

DEMOCRACY: AN INTRINSIC VALUE IN ITSELF AND AN INSTRUMENT OF FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Amartya Sen considers democracy as one of the backbones of development and growth and puts emphasis on the necessity of having a well-functioning democracy as an essential component of the process of development. By democracy, he means governance through dialogue, discussion, participation, debate and consensus. So when Sen talks about democracy, he means substantive democracy and not just the procedural part or formal aspect of democracy involving elections and formation of Government. The constitution gives us the formal framework for freedom but does not provide us with substantive freedom. In the same way, the constitution provides us with the formal and procedural framework for democracy by using which we have to create an enabling environment that will help us make the right choice and be empowered to make decisions.

SUBSTANTIVE DEMOCRACY

The formal framework of democracy given in the constitution gives us the space, the platform to thresh out issues. It gives us the opportunity to have a dialogue on important matters and issues that concerns each and every citizen and the nation at large. Democracy gives a chance to every citizen, equality in participation in the dialogue, presupposing equality for all to give and share opinions and thoughts. Dialogue is preferable over debate, for in a debate one has to be stronger than his opponent to win but in a dialogue it does not necessarily mean that one has to win the argument; they can reach an agreement and therefore provide a scope for consensus. Therefore, a dialogue should not be an aimless dialogue but should focus on the goals to be achieved, A dialogue becomes a discussion when it is goal oriented and the citizens are morally bound to participate in it and not participating in the dialogue undermines the spirit of democracy. So to participate in a well-functioning democracy presupposes that the citizens need to be equipped with certain things: educational capability, economic capability and substantive freedom. These are necessary to create the right and ideal environment that will empower the people to make the right choices. The absence of any of these factors will render the people toothless and

incapacitated. For instance an illiterate person will not possess the rational power to comprehend matters of importance and voice his opinions and thereby making him handicapped in exercising his choice. This will be a big drawback because in a democracy, the government has to be under constant vigil and scrutiny, the responsibility of which falls on the people. An educated and alert public is a must in a democracy as policies and actions of those in power reflects the moods of the people. If the general public lacks awareness, consciousness, and an interest in the affairs of the state, on how the country is governed and how those in the helms of power act, the elected representatives may take advantage of the situation and commit excesses for their self-vested interests ignoring the welfare of the general public. The responsibility of the people is therefore to expose the weaknesses and mistakes of those running the government and prevent them from misusing the power that is entrusted upon them. For this, a well-informed, educated, alert and rational public is required so that they can make use of the formal framework given in the constitution in choosing the right people to run the government.

THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEMOCRACY AND AMARTYA SEN'S RESPONSE

It has sometimes been mistakenly held that democracy and political liberties are luxuries that a poor country having far bigger economic needs to attend to, cannot afford. The force of economic needs in many third world countries is so great that it outweighs other claims including political and civil rights. Poverty drives human beings to take up terrible risks for their survival, that it would be ironical to talk about civil liberties, human rights and other lofty ideals to such people. They couldn't care less about their political rights and liberties when their livelihood is at stake. Therefore, the question often being asked is which should be given priority – (i) guaranteeing political liberty and civil rights or (ii) removing poverty and fulfilling economic needs ?

Critics of democracy may find favour with the second option i.e. fulfilling economic needs because they feel that the ideals of political freedom and civil rights are meaningless in the face of intense economic needs. The poor wouldn't bother about the finer points of political liberty and civil rights when they can barely make both ends meet.

Amartya Sen vehemently opposes such an approach to understanding the problems of economic needs and political freedoms. To undermine the relevance of political freedoms in the face of intense economic needs is the wrong way to see the force of economic needs or to understand the salience of political freedoms. The right approach should be to take note of and analyze the extensive interconnections between political freedoms and the understanding and fulfillment of economic needs.

To emphasize his views on the overriding importance of political freedoms, Sen takes up three arguments put up by critics of Democracy and exposes the error in their judgment.

1. Firstly, it has been claimed by critics of democracy that political freedoms and civil rights hamper economic growth and development. The Lee thesis (attributed to Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore) certainly conforms to such line of thinking. It propagates the view that the denial of these rights helps to stimulate economic growth and is good for rapid economic development.

In response to this line of argument Amartya Sen is quick to point out that although there have been a few cases of authoritarian states such as South Korea, Singapore and post-reform China having faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones, the Lee thesis is in fact based on very selective and limited information. There is rather little evidence that authoritarian governance and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial in encouraging economic development. Rather, empirical studies have shown that certain policies which help economic success such as openness to competition, the use of international markets, the high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms and public provision of incentives for investment, exporting and industrialization etc. are not really income inconsistent with greater democracy. These elements are not sustained by the elements of authoritarianism. South Korea, Singapore and China achieved economic success not because of the authoritarian governance but because of certain economic policies which are actually not inconsistent with democratic values.

Moreover, as per the capability approach to development, it is not adequate to look only at economic growth to judge economic development. Amartya Sen is of the view that it is also pertinent to look at the impact of democracy and political freedoms on the lives and capabilities of the citizens. Democracy alone can give opportunity to draw the attention of the government and pressurize it to take appropriate action to the demands and needs of the public.

2. The second argument against democracy takes the following form: if poor people are given a chance to choose between political freedoms and fulfilling economic needs, they will invariably choose the latter. The issue here is the priority of economic needs over political freedoms. Extreme poverty and dire economic needs drive people to work under inhuman conditions and to take terrible risks for some economic gains. It is not hard to understand that under such circumstances people will hardly bother about such lofty ideals as the right to vote, the right to participate and engage in democratic processes such as elections, debate and discussion especially when they will not directly gain or immediately be benefitted by such process. Even when they employ their full energy and time to eke out a living and still barely make enough, to divert the same to such an unproductive and useless exercise would be grotesque and an

unnecessary luxury, Thus, the critics of democracy argue that given a choice, poor people will invariably choose fulfillment of economic needs over political freedoms and rights.

Amartya Sen questions the validity of such line of reasoning. He doubts that drawing a dichotomy between economic needs and political freedoms is the right approach to understanding the relation between them. He refutes this approach by posing a challenge that the only way of verifying such a view is by putting the matter to democratic testing in free and fair elections with freedom of opposition and expression. He further goes on to say that there is no way of checking the veracity of the proposition that citizens of the third world countries are indifferent to political and democratic rights if they are given little political opportunity to express their views and to dispute the claims made by the authorities in office.

To quash the claim that poor people generally do not care about civil and political rights, Sen cites the example of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s. When an election was called and fought largely on the issue of the acceptability of the emergency, the Indian electorate firmly rejected it. The rejection of the suppression of basic political and civil rights shows that even the poorest people were no less keen on protesting against the denial of basic liberties and rights than they were in complaining about economic poverty.

3. The third argument against democracy is that political freedoms, liberties and democracy are especially western concepts which go against Asian values. The concept of democracy and political rights are not suitable to the social values of the orient which places more importance to order and discipline than on rights and entitlements.

Amartya Sen rejects the conventional interpretation of Asian values as hostile to democracy and political rights arguing that this is based on too narrow an understanding of Asian values. He is of the opinion that the so called Asian values which show contempt for political rights and justifications for authoritarianism have typically come not from independent historians but from the authorities in power themselves. Sen argues that Aung San Suu Kyi who vouch for democracy and political and human rights has as much may be even more legitimacy in interpreting what the Burmese want than the military rulers of Myanmar who are equally keen on suppressing the political freedom of the Burmese (Sen quoted this example when Myanmar was still under military rule and Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest). Similarly, Sen illustrates that within different cultures such as Confucianism, Islamic and Indian thinking, important authors have expressed the need for political and religious tolerance, freedom and diversity. Therefore, such generalized assumptions on Asian values are not well grounded given the size and diversity of the region. There are no quintessential values that apply to this immensely large and heterogeneous population. Cultures and traditions overlap over such regions such as East Asia and even within countries such as Japan or China or Korea. In this way he rebuts the

argument that democratic values goes against Asian values and convincingly rejects the view that there is a need to abandon democracy based on some authoritarian writings.

Thus, Amartya Sen strongly defends democracy as a universal value and considers democratic reasoning as an essential prerequisite in the process of development. To establish the overriding importance of democracy, Sen formulates three considerations which he believes will prove without a doubt the pre-eminence of democracy

THE THREE VIRTUES OF DEMOCRACY

To emphasize the importance of democracy in the process of development, Amartya Sen gives three distinct virtues of democracy: (1) Its intrinsic importance (2) Its instrumental contribution and (3) Its constructive role in the creation of values and norms.

1. The intrinsic value of democracy:

This consideration relates to the direct importance political and civil rights have on people with basic capabilities including that of political and social participation. We have reason to value liberty and freedom of expression and action in our lives and also to value unrestrained participation in political and social activities, the social being that we are. We have reason to value political freedoms as they give us the opportunities to determine who should govern and on what principles, as they make it possible for us to scrutinize and criticize authorities; as they ensure freedom of political expression and an uncensored press. Informed and unregimented formation of our values requires openness of communication and arguments and for this we require political freedoms and civil rights.

2. The instrumental role of democracy:

Besides its intrinsic value, democracy can also play an effective instrumental role. The important characteristics of a democracy are the citizens who form the electorate, the opposition and the press. Democracy can be instrumental in keeping the government on its toe by these three elements: an informed public, an alert and critical opposition and an uncensored and independent press. The Opposition will oppose and expose the mistakes of the government, the press will freely report and question the wisdom of the government policies and actions and the electorate can depose the government. In a democracy, the government has the unavoidable task of facing the electorate every five years. If the people are not happy with the ways of the government, they have the opportunity to change it and choose a different one.

The instrumental role of democracy therefore lies in enhancing the hearing that people get, in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention including the claim of economic

needs. Political freedom can have a major role in providing incentives and information in the solution of acute economic needs. This is the main reason why in Sen's opinion, no substantive famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. The government is accountable to the people who scrutinize its functioning and is watched closely by the opposition, questioning the rationales behind policies and actions. Moreover, a relatively free press without extensive censorship allows the media to report freely and play an important role in checking the activities of the government and prevent it from misusing its power.

3. The constructive role of democracy:

Besides its intrinsic importance and its instrumental role, democracy also plays a constructive part as well. While the instrumental role of democracy see to it that there would be a policy response to economic needs, the constructive role of a democracy includes the conceptualization and comprehension of economic needs. A proper understanding of what economic needs are requires discussion and exchange. Political and civil rights guaranteeing open discussion, debate, criticism and dissent are central to the processes of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities. There are many things that we may desire but all of them do not come under our needs. Therefore our conception of needs relates to our ideas of the preventable nature of some depravation and to our understanding of what can be done about them. In the formation of these understanding and in the identification of our needs, public discussion plays a crucial role. Democratic process itself is therefore constitutive of what we call economic needs. Open dialogue has far reaching effectiveness in assessing social and political problems. Amartya Sen cites the example of the important role public discussion plays in reducing the high rates of fertility that characterizes many developing countries. He attributes the sharp decline in fertility rate in the more literate state in India like Kerala and Tamil Nadu to the debates and public discussions on the bad effects of high fertility rate especially on the lives of young women and the community at large. Sen opines that the high level of literacy especially female literacy greatly contributes to making social and political dialogues possible. Thus political rights including freedom of expression and discussion are not only pivotal in inducing social responses to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves.

CONCLUSION

The intrinsic virtue, the instrumental role and the constructive importance of democracy can indeed be very extensive. But Sen goes on to add that the effectiveness of political freedoms depend on how they are exercised. While it is easy to understand and sympathize the plight of victims of disaster which are prominently visible such as famines or flood, there are other

problems which are not quite so accessible such as literacy, under nutrition, gender in equation etc. These sorts of deprivations call for deeper analysis and more effective use of communication and political participation. Inadequate exercise of democracy may result in failures. The consequence of violations of democratic practice on alleged grounds of national security and other concerns especially in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast is there for all to see. Rather than solving the problems of these regions through democratic means, the Government of India has been attempting to suppress the insurgency and separatist movements with military might using draconian laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 leading to gross violations of human rights. This has resulted in further alienating the people of these regions. This shows that political aspirations and movements of the people can be successfully addressed only through democratic means. The opportunities that democracy opens up have to be positively utilized in order to achieve the desired effect. Thus Democracy is the only system that can ensure a smooth path in the process of overall development. It is an end in itself as well as a means to development.

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