

We are proud to be the largest democracy in the world and a very successful one too. For more than seventy years, we have held successful elections, peaceful changes of government at the centre and in the states, people exercising freedom of expression, movement and religious practices. India has been developing and transforming economically and socially. We have become a foodgrain exporter from being an importer on the eve of Independence witnessing Green Revolution, Operation Flood (White Revolution), Blue Revolution, and so on. We have also made rapid strides in modernisation and industrialisation of our economy – especially since the advent of economic liberalisation since 1991. Though the quantum of economic development is not tremendous if we compare it with other countries of South-East Asia, such as China and Japan, but given our huge problems of poverty, illiteracy, socio-economic diversities and regional imbalances – we have undoubtedly made huge strides in all aspects of life.

Democracy means ‘government of the people, for the people, and by the people’. It means democracy is not limited to just a process of election, but more importantly also fulfilling social and economic aspirations of people. We keep discussing and debating various aspects of democracy, its achievements and challenges.

Social divisions exist in most of the countries and these are profound in a third world country like India. Political expression of social divisions is obvious and desirable in a successful democracy. These strengthen as well as weaken

democracy. It all depends on citizens, political parties and leaders. If they place the nation above social differences, the unity, integrity and prosperity of the nation are ensured. If the social differences are given priority, country suffers and its unity and integrity is in jeopardy.

We seem to strike a middle path in India. It can't be denied that political parties exploit the social differences for electoral gains on the eve of elections through the media. But citizens are wise enough to discern the real issues and they are not much swayed by the media hype just for electoral gains.

Let's examine the three major social differences in our country — gender, religion and caste — on the touchstone of working of democracy in letter and spirit.

Gender Discrimination

Discrimination against girls and women exists in every walk of life. All of us had such experiences of prevailing gender inequality in our society and polity. But we know that gender equality is one of the basic principles of democracy. The Constitution of India enjoins upon the State to ensure that men and women are treated as equals and there is no discrimination against women. Fundamental Rights and Fundamental Duties as well as the Directive Principles of State Policy make these intensions very clear.

But the discrimination against females continues to be a fact of life. It is clearly reflected in the sex ratio, child sex ratio and maternal mortality rate. The number of females in comparison to males has been declining ever since 1901. In 1901, the sex ratio was 972 females per 1000 males. It came down to 927 females per 1000 males in 1991. According to 2011 Census it is 940 females per 1000 males, which is still very unfavourable to females. In some of the States, the 2011

Census reported a very low sex ratio of 877 females per 1000 males (Haryana).

The child sex ratio is a matter of greater concern. According to 2011 Census, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) in India is only 914 female children per 1000 male children. This is lower than the 2001 Census which reported child sex ratio of 927 female children per 1000 male children. It has been declining because of several factors, like the prevailing preference for male child, discriminatory treatment against the girl child right after birth, and the increasing incidence of female infanticides and female foeticides. The infant mortality rate among girl children is high, as compared to that among boy children. The Maternal mortality ratio is also considered very high.

It is now being recognised that the goals of democracy “of the people, for the people and by the people” cannot be fully realised if the female population is not included in all ways in the processes of socio-economic and political development. That is why, besides constitutional provisions, several laws have been enacted, policies have been made and implemented, and institutional reforms have been carried out for the development of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments of Indian Constitution in 1993 are the milestones in the process of political empowerment of women. These Amendments have reserved one-third of the seats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, Municipalities and Municipal Corporations. Another significant development has been the adoption of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 2001, the overriding goal of which is to “bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.”

Hindu Succession Amendment Act (2005) gave inheritance right to women (daughters and mothers) in father's landed

property. Recent government endeavours like **Ujjwala Yojana**, **Jan Dhan Yojana**, **Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao**, provision of piped drinking water in villages and establishment of toilets (under Swachh Bharat Yojana) will go a long way towards amelioration of conditions of women.

Casteism, Communalism and Religious Fundamentalism

Casteism : The caste system which presumably originated in the division of labour in the ancient society has become a more or less rigid group classification, based on birth. Have you ever experienced the role of caste in your life and society? You will agree that the most detrimental and inhuman aspect of the caste system is the practice of untouchability which is continuing in spite of the constitutional ban imposed on it. This has led to segregation of so called low castes or ‘Dalits’, depriving them of education and other social benefits. Casteism has played a negative role even in the democratic political processes. In fact, casteism has become notorious as a strategy of exploitation of caste consciousness for narrow political gains. The caste system acts against the roots of democracy. The democratic facilities - like fundamental rights relating to equality, freedom of speech, expression and association, participation in the electoral process, free media and press, and even legislative forums - are misused for reaping political dividends.

Casteism has also been contributing towards continuation of socio-economic inequalities. It is true that India has been an unequal society from times immemorial. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the Backward Classes have suffered down the ages from socio-economic deprivations. There are enormous inequalities in our society which are posing serious challenge to Indian democracy.

What is more alarming is the mixing of caste and politics

resulting into ‘politicisation of caste’ and ‘casteicisation of politics’ in contemporary Indian polity which has become a grave challenge to our democracy. Despite the era of liberalisation and globalisation caste consciousness has not been eroded in our society and castes are being increasingly used as vote bank politics.

Communalism: Communalism and religious fundamentalism have acquired a very dangerous form and alarming proportion in India. They disrupt the pattern of co-existence in our multi-religious society. Communalism is an affront to India's nationalist identity and a tragic setback to its evolving secular culture. It is subversive of our democratic political stability and destroyer of our glorious heritage of humanism and composite culture. Quite often, communalism is wrongly used as a synonym for religion or conservatism.

Although conservatism represents social backwardness, it does not mean communalism either. As a matter of fact, communalism is an ideology of political allegiance to a religious community. It uses one religious community against other communities and perceives other religious communities as its enemies. It is opposed to secularism and even humanism. One of the manifestations of communalism is communal riots. In recent past also, communalism has proved to be a great threat to our social and political life on several occasions.

Religious Fundamentalism : Religious fundamentalism also reinforces communalists in exploiting both religion and politics. In fact, fundamentalism acts as an ideology which advocates a return to orthodoxy and a strict compliance to the fundamental tenets of religion. Religious fundamentalists vehemently oppose progressive reforms in order to establish their exclusive control on their respective communities.

Corrective Steps

For a successful working of democracy, citizens' participation is a must. The corrective measures to meet the challenges can be actualised only when citizens play proactive role. The citizens must respect the law and reject violence. Every citizen must respect the rights of his or her fellow citizens, and their dignity as human beings. No one should denounce a political opponent as evil, just because of holding different views. People should question the decisions of the government, but not reject the government's authority. Every group has the right to practise its culture and to have some control over its own affairs, but each group should accept that it is a part of a plural society and democratic state.

When you express your opinion, you should also listen to the views of other people, even people you disagree with. Everyone has a right to be heard. When you make demands, you should understand that in a democracy, it is impossible for everyone to achieve everything one wants. Democracy requires mutual cooperation. Groups with different interests and opinions must be willing to sit down with one another and negotiate. If one group is always excluded and fails to be heard, it may turn against democracy in anger and frustration. Everyone who is willing to participate peacefully and respect the rights of others, should have some say in the way the country is governed.

The corrective measures that are needed to meet the challenges to Indian democracy are focussed around the issues and concerns like universal literacy, poverty alleviation, elimination of gender discrimination, removal of regional imbalances, administrative and judicial reforms and sustained economic, social and environmental development.

However, Indian democracy can be successful and vibrant only when its citizens imbibe and reflect in their behaviour the basic democratic values like equality, freedom, social justice, accountability and respect for all. Their mindset, thinking and behaviour are expected to be in tune with the essential conditions of democracy. They have to appreciate the opportunities for their desired roles like participation, making the system accountable, fulfilling obligations, and playing proactive roles to actualise the goals of democracy.

