Parliamentary Democracy in India: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT   Our constitution provides for parliamentary form of government. We have borrowed the constitutional features of several democratic countries. But our parliamentary model is predominantly based on the British system. The Head of Government in our system, the Prime Minister, can hold office only so long as he commands the confidence of the Lok Sabha. Confidence of the House is reflected in existence/continuance of majority support - whether it be of a single party or of a coalition of parties. This feature can, and does, cause instability in governance. In Presidential democracies, the Head of Government, the President is directly elected by the people and cannot be removed from office except in circumstances of high crimes and misdemeanour established through impeachment process. A parliamentary system is a system of democratic governance of a state in which the executive branch derives its democratic legitimacy from, and is held accountable to, the legislature (parliament); the executive and legislative branches are thus interconnected. In a parliamentary system, the head of state is normally a different person from the head of government. This is in contrast to a presidential system in a democracy, where the head of state often is also the head of government, and most importantly, the executive branch does not derive its democratic legitimacy from the legislature. This paper underlines the parliamentary democracy and related aspects in Indian political environment.

INTRODUCTION:

India is the largest functioning democracy in the world. It achieved her independence after a prolonged national movement. We are proud to be the largest democracy in the world. For more than sixty-five years we have witnessed the conduct of successful elections, peaceful changes of government at the Centre and in the States, people exercising freedom of expression, movement and religion. India has also been developing and transforming economically and socially. At the same time we, quite often, listen complains about prevalent inequalities, injustice or non-fulfillment of expectations of certain sections of the society. These people do not feel themselves participative in the democratic process. You may ask why it is so. You have already read in earlier unit that democracy means 'government of the people, for the people, and by the people'. It means democracy is not limited to just a process of election, but also fulfilling social and economic aspirations of the people. In India we keep on debating these various aspects of democracy and its achievements and challenges.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To understand the meaning of democracy in its different aspects;
2. To identify major problems, issues and challenges being faced by Indian democracy;
3. To analyze the corrective measures for improving the Indian democratic system.

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY:

Let us begin with understanding the meaning of democracy and the conditions that are essential for its successful functioning. This will help us in appreciating the challenges to Indian democracy.

Meaning of Democracy:

Long back, former President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln said, "Democracy is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people." The term 'democracy' comes from the Greek word *demokratia* which means "rule of the people". It was coined from two words: *demos* that means "people" and *Kratos* which refers to "power". That is, in a democracy the power rests with the people. This meaning is based on the experiences of the governments that existed in some of the Greek city-states, notably Athens. And, today also, democracy is defined as a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodic free elections. When you examine the definitions of democracy, as suggested above, you will find that most of those definitions define democracy as a form of government which is run by the elected representatives.

CHALLENGES TO INDIAN DEMOCRACY:

India is a very large country full of diversities – linguistically, culturally, religiously. At the time of independence it was economically underdeveloped.

There were enormous regional disparities, widespread poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and shortage of almost all public welfare means. Citizens had enormous expectations from independence. As mentioned above, India has changed a lot. Yet, there are various challenges that the country faces in terms of fulfillment of expectations of various sections of society. The challenges come both from prevailing domestic and international conditions as well as lack of adequate prerequisites for a smooth functioning of democracy. These are discussed below.

- **Illiteracy:** Illiteracy among people was a matter of grave concern for the successful functioning of democracy in India on the eve of independence and it still continues to be a major challenge. The level of education of citizens is a key to both the successful functioning of democracy and socio-economic development of the country. And perhaps, more importantly, it is an essential condition for human dignity. But the state of formal literacy was almost dismal when India achieved independence. The literacy rate in 1951 was mere 18.33 per cent and female literacy was negligible with 8.9 percent. It was, therefore, feared by many that the citizens would not be able to play their roles effectively and exercise their right to vote meaningfully which is an individual's expression of the power of the people.

- **Poverty:** It is generally said that for a hungry person right to vote does not have any meaning. For him/her the first requirement is food. Therefore, poverty is considered as the greatest bane of democracy. It is, in fact, the root cause of all kinds of deprivations and inequalities. It is the state of denial of opportunities to people to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. Of course, India inherited poverty from the long exploitative British colonial rule, but it continues to be one of the gravest problems today. Even now a considerable proportion of Indian population lives below poverty line, called 'BPL'. **The poverty line means an income level below which human beings cannot provide for their basic necessities of food, much less for clothes and shelter.** The governmental definition of poverty line during the 1960s

sought to measure the extent of poverty on the amount of income required to purchase a barest minimum desirable food having nutritional standards of caloric intake by a person. According to it, in Indian conditions, a person in rural areas needs an average of 2400 calories per day and in urban areas and average of 2100 calories per day in order to keep himself above the poverty line.

- **Gender Discrimination:** Discrimination against girls and women exists in every walk of life. You must have had such experiences of prevailing gender inequality in our society and polity. But we know that gender equality is one of the basic principles of democracy.

- **Regionalism:** Indian democracy has also been struggling with regionalism which is primarily an outcome of regional disparities and imbalances in development. We all know that India is a plural country with diversities of religions, languages, communities, tribes and cultures. A number of cultural and linguistic groups are concentrated in certain territorial segments.

- **Corruption:** Corruption in public life has been a major concern in India. In 2011, India was ranked 95th of 183 countries defined as corrupt in Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI). In fact, corruption is rampant in all walks of life, be it land and property, health, education, commerce and industry, agriculture, transport, police, armed forces, even religious institutions or so-called places of spiritual pursuits. Corruption continues to exist in covert and overt ways at all three levels - political, bureaucratic and corporate sector.

- **Criminalization of Politics:** In recent years, criminalization of politics in India has become a debatable issue. There have been allegations that there are some elements in politics that do not have faith in democratic values and practices. They indulge in violence and take refuge in other unhealthy, undemocratic methods to win elections

- **Political Violence:** Violence has been with us for long, but use of violence for political end is dangerous for the existence of any system. In India we have been witnessing various forms of violence. Communal violence, caste violence and political violence in general have attained serious proportion. Communal riots are engineered by vested interests for political, religious and economic reasons. Caste violence in various shapes has been increasing.

PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES:

All stakeholders have to work unitedly to find lasting solutions to safeguard parliamentary democracy from the tremendous strains experienced today and to strengthen it. India had the great benefit of starting its journey under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru during the defining years of its freedom, and a great line-up of visionary and sagacious men and women provided effective leadership in the task of consolidating democracy and in laying the institutional foundations of the republic. Jawaharlal Nehru, as president of the Indian National Congress, declared in 1936 that India's ultimate objective was "the establishment of a democratic state," a sovereign state which would promote and foster "full democracy" and usher in a new social and economic order. A study indicated that in the first three years of the 14th Lok Sabha, 26 per cent of parliamentary time has been lost due to disruptions. During the budget session this year, the Lok Sabha lost 73 hours (34 per cent of its time) due to disorder. Only 11 of the slotted 25 Bills were passed in the monsoon session. In that session, the Lok Sabha lost 40 per cent of its time due to adjournments, and the Rajya Sabha lost 49 per cent. Four Bills were passed without discussion in the Lok Sabha. If the Lok Sabha worked 124 hours in the monsoon session of 2006, it worked only 65 hours in the monsoon session of 2007. Each minute of parliamentary time costs the public exchequer to the tune of about Rs.26,000.

Intolerance, divisiveness, corruption, confrontations and disrespect to dissent are increasingly vitiating our socio-political system. Added to this is the attempt by some institutions to malign and marginalize important people's forums with intent to occupy larger space than what is ideally feasible or constitutionally permissible in a representative democratic system. Judicial activism is sought to be justified because of the perceived decline in the effectiveness of parliamentary accountability. Frequent interventions in the exclusive jurisdiction of the legislature will only contribute to further eroding the authority of Parliament. By expelling 10 MPs for their involvement in the 'cash-for-query' scam, and by suspending others for different periods for various misdemeanors, Parliament has set an example. But these initiatives are not projected properly to help enhance people's respect for democratic institutions. The media, rather than becoming the prophets of doom and contributing to the loss of the people's faith in the institutions, should endeavour to reinforce their trust in them.

OBSTACLES:

The Major Obstacles faced in the Smooth Functioning of Parliamentary Democracy in India! India may best describe as Representative Parliamentary Democracy. Parliament occupies the centre stage in the Indian Political System. The Parliament of India represents all constitutionally organized shades of public opinion at the national level. It epitomizes the 'Sovereign Will' of the people of India. However, there co-exist major obstacles in the smooth working of the Parliamentary democracy in India. India being basically a traditional society was not prepared to adopt the values of Parliamentary democracy. The heterogeneous composition of India Acts as a major hindrance to the democratic working of the Parliamentary System.

The Indian society being highly segmented along the lines of castes, religion, class etc, prevents the true working of Parliamentary democracy. Then there are the obstacles in the form of high prevalence of illiteracy and poverty.

Both continue to create a vicious circle which traps the successful functioning of the system. These factors have contributed to the growth of malaises in the form of corruption, criminalization of politics. Added of these are the problems or regionalism, communalism. Regionalism has many time raise demands for separate statehood. Another consequence of regional has been the growth of regional parties which in effect have made coalition Governments a trend in Indian Parliamentary democracy. Communalism is another evil which adversely effects the normal functioning of the system. The problems associated with the lack of transparency in the Governmental structure and judicial delays have made the smooth functioning of Parliamentary democracy complex.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES:

One of the commonly attributed advantages to parliamentary systems is that it is faster and easier to pass legislation, as the executive branch is formed by the direct or indirect support of the legislative branch and often includes members of the legislature. Thus the executive (as the majority party or coalition of parties in the legislature) has a majority of the votes, and can pass legislation at will. In a presidential system, the executive is often chosen independently from the legislature. If the executive and the majority of the legislature are from different political parties, then stalemate can occur. Thus the executive might not be able to implement its legislative proposals. An executive in any system (be it parliamentary, presidential or semi-presidential) is chiefly voted into office on the basis of his or her party's platform/manifesto, and the same is also true of the legislature. In addition to quicker legislative action, parliamentary government has attractive features for nations that are ethnically, racially, or ideologically divided. In a presidential system, all executive power is vested in one person: the president. In a parliamentary system, with a collegial executive, power is more divided. In the 1989 Lebanese Taif Agreement, in order to give

Muslims greater political power, Lebanon moved from a semi-presidential system with a strong president to a system more structurally similar to classical parliamentary government. Iraq similarly disdained a presidential system out of fears that such a system would be tantamount to Shiite domination; Afghanistan's minorities refused to go along with a presidency as strong as the Pashtuns desired.

It can also be argued that power is more evenly spread out in parliamentary government. The prime minister is seldom as important as a ruling president, and there tends to be a higher focus on voting for a party and its political ideas than voting for an actual person. In his 1867 book The English Constitution, Walter Bagehot praised parliamentary government for producing serious debates, for allowing change in power without an election, and for allowing elections at any time. Bagehot considered the four-year election rule of the United States to be unnatural. Parliamentary democracy in India has become a farce. For the proper working of parliamentary democracy many pre-requisites are needed; till the leaders are responsible and conscious of their duties and responsive to the public opinion. Democracy itself will not be stable. But it is more so in the case of parliamentary democracy because the Council of Ministers should be responsible to the Parliament and should also take into consideration the voice of the people. If they start ignoring what the people want the Government will become dictatorial in its behavior.

CONCLUSION:

All political systems are embedded in their historical past, they work differently in different political and social settings. Each system has its Constitution as the cornerstone of the nation and its governance. It is central theme which determines and defines the functional parameters of all three branches of Government – legislature, executive and judiciary. The framers of Indian Constitution adopted the British model of parliamentary government because Independent India is a product of the most massive freedom movement. Hence it could be a mass democracy, based on universal adult franchise. However they did not make it a sovereign law making body like its English counterparts. They placed supremacy in the hand of legislature, but it had to be restricted because unlike Great Britain, India has a lengthy written Constitution, a federal distribution of powers and a list of fundamental rights. Therefore parliamentary law to be valid must confirm in all respects with the constitution.

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