

Experience of Indian Democracy

PAVAN K VARMA

To speak about the experience of Indian democracy without getting into the very, very seductive temptation of stereotypes is a challenge, and I think diplomats often tend to go into areas where even academics fear to tread.

The important thing is to understand that democracy needs to be analysed, for even though it may be based on certain universal assumptions, there is a context and a milieu which needs to be seen beyond stereotypes and platitudes.

If we can take into account the experience of democracy in the context in which it operates and was born, then perhaps we can see that even though all democracies serve a common goal, each democracy is worthy of being studied in terms of its own dynamics and in terms of the milieu that created it. The fact that democracy exists in India is not enough. The fact that democracy is exceptionally important in analysing where India will be tomorrow is equally self evident.

In this context, I will share with you an anecdote which I know to be true, but which some people consider to be apocryphal. An anecdote, which involved Indira Gandhi when she visited the Soviet Union, the then Soviet Union in 1982. In the Kremlin, in a conversation with President Brezhnev, Mrs Gandhi was speaking to him about the rather volatile insurgency that was going on in the state of Punjab - and President Brezhnev who was in a somewhat advanced state of senility had dosed off to sleep. At some point, very gently, the Foreign Minister Gromyko, in a whisper, woke up Brezhnev, and he asked: "What is she talking about? I can't understand a word of what she is saying". And Gromyko said, 'She is talking about the state of Punjab (where there is an insurgency). The moment the President heard this, with an expansive sweep of his hand, he very politely cut short Mrs Gandhi and said: "Your Excellency, how can you allow such things to happen in

your country? Look at the Soviet Union. In the last 60 years we have managed to survive without any of these problems.”

Brezhnev died in 1983. Mrs Gandhi was assassinated in 1984. In the next couple of years, the Soviet Union became 13 countries. The state of Punjab continues to be in India, and within the democratic set-up and framework that India provides.

The story has a simple lesson, which is, that in a country like India, with the kind of discrepancies that still exist, not only in terms of social status, but also in economic terms, democracy is an indispensable safety valve that provides people a stake in the system, and which keeps the water line of faith in the system marginally above that of despair. Therefore, it manages to hold together the country with its great number of diversities and great number of discrepancies together, and that is the glue that democracy provides.

That is what I meant by contextualising democracy and trying to go beyond the obvious understanding of why, in each case, democracy succeeds or fails and why in each case it acquires a local colour. Let me say that in the beginning when the British left, and left behind the notion of parliamentary democracy, it was an alien idea transplanted into our society. Indians like to believe that in some mythological past we were a great democracy and we lived in a republic where all people were equal. Verifiable, historical evidence says that for thousands of years, India was an exceptionally, stratified and hierarchic society, where hierarchy not only had social sanctions but also religious sanctions. Now, in such a situation the notion of egalitarianism, as contained in the concept of parliamentary democracy, was an alien transplant. How did it succeed in India? That’s the question we most talk about without paying hundreds of tributes to our former colonisers for the great bequest they left to us and without paying undeserved tribute to ourselves for being democratic.

How did it happen? That requires analysis, because it is something that will be of relevance to all the democracies when they try to analyse the manner in which they formed their own democratic frameworks.

In my view, when the idea of egalitarianism, as contained in the notion of parliamentary democracy came to India, it was an alien transplant but it was not considered a sufficiently big threat to the established social systems of the past. If it was interpreted as a threat big enough, it would have created antibodies in the already entrenched and sanctioned structures of the past, including their non democratic elements, and would have been sundered and asphyxiated. The paradox is that India became a democracy not because there were democratic instincts within them at the time when democracy was introduced, but because the structures of the past were so strong that they did not consider the alien transplant to be strong enough to be subdued. And so, during a period of gestation, both the new transplant and the established systems coexisted. The second because it thought itself to be impervious to the democratic invasion, and the first because it was part of the democratic system India had pledged for itself.

It is not a coincidence that those who have been colonised by the French have a Presidential system and those who have been colonised by the British have parliamentary democracy. We take far more from our former rulers than we would like to.

So when that idea came, you had a situation where you had the established and entrenched system – and you had the new idea. The new idea existed because the Constituent Assembly of India, which consisted of a great many Anglophiles who believed that the Gothic façade of Westminster would be easily transplanted onto the red sandstone structures of New Delhi, thought that it should. But the social structures of the past were also strong. Both existed, not on a complimentary field, but on a field of coexistence where neither could prevail, but both could survive. And this continued for a period of time when it provided a vital gestation period for the new idea, to gradually, very gradually, grow roots within the system.

I must confess to you that initially the elite of India and the entrenched hierarchy at the higher levels of India looked not upon democracy, but on the machinery of democratic politics, as one more avenue of upward mobility. To become a Member of Parliament pole vaulted you over the

restrictive hierarchies of the past. It was another means of upward mobility, which they embraced.

In the initial period it was also true that we in India showed a high degree of tolerance towards the evolutionary distortions of democracy. We were tolerant towards its unethical manifestations. We didn't expect to elect angels. We realised that power politics would continue to embrace the machinery of democratic politics in an essentially undemocratic structure. But the important thing was, and that's the miracle of India, that the idea of democracy was provided with that vital gestation period and it grew roots; and what is important is that over a period of time – and that is what democracy does – it plants ideas in the minds of people who were expected to really just remain pliant communities in the hands of the entrenched elite. But somewhere, the idea of democracy, the longer it existed, began to plant ideas in those constituencies that were earlier expected to remain pliant constituencies of the entrenched.

And so gradually, even against those who were at the helm of this process, there occurred a genuine transfer of power. Gradually, very gradually, but definitely. And it happened, and you can see the manner in which it happened, that today, the poor and underprivileged vote in larger numbers than those in the middle classes and in the urban centres. And they vote because they want to take from the ballot box, from the system, that which it is not otherwise willing to yield. And they believe, through successive elections, that it is possible that they can actually make or break governments, without being necessarily, manipulated by those at the helm.

One of the things I believe in is that when a shift in power begins to take place it begins to definitely influence the way in which governments begin to work. It leads to concrete changes.

Let me give some examples. We were very lucky in having the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, whose overt and passionate commitment to the uplifting of the poorest and the most underprivileged was beyond doubt. And so we had, in the Constitution of India, from the very beginning, a 22.5% reservation for scheduled (lower) castes.

Through the workings of democracy, through the actual empowerment, which is the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, the dispossessed and exploited were empowered. In 1965 only four or five percent of the highest echelons of government had representation from the lesser castes. Thirty years later, in 1995, that figure, had already grown to 26%. In Parliament, 106 out of 544 constituencies are reserved for the scheduled castes.

But in the latest Parliament, the number of those from these underprivileged communities is higher than that reserved for them. They have not only been winning in constituencies that are reserved for them, they have also been winning in constituencies that are unreserved. So that is the journey of democracy and it is reflected in the actual statistics, which are transparent and verifiable.

We spoke about women. In 1993, as a populist measure, prior to possible elections, the then Prime Minister announced a 33% reservation for women in all local bodies. The first candidates who were put up were wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, fronting for the men. I am trying to make the contrast between intent and consequence, because that is the real dilemma of democracy. If we are merely mesmerised by the intent of the ideology, we are losing out on how democracies actually grow and mature and strengthen. But if you combine the two, another picture emerges. In that first election, women were fronts for their male counterparts; they were merely pliable accessories. But after five years of being in power, at the next election, some of them, said that they had quite enjoyed the process, and were not willing to front for the men.

So, what happened, beyond the drawing rooms and salons of Delhi and Bombay and the bigger cities, at the grass roots level, there was an unfolding of genuine empowerment, of women away from the lamp-lights of the media. At the grassroots level, and in a manner which is typically Indian, whereby democracy strengthened itself, not as one dramatic gift to the people, but incrementally, taking into account local context, working within the systems that prevail, and ultimately managing to prevail over them. Where women are concerned, that is how it happened.

Where minorities are concerned, again in the working of democracy, the first thing you have to understand about India is that it's a nation of diversity where there are people of all religions and some 120 million Muslims. The first letter that Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to the Chief Ministers of Independent India, was to say that co-existence in India between different religious communities is not an option but a compulsion. And the reason for that is very simple. It is because none of the minorities or the majorities are concentrated in one definable area.

Now, take the Muslims. Apart from Kashmir where they are a majority, there are 30 million Muslims in the state of UP. There are 15 million Muslims in Bihar. A quarter of Kerala is Muslim. A quarter of West Bengal is Muslim. Muslims constitute 11 per cent in Karnataka. They constitute eight per cent in Tamil Nadu. They are scattered across India. Now today, the manner in which Muslims vote, make them a significant density in as many as 125 constituencies out of 544. No political party in India can therefore afford to ignore a minority, because the manner in which that minority can vote can make the difference between the number of seats a political party aspires to get at the national level. So, the momentum of politics in a democratic framework means that the minorities cannot be ignored.

Today, most Indians want to swim away from the islands religious exclusivism to the dividends that the secular mainland can offer.

One of the unintended consequences of democracy is that the Banyan tree-hold of the Congress Party has splintered into what are now coalition governments in India. What has happened is that in a system of coalition politics, you have a government formed by several political parties, many of which are regional parties, and some of them don't even contribute more than two members to Parliament, and this is especially important where majorities are wafer thin. Smaller parties have, therefore, a tremendous importance, not only in terms of what they can contribute ideologically, but in what they can get in monetary terms. And so, their voice has to be heard.

I once remember, when attending a Cabinet meeting in the 90's, when the Prime Minister sat down and there were as many as 24

representatives of political parties, a Cabinet decision was held to ransom by a political party which had one member in Parliament representing a far flung state away from the centre. That gentleman said I cannot agree with this Cabinet decision, and the PM could not ignore what he said because his majority was not entirely beyond doubt in Parliament. I am not saying that all this is unblemished, and on occasion, good policies can be held to ransom by bad politics. The point is, the actual working of democracy is in pursuit of goals that might not have been intended on the original blue print.

Take the situation of castes. We have an entrenched caste system and is a favourite whipping horse of most commentators, especially from abroad. There is an obsession and rightly so. But in many instances the democratic process has turned the caste system on its head, because in Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh, somebody told me he saw the unbelievable sight of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who are at the top of the hierarchy, trying to fake scheduled (low) caste certificates in order to be entitled to job allocations. The Dalits in India have been exploited over the centuries, but in a democracy they also constitute a very significant numerical size and they have realised that in a democratic system they can leverage that numerical value.

Here you see Gandhiji's ideological commitment, internalised by a sensitive government in 1947 led by Nehru, but implemented and metamorphed, and transformed much beyond their vision by the real polity of political democracy. You cannot ignore the numerical majority of the Dalits and Muslims. Their viewpoint has to be taken in account. If someone said 20 years ago there would be a Dalit Chief Minister in India's most populous state of UP, you would not believe it.

Two new developments. And they are important. The first is, even though so much of the past continues to spin over into modern India, some things are changing, and one of them is the principal of accountability. Earlier, political leaders could almost take for granted committed constituencies based on caste, community, region, family, lineage, you name it. Today, the voter is saying, "I like you because you have the same surname as me, I like you because my father and your father worked together, and so on and so forth. But what happened to

that school you promised, what happened to the road, what happened to the employment you said you would give us?" India is changing: there are 100 million cable TV connections in rural India. And if one television is watched by five people, then 500 million Indians are watching television. Across the board, you can't take people for granted anymore. And that is showing in electoral results. In states, where Chief Ministers have performed better, in terms of the electorates expectations, they have bucked the old conventional wisdom of complacency, that if you win once you will be safe, because if you can't satisfy the expectations of the people, you will be thrown out a second time. This is an exceptionally significant change as it puts the fear of God into the hearts and minds of politicians. They have to perform, irrespective of what ancient connectivities they may invoke. If they don't perform, they will be defeated. That's very important.

The other development is accommodation and compromise. Over the years Indians have become exceptionally sensitive to power and hierarchy. And frankly, the political avenue, because it is the most important and powerful avenue to patronage and resources of the State, is highly coveted. And through that political avenue, the whole notion of accommodation and compromise essentially means that they will always stop in some manner and step back from the brink. If politics for them is the important goose that lays the golden egg, they will never kill the goose. And this ability to accommodate and compromise, even in situations where it seems almost unreachable, is a talent that has been honed by the democratic process.

There is much that is wrong with Indian democracy, even today. The use of money power, the use of muscle power, is often visible. Candidates are bought and sold. This is par for the course. But I must say, not out of diplomacy, but out of genuine conviction, that such aberrations are not the norm. And I believe today that democracy has become a way of life in India. It produces the largest number of politicians, elections and political parties. It produces more in this regard than the rest of the world combined.