highly disproportionate. Moreover, the representation has not achieved justice for these social groups. In the USA, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement brought back the deep-rooted racial discrimination in American society to the forefront. The overturning of the Roe vs Wade judgment showed how even popular will had to lose to the politically driven interests. The growling wave of disinformation further aggravates the problem. In India, affirmative action policies could do little to do away with the oppression and crimes against the Dalits. Globally, less than one in four cabinet ministers is a woman, with 26.5 percent of women members of parliament across the globe. Thus, gender parity in political life is far off.

The economic and environmental state of affairs is no less worrisome. A breakthrough study conducted by American Political Scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page in 2014 concluded that Economic elites have substantial impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens have little or no independent influence. Reports by Oxfam too cried the same lament of 'Captured Democracies' in 2018 of how economic elites use their affluence and influence to grab control over governments' actions. At a time when climate crisis looms large, there are chances of worsening social inequalities, thus perpetuating the cycle. Unless the democracies do not seek to recognize non-humans as a special class of citizens, the sustenance of democracy would become difficult, given the imbalances climate change would generate in the societies. Thus, the idea of environmental democracy is something worth serious consideration.

While dealing with issues such as the environment, the question of global democracy also comes into the picture. Now, this is something even more difficult to attain, given the disagreements and dissonance among various states on various pivotal issues, let alone ecology. Despite all these glaring gaps, there's still hope to start afresh.

For that's what democracies are known for: they allow room to make amends, and fix problems more effectively. While the process is not easy, it needs democracies to come to the table and discuss ways of better governance. After all, dialogue is what helps democracy thrive.

The next section would seek to explore India's contemporary standing in the international domain and how it can use its democratic credentials to instill inclusivity in the global order and perform recalibrations for its political order.

India's G20 Presidency and the quest for a more inclusive and interconnected world order

With India assuming the G20 presidency for 2023 on December 1, 2022, efforts are underway to inject the ideas of universal togetherness and collective action to make the global order more responsive to the existing challenges. India's presidency comes at a critical juncture when existential threats are surging and there is an urgency to find solutions.

Keeping up with its ages-old democratic tradition, the central theme of India's G20 presidency is Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam- One Earth, One Family, One Future. This idea, drawn from the Maha Upanishad not only affirms the value of all living beings and the interconnectedness among them but also aims at bringing the Global South to the core of the agenda.

As the pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine have together yielded shocks across the global order, ensuring equality and justice has become increasingly difficult and also important at the same time. If India succeeds to wade through these times by bringing various countries on board, it would emerge as a consensus builder in an increasingly polarised world. Furthermore, the global financial reform agenda is one policy area, where India could make a significant contribution as part of its G20 presidency. India could help build a robust global financial safety net that would help prevent and mitigate crises of various kinds. That said, India also needs to work on deepening its democracy to lead by

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example. Given today's times, the issues of religious conflicts, growing centralization of power, and alleged assault on press freedom and civil societies are some issues that could have a profound impact on India's prospects to call for a more just and equitable global order.

Furthermore, going beyond representation, a country like India needs to ensure social justice for all sects and classes. Whether India succeeds in its quest to foster a sense of unity and fraternity domestically and internationally is something that only time can tell.

To conclude, bringing the voices and making them count is the key to a healthy democracy. We need inclusion so that we do not have to bother ourselves with the question of whether or not democracy is on the brink today, but to assert, with a whiff of confidence, that democracy has just made a new beginning and a better future awaits us all.

