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MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is one of the most widely accepted forms of government in the contemporary world. What makes democracy so popular? To answer this, we must understand what democracy truly means and examine whether it is indeed best form of government capable of meeting the challenges of modern society. Many definitions of 'democracy' have been given by eminent authorities on the subject. The term 'democracy' was coined in ancient Athens in the fifth century BCE. It originated from the Greek word 'demokratia'. The components of the word are 'demos' people; 'kratos' power. Thus, democracy means "rule by the people."

Democracy in Athens is the earliest example of the system and it corresponds to some of the modern ideas about democratic rule. The whole of adult male population of Athens could vote, whether they were poor or rich did not matter. All Athenian male citizens were free to vote and speak in the Assembly. Athenians did not vote for representatives but made decisions directly.

The simplest definition of democracy is that "Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people." This can be achieved by implementing a system of voting in which the adult people, choose/elect their representatives. Elections become the necessary and basic condition of democracy.

ROOTS OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

India has a long history of democratic practices that developed long before the rise of modern democracies worldwide.

Vedic society, believed in active participation of people both in governance and decision-making. Institutions such as Panchayats in clans and assemblies such as the Sabha and Samitis functioned as early democratic bodies where power rested with the people. These bodies discussed public matters and advised the king, which shows that rulers did not enjoy absolute power and were expected to consult the people. Authority was not centralised and not hereditary. The brotherhood of mankind, expressed through the principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, meaning the world is one family, formed the moral foundation of Aryan democracy.

Between 600 BCE and 400 BCE, many large kingdoms and republics known as Mahajanapadas emerged in northern India. Some of these, such as the **Vajjis**, followed a republican system of government. In these states, rulers were not hereditary but were chosen through election. Governance was based on collective decision-making, with discussions and debates playing an important role. The Buddhist text Mahaparinibbana Sutta describes the Vajjis as a well-organised republic with strong community rule. It praises them for holding regular assemblies, making decisions through mutual agreement, and ensuring fair representation. The **Sakya** Republic also followed democratic practices. The head of the Sakya clan, known as the Raja, was elected by an assembly of elders through discussion. The Panchayat system forms the foundation of modern Indian democracy, but its origins go back thousands of years. The word Panchayat is derived from panch, meaning five, and refers to a council of five respected elders chosen by the community. This system was democratic in nature because the members were selected by the people and were responsible to them. The Panchayat played an important role in village life by taking key decisions, settling disputes, and delivering justice.

The Gupta Empire is often described as the Golden Age of India. This period saw great progress in art, science, and literature, as well as in ideas related to governance and public life. Administration during the Gupta period was marked by a high degree of decentralisation and local self-government. Village councils, known as Sabhas, played an important role in managing local affairs and delivering justice. These councils were made up of local landowners and merchants chosen by the community, and they functioned independently. These early democratic traditions influenced modern democracy in many ways. They promoted people's participation in governance, inspired institutions of local self-government, and encouraged respect for discussion and consensus. Thus, modern Indian democracy is deeply rooted in India's own historical experience rather than being entirely adopted from other countries.

➤ **FEATURES OF DEMOCRACY**

- **Final decision by elected representatives:** In a democracy the final decision-making authority rests with elected representatives, but they function within the limits of the Constitutional law.
- **Free and fair elections:** A democracy must be based on a free and fair election where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing. (i) First, voters must be honestly counted (a proper census). (ii) Voters should vote freely without any kind of pressure from those in power. (iii) Voters should have the right to choose freely from among those competing in the elections. (iv) Elections should be held regularly and be strictly impartial. In India the Election Commission of India ensures free and fair elections.
- **Universal suffrage:** All adults have the right to vote in the elections irrespective of their colour, caste, religion, gender, etc. In a democracy each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

- **Freedom of expression:** Citizens should have the right to express their opinion without any fear. They can also demonstrate, criticise, organise meetings or campaign on public issues.
- **Freedom to form associations:** Citizens have the right to form associations, unions, and political parties, and to join or leave them freely, subject to legal restrictions in the interest of public order and national security.
- **Freedom of culture and religion:** A democracy allows people to follow their own beliefs and faith. People can openly and freely follow any religion, and speak their own language. The rights of the minorities should not be in any way less than those of the majority.
- **Individual freedoms:** In a democracy, citizens enjoy personal freedoms such as freedom of movement, residence, occupation, and education. However, these freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions in the interest of public order, morality, and national security.
- **Rule of law:** In a democracy, the rule of law prevails. No individual or authority is above the law. The police and military function under civilian control. The judiciary is independent, protects the rights of the individuals and its decisions are respected by the government. Thus, a democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizens' rights.
- All the above are the minimum necessary features of any country aspiring to be called a democratic country. Democracy demands accountability from all organs of government — the legislature, executive and judiciary — within the framework of the Constitution.
- These facts tell us whether a country, claiming to be democratic, is really democratic or not. It is easy to see that no country enjoys all the rights needed in a democracy or has institutions which work with equal effectiveness. No country provides unlimited freedoms. Even advanced democracies such as France and the United States impose certain legal restrictions to maintain public order and security. There are certain defects common to all forms of government. They arise because of certain inherent and instinctive weaknesses in human nature.

➤ **TYPES OF DEMOCRACY**

- Direct versus Representative Democracy
- In ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, adult male citizens directly participated in

discussions and decision- making, while women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded. But in many vast, modern countries direct democracy is impossible. The vast population cannot collect at one place, for example it is just impossible for 140 crores voters of India, to find a place where 50 to 60 thousand people can assemble for discussion.

➤ **DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IN THE WORLD**

- Most democracies today follow the system of representative democracy, in which citizens elect their representatives to govern on their behalf. However, democracies do not function in the same way everywhere.
- There are two main forms of representative democracy.
- Parliamentary Democracy
 - Parliamentary democracy is a system of government in which the executive derives its authority from the legislature and remains accountable to it. The members of the executive are also part of the legislature. The head of the government, usually the Prime Minister, is chosen from the majority party or coalition in the legislature. The Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers are responsible for implementing government policies. The Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the legislature, which makes the government accountable
 - for its actions. India has a bicameral legislature made up of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. In our country, the Council of Ministers can continue working as long as they have the confidence of the Lok Sabha. In this form of government, citizens elect the members of the legislature. Selected members become the ministers (part of the executive). In a parliamentary system, there is a close relationship between the executive and legislative branches, with the executive being dependent on the confidence of the legislature.
- Presidential Democracy
 - The presidential form of government is based on the principle of separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. Under this system, the executive is independent of the control of the legislature.
 - In the presidential form of government, the head of the State is also the real executive head. The President directly exercises executive powers.
 - This system is based on the principle of separation of powers, in which the executive, legislature, and judiciary work independently.
 - At the same time, the system follows the principle of checks and balances. Although the three organs of government are separate, they keep a check on one another to prevent misuse of power.
 - The President holds significant executive authority but these powers are limited by constitutional provisions and checks and balances.
 - Another important feature of the presidential system is that political homogeneity is

not essential. Members of the cabinet do not have to belong to the same political party as the President. At present, countries like the USA, Brazil, etc. are having presidential form of government. Sri Lanka has semi-presidential system.

Why Democracy has Spread

Democracy promises equality to all. Every citizen has a right to be elected and contest elections. In the non-democratic governments those who enjoy power do not want to give it up. They resist attempts to wrest power from their hands. To have a democratic government people have to struggle for it, as in Poland during the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. Various social groups including workers, students, and civil society organisations have played important roles in democratic movements.

Democracy has spread because of three major events:

- (i) The Second World War
- (ii) Decolonization and
- (iii) The collapse of the Soviet Union. These three external factors started a chain of events in many countries which helped democracy. There were, of course, internal forces and conditions conducive for democracy.

CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy may be the best form of government but it has to face many problems.

- Wide gaps between rich and poor allow the wealthy to dominate politics, often leading to exploitation of underprivileged voters.
- The growing economic inequality has an adverse impact on politics. Policy-makers may sometimes prioritise the interests of influential economic groups over those of weaker sections, their grievances are not properly addressed.
- Economic inequalities have an adverse effect on elections. People with money have more chances of winning elections. More and more money is being spent on elections — on campaigning, publicity, etc. Huge contributions are made to the election campaigns. People who make the contributions expect favours from the parties and leaders they help. The ordinary citizens cannot do this. Some non-democratic or weak democracies, voters may face coercion or intimidation. How can people, elected by corrupt means, be true representatives of the people? Democracies have been harmed by the practice of corruption, inefficiency and negligence. These factors lead people to lose interest in democracy. People start losing confidence in democratic political institutions. About two-thirds people have lost faith in political parties and many do not trust government officials. But still the majority of people, two-third, think that a democratic political system is best suitable to our country, only 5 per cent think it is not. They feel that democratic institutions are not working properly and are dissatisfied with the present state of affairs.
- The need of the hour is to establish a healthy democracy based on a democratic society. Correct democratic values have to be taught and imbibed at the grassroot levels — beginning with the family, friends and neighborhood.
- All-out effort should be made to root out corruption from public dealings and choose a government which is sensitive to the needs of the people.
- Last of all, the voters must realise how important it is to exercise their voting rights. It is in their hands to elect representatives who can govern with integrity, commitment

and ability.

In the end we can conclude that democracy cannot find immediate solutions to all problems. In countries like India, with a large and diverse population and significant socio-economic challenges, fulfilling public expectations can be complex. But democracy is still a better form of government. It is because of the values a democratic government stands for. These values are freedom, equality and justice. It is up to us to consolidate democracy so that these values are realised in society.