

## Threats to Democracy

**\*Dr. Kiran Shukla**

### **Abstract**

Democracy is one of the oldest system of governance which is still very relevant in today's world. But during these times, many limitations and fissures have emerged in the democratic system. To keep this system alive and relevant we must closely examine these limitations and make efforts to overcome them. To merely think that democracy is a perfect system in which no flaws are possible will only invite exploitation and degradation of this system. In this paper we look into the origins of the democracy, the way it acquired its modern form. We examine various issues plaguing it and how to overcome them.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Parthenon, Democratic Institutions, Fake News, Democratic Reforms.

### **Introduction**

Many world leaders can be seen posing in front of "The Parthenon Elevation" in their photos whenever they visit Greece on any diplomatic visit. This ancient temple of Athens is often considered as the birthplace of democracy. Thousands of years ago, senators would gather here and debate on various issue and reach to a democratic decision. By posing in front of this building, these democratically elected leaders pay their respect to democracy and show how they are a continued progression to it. These photos are then published in front pages of international journals and everybody celebrates democracy. But the various issues arising in democratic systems are often pushed back to the last pages. Sometimes when we start celebrating or worshipping something, we stopping noticing inherent flaws in it or its eventual degradation. Similarly, to keep a system healthy an observer must always be very skeptical of the claims made under it. He must examine all its implications in detail. Similarly, democracy, an ancient institution has gone through various changes and reforms according to the modern needs. This is inevitable as static systems often degrade and become corrupt. Hence, we must be mindful that present democratic system is not in its final form and will need constant reforms as well.

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**Origins**

Democracy is generally explained as “The Rule of the People”. Though there are many evidences present which show a system similar to democracy was present in Ancient India under Sabhas and Samitis where elders of the villages made decision by majority. But most experts generally consider Ancient Greece as the birthplace of democracy. City of Athens specially was governed by this system. This system was widely celebrated and praised in their society and literature. In one of the most famous plays of that time, Oedipus Rex, the writer discusses the virtues of democracy. But even then, some experts understood its limitations. In the book, The Republic, Socrates criticizes democracy for placing popular people in charge of governance rather than the wise. Aristotle, famously criticized democracy for being prone to degradation. Even in the birthplace of democracy some wise men knew about its imperfections.

**Modern Form**

After the American Revolution and French Revolution, people tired of conflict, wary of authority decided to pursue democratic system. Constitutional framers of these countries hoped that democracy will give rise to equality, empower the masses and prevent authoritarianism. With a similar belief, India on its independence followed a democratic system of governance. Even our Constitution maker, Dr BR Ambedkar, wary of colonial authoritarianism and inequality in the country preferred democracy. But even then few leader like Subhash Chandra Bose were skeptical of whether Indian masses were ready and mature for democracy.

**Justification**

Many experts define the legitimacy and superiority of democracy on various grounds. Social Contract theory of Rousseau argues that a legitimate authority derives its powers from the people. In democracy, people cast votes and thus gives legitimacy to the government of the day. This government then enacts “General Will” of the people by implementing welfare policies. Some experts also stress that decision making by a large group of people, coming from various backgrounds and experiences are generally better for a society. In modern times, Democratic Peace Theory suggests that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other. The book Why Nations Fail, argues that undemocratic political systems naturally tends to favor market monopolies and closed market structures. It further asserts that open and free markets are possible only under democracies. These free markets are the real generation of wealth.

**Issues**

UK Prime Minister, Winston Churchill once said that “the best argument against democracy is a five minute conversation with an average voter.” This line precisely highlights the structural limitation with democracy. A good democratic system requires well aware and educated masses as a prerequisite. Masses are engrossed in their daily living and can't be expected to have deep understanding of political issues. This has been highlighted with the election of Donald Trump in the US Presidential Election of 2016 who took a very populist approach. Brexit Referendum was also

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criticized by many experts as it was based on misinformation and prejudice. Rise of right wing populism in Europe is another defining moment in the history of democracy. Many experts have increasingly criticized democracy for slow and inefficient decision making. China, a non-democratic country has been able to achieve higher level of growth than India, a democratic country. Louis Brandeis, a prominent political thinker, criticised democracy for encouraging concentration of wealth. He argues democracy degrades to oligarchy where power is controlled by a few elites. Democracy has a dangerous nature of degrading into majoritarianism, where the majority makes all the decisions and minority is often marginalised. Democracies and free societies are also at threat from propaganda from outside affecting their elections. Recently allegations were made that Russian Hackers tried to sway 2016 US Presidential Elections through social media. Hostile nations often fund political protests and strikes to create political instability in other countries. Indian democracy presents its own unique challenges. In India, votes are casted on the basis of religion, caste, etc. Even after 70 years of independence, caste and communal politics is well alive in the country. According to Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), in 2014 Parliament of India, 34% MP were facing criminal charges. This is the reason why people increasingly losing faith in the democratic system. Corruption and inefficiencies take root. Elections increasingly become a popularity contest where the candidate with the most money and muscle power tend to win the elections. Experts and honest candidates are often at the losing side. The election system followed in India is decades old and becomes redundant in this age of internet. We can make online transaction from banks in seconds but we can express our views of any political issue only by electing a candidate once in five years who represents all our political views. Online system can give more to direct democracy, referendums and opinions polls than it was possible in the past.

### **Steps Taken**

Our Constitutional framer were aware of the fact that present system cannot last for long. To keep it efficient and relevant it will need constant changes. Hence, they added the ability to amend constitutions and make necessary changes. Judiciary has played a major role in making democratic system more suitable for this country. Gradual process of defining the post of Office of Profit by the Supreme Court ensured that lawmaker have no conflict of interest. Historical laws like Right to Information ensured transparency and accountability in the system. Lokpal Act was passed to root out corruption though its implementation is yet to happen. A Model Code of Conduct was developed by the Election Commission of India and all political parties to ensure a free and fair elections. Anti-Defection Laws were passed in 1985 to ensure stability of the government and reduce opportunism of lawmakers. Amendments were made to the Representation of People's Act to disqualify candidates who were found guilty in serious offences from conducting elections.

### **Reforms Needed**

These issues do not necessarily demand a complete overturn of the system. But certain democratic reforms are necessary. Noam Chomsky, a major political thinker, regularly highlights the importance of a vibrant education system which not only feeds facts but also makes people aware and ethically

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sound. He advocates ethical media which disseminates information and counter misinformation and Fake News. These recommendations strike at the heart of the problem. Our institutions like media must develop themselves to remain neutral arbiters of facts and not get politicised themselves. People need information to make an informed choice. More elements of direct democracy and engagement with people must be aimed. Using internet technology can be a big tool in this direction. To weed out the problem of corruption in elections we need reforms in election financing. Former Chief Election Commissioner, SY Quraishi, recommended that all donations to the political parties must be made digitally and political parties must be brought under Right to Information (RTI) Act. People must feel invested in a system to actually care about it. People must feel that their voices and opinions matter. Marginalization of people creates anger and rage.

### Conclusion

Democracy is not unambiguously good but only as good as the education system, democratic institutions surrounds it. This is the major differences between many successful and failed democracies. People alive during the peak of Roman Empire or the British Empire could have never imagined that one day it will collapse. We cannot afford to repeat the same mistake as the whole human civilization is dependent on the fact that we can make democracy work in these challenges of our times. But this will require us to come out of a cult like worship of democracy and photo-ops done before some ancient temples and solve these problems arising out of implementation of democracy.

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