

Democracy in India

By M. J. Audi

Democracy, defined Lincoln, as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Such a government does not exist anywhere in the world, not even in the Lincoln's country. Nowhere is there a government "of" the people. There are governments everywhere but definitely not "by" the people. The governments may or may not be "for" the people. Yet Lincoln's is the most accurate description of democracy. What can make it a living reality in India?

Principles

Our Constitution proclaims that India is a democracy. Three principles decide the existence of democracy. The first and the foremost principle is that no person is indispensable in a democracy. In India, self-proclaimed persons think and act assuming that without them neither democracy nor country can survive. Hence these indispensable cling to power like flies clinging to sweets. To say that a leader or leaders and their cronies have no alternative is to create maniacs in society — some big, some small. The vitality of democracy is always known by its capacity to change the horses in the midstream.

Economic independence of citizens is the second principle of democracy. Political equality by itself is an empty shell. Therefore, all thinkers concur that in a democracy, political equality should be accompanied by reasonable economic equality. To ask for economic equality in a country whose ruling class seems to have developed vested interests in poverty is to ask for the moon.

Like people remembering God only in times of adversity, our ruling class remembers the poor only during elections. Elections, though important, are just one of the components of democracy. But in India, democracy is completely identified with elections. Proudly, we claim that on the continents of Asia and Africa, free and fair elections regularly take place only in India. This is true. But it is not true that because of such elections, we are a democracy in true sense of the word. Identification of democracy with elections is as ridiculous as identifying weather with chimney smoke.

Votes

During every general election roughly one third of the electorate on the rolls does not even care to turn up at the polling booths. The votes polled are sorted out as valid and invalid votes. The victorious party is that which gets the majority of valid votes. To take the latest example, the net-poll percentage in 1984 elections was 61.46 of which the Indian National Congress (I) got 49.17. So

far, we had eight general elections. So far no party in power at the Centre has got even 50 per cent of the valid votes polled. In terms of vote, every Union Government has been and is a "minority government" ever since independence. There is no correlation between the percentage of votes polled and the seats bagged in the legislatures. In 1984, the Congress (I) won 401 seats. Thus, democracy in India is reduced to the game of numbers — the number of seats. These facts damage the validity of election exercise and knock the bottom out of the "massive mandate."

Third principle of democracy is continuous and effective participation of all citizens in the affairs of the state. In India, citizen participation is strictly confined to voting whenever elections take place. Real power is monopolised by a few families. Just as earth revolves round the sun, democracy in India revolves round the families. Political party is a misnomer for organisations which are essentially family concerns. We find families so dedicated to the service of India that they are eager to serve her in every generation. The democratic processes are used to sanctify the family rule. Political parties, the guardians of democracy, are intensely allergic to democracy within party organisation. Bogus membership and bogus leadership threaten to become basic traits of our parties. Curious constellations of father-daughter, mother-son, husband-wife, fathers-sons-daughters-in-law, uncles-nephews and first-cousings glide in India's political sky. It could be a matter of opinion whether they grace or disgrace democracy. It is a matter of fact that they decisively damage fibre of democracy in India. The constitution also says that India is a republic. A republic rejects hereditary title to rule. But, in India, whenever the rulers are forced to quit or die, their children and relations fill up the vacuum.

Gandhiji

In modern India only one person resolutely refused to promote the interests of his children by taking advantage of his position in public life. He insisted that those who aspire to rule should aim at nothing but public good. That was Mahatma Gandhi. In a country which hails Gandhiji as the Father of the Nation, Gandhians and non-Gandhians profess noble creeds but skilfully use their positions for building family fortunes. Just as each priest praises his own relics, each family recommends its scion as the only saviour of people of India.

Families with better prospects of forming a government and doling its patronage are surrounded by another breed whose life's purpose is holding offices

of the state and enjoying privileges and perquisites that go with them. As such persons cannot earn offices by their own ability, they grab them through servility. They prudently worship the rising sun and change their loyalties as quickly as the chameleon changes its colours. Ruling families know it and yet tolerate these lice to meet their own psychic needs. The best sycophants come from the ranks of this breed. As the number of sycophants is more than the number of offices, the families set up boards, committees and commissions on one pretext or other to accommodate them. In a country of seven hundred million only ten thousand persons are controlling the show of democracy. The vast multitude are used as the guinea pigs. No wonder, even after forty years of freedom, democracy in India has failed to take grass-roots.

Fruits of progress made so far are largely enjoyed by these families, their sycophants and top brass in different branches of government. They fix for themselves their salaries and allowances, preferences and priorities, privileges and perquisites, tours and travels in utter disregard to the plight of people whose welfare they profess to serve. In 1940, Gandhiji asserted that "the contrast between the palaces of New Delhi and the miserable hovels of the poor cannot last one day in a free India." The contrast has become greater and sharper as could be seen from the two distinct life-styles side by side — that of the ruling class and the ruled. Elections give legitimacy to these life-styles. Therefore, "elections" are to India's ruling class what "open sesame" was to Alibaba.

The ruling class in India flourishes at the expense of hapless millions frantically searching work and bread. During freedom movement, Gandhiji used to assure Indians that Swaraj would never be the replacement of white exploiters by the brown. Facts of life prove him wrong. If the Indians care to examine the account books of the nation, they would be shocked by enormous expenditure from the public exchequer on the maintenance of the ruling class.

This, then, is the scenario of democracy in India. An ape is an ape and a varlet is a varlet though they be clad in silk or scarlet. Formally, India is a democracy. Factually, she is an oligarchy of families. The establishment intellectuals defend it contending that democracy lives by trial and error. The contention is that errors are bound to be committed but they would automatically disappear in course of time. Did our great patriots sacrifice their lives for such a polity? Are we, their descendants, incapable of giving ourselves a democracy in true sense of the term?