

CONSULTATIVE PAPER

On Political Reforms in India

India: A Democracy or Parliamentary Dictatorship?

Lok Sabha Election 2019 and the Need to Transform the Political System



A sick, homeless man sleeping on a road in India's capital New Delhi. Political and bureaucratic corruption is the main cause of poverty, pollution, sickness, and hunger in India. Photo (2018): Rakesh Raman

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INTRODUCTION

In its current deformed form, the democracy in India has taken the shape of parliamentary dictatorship. Now there is a need to create a system that can usher in an egalitarian society.

In his Gettysburg speech of 1863, the-then U.S. President Abraham Lincoln introduced America's representative democracy as the "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Driven by this principle of democracy, many progressive nations adopted it as the system of governance for the well-being of their people. But slowly the democratically elected members in various governments started misusing their powers for their own selfish interests, reducing the concept of democracy to a mere farce.

Now the democratic system of governance has lost its very meaning. Today, people or common citizens don't have any role to play in the affairs of a so-called democratic government. And there is a big divide between the rulers and the ruled. After giving power to a few politicians, today's democracy becomes autocracy or it plays in the hands of the wealthy to become plutocracy, which is a deformed form of democracy.

India is one such deformed democracy. While political analysts often discuss about the reforms in the Indian democratic system, it can't be reformed. Rather, there is a need for a complete overhaul, a need for a totally new system of governance – which is based on individual competence and free from the current system of parliamentary dictatorship.

ELECTION FRAUDS IN INDIA

While almost all politicians in India are corrupt – many are facing serious criminal charges – they have been winning elections by dividing voters on the basis of their caste, creed, color, and religious affiliations. Elections are also being won by bribing the voters, intimidating them, or by tampering with the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

It is also observed that people who vote in Indian elections are mostly poor, uneducated, and ignorant who can easily be cheated by corrupt politicians with their ad campaigns and false promises. As India continues to be an underdeveloped country, the politicians deceive the voters and win elections by promising basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, and cooking gas which are scarce across the country.

The victory in an Indian election is based on a politician's capacity to tell lies and hoodwink the voters most of whom belong to the underprivileged sections of the society. As a result, illiterate politicians or those with serious criminal records (history-sheeters) get elected and behave as dictators with ordinary citizens. These politicians are supported by unskilled bureaucrats. People of India are almost dying under the misrule of such politicians and bureaucrats.

World's top magazine The Economist says "a penchant for criminality is an electoral asset in India." The magazine has published data about the political success of India's "accused murderers, blackmailers, thieves, and kidnappers," saying that 34% of India's members of parliament (MPs) in the Lok Sabha have criminal charges filed against them.

Similarly, a report by political think-tank Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and National Election Watch (NEW) reveals that 31% ministers in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government have declared criminal cases against them. The cases include murders, attempts to murder, kidnapping, and crimes against women.

The role of democracy ends in India immediately after the elections – most of which are not fair and just. Here voters are like slaves who vote to elect their masters who are, more often than not, uneducated, arrogant, senile, and criminals. After winning the elections, the politicians impose their draconian decisions on the citizens.

Although all national and state governments in India have been working as dictatorships, of late a few despotic decisions that were taken at the national level showed the autocratic nature of Indian democracy.

The demonetization decision, for example, was taken arbitrarily by the prime minister of India in 2016 without discussing the issue in the parliament. After the sudden demonetization announcement, the banks in India refused to pay people's own money deposited in banks.

Similarly, the crudely designed Goods and Services Tax (GST) - which has caused unprecedented chaos in the country - was imposed by the government on the people of India. The imposition of taxes is also a big fraud by the governments because tax is the money that ordinary citizens and businesses are forced to pay to the government thieves who squander that money at will.

While these are anti-people decisions taken by the so-called elected governments, there is no provision in the democratic framework of India to hold such governments accountable and dethrone the politicians. While all law-enforcements agencies and even

courts act as toothless outfits, they do not dare to take action against the elected politicians. The same politicians again make false promises to cheat the voters and win new elections.

There is also a dangerous nexus between capitalists and shady politicians who want to stay in power by hook or by crook. Together, they have reduced India to a level of criminalized kleptocracy, in which all the four pillars of democracy have collapsed. Now it is also being observed that India has become a kakistocracy where the government is under the control of the worst, least qualified, and most unscrupulous people.

The sorry plight of Indians indicates that India has already become a politically unstable banana republic with rampant lawlessness, corruption, and exploitation of the ordinary citizens.

DISGRACE IN THE GLOBAL ARENA

As the deformation of the Indian democracy continues, the country has plummeted to 42nd position losing 10 notches on the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) annual Global Democracy Index 2017.

The democratic health of the country is going from bad to worse. This fact is also reflected in the findings of a global survey done by Global Democracy Ranking, a non-profit organization based in Vienna, Austria. It measures the quality of democracy on parameters such as politics, gender, economy, knowledge, health, and the environment.

For its Democracy Ranking 2016, a total of 112 countries were evaluated using a multidimensional approach. India, which claims to be the largest democracy in the world, is placed at a poor rank of 65.

India is not the only country that has failed to achieve true democracy that is supposed to bring overall development uniformly for all the citizens. Today, it's observed that the democratic systems in different economies of the world are crumbling and there is an increasing degree of unrest among the people in democratic nations.

Freedom House, a global think-tank that analyzes the political systems, observes that the acceptance of democracy as the world's dominant form of government—and of an international system built on democratic ideals—is under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years.

For the 11th consecutive year in 2017, “Freedom in the World,” Freedom House’s annual report on the condition of global political rights and civil liberties, showed an overall decline.

India is part of the global trend in which the viability of democratic systems is increasingly being challenged. It is leading the pack of countries that have lost respect for the concept of democracy.

Successive governments in India have leveraged democracy to their own advantage or for the benefit of a few corrupt politicians while depriving the citizens of their fundamental rights. And bureaucratic inefficiency - which is thriving under political corruption - has become the worst form of corruption in the country. Today, no government in India is willing to stop corruption because it has become the lifeblood of Indian bureaucrats and politicians.

Corruption, attacks on minority communities, restraints on freedom of expression, human rights violations, gender inequality are among the traits of the current political system in India. Politicians assume that democracy cannot be achieved and it cannot be delivered without these horrific traits. But why do we need such a torturous democracy? And what is wrong with this system?

ELECTION PARADOX

The problem begins with the elections (Lok Sabha as well as State Assembly elections). Today, in India’s population of 1.3 billion, there are nearly 750 million voters. On average, about 60% voters vote in a particular election.

It’s mostly seen that a candidate in any constituency wins the election with nearly 50% of the votes polled. So, if there are, say, 100 voters in a constituency, 60 will vote. And the winner will get 30 votes. In other words, out of 100 voters, 70 have not elected that candidate for their area. Then how can such a candidate be the true representative for the whole population in that area or constituency?

But this faulty system is being followed throughout India. Take, for example, the Lok Sabha elections of 2009. In those elections, 417 millions votes were polled out of total voters of 716 million. In the 543-member Lok Sabha, a political party needs at least 272 seats for majority and to form the government. But the Indian National Congress (or Congress) won just 206 seats and formed the government – with support from smaller

parties with fewer seats. This is a major flaw by itself because a coalition government is formed on mutual convenience of political parties rather than any convergence of ideologies or objectives to serve the masses.

A disturbing paradox in such elections is that majority of the voters don't elect but they reject the party that forms the government. In 2009, Congress got 119 million votes, which is just 16.6% of the total votes. That means, 83.4% voters did not want Congress to form the government.

Similarly, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the government in 2014. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 336 seats in the Lok Sabha election of 2014. The BJP itself won only 31% of all votes, which gave it 282 seats in the Lok Sabha (Parliament). That means, 69% of voters and a bigger percentage of Indian citizens never wanted BJP to form the government.

This is simply a mockery of democracy, which is instituted through a flawed election process. How can a government function properly without having the trust of majority of its people? This fault in the Indian electoral system has been persisting for decades.

VOTER ILLITERACY

Among the other irritants in the present-day democracy is the lack of education among Indian people. The literacy factor is a big bottleneck in the progress of the country on all conceivable fronts. This is also reflected in the election process, as people elect the candidates without analyzing their capabilities and then keep complaining during their tenures till the next elections.

According to government data, the national literacy rate is 74%. Most would think that this is a good achievement for a developing country like India. However, these figures are misleading. They conceal more than what they reveal. The definition of literacy in India is flawed. Literacy is defined as "every person above the age of 7 years who can read and write in any language is literate."

In the current knowledge-driven world, how can you expect such a naive person to take informed decisions in an election to elect the right candidate? While the entire education system in India is defective, you need to be at least a graduate and intelligent enough to understand the good and bad of governance in the democratic system.

Going by this yardstick, you don't have even 20% voters in the country who are educated

– and educated enough – to participate effectively in the election process. Consequently, those who vote, can't think; and those who think, don't vote. Result: Incapable politicians and defective democracy that brings misery and pain for the people at large. Indian people are the victims of this defective democratic system.

Now, India is the largest country in the world that is struggling to protect the democratic fiber in the nation, because the country is facing a severe leadership crisis. There is a need to radically change the electoral system and the way government services are delivered to the citizens.

As there is no competent leader in India to spearhead this change, the democratic values are wearing away from the systems of the country's governance. India can't be called a democratic country anymore because the rulers are not capable to serve the masses.

INCOMPETENT CANDIDATES

The post-independence era in India (1947 – 2018) can be categorized into two phases: Transition and Development. In the transition phase, the leaders who directly participated in the freedom struggle took the reigns in their hands and anointed Jawaharlal Nehru as India's first Prime Minister.

Nehru governed the country from 1947 to 1964. He and his colleagues in the government were abrupt in delivering the governance to people of India. That means, instead of creating tailor-made administrative processes for the people of the country, they simply adopted the British systems, which were never conducive to growth. During 17 years of his rule, Nehru could not develop India-specific policies and plans for growth.

In the post-Nehru period, or the development phase, the development was supposed to happen in the country. But for all political leaders in this phase, politics became a lucrative trade. People who wanted to make quick money or grab power started entering politics. They never had the will to serve the people.

As a result, majority of the people who adopted politics as a profession during the past 50 years are uneducated, unskilled, goons, or from the traditional political families. There is another category of passive politicians who came from other professions in which they failed or came after retirement. They include film actors, sportspersons, businessmen, civil servants, journalists, and so on.

As most of them are illiterate or incompetent to run a democratic system efficiently, they

can't think about the welfare of the people. How can you expect them to be a part of the democratic system that is on the verge of collapse for want of a forward-looking approach?

UNSKILLED MINISTERS

In today's increasingly specialized and cut-throat world, a person needs in-depth knowledge and extensive domain expertise to handle a particular department even in a small company. But it is highly unfortunate that people with no qualification or expertise become Presidents, Governors, Prime Ministers, ministers, and bureaucrats in India to manage highly complex domains of governance. That's why India continues to be a poor, underdeveloped country.

In fact, governments are supposed to be run like progressive corporations. Each and every department of the government must be in professional and competent hands. The ministers heading each government department should be qualified and should have demonstrable skills to handle a specific domain like finance, education, law, HR, technology, foreign affairs, defense, and so on.

However, in the current democratic system, you need to just win an election by fair means or foul to get eligibility to become a minister while there is no minimum qualification required to contest an election. Worse, the candidates who lose elections can also become ministers with the backing of their political party.

Even the new breed of dynastic politicians, who come with purchased and frivolous academic degrees from local and foreign universities, are unemployable for any professional job. But because of their lineage, first they get easy entry into politics. Then they easily become ministers. You can't expect good governance from such incompetent heads of departments.

In a professional environment, incompetent bosses are kicked out, but in Indian government, there is no accountability for ministers. And even the performance parameters are not specified for them. They work in a totally free-wheeling manner and squander public money carelessly. Result: India stands at the bottom of the pyramid in the world in all professional fields – such as education, industry, sports, science, technology, economics, entertainment, and so on.

Worse, a whopping 20% of the world's 4 billion poor who live on less than US\$ 2.50 per day, are in India. And India's human development index, which indicates the level of

skills in a country, is at a dismal rank of 130 in the world.

If you analyze the situation closely, you will find that India's sorry plight is persisting because of the flawed democratic system – which nurtures incompetence and kills talent – beginning with the elections. India will never be able to grow with this system under any political party and will remain a country of the poor and downtrodden for the next many centuries. Unfortunate but true. And there are plenty of other defects in the current political system of India.

DEFECTIVE RAJYA SABHA

With 250 members, Rajya Sabha is the upper house of the Parliament of India. Unlike Lok Sabha where the Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected by the voters of India, Rajya Sabha members are chosen indirectly.

Rajya Sabha provides a backdoor entry to certain favored and privileged people to enter politics without facing the people in democratically organized elections. While 12 members of Rajya Sabha are arbitrarily nominated by the President of India, others are handpicked by state and territorial legislatures.

While most Rajya Sabha members are not directly in touch with the citizens, they are not quite aware of the needs of people at large. Still, the Rajya Sabha members are part of the decision-making process to deliver governance to citizens.

This is a serious defect as the Rajya Sabha members are not directly accountable to the voters and they don't have any experience to serve the people.

NO ROLE OF PRESIDENT

In the present structure, the President of India has hardly any role to play in the development of the country. The President, who is called a mere rubber stamp, is largely chosen by the ruling political party to serve its own interests.

While most Presidents are tired and retired people, they have not been competent enough to make any democratic reforms. Rather, they just issue occasional superfluous, vague statements such as "Corruption is cancer," "India should progress," and so on.

It's seen that Presidents (and Vice Presidents) either enjoy frequent foreign trips on taxpayers' money, or behave as consultants without giving any implementable solutions

for growth in the country. But there is no accountability for them as they are not elected by the people at large. Do people really need a President?

No. Indian people don't need such a figurehead President. Indian people don't need incompetent politicians. Indian people don't need criminals in politics. Indian people don't need parliamentary dictators. Indian people don't need this defective democracy which is working like slow poison for them.

Instead, Indian people want an administrative system that can usher in an egalitarian society for them where all enjoy an equal opportunity to live and progress. In order to achieve such a change, there is a need to adopt a competence-based political model.

NEW POLITICAL MODEL

The new political model should prescribe the eligibility for each candidate who wants to contest elections. Here are the six traits that every politician must possess to be eligible to contest the elections.

1. Literacy: If a politician does not have proper education – preferably a genuine university degree – they should not be allowed to come anywhere near politics. While a politician has to operate in a globalized world, they should be able to speak fluently in English language in addition to the local language.

2. Domain Expertise: Politicians should offer their candidature for a particular domain of governance such as finance, education, technology, law, environment, healthcare, and so on. If they do not have demonstrable experience in any of these domains, they are not fit to be in politics and certainly can't become ministers. If the government ministers are domain experts, they would hire only those executives who have adequate domain knowledge instead of retaining the traditional good-for-nothing bureaucrats such as IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officers.

3. Social Work: Politics is all about community service. Only educated people who have been serving the communities selflessly understand the real issues that affect people. The political parties must encourage such social workers to join mainstream politics.

4. Truthfulness: Most people have seen the disastrous results of falsehood in Indian politics. It has led to a plight where only politicians thrive and ordinary people find it difficult to survive. Politicians who have a visible record of telling lies should be kicked out of the political arena.

5. Honesty: Corruption has always been the bane of politics in India. Corruption has caused a wide rich-poor divide where rich are becoming richer and poor are falling deep into the chasm of poverty. This ugly trend needs to be reversed to ensure equality among the masses. Say ‘No’ to corruption in politics.

6. Compassion: A politician must have respect for all forms of human rights. They should have proven record to selflessly helping others – particularly those who belong to the disadvantaged sections of the society. Selfish souls must stay away from politics.

Although today it will be difficult to find even 10 persons in India who could satisfy the above-stated six-trait criterion, we must begin our work now to usher in such a political paradigm in the country.

The main objective of the new competence-based political model is to allow only domain experts to handle different fields of governance, and uneducated people should not be allowed to even contest the elections.



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