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## DEMOCRACY AS A WAY OF LIFE: LIBERTY AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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### Abstract

This article attempts to investigate democracy not as a form of governance, but as a way of life with specific reference to India. It is concerned with the basic concept of liberty and analyses the political, civil and economic categories of liberty with references from thinkers such as Ernest Barker and Harold Laski. It establishes how liberty, be it in the political aspect as voting rights, right to oppose government and candidature for election, etc, remains incomplete without civil liberties and economic security for the citizens of any country.

“Democracy stands for a society which is courageous, which is compassionate, which is solvent, which is dignified and which is human. We will not be truly democratic if on every occasion, we resort to violence.”<sup>1458</sup>

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<sup>1458</sup> Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, an eminent philosopher, educationist and the second President of Independent India, conveyed this message in the Constitution Assembly on January 20th, 1947 cited in G.L. Batra, “Indian Democracy, A Historical Perspective – Then and now”, *The Speaking Threads*, November 1, 2018, available at [http://speakingthreads.com/2017/01/05/indian-democracy-a-historical-perspective-then-and-now/#\\_edn1](http://speakingthreads.com/2017/01/05/indian-democracy-a-historical-perspective-then-and-now/#_edn1) last visited on March 20, 2026

## 1. Introduction

Before we deal with the Indian democracy, it is important that we must understand what kind of liberty a democratic State provides to its citizens to protect their diverse and multifarious interests. It is the general notion that where the head of the State is elected by the method of universal adult franchise, have the democratic nature of government. But it must be noted that the democracy and its principles lie in the participation of citizens in decision making process while formulation of any public policy or enacting any law.

Whenever the government in a democratic State exercises its power in arbitrary and oppressive manner, and makes consistent attempt to hold, rather control public opinion through suppressing the dissent voices of intellectuals, subject experts and individuals manifested in the form of public debates, writing opinions in newspapers, by unauthorized exercise of State police power, that government does not deserve to be attributed a democratic government.

Therefore, let us look at the nature of liberty that democratic nature of State entails and guarantees to its citizens and basic understanding of what the democracy is all about. Is it only limited to the formulation of the government or it further extend to the process through which so called welfare state formulate the public policy, laws, rules and regulations.

## 2. Concept of Democracy

**Meaning:** There is no precise definition as to what exactly the democracy signifies under any political system. However, historically, the democracy has been manifested under different political system with different features. The political thinkers finds it difficult to give any straight forward or four cornered definition to the word "Democracy". In the words of the great political thinker and philosopher Bernard Crick democracy is the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs.

The dynamism of political system made it more difficult to give any exact meaning to the word

since ideas regarding about the scope of governmental interference in the individuals' lives are continuously under radical change. However, different political and social philosophers attempted to define the term democracy.

According to the Great Greek philosopher Cleon in 422 BC, the democracy signifies a setup which is of the people, by the people, for the people. Similar connotation is given by the US former President Abraham Lincoln as the democracy means the government of the people, by the people and for the people. According to Lord Bryce, democracy right from the days of Herodotus is meant to denote that form of government wherein the ruling power of a State is legally vested in the members of the community as a whole, where the will of the community is determined on the basis of majority votes in constituting the government. With the passage of time and usages the term occupied such general meaning.

The term "democracy" is essentially a matter of political method and a civilized way of taking political action. According to Bassett, -

"It constitutes an attempt to harmonize the individual freedoms with the requirement of law and its obedience. It is a political method where individuals as citizens have opportunity to participate through discussions and debates with an object to reach voluntary agreement as to what shall be done for the good of the community as a whole. In practice it is a continuous search for agreement through discussions and compromises, and wherein action is taken on the basis of maximum measure of agreement obtainable."

According to Sir Stafford Cripps,

"Democracy is a system of government in which every adult citizen is equally free to express his views and desires upon all subjects in whatever way he wishes and to influence the majority of his fellow citizens to decide according to those views and to influence those desires."

According to great American philosopher John Dewey (1859 - 1952), Science and Democracy

are mutually supportive and interdependent enterprises since they both are egalitarian, progressive and rest on habits of open social communication.<sup>1459</sup> He argued that social and political life is the aggregation of inherently conflicting private interests where well-being of an individual can be sustained only in the well-being of the society as a whole. He opined freedom under positive sense as the positive fact of participation to attain ethically desirable social order. He described Democracy as it is not simply a form of government defined by distribution of the franchise or majority rule rather it is the way from which the majority is formed.<sup>1460</sup>

He prescribed that the democracy as a form of moral and spiritual association that recognizes the participation and contribution of each member in their own to achieve the mutual purposes and interests under the ethical society. And the capacity to participate determines through the individual engagement in the institutions and practices of our society.

He expressed that Democracy is not merely and only a form of government but a wide range of social relationships of a personal and social ideal. He argued that the value of freedom is the positive power to be an individualized self rather than negative absence of interference.

He described Democracy as an ethical idea, where the idea of personality of an individual complements the ethical values of the society is encouraged recognizing that it has truly infinite capacities. Where the ultimate ethical ideal of humanity prevails over every social, political and industrial relations prevails and are treated as synonyms. He expounded idea of democracy recognizing to great extent the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity to realize the ideals of the society. According to Gettell, Democracy is that form of government in which the mass of the population possess the right to share in the exercise of sovereign power.

Among the differences in the definition of the democracy, it has some basic features like, the supremacy of the will of the people; the government is run by those people who are duly elected through adult franchise for periodic intervals; the government is responsible to the people and aims towards social welfare. It is the trust of the people that is reposed on the individuals forming government and made accountable to its values.

Conclusively, it can be comprehend that the democracy is not only a form of government, but a form of the State and a way of life to achieve the ideals and values of the society. Where, government implies political sovereignty lies in the people as a whole. Where the following basic principles prevails:

- (i) It recognizes sovereignty lies on the people, and allows every individual to speak, criticize and disagree with others and extends to criticize the government;
- ii) It is based on the principle of tolerance where individuals are allowed to have separate ideas and ideologies and does not believe in crushing them;
- iii) It believes in the method of persuasion and peace in all spheres of life;
- iv) Government is not allowed to illegitimately coerce in the name of social welfare. It upholds the dignity of human personality and recognizes various rights of individuals;
- v) Principle of Liberty and Equality is the foundation of the democracy;
- vi) Though it is based on principle of majority, but recognizes the equal protection of the minorities' rights;
- vii) Government is required to the work in accordance with the Constitutional principles and render adequate opportunities to all for the personality development;
- viii) In democratic setup, the power of taking basic decisions relating to the government are vested in all the members of the community and not in any particular class of persons;

<sup>1459</sup> Dewey's Political Philosophy, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-political/> last visited on March 23, 2026

<sup>1460</sup> John Dewey, *The Ethics of Democracy* 28 (1888), cited in supra note 9

ix) It is based on the principle of consent and not coercion, where the use of force is minimum

John Rawls opined that Democracy must not be seen as just in terms of ballots and votes, but primarily in terms of “public reasoning” which includes the opportunity for public discussion vis-à-vis interactive participation and reasoned encounter. It must include Government by discussion wherein balloting and voting are only part of that wider public process.<sup>1461</sup>

He emphasized the objectivity in politics wherein a public framework of thought must provide an account of agreement in judgment among reasonable agents. Reasonableness wherein requires individual political will to reach beyond their limits of self-interest. Wherein it further made social demands for fair discernment, including access to relevant information; opportunity to listen to varying points of view; and exposure to open public discussions and debates. He manifested political objectivity demands democracy to take the form of constructive and efficacious public reasoning.<sup>1462</sup> These principles, similarly, have been practiced and established under Indian context. However, in analysis, such features may take different form on the basis of Indian multi religious society.

### 3. Concept of Political Liberty in contrast with Civil and Economic Liberty

According to the famous English Political Scientist Mr. Ernest Barker, political liberty means constituting and controlling government, wherein constituting it by a general act of choice or election in which we all freely share on the basis of universal adult suffrage, and controlling it by a general and continuous process of discussion in which we all freely share according to our capacities.<sup>1463</sup>

Public or Political Liberty is enjoyed by an individual in his capacity as a citizen. Such an individual as a member of the State exercise

such liberty as a right to constitute and control government. Government is constituted generally through the means of Universal Adult suffrage by giving an expression to his right to vote. The government is controlled by citizens through meetings, processions and discussion. Political Liberty is the combination of various independent rights such as right to vote, the right to stand for the election, the right to hold public office and the right to express political views and criticize the government. Such political liberty is constitutionally recognized in our country. Such political liberty can be made effective through imparting effective education, freedom of political parties and freedom of the press.

Such political liberty has no importance unless an effective personal or civil liberty is guaranteed to the citizens. According to Ernest Baker, it consists of three different forms freedoms such as- Physical freedom from injury or threat to life, health and movement of the body; Intellectual freedom in order to acquire, hold and express individual thoughts and beliefs; and Practical freedom of the exercise of will and choice under contractual action and relations with other persons in general field.<sup>1464</sup> Such civil liberties could only be effective when they are not unreasonably restraint and controlled by State through exercise of powers in arbitrary, and illegal manner.

When a person has the right to life, freedom of association, freedom of speech and thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of action and movement, equality before law, etc., is said to enjoy the civil liberties guaranteed and protected by the State. It has been recognized that the recognition and protection of civil liberty of an individual is an important duty of the State. Wherein law protects individual liberty from encroachment by others. It is equally important that the individual has to be protected from actions of government which are dangerous to civil liberty. The recognition of fundamental rights or bill of rights by the State is the manifestation of idea to protect the

<sup>1461</sup> Amartya Sen & Thomas Scanlon, What's the Point of Democracy? 57 Bull. Am. Acad. Arts & Sci. 8 (Spring 2004)

<sup>1462</sup> Ibid

<sup>1463</sup> Ernest Barker, *Principles of Social and Political Theory* 147 (1951), cited in Vidya Dhar Mahajan, *Political Theory (Principles of Political Science)* 313–38 (5th ed. 2015)

<sup>1464</sup> Ibid

individual from any unreasonable encroachment by the State to their fundamental liberties.

Such civil and political liberty can only be realized by citizens under democratic countries with the recognition of distinction between the State and the Government, a democratic constitution, whether written or unwritten, the actual definition of the rights of private action and the recognition of fundamental rights. It is further complemented by economic liberty guaranteed to citizens under democratic setup. Without such liberties trinity, an individual cannot develop himself in fullest extent which is the basis of granting liberties to citizens.

It can be understood through that civil and political liberty mean nothing to a hungry man and such two liberties can prevent the exploitation of the poor by the rich. According to Prof Laski, economic liberty means security and the opportunity to find reasonable significance in the earning of one's daily bread i.e. an individual must be free from the constant fear of unemployment and insufficiency which, perhaps more than other inadequacies, that develops the whole strength of personality.<sup>1465</sup>

Such economic liberty manifests industrial democracy wherein the industrial government respects the fundamental liberties of the citizens and give industrial directions and enact laws through cooperation and not by compulsion.<sup>1466</sup> Its importance can be understood through the simple analogy such as in the absence of economic liberty, a citizen can hardly enjoy his right to constitute and control the government.

However, such liberties have tendencies to quarrel among themselves when it is not against the well-established legal system. For example, under the impression of political liberty a parliamentary majority may take punitive action against an individual who in exercise of his civil liberty publishes articles in criticizing the policies of government under public domain, on the ground that the author

has attempted to create disaffection or hatred against the government in public.

A democratic form of government and governance has a tendency to safeguard such liberties for its subjects. It is only in democracy and under democratic State, people can enjoy full civil, political and economic liberty. Because citizens have the right to constitute and control the government of their choice that can best safeguard their liberties and have a right to express their demands and values for making suitable policies, laws, rules and regulations. The protection of liberties is further strengthened by recognizing the fundamental rights by the State who is under obligation to do not act and run administration in contravention of such rights.

But it is equally possible that such liberties is also in danger by the tyranny of the majority. Under a democratic form of government, the ruling party having brute majority may pass any law disregarding the people liberties, and can trample them unless the people exert pressure upon the government through the press, platform and public opinion to desist from passing such oppressive law or act in destruction of liberty.<sup>1467</sup>

#### 4. Public participation in democracy

In contrast to Indian context, public participation in governance is sine qua non for the survival and working of democracy. However, majority of scholars hold that democracy, from the point of view of citizen, has only contribution in the formation of government through adult franchise. But it has been debated and recognized by the scholars, democratic structure is not limited to the voting system and contribution of the citizens in the electoral process, and extends to the methods and means adopted by the government in governing the population and society as a whole.

It is believed that though India under its Constitution has adopted Parliamentary form of government and guarantee the respects for the democratic institution but it does not imperil the

<sup>1465</sup> Harold J. Laski, *A Grammar of Politics* 148 (1925), cited in Vidya Dhar Mahajan, *Political Theory (Principles of Political Science)* 313–38 (5th ed. 2015)  
<sup>1466</sup> Ibid

<sup>1467</sup> Vidya Dhar Mahajan, *Political Theory (Principles of Political Science)* 313–38 (5th ed. 2015)

rights of the citizens to hold these institutions accountable when they fail to realize their commitments and threatens the trust imposed on them by the Constitution and the will of the people as a whole.

The great American Political Scientist John Dewey opined that democracy cannot be conceded as a form of governance that increases the divisions in the sub-strata of the society in socio-economic and political context. It is the opposition that has the major responsibility to safeguard the working of democracy.<sup>1468</sup> He opined that though it is largely conceded that the spirit of democracy lies in the power of citizen to participate in electoral process and cast vote for the form of government they want, but individuals do not vote in isolation but have the representative character of the society having notions of socio-economic and political progressive objectives of it.<sup>1469</sup>

Under democracy the heart lies in the process by which the majority is formed.<sup>1470</sup> It has the important role in both processes of formation of the government and how the government serve the people of the territory. It is obligatory for the government in democratic system that though they have the majority in legislative institutions and have great strength to control the mass through executives, but the laws, policies, rules and regulations they enact and implement must address to the will of the people. That means they must have due consultation and discussions with the opposition leaders or organization, before making and implementing any policy, law, rule and regulation and they must give due consideration in such policies and laws to their demands. Because democracy as institution lay its strength in solidarity, flourishment and promotion of different ideas and opinions progressive to the society.

Where in the society progressive dissent and disapproval is conceded as the obstruction in socio-economic development and society as a whole encourages the suppression and oppression of the minorities and becomes intolerant to any new and different ideas only because it has its source from the minorities, the democracy fails to achieve its objectives.

It has been accepted by the scholars that government in democratic system is not made up of who holds office or who sit in the legislature.<sup>1471</sup> It consists of every member of the political society including minorities and the persons who holds different views and beliefs from that of majority. It consists of every member of the political society including minorities and the persons who holds different views and beliefs from that of majority.

The preservation, propagation, promotion and protection of egalitarian ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity are the spirits of true democracy. It does not lies in stifling the dissent and lowering the oppositions. But it has its strength in its standing before the public debates and discussion not manufactured by the person those in power, where the truth has to be find out for the welfare of the society.

##### 5. Merits and demerits of democracy

Though it has been scholarly recognized that the democratic form of government has the best capacity to cater and serve the diverse demands of the society through public debates and deliberations but like any other system, democratic system has been praised and criticized. Let us first look at the merits of the democracy for which it is globally praised from the time of renaissance, which are as follows<sup>1472</sup>–

a) The will of the people is the fundamental core of any working democracy, and such democratic system has the best tendency to serve the society as a whole for the public welfare rather to give any privilege to any particular class or group;

<sup>1468</sup> Supra note 10, at 7-8

<sup>1469</sup> Id at 9

<sup>1470</sup> Id at 10

<sup>1471</sup> Ibid

<sup>1472</sup> R.C. Agarwal, *Political Theory (Principles of Political Science)* 254–85 (S. Chand & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 8th ed. 2014)

b) It is based on the egalitarian belief and practices in society as a whole, where even the poorest and minorities has equal participation and say in the governance;

c) It has been recognized that survival of any working democracy depends on the promotion and practice of the principle of liberty and fraternity, which is in best preserved, protected and promoted in democratic countries;

d) The governance in democratic system is on the basis of the sovereignty of the will of the people as a whole and the power structure is converted into the consensual public participation in every aspect of the governance, right from the legislative extends to the executive and judiciary;

e) It has the tendency and capacity to hold and achieve the goals on which we adopted the democratic system through developing support for social revolution and promoting unity and integrity in the society;

f) Though we have the representative democracy, but the master of the governance is still in the hands will of the people, and under democratic system, they have every right to held the democratic institution accountable, when they fail to fulfill their commitments through exercising democratic rights especially right to dissent and protest against the despotic actions of the governments;

g) It develops the individuals as a whole, which is the fundamental aim of any democracy. Individuals under democratic system are the masters of their own destiny, and any success and failure of a nation depends upon collective will of such individuals. And therefore, democratic system held individuals accountable for the governance of his nation, which produces most aware, politically intelligent and developed individuals in the society;

h) Democracy trains the people in the art of governance by giving them proper opportunity to participate socially, economically and politically in the working of governing

democratic institutions. And therefore, it caters our great aim of swaraj promoted and imbibed though the freedom struggle for independence.

Though the democratic system is praised for various points and it is inherently does have the ground for its criticism. Following are some demerits of any working democracy<sup>1473-</sup>

a) It has been recognized by the political scientist that the intelligence lies in few and not in many, and since democracy is dependent on the popular voice of the society, therefore, it has inherent tendency that sometimes the democratic institutions are in the hands of fools, incompetent and illiterate persons, which is threat for the efficient and good governance of a progressive nation;

b) Democratic system however promotes progressive ideas to be flourished but every society glorifies their historical achievements and traditions, and thus, there are large population who believes and practices conservatism and orthodox traditions, And therefore, democratic system as popular governance due to inherent conflict between such ideas, may hinders the progress of civilization and culture;

c) Democratic system finds authority in majority views and therefore, it is more concern with the quantity rather than quality in the governance of the nation;

d) Forming government under democratic system is threatened with the costly process adopted by the institution to flourish and maintain the popular view in the society;

e) The democratic institutions due to lingering of economic growth finds the capitalists as their major source of finances and funds, and therefore, democratic system is threatened when institution due to such dependence take favorable view against the public welfare notions;

f) Under democracy, party politics sometimes for their own benefits disturbs the social

<sup>1473</sup> Ibid

harmony and promotes corrupt practices only to gain the confidence or manufacture such confidence in the public;

g) Under democratic system, sometimes majoritarian government may inflict oppressive and act contrary to the minority views and ideas. And therefore, it creates disaffection and discomfort for the institutions in building confidence and trust in such minorities;

h) The scholars have mutually agreed that every nations claim that they are democratic but in practice they do not follow the principles of the democracy;

i) Representative democracy sometimes betrays the public confidence given in the elections by the people and acts in authoritarian manner and threatens the civil liberties of the people especially the right to peaceful protest and holding different views than that of the power.

## 6. Conclusion

From the discussions above, we can derive a conclusion that democracy is not merely the setting up of a representative government, but much more so, it extends deep down to the everyday life of individuals. In the Indian context, democracy works out to be a continuous struggle between liberty and participation where an individual is not just a recipient of public life but an active participator in shaping up the public life.

We can study from the analyses of political, civil, and economic liberty that none of them are independently sustainable, they are inter-dependent and an individual can really not have meaningful realization of democratic principles without these. If any of these forms of liberty is curtailed or weakened, the overall structure of democracy and individual development as well takes a blow. And it is the participation that becomes the very source of democracy by keeping it in check and relevant to public life.

Democracy also presents few challenges to its existence, mainly the majority excesses, socio-

economic disparities and diminishing dissent. It becomes very clear from these that an institution needs much more than just constitutional guarantees or procedures to survive; it also needs a proactive citizenry. Therefore it becomes very clear that democracy will only function at its best when there is tolerance, dialogue and reasoning.

In the final analysis, the fact of life only makes democracy alive when liberty is sustained, participation is initiated and voices are given the due they deserve. This is what will make democracy true to itself- not as just a system of political governance, but as an ethic and a social practice ensuring the all round development of an individual and of society.

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