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**Democracy at Work : Evolving Federalism Through
Political Representation in Socio-Cultural Pluralism**

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To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self respect and their oneness, and should insist upon choosing as their representatives only such persons as are good and true.

—Mahatma Gandhi

The Political developments in the second half of the 20th century clearly prove that democracy or democratic governance only can hold together a country with diversity and plurality. During this period there has also been a lot of discussion about the nature of democracy in various countries—whether it is guided democracy, people's democracy bourgeois democracy, social democracy or representative democracy. Whatever it may be, the focus in all cases is on the democratic process, its evolution and development with the key word, that people are sovereign and their will must prevail. Thus democratisation has become a central issue in almost all parts of the world, especially in the developing countries.

While direct democracy is the ideal form, what we have today is representative democracy. Although no one can really represent another person and no one's will can be treated as substitute for or representative of others, we have accepted this system. The countries whose governance is deeply rooted in democracy are constantly discussing, debating, reviewing and rethinking as to how to make their representative democracy an

effective system in which "every adult is entitled to an equal say, in the conduct of public affairs", so that, as Jeremy Bentham had said, democracy works for the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Within the limitations of representative democracy, we are witnessing situations where as and when true and genuine representation of diverse interests fails to happen, the interplay of multifarious social, economic, religious, cultural and ethnic variables throws up actors, resources and motivations which threaten the very political system. When a section of the society feels alienated civil strife and social tensions begin to engulf it. They lead to movements subscribing to violence and terror. Let me underline the fact that only genuine democracy can give freedom to voice one's dissent, accommodate protests and evolve consensus. When E.M. Forster said "Two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism" he was nearer the truth and closer to contemporary reality.

The correlation between democracy and federalism is well known. Without democracy federalism cannot work. As democracy takes roots, federalism evolves. People have their demands which know no end, but democracy provides the mechanism to express those demands and federalism is the framework within which they can be met.

India is an example of how federal principles evolve as democracy takes roots. Perhaps the Indian experience could be taken as a model to show that political representation through the democratic process is the most ideal, civilised, humane way of accommodating plurality: a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-regional and multi-caste national fabric.

India with a population of nearly a billion has 18 official languages and as many languages demanding official status. In 1947 when India became independent from the British rule, there were more than 600 princely states besides British India. There is no other country in the world with such a hierarchically ordered social structure as India's. Economically, the country has poor, very poor, rich and very rich. According to estimates, about 30 per cent of India's population is below the poverty line. There are extremely backward and highly developed regions.

But democracy works in India. It has become part of its being. Today, no one in India can think of an India without regular elections—perhaps several elections a year at various levels of government.

Elections have been held at regular intervals since 1952. There have been 13 national or parliamentary elections since that year. In the latest elections held in September 1999, the electorate was 620 million. All above 18 years are eligible to vote. In 1999, 58.5 per cent of the electorate voted whereas in 1998 about 62 per cent registered their votes. For one nationwide parliamentary election India has 773,708 polling stations and for 543 seats in Parliament more than 46,650 contestants enter the fray (out of whom about 6 per cent are women). For the last elections India spent 8.5 billion rupees. It needs 4.5 million persons to administer a country wide election. Each of the 620 million voters has been provided with a photographic identity card. Incidentally, the 620 million voters in India elect not

only 543 members of Parliament, but also 4,173 members to the state assemblies and about three million members to the local bodies. In the last 10 years India witnessed five national elections and spent about 2 billions for holding them. Although there were voices raised about the frequent elections and enormous expenses involved, it is a testimony of people's deep faith in the democratic process that no one seriously challenges the cost. For they believe that it is politically costlier not to have elections and a democratically elected government.

India's diversity is also reflected in its political party system. India has over 550 registered parties. Out of these only six are national parties, 40 are state level parties and the rest 504 are registered parties with local base. It can be stated that the increasing number of parties are one way of expressing regional sentiments and aspirations. Whenever some sections of the population feel that the bigger parties are not adequately caring for the local or sub regional interests they form a political party. Very often big or medium parties split and go for representing caste or community interests. In many cases interests of individual leaders and clash of personalities also result in new party formations. In the birth of new parties, very often unfortunately the casualty is ideology.

A remarkable achievement of Indian democracy has been ensuring representation of traditionally excluded communities through a quota system (reservation of seats) or affirmative action in their favour. For instance, the Scheduled Castes or the former untouchables (now they are called Dalits or oppressed) and the Tribals, which constitute about 24 per cent of India's population, have representation in Parliament, State Assemblies and local bodies according to the proportion of their population. It has worked very well over the last 50 years and it is only through the democratic process that their inclusion in the decision making institutions was made possible.

Another excluded section of Indian Society, women, are fighting for their due share in the State Assemblies and Parliament. They have already one third seats reserved for them in the local bodies—one million women get elected to the rural and urban local self-government bodies every five years. The demand now is that atleast the same—33 per cent, seats must be reserved for women in Parliament and State Assemblies. As of now in these bodies their average representation is only 6-8 per cent. The day when the women will get their legitimate quota is not far off. This is a big achievement of democracy in a traditional, iniquitous, highly stratified society like India's. Even today, in majority of areas feudal values prevail, patriarchy is the norm, illiteracy is considerable. Democracy is changing this social ethos, slowly but steadily.

The federal character of India has been at the centre-stage of discussion ever since the country adopted its Constitution in 1950. Considering the unity in diversity that is India, the Constitution presents a very unique representation of federation which has been described as "a dialectical amalgam of apparent opposites" and "perception of both union and non-centralisation."

There has also been other ways of looking at the Indian state. It has been described/characterised as a federation without federation, a polity covered by some form

of federalism—i.e. quasi-federal, co-operative, executive, emergent, responsible, parliamentary, populist, legislative, competitive, fiscal, restructured, reluctant and so on. The Constitution says India is a union of states and it doesn't use the word federal. When the Constitution was adopted (26 Nov. 1949) the founding fathers envisaged a strong Centre because at that time they believed that only a strong Centre will ensure unity and integrity of the nation. In less than 30 years they were proved wrong.

It is an unfortunate part of Independent India's history that taking advantage of the important position given to the Centre or Union in the Constitution, its leaders went too far thinking that India could be governed as a Unitary State. The political emergency in 1975-77, disrespect to the feelings of the States by imposing Chief Ministers from Delhi, bringing the state governments under the Central Government's rule (President's rule), encroaching on the state lists, abridging their powers, making the States dependent on the devolution of central finance, and, above all, ignoring the importance of self governance below the state level—i.e. districts, blocks and villages or cluster of villages, as well as cities and towns have been the bitter fruit of this thinking.

It must be said to the credit of India's democratic process that through democratic means most of these aberrations have been set right. However, the most revolutionary change that has occurred is in respect of local self-government Institutions.

Seventy Four percent of India's population lives in villages i.e. the rural India. The urban population is growing and now it is about 26 per cent or so. India had traditional village governing bodies known as Panchayats. These were village councils of five persons who administered the village affairs. Gandhiji in his philosophy for a modern India placed these 'village republics' at the centre stage but the Constitution and the political leadership till about mid 80's ignored these Panchayats and along with them the town municipalities. They had no constitutional status, no regular elections, no finance, no personnel, no powers. Of course, a handful of states were exceptions.

Since 1993 the Panchayats and Municipalities have become 'Institutions of Self-Government' and they have received constitutional status. Today India has below the States and Union Territories (We have 25 states and 7 Union Territories—the biggest state having a population of 160 million).

- 523 District Panchayats with an average population of 2 million
- 5612 Blocks Panchayats with an average population of 200,000
- 250,000 Village Panchayats with an average population of 1000–30,000
- 95 city Corporations with above 1/2 a million population
- 1436 Town Municipalities with 50,000 - 300,000 population
- 2055 Nagar Panchayats (smaller municipalities)

All these bodies elect about three million representatives out of whom:

- 10,00,000 (1 million) are women
- 700,000 are former untouchables + tribals

One third of all the local bodies mentioned above are headed by women as Presidents. About 25 per cent are headed by SCs and STs.

Therefore, instead of 4963 members of Parliament and State Assemblies representing a billion people today more than three million people get elected through the democratic process.

That is to say, the base of representative democracy has widened. Earlier it was what I may call only the superstructure of democracy although even then we were proudly calling ourselves the biggest democracy in the world. But it took about four decades for Indian democracy to evolve to this level with the widest democratic base.

This development has two other important dimensions related to the main theme of our conference :

1. The Direct Democracy has become an essential, integral part of our democratic system. Below the Village Councils or Panchayats there is assembly of all adults/voters in a village to discuss the development priorities, utilisation of funds, selection of beneficiaries under state and central government programmes, etc. They have to compulsorily meet two to four times or a more a year, and in these meetings locally elected members and officials must be present.
2. The Panchayats–Districts and below are now treated as third stratum of governance. As there is a Federal/or Central/or Union Government and below that the State Governments, we are now moving towards a District Government. That is to say, more than 500 District Governments within India besides 250,000 Village Governments.

This has radically altered the Federal Structure of India. Today, the Central Government depends on the State Governments because most of the states are ruled by state level or regional parties and the Central Government is a coalition of these regional/state level parties. The State Governments depend on District Governments + Village Councils because the State Governments which do not care or give due importance to the governments below the districts, tend to lose power in the next elections.

Today in India if there is a strong Centre it is not by virtue of its powers over other units but because the lower units – States, Districts, Blocks, Villages—are powerful. This is exactly opposite of what India started with, as we have seen in the beginning. I may also mention here that after the coalition governments came into existence - say in the last 5 years or so, the Centre has not attempted to encroach upon the powers of the States, especially bringing them under the Central rule, dismissing the elected governments. Thus, one can say that strong regional and state level political parties have strengthened India's democracy and federal character.

India is a country of uneven development. While some parts remain poor, the states where political awareness is high and democracy is vibrant have reached unparalleled heights in human development even with relatively low per capita income. For instance the state of Kerala with 30 million people has the lowest birth rate, the lowest infant mortality, the highest life expectancy for women, almost hundred per cent literacy and not even a single girl child dropping out of school. According to a UN study, Kerala achieved all these because of a long tradition of participatory democracy. Vibrancy of its democracy has thus made Kerala a role model for other Indian states.

Another interesting aspect of India's democracy is that in the state and local elections participation of voters is higher than in the Parliamentary elections. In Local bodies elections, participation goes up to 90-95 per cent. Moreover, participation is higher among the underprivileged classes than among the more educated, higher classes or castes." The poor, the under class, the uneducated, the former untouchables tend to vote not less but more than among the others" (Chief Election Commissioner .M.S. Gill). In short, definitely there is a democratic upsurge, a rising tide of democratisation in India. And this democratic upsurge has its share of serious problems too.

First, there is social unrest and political instability. In some cases, in some regions democratic freedom is stretched too far to the detriment of public or general interest. Governments are pulled down at will causing instability. The latest debate in India is stability or democracy. Votaries of stability say we must review the Constitution. Second, criminalisation of politics is a major problem in some parts of the country. Even persons with criminal records are getting elected. The former Election Commissioner G.V.G. Krishnamurthy had gone on record to say that the situation is threatening to degenerate into a "Government of the criminals, for the criminals, by the criminals." He might have exaggerated the situation but today people are fully conscious of the danger of taking democracy for granted. Third, democracy faces serious challenges from the power centres—vested interests whether they are landlords, caste politics, fundamentalist groups, feudal interests, or corrupt officials, politicians and business centres. They create power centres for manipulation. On the one hand, they are afraid of people's power exercised through the democratic process, on the other they support, finance and even put up candidates. In other words, they make use of the instrumentality of democracy for their own ends.

Finally, when money power and muscle power take over the democratic process, dissatisfaction, rebellion, militancy grip the affected sections of the population. India has to grapple with these problems on a regular basis. How is India grappling with the serious problems facing the country? Of course, through Democracy. But I would like to identify three factors, elements, which help the process.

1. Increasing political awareness of the people. Now the knowledge revolution and information highways along with print media have created an information revolution by which local, regional and national issues are debated and discussed. From extreme left to extreme right, various ideologies are competing to influence people's thinking.

2. India has an independent Election Commission which plays a vital role in conducting free and fair elections. Free and fair elections are a necessary condition for representative democracy to work even when there are adversarial conditions. The Election Commission has made the democratic process vibrant. The public in India trusts the Election Commission even when their trust in other institutions had declined. "High levels of public trust in the Election Commission suggest that Indian electoral processes diverge strikingly from the tainted ones common in other developing and some developed countries", say Susane and Lloyd Rudolph.
3. The strong civil society in India is an effective instrument to counter the problems of Indian democracy or whenever there is a crisis in Indian democracy. The vibrant civil society (according to estimates there are more than 100,000 registered voluntary organisations) informs and organises people. People are aware of the dangers of taking democracy for granted. They know that eternal vigilance is the price they have to pay for the freedom they enjoy in a democratic policy.

Conclusion

Haroy Emerson Fosdick said "Demcracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people." The developments in India in the last 50, years and especially after local governments came to the fore, fully endorse this statement. Of the three million now getting elected to the grassroots democratic institutions every five years in India, a sizeable number are illiterate and about 25 per cent come from former untouchable and tribal backgrounds. A substantial number of women representatives are coming out of their kitchens and homes to public life for the first time. But within a short time they have proved that they can do many things because they got this opportunity through democracy. It is no exaggeration to say that India is today democratically knitted from Gram Sabha – (Village Assembly i.e. Direct Democracy in practice) to Lok Sabha–the Parliament.

Indian democracy is facing problems. Some people say there is a crisis in Indian democracy. But it is my conviction that when something is static there are no problems, when it is dynamic and growing there are problems. But we in India believe that problems of democracy can be solved by more democracy and not less of it.

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