

## Participatory Democracy: Role of Citizen

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### **Abstract:**

A wide spectrum of ideals and definitive formulations associated with the concept of "democracy" notwithstanding, there is general agreement that democracy stands for a form of Government in which all able-bodied, adult citizens have a right to participate, either directly or indirectly, in the decision making process which affects them individually or collectively. Although there have been ambiguity and divergence regarding the degree and method of participation in democracy, there is a unanimous consensus that participation of the citizens is the hallmark of democracy. A democratic government has been considered to be a government by persons freely chosen by and responsible to the governed, yet there are differences of opinion about (the descriptive meaning of what, constitutes 'free choice' and responsibility. Democracy has been seen as '**the sovereignty or the people**' by idealists. It has been interpreted as '**majority rule**' by more sober thinkers and yet others see it as rule by a dominant majority interest group. The majority principle is important in a democracy mainly as a way of ensuring sensitivity to the widest possible range of interests. It is this sensitivity, which distinguishes democracies from other plebiscitary forms of Government.<sup>1</sup>

Democratic systems or government always provide for various institutional arrangements and processes through which participation of the citizens is encouraged in many ways and at various levels.

However, such systems ultimately depend upon the degree and quality of the participation of the citizens. To quote the words of Joseph Story which were cited by Shri Sachchidananda Sinha, provisional of the Constituent Assembly of India-

**'The structure has been erected by architects of consummate skill and fidelity; its foundations are solid; its compartments are beautiful as well as useful; its arrangements are full of wisdom and order; and its defenses are impregnable from without. It has been reared for immortality, if the works of man may justly aspire to such a title. It may, nevertheless, perish in an hour by the folly, or corruption, or negligence of its only keepers, the people. Republics are created - these are the words which I commend to you for your consideration - by the virtue, public spirit and intelligence of the citizens. They fall when the wise are banished from the public councils because they dare to be honest, and the profligate are rewarded because they flatter the people in order to betray them.'**

In the above context, democracy does not mean merely a set of political institutions like universal suffrage, representatives' government and decisions by majority procedure etc., but a set of processes such institutions tend to realize. Participation of the citizens is the most important

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functional pre-requisite for a vibrant democracy.

The issue of citizens' participation in a democracy has many dimensions. On the one hand, the structural dimension of the subject includes the institutional frameworks, which are laid down to allow the citizens to participate in a meaningful way. The functional aspect is concerned with how such institutions in reality perform in relation to the actual capability of the citizens. The process related issues relate to the interaction between the citizens in their various roles: and the decision makers at various levels.

### **Structural Issues:**

The history of evolution of democracy is replete with experiments to develop institutions by which the due role of citizens can be ensured. The institution of adult suffrage is perhaps the most historic of them. This principle is a way of giving practical recognition to the moral value of every human being as a source of claims; it is also a way of providing that the rulers will draw legitimacy to rule from them. The principle 'one man, one vote', however, it may be varied in detail, is an expression of the prima facie equality among the citizens and recognition of, the right of every of every citizen to participate in a democracy; this principle also relegates to the past the age-old discriminations on the basis of colour, caste, status, sex etc. which hindered political participation of the citizens in a democracy. The representative form of government and periodic elections are other important structural arrangements in this sequence. Constitutional government recognizing the freedom of the individuals has been the unique achievement of human civilization in the last two centuries or so. The liberty of the press, the liberty of the public association, the freedom of religion and all such freedoms enshrined in the constitutions of various countries have institutionalized the right of the citizen to participate in a democracy in a variety of ways. But in addition to all these, democracy is a of coming to terms with the need for authority without accepting a duty to submit to whatever abuses it may bring its train. The right to criticize and censure a government and the right to exercise a vote to remove it, is a practical recognition of principle that the duty to obey, understood as a moral duty, must always be conditional, and is never a duty to suspend judgement. It depends in the end on how authority is exercised. Democracy provides a peaceful way of getting rid of governments, which fail to convince a majority of their adult subjects that they have a lively concern for the opinions and interests of the governed.<sup>3</sup> It is not a denial of the need for authority but a recognition that no authority can ever be keeper of citizen' conscience.<sup>2</sup>

The evolution of political parties performing the role to aggregate, articulate and assimilate the divergent opinions and interests of the citizens in a polity is another important structural development to facilitate the participation of the citizens in political affairs. The growth of pressure groups and interest groups in various forms is another evolution providing channels for the expression of various claims of various groups.

All these institutional arrangements and structural entities in a democratic system are only safeguards and enabling arrangements within a democratic system, but these no guarantees ensuring legitimacy and responsiveness of the power elite. The actual functioning of these structural entities

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largely depends the degree, extent, quality and continuity in the participation of the citizens'. The majority principle is important in democracy mainly, as a way of ensuring continuous sensitivity to the widest possible range of interests. On the election day, the voters pass judgement on a given government's record and by choosing between political parties, settle the: broad lines on which government will be conducted in the next few years. But between elections, the government must mediate between interest groups, none of which, perhaps, could claim to speak for a majority. but each 'of may include people on whose support the government must rely in the next election. In this sense, democracy allows considerable room for the citizens to participate at various levels in the polity.

In addition to the political forum, democracy encourages formation of associations and organizations outside the domain of the State for participation of the citizens, in a variety of ways. Democracy recognizes the pluralist nature of society and encourages the functioning of groups, which allows individuals to give expression to their views and opinion. The proliferation of a variety of non-governmental organizations dealing with a number of important subjects is another important institutional evolution within the democratic framework.

Democracy encourages participation of the people not only to elect the government or participate in the political decision-making; it also encourages participation of citizens at various levels. The growth of local self-government in various countries and the Panchayati Raj experiment in India are examples in this regard. The concept of grassroot democracy has also become an important area of participation.

### **Functional Issues**

The effectiveness of democratic functioning depends not only on the existence of necessary institutional framework as discussed above, but more important, on the actual political participation. Many approaches have been adopted in discussing the degree political participation by the citizens. The elitist theorists believe that only a few groups of persons stake their claim to capture power and they are the real actors in a democracy. The large majority of the citizens have only a passive role to play in choosing one of the groups from amongst the choices available. The ruling elite groups circulate themselves in many ways, but the vast majority or the people have no real access to the positions of power. Pareto, C, Wright Mills, and Floyd Hunter etc. are vocal examples of this theory. They believe that the rule by minority is .an inevitable aspect of social life in which there is a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less in number, 'performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings. The second class, on the contrary is more numerous and always controlled by the first. Democracies, therefore, are not seen as progressive and representative system of government. This view is an extreme conceptional stand and has been found not representing reality. A number of studies in United States have provided support to the view that power is dispersed among a variety of groups in society. Democracy encourages formation of groups to give expression to a variety of interests and opinions in a society and each group develops its own particular needs and concerns. Thus, as the range and the varieties of opinions and interests increases, a growing number of specialized organizations such as trade

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union professional associations develop as interest groups. Democratic politics involves competition between a variety of groups, each pursuing its own interest. In such a situation, no single group can become dominant and so democracy becomes a business of bargaining and compromise. Power is seen to be dispersed among a plurality of these groups provide channel for the citizens to participate. In their own way and influence decision-making. The bulk of population is therefore, not a passive and manipulated mass, but they participate through various channels. One of the famous studies, "Who Governs" by Robert A. Dahl in United States came out with the finding that power is dispersed in a democracy and no one group dominates decision making. "Arnold M. Rose in his book '**Power Structure**' also concludes that U.S.A. is not ruled by any particular unified elite but it is a society of many elites, each relatively small numerically and operating in different spheres of, life. Among these groups are several that have their participations through political controls, through economic controls and still others that have participation in decision making through associational, religious and other controls. Via this multiplicity of relatively independent elites, the major interests in society are represented. In India too, the experience of more than five decades of democracy has proved that there has been a considerable circulation in the power structure at various levels. The so-called traditional elites in power structure who owed their positions to family back ground, or caste dominance or such other bases have yielded to other groups. The emergence of leadership from among persons belonging, to scheduled castes and other backward classes in U.P., Bihar, Tamilnadu and many other States s clear repudiation the elitist theory of democracy.<sup>3</sup>not healthy science

Another approach examining the degree of political partition among citizens divides the citizens into four categories. Firstly, the politically apathetic or inactive are those who are completely unaware of the political world around them. They are practically outside the arena or the democratic process. These citizens are either prevented from taking interests in the political affairs owing to their incapability or lack of resources or are largely disinterested. The second category is those involved in spectator activities or in indirect participation of a remote nature. These citizens take part in voting or in discussing the political affairs; however, they do not go beyond this level. The large masses of any society belonging to the lower middle class and the professional middle class belong to this category. The third category consists of those who may be called to be involved in '**transitional activities**' include making financial contribution to a political party or actively sympathizing or opposing the views or a political party. Finally, are those who enter the political arena and participate in, what has been called, '**gladiatorial activities**', such as standing for and holding public and party offices. Lester Milbrath in his book Political Participation estimated in 1965 that in the U.S.A., 30% of population is politically apathetic, 60% reaches the level of spectator activities and from 7 to 9% is involved in transitional activities while only 1 to 3% participates in gladiatorial activities. In India, the level of political participation is largely dependent on a citizen position in the class structure. Various studies have shown that participation of citizens in democracy is directly proportional to the educational level, the income and occupational status and social position. Gender and caste status have also important bearing on the level of participation by the citizens. Those with low levels of participations often lack the resources and opportunities for direct involvement in the affairs of a democracy. They lack higher education which brings a greater awareness of the political process and

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knowledge of the mechanics of participations. Similarly, citizens are unlikely to participate in public affairs, if they feel the probability of reward for involvement to be low. Those who receive low awards as part of their daily routine are unlikely to have higher levels of political participation since their experience has shown that efforts to not bring worthwhile results. This explanation applies to many low wage workers, persons in the unorganized sectors etc. Such groups have little power in society and believe their participation will have little effect in public affairs. Similarly, levels of political participation appear to be related to the feeling of the citizens as to whether they are socially integrated or isolated from the national main stream. The women in the rural areas in India, for example, till recently felt that they were largely outsiders in the context of the public affairs. In addition, citizens are unlikely to have higher levels or participations if they believe that the outcome of public affairs will be satisfactory without their involvement.

Low participation by citizens has been a cause of concern in many democracies. It has been unanimous opinion in general that low political participation not only indicates the rejection or politics and politicians but is a rejection of democracy itself. The report of the National Advisory Commission on civil disorders enquiring into the series of Black riots in U.S.A. in 1960's concluded that the typical rioter was highly distrustful of the democratic political order and saw violence as the only effective avenue or political participation open to him. The Commission made it clear that the Blacks wanted to participate in the democratic system and in the social order, but felt that access to political participatory structures was denied to them. Similarly, it has been seen in many States in India that whenever the members of lower castes or tribes have felt that they have been left out of the democratic participation process, such groups have often resorted to violent behavior or alternative, methods for the representation of their opinion and interests. It has sometimes been argued that low participation may not be necessarily an indication of rejection. It may be the indication that the various interests and aspirations of various groups of citizens have been adequately represented and so low participation is a sign of contentment. If the democratic system is so strong and autonomous that it legitimately gives representation to the various sections of the society, then this gives a sense of confidence, which results in lack of anxiety. The reality lies somewhere in between these two explanations. Voting behavior has sometime been considered as a reflection of the level or participation of the citizens in a democracy. The low turnout at the polls has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but there has been wide agreement that low turnout is not healthy sign for democracy.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of the expansion of knowledge and easy access of the citizens to knowledge and information, participation of the citizens in a democracy has come to acquire meaning and significance, which is far beyond the view that connotation of participation of the citizens in a democracy means political participation alone. The affairs of the State and politics are important for citizens, but they do not in any way exhaust the implications of the citizens participation in the many facets of the government of society. It has been argued that citizens take part in various capacities: as individuals, as subjects, as clients, as customers, and in such other numerous capacities. As an individual the many rights, which include the basic right to life, liberty, equality etc. and to promotional rights such as the right to education, cultural and religious liberties, the right to

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information, the right to full employment etc. One of the cardinal principles of democracy is that it provides opportunities and environment to an individual to realize his potential in the fullest manner. Hence, the importance of the concerns of the individual in a participatory democracy has been emphasized. As a subject, the participation of the citizens is regarding conformity to the rules and laws of a democracy which are laid down with a view to allow everyone his due opportunity for development and freedom. The right to swing an arm of one citizen ends where the others nose begins. So, the citizen has to participate in a democratic polity to ensure that arbitrariness, exploitation, unfair practices etc. are not permitted. It is not only the duty of the government to enforce compliance with the laws of the State, but it is also the bounden duty of each citizen to be vigilant in this regard. The famous saying of Harold Laski that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty is important in this sense. As a customer, on the other hand, the citizen has both a right to have 'free choice' not only to choose as to who would govern, but also not to be subjected to monopoly of any kind for the satisfaction of his wants. This view has been emphasized by Schumpeter and others who have tried to establish a link between democratic political system, and free economy. While it is not entirely acceptable that the two go together necessarily, it is nevertheless important that the supremacy of the citizen requires that he should have the right to choose and therefore it is necessary that there should not be monopoly in any field of social and economic life. The right of the citizens as consumers has led to strong consumer movements in the western countries and has also, spread to other parts of the world in the last few decades. This has been a notable development and has added a new dimension to citizens' participation in democracy. The fourth capacity in which a citizen has been seen is the duty of the citizen as a client. As a client the citizen participates in a number of social institutions like schools, libraries, universities, environmental groups, religious bodies, cultural organizations, interest groups etc. Such groups and institutions do not exist for power or profit motive, yet they have acquired a meaningful role in a democratic society considerably. Indeed, the participation of the citizens has acquired a new meaning in the context of the proliferation of non-state institutions, as they have been called, have come to act as a hyphen between the citizen and the democratic society. It is true that the business of managing government and various spheres of social activities are so complicated and specialized that a common citizen cannot acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in the public affairs. He does not also have the time and public affairs for this, he can therefore, most optimally take part in the public affairs as a member of a group of like-minded persons who have common interests and opinions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Process Related Issues**

The role of citizens in a participatory democracy may be seen from the point of view of various concrete processes in the context of above discussion on the structural and functional parameters. How do citizens actually participate in a democracy? Do they participate in a secular way or do they participate as members with some traditional Primordial label or identity derived from religion or race or caste etc.? What is the level and quality of participation of women citizens in a democracy? What is the importance of age as a differential factor affecting the participation of the citizens? Do the youth or the senior citizens take as much part as the other citizens? How does accessibility and availability of information influence the degree and quality of participation? How do the members of

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the minority or the members belonging to low income and low status groups participate in a democratic society, which is characterized by wide differences in socio economic status among citizens? In the Indian context, this would lead to discuss the issue of participation of the citizens belonging of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes, minorities etc. How do money power and muscle power influence the quality of citizens role in a democracy ? What have been the composition of citizens abstaining from directly participating in elections or from voting and what has been the outcome of such phenomenon on democracy?

These and various other such issues have been the concern of researches and thinkers in various democracies. No clear theoretical formulations have emerged, which have universal applicability to all kinds of democracies and that is quite obvious. But It has more or less been established beyond doubt that these concerns are of immense importance to the sustenance of democracy. To quote nani palkhiwala politics has never been a particularly edifying activity. Daniel Webster said that the unvarying tendency of the mad strife of politics is to be little greatness and corrupt goodness. It contracts the, mind and hardens the heart. John Dewey observed that while saints are engaged in introspection, burly sinners run the world.<sup>6</sup>

But politics at the same time is important for a society and if the quality of the citizens taking part in politics deteriorates, then it affects the public life directly. Hilaire Belloc, after spending a term in the house of commons, wrote: 'The standard of intellect in politics is so low that men of moderate mental capacity have to stoop in order to reach it.' Palkhiwala has observed that Indian democracy reached its nadir because in our average politician we have the sordid amalgam of lack of intellect with lack of character and lack of knowledge. All these remarks underline the need of citizens with character and intellect to take part in the political affairs of the democracy directly. The paradox is that democracy offers unique opportunities and environment to the citizens for self- development and realization of the potential in many ways. Politics is not certainly a very attractive field in which men of intellect and character would like to excel because of the inherent nature of politics involving distasteful techniques. However, every democracy must needs have an aristocracy of talent of knowledge and of character. The challenge before every democracy is to ensure attraction of eminent citizens of the inevitable task of politics. From the very beginning of political theory; philosophers like Plato have argued that the polity should be ruled by people of intellect and character, the 'Philosopher kings', as he called them. All writes on democracy universally agree that the democracy ultimately depends on its ability to attract people of character to politics. However, this paradox in democracy continues and every democracy has to find a solution this in its own way.<sup>7</sup>

As far as the role of citizens perceived to be disadvantaged and discriminated against is concerned, a variety of methods have been experimented with in the history of democracies. Beginning with the introduction of universal adult suffrage, experiments like reservation of seats in representative bodies for women, disadvantaged sections, minorities etc. have been attempted in various ways. Artificial creation of space in the decision making process for such groups has been argued to be the most legitimate, way for ensuring the participation of citizens belonging to such disadvantaged groups. However, a contrary view has also emerged that such artificial methods do not necessarily

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result, in desired participation. Alternatively, it has been argued that empowerment and organization of such groups are better alternatives to ensure the desired results. But it has been universally agreed that in order to be vibrant democracy must find out ways to accommodate all sections of the society within its fold.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of gender in has also been a subject of much attention in so far as ensuring the participation of women in participatory democracy in concerned. Women movements throughout the world have struggled for securing political space and rightful role in decision making of various levels. The extension of right to vote to women was the first major structural change in this direction. Reservations of seats for women have been provided in many democracies. Political parties have informally attempted to ensure adequate representation of women as elected public representatives . In India, women have participated in the public affairs from the days of struggle for independence. The reservation of 1/3 seat in the panchayati raj institutions for women is perhaps one of the most revolutionary steps for ensuring political participation of the women in the history of democracies. Various studies of the political participation by women by a number of researches have revealed that from 1950's onward women have emerged as a substantial force in public affairs. Women have been seen as suffering from double disadvantages: both as members of the so-called weaker sex and also as neglected citizens in matter of education, social status etc. It is very important that women occupy their due place in the field of participation.

The age composition of the citizens abstaining from participatory democracy has also been a subject of much concern many democracies have lowered the age of voting to 18 to ensure better participation the youth. It has been found that the youth are at the receiving end of many socio-economic problems like lack of access to skills and education, unemployment and under employment; divorce etc. and they trend to be volatile in reaction. If the youth are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process, then they are likely to be revolting or rebellious, which may disrupt the democratic fabric.

The problem of citizens participating with racial and sectarian bias has also been a cause of much concern in democracies. Communalism in India and many other east European and Asian countries, racial hatred in U.S.A. and many countries and so have been formidable concerns in the twentieth century. Democracy believes in the moral conviction that each citizens is regarded and as an individual human being without reference to his colour, caste, race etc. It is a challenge before every democracy to lift its citizens above these sectarian biases.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The legitimacy and authority of a democratic regime is intrinsically linked with the role of the citizens. It is not only the duty of a democratic government to ensure that there is no **'trust deficit'** – as vice president Al Gore declared in 1993, but it is also the scared role each citizen to be constantly vigilant and redefine his role for the democratic set up. The government can make provision for structures and institutional arrangements for ensuring greater role for each citizen. As discussed, the

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experiments of reservations of sects, Panchayati Raj Institutions, empowerment of ward sabhas and gram sabhas decentralization of power to the local bodies etc. have been very meaningful structural changes brought about in India. However, citizens are still viewed as alienated, apathetic, cynical and distant from society. This phenomenon may be owing to a '**credibility gap**' or owing to feeling of powerlessness and helplessness on the part of the vast majority of citizens or because of other reasons like the predominance of money power and muscle power in public affairs.<sup>11</sup>

All these phenomena notwithstanding, every democracy has to realistically grapple with these realities. As has been said, democracy is a continuous voyage, and not a safe harbor. Citizens are the navigators as well as passengers in the democratic vessel. The efforts to educate organize, activate, motivate, mobilize and in the end vitalize the citizens to their meaningful role would be the constant concern of democracies. This, indeed, is the dynamic aspect of each democratic society.

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