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Topic: - Democracy: Participatory and Representative

Introduction

The term 'Democracy' has been in use in the tradition of Western political thought since ancient times. It is derived from the Greek root 'demos' which means 'the people'; 'cracy' stands for 'rule' or 'government'. Thus, literally, democracy signifies 'the rule of the people'. Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy is very close to its literal meaning. It reads: 'Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' In short, democracy as a form of government implies that the ultimate authority of government is vested in the ordinary people so that public policy is made to conform to the will of the people and to serve the interests of the people.

Participatory Democracy

Concept of democracy implies that ultimate authority of governance should rest with the people themselves. When this idea is sought to be implemented through the mechanism of representative democracy, it is possible that the people may become inactive after choosing their representatives till the next general elections. Moreover, when the size of a democratic community expands geographically and it includes a large population with a variety of composition in terms of race, religion, language and culture, the distance between the people and their representatives is likely to widen. For example, in large democracies like India and the United States, a very small section of citizens participates in any discussion; and very few citizens enter into contact with their representatives.

Concept of participatory democracy repudiates this model of democracy as it regards people's political participation as the basic principle of democracy. In short, political participation denotes the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes effecting their lives. In other words, when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation.

Methods of Political Participation

There are various methods by which citizens can participate in democratic processes: -

1. Citizen-initiated Contact

This is the process in which a citizen contacts public officials regarding a pending piece of legislation or a matter affecting many people. For this purpose, citizens may also meet the concerned officials individually or collectively.

2. Initiative

The process in which citizens may collect a specified number of signatures on a petition whereafter it is entitled to be placed before the legislature for popular vote.

3. Recall

The process in which an elected official is required to relinquish office before the expiration of his term, on the demand of a specified number of voters.

4. Public Hearing

The process in which public officials invite members of the public to share their comments on particular matters. Sometimes such comments are invited in writing also.

5. Voting

The process in which citizens actively participate to choose their representatives to carry on making policies for them.

6. Protest

The process in which citizens express their disapproval to government's policy or decision. It may include a strike, hunger strike, picketing, procession, carrying of banners, slogan-shouting, sticking posters on walls, distributing leaflets, refusing or returning an official prize or honour, etc.

7. Civil Disobedience

An open and intentional act of breaking an unjust law or courting arrest to draw public attention to a particular issue.

8. Political Violence

An extreme form of protest involving bombing, assassinations, riots, taking people hostage, damaging public property, etc.

9. Advisory Council

A body of distinguished citizens set up by government to advise it on particular aspects of the work of a department, e.g. the Central Health Services Council and the Central Housing Advisory Committee, formed in England.

10. Referendum

The process in which an act passed by a legislature is presented to the voters for their approval.

Athenian Democracy

The most celebrated form of direct participatory democracy was the one practised in the Athenian city-state of ancient Greece during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. They met in open assemblies to debate and deliberate on all matters and shared magisterial and judicial offices. All major decisions were made by the assembly to which all citizens belonged. What is remarkable in this model is that it ensured a high level of political accountability and political activity of the citizen. Indeed, citizenship entailed participation; it was a sacred duty and the full-time occupation of the citizen. The purpose of political participation was the common good of the state.

But the Athenian democracy depended on a system of exclusivity and inequality. Only citizens were worthy of the good life and a majority of the population—women, slaves and resident aliens—were kept out of citizenship. Indeed, it was on the basis of their labour and economic activities that the free adult male could be freed for citizenship. Aristotle, even as he was critical of democracy, justified this denial of political equality to women and slaves both on the grounds of necessity and the latter's natural inferiority.

Rousseau's idea of Democracy and General Will

Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-78), the exponent of popular sovereignty, is regarded the pioneer of participatory democracy. For Rousseau, democracy was the way by which citizens could achieve freedom. By freedom he did not mean the absence of constraints on the individual's pursuit of self-interest. Instead, he articulated a positive notion of freedom. Individuals are free only when they participate directly, actively and continuously in shaping the life of the community, especially in the making of laws. For him, law-making was an exercise of sovereignty—which cannot be transferred or represented by anyone else—and an expression of the will of the people. For Rousseau, participation was essential for the self-development of the individual and democracy was a means of individual development, but not the pursuit of selfish interests.

Rousseau made a distinction between private will and what he called 'general will'. General will is not an aggregation of private will or interests of individual citizens. Instead, general will is that which emerges when people set aside their selfish interests and deliberate on the collective common good of the community. Freedom lies in obedience to the general will; by doing so they are obeying their own true nature. Rousseau goes to the extent of saying that people can be 'forced to be free', i.e. obey the general will.

Ways to achieve Participatory Democracy

In modern large-scale states, the objectives of participatory democracy are sought to be achieved through:

- (a) Decentralization of administration** in which many decisions are left to local communities, as in the case of expansion of Panchayati raj in India; and
- (b) Extensive use of referendum**, as in Switzerland. Under this procedure, people's vote is sought on any new law, constitution or constitutional amendment. In Australia, referendum is compulsory on any constitutional amendment. It is a method of combining some features of direct democracy with representative democracy.

Representative democracy

Representative democracy is a limited and indirect form of democracy: It is limited in the sense that participation in government is infrequent and brief, being restricted to the act of voting every few years. It is indirect in the sense that the public does not exercise power by itself, but selects those who will rule on its behalf. This form of rule is democratic only as far as representation establishes a reliable and effective link between the government and the governed.

Conditions for the success of Representative Democracy

1. Popular Sovereignty

It means that the ultimate source of all public authority is the people, and that the government does what the people want to be done. Four observable conditions can be recognised in popular sovereignty: Government policies reflect what the people want, People participate in the political process, Information is available and debate takes place and Majority rules, i.e., policies are decided on the basis of what a majority of people want.

2. Political Equality

According to this principle, each person carries equal weight in the conduct of public affairs, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex or religion. But political thinkers believed that great inequalities in economic circumstances can eventually turn into political inequality. Particularly important in modern times is the unequal influence in the control of information and financial contributions to electoral campaigns. This unequal influence represents a serious barrier in achieving a complete democracy.

3. Political Liberty

According to this principle, citizens in democracy are protected from government interference in the exercise of basic freedom, such as freedom of speech, association, movement and conscience. It is said that liberty and democracy are inseparable. The concept of self-government implies not only the

right to vote, right to run for public office but also the right to expression, to petition the government, to join any political party, interest group or social movement. In the practice of democracy, however, it has emerged that liberty can be threatened by democracy rather than being an essential ingredient.

The Election Process

All modern democracies have indirect or representative governments, which are elected by people. These representatives are chosen by the people through elections. Thus, elections have assumed a very important role in the formation of modern representative democracy.

Secret Ballot: The voter casts his vote secretly in an enclosure, so that no one comes to know of the choice he has made. In representative democracy, secret voting is preferred; otherwise, the voter may not exercise his true choice openly due to fear of intimidation and undue influence.

Constituency: Constituency is the territorial area from where a candidate contest election. If only one person is to be elected from a constituency, it is called a single member constituency. If several representatives are elected from the same constituency, then it is called a multi-member constituency.

Stages of election process

The process of election runs through several formal stages. This process comprises of:

- a) Announcement of dates
- b) Filing of nomination papers
- c) Scrutiny of applications
- d) Withdrawal of applications
- e) Publication of the final list
- f) Campaigning
- g) Casting of votes
- h) Announcement of results

Electoral systems

An electoral system denotes the method by which: (a) a voter is required to indicate his or her choice of a candidate or political party out of those contesting in the election; and (b) the votes obtained by a candidate or political party are translated into allocation of seats or offices. When the number of qualified candidate or candidates in a constituency is equal to the number of offices or seats provided in that constituency, that candidate or candidates are declared unanimously elected. But where the number of candidates exceeds the number of seats, voting becomes necessary. The result of voting is determined according to the prevailing electoral system.

First past the post system

If there are only two candidates in the field for one seat, there will be no problem in deciding the winner. When there are three or more candidates in a single-member constituency, and the voter is required to vote for one candidate only, the principle of 'first past the post' would be applied to decide the election. It implies that any candidate obtaining the largest number of votes will be declared

elected. It is not necessary for him or her to secure absolute majority, that is more than 50% of the total number of valid votes. This practice is widely followed. The elections held for the British House of Commons, American House of Representatives, Indian House of the People (Lok Sabha) and Legislative Assemblies are based on this system.

Its opponents argue that this practice is not fair to the minorities since the candidates supported by them might lose in election in most of the constituencies by a very small margin.

The champions of this system, however, contend that this system promotes two-party system which results in a balance between the ruling party and the opposition. It makes the majority sensitive towards the minorities, and encourages major political parties to accommodate the interests and viewpoints of the minorities. Simultaneously, it prevents

separatist tendencies among the minorities and motivates them to join the national mainstream. Above all, it provides for a relatively stable and effective government.

Second Ballot System

Under this system a voter is required to vote for one candidate only. If no candidate is able to obtain absolute majority, second ballot is held to decide the winner. Again, several methods may be adopted for this purpose. For the election of the French President, when such a situation arises, second ballot is held between the two candidates who obtain the largest and the next largest number of votes in the first ballot. Then, for election to the French Assembly, if no candidate is able to secure an absolute majority in the first ballot, then a second ballot is held among those political parties who have obtained 12.5% votes or more of the registered electorate, and then the candidate obtaining the largest number of votes is declared elected.

List System

Under this system the ballot contains separate lists of candidates of different political parties; the voter is required to mark one list according to his or her choice. In some systems the voter is allowed to alter the content, the order, or both, of the list itself. Various complicated methods of calculation of seats per list are used. The list system is employed in voting for national elections in Germany, the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the Swiss National Council etc.

Single Transferable Vote

Under this system a voter is required to indicate his or her order of preference against the names of different candidates. For each constituency, a quota is set which is usually equal to the total number of valid votes, divided by one more than the number of seats available, plus one vote. A candidate who obtains first-preferences equal to the electoral quota, or more, is declared elected. His or her 'surplus votes' (that is first-preferences over and above the electoral quota) are redistributed among those candidates whom these voters had given their next preference, in proportion to the number of second-preferences obtained by each of such candidates. The candidate obtaining the least number of first-preferences is eliminated and the next preferences of his or her voters are added to the first-preferences of those candidates. This process of redistribution from both sides is repeated till the number of candidates securing the electoral quota equals the number of seats available, who are then declared elected. This system has been used in the national elections of Irish Republic and Malta.

The system of proportional representation has a unique advantage: it enables due representation of all types of groups, such as ethnic groups, women, different interests and ideologies.

But it has a disadvantage also. If a nation is deeply divided into different social, economic, racial, religious, linguistic, cultural and regional groups, proportional representation would hardly result in clear majority in the legislature. Coalition government, formed as a result of bargaining between different groups in the legislature, is bound to prove unstable and ineffective. Secondly, provision of proportional representation would encourage formation of political parties on the basis of narrow, sectional interests rather than on the basis of larger national interest representing reconciliation of conflicting

Strengths of Representative Democracy

The strengths of representative democracy include the following:

1. It offers a practicable form of democracy, as large populations cannot actually participate in the governmental process.
2. It relieves the ordinary citizen of the burden of decision-making, thus making it possible to have division of labour in politics.
3. It maintains stability by distancing the ordinary citizen from politics thereby encouraging them to accept compromise.

Problems of Democracy

1. **Tyranny of Majority:** Alexis de Tocqueville first used the term 'Tyranny of Majority' in his book 'Democracy in America'. Majority tyranny implies the suppression of rights and liberties of a minority by the majority. It is believed that unbridled majority rule leaves no room for the claims of minorities.
2. **Unwise decision making:** It is argued by some that representative democracy, which is majoritarian by nature, is not perfect. They say that there is no guarantee that representative democracy will always lead to a good decision. A majority, like the minority, can be unwise, cruel and uncaring and can be misled by unscrupulous or incompetent leaders.
3. **Instability:** There is constant instability in Democracy as the leaders keep changing in the Democracy as the elections are held regularly.
4. **Delayed action:** The decision making in a Democracy gets delayed as many people have to be consulted.
5. **Lack of Morality:** There is no scope for morality in Democracy as Democracy is all about power play and political competition.
6. **Corruption:** As Democracy is based on electoral competition, it leads to corruption. It has become a grave issue in contemporary democratic politics.
7. **Political Polarisation:** Democracy can lead to political polarisation, where political parties become more extreme and less willing to compromise. This can result in gridlock and prevent important decisions from being made.

8. **Voter Apathy:** Democracy relies on the participation of citizens to function effectively. However, many citizens may become apathetic and disinterested in the political process, leading to low voter turnout and a lack of engagement.
9. **Incompetent leader:** As there is generally no criteria for the election of representatives, in many cases in a democracy incompetent leaders can take control of major power.
10. **Expensive execution:** The process involved in a democracy is long and complex. This may lead to wasting time with funds. The elections consume time and money, which is spent using the public fund, including the mid-term elections caused due to resignation or death of any person holding a constitutional position.

Conclusion

Of all forms of government, democracy alone is meant to serve the cause of the people directly. However, the democratic process calls for a good deal of patience not only at the level of policy-making, but also at the level of policy-implementation. This may not be found to be very effective during the times of crisis. It is therefore essential that the provision for a temporary suspension of the democratic process during an emergency, and suitable checks against arbitrary use of power should be made within a democratic constitution itself. Moreover, today democracy is regarded not only a form of government, but as a way of life. That is why there is demand for democratization at all levels, including factory, office, school and family.