



## Participatory Experiences of Indian Democracy

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### Abstract

*Strengthening the democratic polity by utilizing enhanced space for peoples' participation has become imperative for development and good governance in nations. However, when it comes to practice in the Indian context, the distance between what has been prescribed and what has been actualized marks a huge gap in formalism. Constraints of Caste, Religion, Language, Gender, and Economy play havoc in achieving the statist goal of mass participation. Governments are becoming popular, and leaders are activated in populism, yet common remains far from the epicenter of political power. Empowerment has become the catchphrase of the decade, yet the scope of such endeavor has been reduced to mere symbolic representation. The present paper attempts to trace the limits of participatory experience within the largest democracy in the world through a critical overview.*

**Keywords:** *Multiculturalism, Development, Panchayats, Universal Adult Franchise, Governance.*

In a multicultural nation, like India, participation in democratic polity is a contested idea. There are several standards and parameters of 'participation' determined by Caste, Gender, Region, and many other socio-political backgrounds. During the Ancient and Mediaeval periods, India experienced rules of mighty conquerors and emperors and therefore the scope for the commons to take part in Royal politics was least little. However, references to 'Sabha' and 'Samiti' as the primary units of rural polity are available in the descriptions of the Indus Valley Civilization. During British Rule, Indians as subjects were treated as slaves. With the advancement of nationalist spirit amongst the educated elite Indians, things started changing. Indian National Congress, as the first political party for the Indians, did not owe a mass basis until Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, through the Satyagraha movement welcomed the backward and downtrodden people to join the platform of Congress for the struggle against foreign rule. The participation of mass in the Indian freedom struggle was further hindered by the 'Divide and Rule' policy of British rulers and the communal equations troubled the next entire course of India's struggle for freedom to a great extent and resulted in a bifurcated independence in 1947.

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The creation of Pakistan was never a permanent solution to the communal divide in India. And the democratic politics adopted employing constitutional arrangements has been under certain critical challenges from communal perspectives to date and the issue of participation in democratic politics remains complicated for the same reason.

One major facet of the process of nation-building in post-independence India was the creation of States as regional units of federal structure based on linguistic diversity. But the plan failed miserably within a very short span as aspirations to achieve a State as a native political unit based on linguistic identity continued to spring seeking autonomy from the larger linguistic group of the already created States. Identity politics around the ethnographic and linguistic variations grew in numbers and on occasions, the movements for autonomy resorted to militant politics. The Mosaic Theory of national integration, where participation was considered a crucial tool for the unification of the nation, come to face serious challenges of Identity politics.

The process of economic development throughout the country was never uniform. If the geographical diversity of the country was one of the reasons behind this, the benefits of development did not reach the grassroots at the remote corners of the country majorly due to bureaucratic lethargy and faulty policymaking. Moreover, the underdeveloped regions repeatedly complained the cosmopolitan development of mainland India was at the cost of the underdeveloped and marginalized regions. Resources were being expropriated from regions to feed the urbanized, industrialized, modernized 'other' India. The sense of depreciation and deprivation could not encourage people's participation in the process of nationwide development at a holistic scale and regional underdevelopment contributed further to the growth of regional identity politics.

Casteism and the phenomenal politicization of Caste have been another source of distortion in the process of people's participation in the democratic process in India. This age-old practice has been a long-standing burden over the constitutional democracy in India with its proverbial expression "Jaat Ka Beti Jaat Ka, Jaat Ka Vote Jaat Ka". It is often found that in an area dominated by the upper castes, the Dalits strive to attain their basic human rights, participation in political life there would then become next to impossible for them. In areas where the majority of the population belongs to several tribes, like that of the northeastern part of the country, the polity is run by traditional ethnic tribal practices like the "GaonBurah" system. There also, domination of the educated and wealthy section of society remains prevalent in connection to mainstream democratic politics other than the local grass root level systems.

For generations, women are the most deprived section of society in terms of their number, rights, and representation. Prejudiced social practices have refrained women from their reach to religion, education, health, wealth, power, expressions, and the right to self-determination. Their participation in social and community life remained passive as to their roles in politics. Their right to elect and get elected remained suppressed for quite a long time. Therefore, their participation in democratic politics has been a chapter that was rarely opened.

In the backdrop of such and many other unequal equations in socio-cultural and political life, India's search for a viable and vibrant political system to ensure people's participation from the grass root level continued within and outside the limits of constitutional arrangements. Community Development Programme brought in during the early 50s was a thriving effort to meet this end. People in rural areas were bestowed with the responsibility of planning their own goals of development based on their primary necessities of the locality and the state agency would work as the facilitator to ensure the needed development.

The scantiness of people's involvement in the Community Development Program was shown by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, which in turn, suggested the installation of Panchayati Raj institutions to make popular partaking more evocative and operative. The committee detected that there was a requirement to realize or generate a representative and democratic foundation which will endure the local concern, guardianship, and custody, indispensable to guarantee that the spending of finance upon local matters adapts the necessities and desires of the locality, bequeath it with passable power and allocate to it apposite funds, which may stimulate local responsiveness and motivate local enterprise in the field of development. Thus, the preconditions for perceptible decentralization and evocative popular participation were very categorically accentuated by the Balwant Rai Mehta study team. Accordingly, Community Development Program was institutionalized as a Panchayati Raj system throughout the country.

Alike the concept of 'Swaraj', the Panchayati Raj was committed to establishing the self-rule of the people at the lowest tier of Indian democracy. Participation of every adult villager in the 'Gram Sabha' was ensured through legal and structural setup. In the initial stage, bureaucracy played havoc on the functioning of the units of Panchayats. Yet, people's enthusiastic participation in the reconstruction of micro-level developmental initiatives was visible to some extent. The rudimentary principle posterior to the enactment of Panchayati Raj as an approach of Local Self-Governing in the countryside expanses of the country was that of drawing democracy back to the grass root plane. This, verbosely, was also destined to encourage people's sharing in the management of local dealings in a style that will advance to self-adequate village societies of conscientious villagers.

In 1989, the then Prime Minister of India, late Rajiv Gandhi made a historical move to revitalize the Panchayati Raj institutions by initiating the 64th Constitutional Amendment Act in the parliament. The bill was rejected by Rajya Sabha. However, in 1992 in a renewed attempt of amending the Indian Constitution for the 73rd and 74th occasion, people participated from all sections of the society in the local governance institutions like Panchayats and Nagarpalikas, with proper reservation for the weaker sections. This was a landmark arrangement towards ensuring people's participation in the PRIs.

The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 distinctly proposed that the Panchayat should be the foundations of Local Self-Government around which political authority should be decentralized to the commons to guarantee their participation in the procedure of planning for economic development and social justice, and execution of suggestions and programs for

these objectives. To reinforce and supplement the capability of grassroots-level governance, Panchayati Raj Institutions were devised in an amalgamated three-tier scheme. At the foundation of its pyramidal erection, the village assembly or the Gram Sabha which is the unit arranged of all adult citizens eligible to vote was to operate as the basis of grassroots democracy. Such a consideration on the part of the policy-makers suggests that grassroots-level institutions are the indispensable mechanisms in the course of manumission of lower levels and these processes are stauncher as and when common people recognize themselves as enthusiastic collaborators. The developed system brought in all the competent countrymen who are enunciated to articulate in decision-making by means of their partaking in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Panchayati Raj system, consequently, becomes the valuable backup for the Empowerment and Social Justice of the scrawnier segment on which the growth arrangement must built upon for consummating the inclusive accomplishment of the community. The central idea of the 73rd Amendment Act concerning reinforcing the Panchayati Raj Institutions is that the involvement of the underprivileged section of the society in the course of development would confirm the opportunity of a sound democratic polity throughout the nation.

Notwithstanding terrific disputes, plus extremely abject literacy and a very lofty level of poverty, the nation-builders had the buoyancy and persuasion in the populaces of the nation with assorted backgrounds and susceptibilities. As one may recapitulate, India always had been an exclusive example wherein popular democracy not only endured surpassing all odds but also has lay down several unique trends in the process of democratic governance. Indubitably, there can be hardly any denial of the fact that there were also occasions when democracy was threatened. And such a threat continues to operate even today.

One of the strong pillars of Indian democracy is the Election Commission of India. Although, on many occasions, its working as an independent and constitutional body came under public scrutiny, it has, at large been able to guarantee free-and-fair polls throughout the nations. The Election Commission can be acknowledged for the gradual higher turnout of electorates in elections, Although the said turnout of voters at polling stations could have been much more, any statistics of 65% and more are reasonably praiseworthy, and is a genuine gauge of people's participation in democratic politics via electoral system.

The judiciary in India is also passing through an evolving phase, and there is a huge number of backlogs of court cases for disposal, especially in lower courts. People seeking justice often wonder when justice would be delivered to them. Under such comprehension, the participation of people in seeking justice has been enhanced through Public Interest Litigations, Judicial Reviews, and to some extent Judicial Activism, and citizens, more often than earlier, determine going to the Courts whenever a breach of social justice becomes prevalent. Amid such scenarios, several Supreme Court verdicts and some High Court judgements have spawned optimism amongst the public. Such sentences lean towards making people recline confidence in the judicial system of the country.

Legislation as the system of law-making should promote the common interest of all sections of society. Unfortunately, in India, people's participation in legislation is miserably missing, neither all the elected representatives of the people have the appropriate knowledge, pursuance, or capability to establish their views in lawmaking. And such activity appears to be the prerogatives of a small number of leaders in the ruling disposition.

Policy designing in the Union and the States is a different facet wherein the participation of people is found demanding. Very often, policies are made keeping electoral gains in mind rather than the maximum benefit of the people. People's participation in policymaking can build democracy more effervescent. From Policy-making to its implementation or execution the bureaucratic agencies operate minus the responsiveness and dexterity to guarantee people's participation, rendering the purpose an almost pointless workout most of the time. The welfare plans that are for the profit of the people, should be determined by the people or otherwise, as it has been in many times, get translated into political issues on political lines. Remedying gripes is a vital part of governance in a democracy. A vivacious democracy must have the mechanism to listen to its people to meet their issues. Though theoretically, a mechanism for grievance redressal is supposed to work effectively in every segment of the governmental establishment, mostly these are found to be non-functional for practical purposes. It is the fourth estate of democracy, the press and the media, that sometimes provide space to increase the voice of a segment of public, and account occurrences of injustice, anomaly, etc. Therefore, Public Opinion is another very important aspect using which learned and concerned sections of the society ventilate their desires and directions to the political system.

The urgent necessity of the time is the spirited participation of Civil Society athwart the country on innumerable concerns that has impact upon the commons. Level headed political parties, pressure or interest groups, trade unions, and civil society organizations must elevate their accent, and sensitize the commons. Such organizations must appear as platforms of popular participation where matters of local and nationwide importance, may be conversed, argued, and resolved to elucidations, unlike the prejudiced so-called Prime Time debates on the TV channels.

India remains a vivid land, and democratic politics here can flourish only with the active participation of its people in every remote corner of the country. But with the rise of 'populism' in Indian democracy the participation of people in politics has quantitatively multiplied, while in qualitative aspect it has reduced much to an insignificant level. People's political behavior is no better than the mob as in major cases they have been found to back the propaganda of the leading political force in power, some times in the name of nationalism, at other times for the sake of communal outlook. Irrational activities of mass-participation have been noticed when asked to make noise to acknowledge the dedication of the Covid Warriors at varied sectors. People came out in large number breaking all protocols to 'celebrate' in cacophonous demonstrations considering the call a treatment of the epidemic! Gatherings around any festivity goes huge day by day, although employment opportunities are lessening drastically. Similarly, during the days of demonetization, people were resilient

enough to utter any protest for the inconvenience caused due to a whimsical order of the government, yet the leaders are becoming popular at an unprecedented level to collect votes in their favor or attracting people in public meetings and rallies.

People's participation is a key to a successful democracy, but that has to be a 'conscious' participation on the part of the commons. In a nation of popular sovereignty effective mass-participation may lead to good governance, which is the need of the hour. India is passing through a juncture of its experiment with democracy since last seventy-five years and the majority of the population represents the youthful age group well-exposed to digital communications and information connectivity. It is therefore high time for the country to bring much desired change towards the nature and orientations of peoples participation in democratic politics towards attaining aspired success in making a government 'by the people, of the people, for the people'.

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