Knowledge. Voice. Democracy.

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Grassroots Democracy: Governance as If Citizens Mattered

By

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Introduction

Our country is completing fifty years of independence in 1997. Much experience has been gained in systems of governance during the past five decades. Comparative experience of governance is also available from other postcolonial country contexts in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

After the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of 1970's and 1980's many more countries have accepted democracy as perhaps the most appropriate form of governance of a nation. This new consensus on democracy at the dawn of twentieth century is welcome development globally. Yet, much of the substance of this democracy continues to be narrowly defined as multi-party polity, periodic elections and separation of judiciary, legislature and executive. Democracy as a grass-roots praxis has not been fully integrated even in this new consensus. By examining the experience of democratic governance in India (as elsewhere in countries of the South), it is possible to explore more deeply the meaning and implications of grass-roots democracy.

Features of Democracy

Democracy as a form of governance has been variously defined and articulated; it also has a wide variety of forms in practice throughout the world. However, there are some common features of democracy. Essentially, these are four features. The first feature is Representation on the basis of universal franchise. Under this principle, every section of the population gets representation in democratic system of governance; all adults participate in the election of their representatives. The rationale is that by providing opportunity to elect representatives, the interests, needs and priorities of each section of the population get represented in the decision-making process.

The second feature of democracy is Voice. In a democratic system of governance, all citizens have the right to be heard. Opportunities and fora to express their points-of-view, to be paid attention to their agreements and disagreements, constitute an important feature of democracy. Formally accepted methods of seeking opinions and feedback from all citizens are maintained in democracy.

A third feature of democracy is due process. It is a legally sanctified process of petitioning. Should a citizen have a grievance against any wing of the government, there would be a mechanism for redressal of this grievance? Courts, tribunals, ombudsman etc. are examples of such mechanisms of 'due process' in a democracy.

Finally, democracy implies a system of accountability of the governing mechanism to its base population. It is assumed that democratic governance, by its very nature, has built-in mechanisms of accountability to the larger population for whose well-being the system is in place. Leaders in government and public officials are expected to be subjected to regular and comprehensive public scrutiny as a means of ensuring their accountability. While democratic system of governance could vary significantly across regions, levels and countries most do incorporate in some appropriate form the features mentioned above. When we examine the system of democratic governance in light of the above features, as it has evolved in the last 50 years since independence in this country, we wonder whether this democracy is likely to serve and promote long-term equitable, just and people centred development. Regular elections, with a few exceptions, have been held in India. Yet, there are enormous distortions in the process of representativeness based on universal franchise. The system of governance has been 'captured' by a section of the vested interest whereby excluding and denying the voice of a large section of our illiterate, poor, marginal population.

The system of legal jurisprudence which we inherited from our colonial masters and have tried to perfect since then, leaves even the educated, urban middle-class feeling cheated, entangled and excluded from the legitimate due 'process'. What can be said about the poor and the unorganised, for whom seeking redressal to their grievances invites intimidation, harassment and violence. Finally, in the current scenario, very little needs to be said about accountability. Open and fair criteria of decision-making, transparency in the process of decision-making, obligation to provide answers for one's conduct etc. (from the government and public officials) is beyond the hopes and imagination of ordinary citizens today. The complete absence and distortion of transparency and accountability in the current system of governance in India makes a mockery of democracy itself.

Grass-roots Democracy

It is in this context that the alien character of this macro democratic system of governance is to be understood. The system inherited from our colonial masters was implemented without any appreciation of the grassroots realities and reference to the historical processes. As a result, the macro system of democratic governance did not develop strong links with the existing processes and structure of grassroot democracy. This is how the major weaknesses of the current system of democratic governance could perhaps be explained. The disarray in our system of democratic governance today may prompt many to conclude that this system is inappropriate to meet the challenges associated with economic and social development in our country at this juncture. Such a conclusion will be both simplistic and problematic. Therefore, a deeper exploration of grassroots democracy might suggest ways and means to strengthen our system of democratic governance in the country today.

In comparison to the formal, more legislated system of democratic governance which operates at the national level, grassroots democracy can only be experienced in practice at local levels. It is not a system of functioning based on formal rules, procedures, guidelines etc. By its very nature, grassroots democracy is practiced through a system of norms, values, social processes and institutional arrangement fuelled by the commitment and capacities of ordinary people. The expression of the grassroots democracy can thus be seen in myriad local, informal, formations and associations of citizens throughout the country. Historically, a vast number of people found ways to come together at local level to address some of their common problems. Village society had a variety of such formations: caste formations, tribal councils, associations for undertaking agricultural operations, cooperatives; social associations to meet a variety of cultural and social rituals and obligations, etc. In recent years, contemporary forms of these associations have also developed in many parts of the rural society: youth associations, women's associations, associations of people engaged in joint efforts at the protection of forests and water, people coming together for cultural occasions (like Ramlila and Puja societies) etc. Many of these local groups address basic needs of the local community: health, education, drinking water, fodder, etc. As local issues and priorities vary, so do the forms and compositions of local associations. Likewise, in urban centres, citizens come together at the neighbourhood level to organise their own life: sanitation, security, cultural events, etc. A large number of these local associations continue to

operate in a somewhat invisible manner. For an outsider looking in, associational life of a community may not be visible at all. In some ways, this low profile gives protection for their continued functioning. As they become visible, the state begins to interact with them. Slowly but surely it manages to incorporate them, formalise them, resource them and thereby make such local institutions an appendage of the 'state' under the guise of a democratic system.

Local Institutions

What are some of the features and aspects of such local institutions? By their very nature, they are focusing on specific issues: water, health, hygiene, education, children, social functions, agriculture, crime, peace and protection of environment. One could mention any number of issues that affect human society and there will be several examples of such local associations working on those issues. This specificity of focus provides the purpose and rationale for such associations.

The second feature of these associations is their voluntary_character. People come together because they like to do so; not because they are deputed to do so or it is mandatory or there are some external compulsions. The voluntary nature of such associations provides a level of energy and commitment which acts as a fuel for the functioning of these associations.

The third feature of such associations is that they maintain a largely informal basis of functioning. While sometimes they may select some secretary of so-called office bearers to ease their functioning, in most situations, they remain informal. They govern themselves on the basis of commonly held norms and values; they manage themselves on the basis of social and interpersonal processes of communication, mutual trust and obligations. The quality of face-to-face interaction and related social mechanisms provide the basis for informal functioning of such associations.

This combination of features necessitates that associations tap potential, energy and commitment of ordinary human beings. The associations of this variety thus bring out the capacities for compassion, camaraderie and solidarity inherent in all human beings. They bring out the practice of humanity in a common search of good and peaceful life. Through this nature of their functioning, such associations become the basis for generating more effective and rooted local leadership (Up Hoff, 1986). Lest

it may appear that all local associations represent the ideal type mentioned above, it is important to point out that circumstances and conditions vary greatly across the country. As these associations begin to get formalised, begin to attract external attention and resources, begin to get involved in the mainstream political process, they tend to incorporate many of the distortions of the formal system of governance elaborated above. As a result, internal struggle, in fighting, misappropriation, self-centredness etc. are also many a times visible in these associations. However, any collective human enterprise is bound to generate some tensions and conflicts; differences in perspection, attitudes, values, priorities and perspectives are all an inherent part of any collective social and human processes. Local institutions develop their own unique and humane ways of dealing with such tensions and conflicts.

Indigenous Knowledge

The features of effective functioning of such local associations are closely linked to indigenous local knowledge systems. Historically, a great volume of knowledge has been produced through the work of collective human endeavour solving specific life problems. This has been 'knowledge-in-use' over generations, it has been transmitted largely through oral and symbolic means. This knowledge can be seen in the field of agriculture: in practices associated with multi-cropping and seed-production. This knowledge is used in selection and nurturance of appropriate species in forestry. This knowledge is the bedrock of herbal system of medicine. This knowledge is also used in organising local associations which invite broader participation.

However, this indigenous knowledge has historically remained in the popular form; it has remained in the personal and subjective domains of ordinary citizens who have relied on this knowledge for solving their daily problems. With the rise of modern system of knowledge production and dissemination, more particularly in the guise of the colonial and post-colonial formation, this indigenous knowledge system became increasingly de-recognised and de-legitimised. What became known as 'knowledge' and certified to be so, was what was produced by certified knowledge producers in recognised knowledge producing institutions: universities and colleges. Academia became the centre of knowledge production in dominant language and represented in a printed form (Tando,1982). But a vast section of our population is illiterate, using

local vernacular languages, and expressions in oral folk traditions. Their indigenous knowledge quickly lost ground to this formal, academic, printed knowledge.

The formal system of democratic governance implanted since independence relied largely and exclusively on this formal system of knowledge. Policies and programmes of development were based on the conclusions of this formal system of knowledge. This further caused the negation and undermining of popular and indigenous knowledge system which provided sustenance to local associations. The contradictions and tensions between the systems of formal and academic knowledge and popular, indigenous knowledge get reinforced in the dichotomy between the formal system of democratic governance, on the one hand, and the practice of grassroot democracy, on the other. The former relied exclusively on the formal system of knowledge in pursuit of its own objectives.

The latter (grassroots democracy), by its very nature, continued to work through and relay on indigenous knowledge systems available with the ordinary people at the local level. In fact, the effective and sustained functioning of local associations and the sustenance of grassroots democracy is very closely and intricately linked to the promotion and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. We have now come full circle. Our policy-makers and leaders in government have gradually now begun to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge system. But this is largely due to recognition and promotion of such knowledge by international agencies and multinational corporations. The worth of this knowledge, (for example, in herbal medicine and biodiversity preservation) has been ironically reinforced by such global players.

Thus by its very design, the system of formal democratic governance appears to be dependent upon formal knowledge system and does not have much space for recognition and flourishing of indigenous knowledge.

In contract, grassroots democracy is reflected in the collective mosaic of citizen associations, local informal institutions and participation of ordinary people in their social and collective life based on their own experiences, norms and values and indigenous system of knowledge that they have acquired over generations. This rich tapestry of local institutions and citizen participation forms the basis of the emergence of the Civil Society in a given context: the representation of this

associational life and its emergence at the grassroots level (CIVICUS, 1995). Not all actors of civil society are necessarily in conformity; by its very nature, various formations and associations in civil society are diverse and, at times, in conflict with each other. But it is the vitality, energy and continuity of this associational life, of citizens participation, of local institutions which provides the continuous fuel for the furtherance of grassroots democracy. If our formal system of democratic governance has to serve the larger socioeconomic development and interests of our population as a whole, then it must come to terms with these aspects of grassroots democracy. Democracy, therefore, does not merely imply creation and nurturance of a political society where every human being is a member of a political party voting for elections and re-elections at the national and provincial levels. Democracy requires nurturance and growth of civil society, citizens participation and citizen's associations in order to provide a fertile basis for the practice of collective human enterprise in common public good. This is the arena of grass-roots democracy; this is the space for citizens participation; this is the playground of civil society.

Formal system of democratic governance should encourage, support and nurture such trends in grass-roots democracy. Unfortunately, fifty years of democratic governance in India systematically trampled upon grass-roots initiatives and experiments in democracy. As a result, we have now a hollow, decaying and rusted shell of democratic governance, demoralised by widespread corruption and eroded by, private use of public resources. To fill this shell of democracy with life, purpose and vision requires nurturance and strengthening of grass-roots democracy on an urgent basis.

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