



In defence of India's noisy democracy

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(Mains GS 2 : Comparison of the Indian constitutional scheme with that of other countries.)

Context:

- China's developmental pathway over the last century has been spectacular and it successfully lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty.
- But India's developmental progress shows mixed records.

India lag behind:

- Since the 1990s, the Indian economy has grown impressively, but it remains far behind China in its global competitiveness.
- Poverty has come down, but employment prospects for the majority remain limited to low-wage informal sector jobs.
- According to Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, improvements in basic social development indicators have actually fallen behind Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The 'too democratic' line:

- Comparing the track records of India and China, some commentators said that India's problem lies in too much democracy.
- Unlike China, making and implementing key decisions about public investment and various reforms is impossible in the din of multiple and contradictory democratic voices.
- Thus India needed firmer and more independent forms of decision-making that are insulated from this cacophony.

Democracy regime performs better:

- The claim that less democracy is good for development does not stand up to comparative, theoretical and ethical scrutiny.
- Comparative evidence clearly shows that democratic regimes handle economic management better than non-democratic regimes.

Cross country analysis:

- China, with a history of state-building going back two millennia, and an exceptionally well-organised, disciplined and brutal form of authoritarianism, has done especially well in transforming its economy.
- Africa and West Asia, where authoritarian governments of every stripe have dominated, remain world economic laggards.
- The Latin American military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s had a terrible economic and social record.
- It was only with the return of democracy and the “pink wave” of Left populist parties that prosperity and social progress were ushered in.
- Taiwan and South Korea are also instructive as their economic take-offs happened under military regimes and relied on labour repression.
- Their transitions to democracy saw their economies move up to the next level and become much more inclusive.

Democracy and development:

- One has to look within India to understand how development and democracy can thrive together.
- Kerala and Tamil Nadu have done more to improve the lives of all their citizens across castes and classes than any other States in India.
- It is no coincidence that both have also had the longest and most sustained popular democratic movements and intense party competition in the country.
- In contrast, in Gujarat, where single party rule has been in place for nearly a quarter century, growth has been solid but accompanied by increased social exclusion and stagnation in educational achievement and poverty reduction.
- The comparative record leaves little doubt that on balance, democracies are better at promoting inclusive growth.

Elected representatives are accountable:

- It is argued that Authoritarianism supports forms of decision-making that can rise above the hubbub of democratic demand-making to get things done.
- This argument presumes that those in command will serve the general interest rather than catering to the powerful.
- But in reality authoritarianism enjoys more autonomy and consolidates wealth around a few hands of their choices.
- Thus democracies are more likely to meet the necessary conditions for successful decision making.
- As elected representatives, no matter how venal, have to win re-election, which means answering to a broad swath of the electorate.

Democracy allows negotiation:

- The conflicts and noise that democracy generates may complicate things, but in the end, having to respond to a broad spectrum of interests and identities.
- Democracy not only protects against catastrophic decisions, but actually allows for forms of negotiation and compromise that can bridge across interests and even balance otherwise conflicting imperatives for growth, justice, sustainability and social inclusion.
- Welfare programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, National Health Protection Scheme, the Right To Information, the right to food and other programmes is a testament to how a democracy can master even the most complex policy goals.
- Democratic theorists have long argued that the common good cannot and should not be determined by science, profits, technocrats or autocratic fiat.

A look at China:

- India's tryst with democracy was born not only of its liberation movement but also of its affinity with what makes democracy ethically unique.
- it promotes equality by endowing all citizens with the same civic, political and social rights even as it protects and nurtures individuality and difference.
- And this is where the China-India comparison is so problematic, indeed unconscionable.

Suppression in china:

- One might measure or evaluate China's development successes but there is no way to discount the human cost of the progress.
- China's subjugation reflected in party-made great famine that took some 35 million lives, a cultural revolution that made enemies out of neighbours, a one child policy that devastated families, systematic repression of the Uyghur Muslim and Tibetan minorities.
- These were and are the irredeemable instincts and predations of an authoritarian state, one which now denounces as "historical nihilism" any interpretations of the past that challenge the party's official history.

India' s vibrant democracy:

- Although India's democracy has been quarrelsome, cumbersome and often dominated by elites, it has also opened social and political spaces for subordinate groups.
- It has built a sense of shared identity and belonging in the world's largest and most diverse society.
- It has preserved individual liberties, group identities and religious and thought freedoms, all the things that confer recognition on human beings.
- India's democratic freedoms and the role they have played in building a pluralistic nation shows the very idea of human agency and dignity.

Conclusion:

- Democracy deepens its roots when successive regimes allow comprehensive decision-making and ensure independence of democratic institutions.
- Thus by tackling challenges of polarisation, economic and social inequality along with flourishing of opposite views, India makes its journey to development inclusive.