THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY.

The Future of Democracy published in Mainstream, VOL L, No 35, on August 18, 2012.

I. Setting and Argument

Between December 18, 2010 and September 17, 2011, three events in different parts of the world highlighted the issue of the future of democracy as central to the social and political discourse everywhere. These three epoch-making events have different evocative titles: The Arab Spring; India Against Corruption; and Occupy Wall Street.

The Arab Spring—a wave of demonstrations and protests-began on Saturday, December 18, 2010 in Tunisia when Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in protest against police corruption and ill-treatment in a rather remote place called Sidi Bouzid. The protests soon spread to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Western Sahara. This people's uprising in Tunisia is popularly referred to as the Jasmine Revolution because of the place that

jasmine occupies in Tunisian society. Subsequent interviews with Mohamed's father and sisters established that he 'set himself on fire for dignity' and that to him 'dignity was more important than the bread'.

The Arab Spring generated a lot of hope in the Arab world. The massive and spontaneous nature of the street-protests posed a decisive challenge to authoritarian rule. They resolutely questioned the authority of rulers who were stealing the wealth of the community and depriving people of their freedom. As a result of mass uprisings, governments were overthrown in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 11, 2011, thus ending his 30-year Presidency. The Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was challenged on August 23, 2011 and was killed on October 20, 2011 in his hometown of Sirte. A civil war broke out in Syria and demonstrations occurred everywhere.

During this period of regional unrest, several leaders—President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, Iraqi

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—announced their intention to step down at the end of their current terms. Protests in Jordan have also caused the sacking of two successive governments by King Abdullah.

All of these were perhaps provoked by the fact that dictatorial governance was the norm in the Arab world. In future, it may well be that this region will be ruled by democratically elected leaders. The Arabs will eventually exercise their rights to regime change as in the European countries, the US and India. It will, however, take time for democratic institutions like the legislature, the judiciary, the media and the Election Commission to acquire firm roots and an independent character. The India Against Corruption movement owes its leadership to, and inspiration from, Kisan Baburao Hazare popularly known as Anna Hazare. On April 5, 2011, Hazare began his hunger strike in New Delhi to press the demand for a strong Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayuktas (ombudsmen) in the States. On April 8, the Government of India accepted the movement's demand and a Committee was constituted to draft the Lokpal Bill. On July 28, the Union Cabinet

approved a draft of the Lokpal Bill, which kept the Prime Minister, judiciary and the lower bureaucracy beyond the ombudsman's ambit. Hazare rejected the government's version by describing it as a 'cruel joke' and wrote a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announcing his decision to begin an indefinite fast from August 16, if the government introduced its own version of the Bill in Parliament without accepting suggestions from civil society. On August 16, following the Independence Day celebrations in India, Anna commenced an indefinite hunger strike but was arrested by the Delhi Police and sent to Tihar Jail. After his arrest, Hazare received extraordinary support from people across the country. He refused to leave Tihar Jail. There were reports of nearly 570 demonstrations and protests with millions of people marching on the street all over the country. The government allowed Anna to undertake a public hunger strike of fifteen days at Ramlila Maidan as demanded by him. Anna ended his fast on August 28, after the Lok Sabha passed a resolution indicating its resolve to strive for a strong Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayauktas in the States.

Anna, a former truck driver of the Indian Army, was elated with his work and saw himself as an agent of change. He declared at a public meeting: 'When God wants to bring in change, He needs a vehicle of change, I became that vehicle.' The movement brought into focus the fact that Indian democracy is injected with corruption at both the top and bottom of the system.

This anti-graft movement received support from constitutional bodies like the Supreme Court of India and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India as well as from enlightened citizens, the media and the middle class.

The Occupy Wall Street movement began on September 17, 2011 (in Zuccotti Park, located in New York City) against social and economic inequality, high unemployment, greed and corruption. Capitalism and its working faced severe criticism. The inspiration came from the Canada-based Adbusters Media Foundation. This, in turn, gave rise to the Occupy movement in the United States and around the world.

These protests are against social and economic inequality, high unemployment, greed, as well as corruption and the undue influence of corporations on government—particularly by the financial services sector. The protesters' slogan—We are the 99 per cent—refers to the growing income and wealth inequality in the US between the wealthiest one per cent and the rest of the population. The protests in New York City have sparked similar Occupy protests and movements around the world and still continue to do so.

My enquiries against the backdrop of these three continuing movements have revealed that while people believe in the desirability of democracy as against other forms of governance, they are profoundly dissatisfied with the manner in which the institutions of democracy are working—functioning without significantly addressing the issues concerning the dignity and welfare of its citizens. They allege that the State has failed to deliver quality service to its citizens and stop corruption on the part of political leaders, civil servants, and businessmen.

In several democratic countries, citizens have expressed disapproval in the working of key democratic institutions such as National Parliaments, States Assemblies, Civil Service and Local Self Government bodies. Yet people continue to believe in the virtues of democracy and clamour for it especially where dictatorial or monarchical dispensation prevails. Is it possible that this precarious balance between the appeal of democracy and the dissatisfaction at the working of its political institutions could jeopardise the future of democracy itself? Are democracies, as John Keane puts it, "sleepwalking their way into deep trouble"? Are alternatives to democracy being contemplated both in democratic countries and authoritarian ones?

The paradox of this situation needs to be appreciated both in historical perspective and in the context of the world we live in.

II. Origins of Democracy

SOME form of participatory democracy was born about 2600 years ago in the Greek city of Athens. This invention was a product of

the Athenian attempt to broaden the form of authoritarian government which they had and truly reflected their genius and good sense. They called it Demokratia by which they meant self-government among equals. It was a unique experiment in a kind of direct democracy where the people did not elect representatives to vote on their behalf, but directly participated in and voted on legislation, and gave some executive directions.

Athens was located in the region of Greece called Attica protected by mountain ranges in the north and west and measuring some 2500 square kilometres. Athens produced great leaders like Cleisthenes, Heraclitus, Pericles, Demosthenes and several others. However, their type of democracy, while an early experiment, was also deeply flawed.

This Athenian democracy, though a somewhat secular one, highly esteemed their gods and deities. Sadly, they put Socrates—their finest genius—to death in 399 BC after a public trial for impiety and for corrupting the youth. Other negative features of the Athenian system

was that slavery existed, women could not vote and the franchise was very restricted.

The Greeks were very proud of their type of governance. The celebrated historian, Thucydides, recorded the famous funeral oration that Pericles gave at the end of the first year in that long war between Athens and Sparta. Pericles mounted a high platform and addressed the mourners proclaiming the virtues of Athens, a form of government in which he argued that everyone was equal before the law. Athens was a model for others to follow, he claimed. 'I declare that our city is an education to Greece.'

The Athenian 'democracy', however, ended with terrible defeats at the hands of Sparta. It survived on and off for two-and-a-half centuries.

The attacks on democracy arose from intellectuals who found the demos disgusting. There were widespread allegations of abuse of power both in internal and external affairs. Leaders were accused of not caring for the welfare of the people or giving them real power. Other models of

governance, more authoritarian in nature, were held up as better systems of organising a community.

The lamp of assembly-based democracy, however, was practised in the east as well. Syria, Iraq, Iran and India too had practised some form of popular self-government. In the early Buddhist period, local republics governed by assemblies were common. The Pali canon gives us a picturesque description of the city of Vesali or Vaishali in the 5th century BC where the government by discussion was practised. This is borne out by recent archaeological excavations as well. Recorded history shows that the Buddha had a fondness for democracy as practised by the Vajjians or the Licchavis in Vaishali. Once, the mighty king of Magadha wished to annex the Vajjian confederacy and sent a Minister, Vassakara the Brahman, to the Buddha to seek his advice as to whether the attack would be a success. Instead of answering this question directly, Buddha spoke to Ananda, his closest disciple in the following manner:

Buddha asked: 'Have you heard, Ananda, that the Vajjians hold full and frequent public assemblies?

Lord, so I have heard, replied he

So long, Ananda, rejoined the Blessed one, as the Vajjians hold these full and frequent public assemblies; so long may they be expected not to decline, but to prosper…'

It is another matter that after the death of the Buddha, the Magadha empire annexed the Vijjain confederacy into its fold.

Even in the days of these early democratic experiments, it was recognised by some that although people were not angels, they were perhaps good enough to prevent oligarchs and dictators from thinking that they were so. Democracy meant self-government where sovereign power resided in an assembly of people and not in the hands of despots or voices of tradition.

Over the years, democracy has aroused millions of people all the world over. It has also empowered them in shaping their own destiny in a manner that they have considered appropriate and useful. It is true that the world has been ruled by monarchs, dictators, and autocrats, duly sanctioned by force at their command, for much longer periods than by

democrats or elected bodies. Democracy in its modern avatar, representative government constituted by political parties on the basis of secret ballot guaranteeing individual liberty and freedom, is only 200 years old. It has some of its roots in the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the British resistances against dictatorial monarchs in the 17th century AD. Democracy evolved thereafter but had major setbacks in the first half of the 20th century. The first five decades of the 20th century saw a long period of dictatorship and hate. Bolshevism in Russia, Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and Militarism in Japan and Latin America negated democracy and destroyed many individuals' rights, freedom and self-rule. Democracy, however, reasserted itself toward the end of the 20th century, and soon more people were living under democracy than under dictatorship. According to the New York Times, at the end of the twentieth century, 3.1 billion people lived in a democracy and 2.66 billion did not.

III. Participatory Democracy to Representative Democracy

OVER the centuries, 'participatory democracy' proved difficult to function because communities grew too big and got replaced by 'representative democracy' a clearly superior form of governance. It was the American freedom leader and thinker, Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804), who first coined the word 'representative democracy' in 1777 in a private communication and that rapidly gained public currency. In hindsight, one feels that if adopted earlier it might have even added to the quality of life of the people of Athens and of Vaishali. For representative democracy delivers a more efficient way of conducting the political affairs of communities as they expand in size and activity.

Democracy is a very flexible and adoptable system and at places it has even accommodated monarchy. However, democracy does not draw its legitimacy from having a king or a queen in its midst. Democracies do not invoke divine authority for management of secular challenges. Above all, no political party or party in power derives its legitimacy from being the instrument of a privileged social grouping, be it a

business house, a political family, or an academic institution. Democracy has often evolved with a mixture of democratic, aristocratic, monarchial and capitalist elements.

Throughout its history, the essence of democracy is that people are the sole source of its authority. One is aware of emperors like Ashoka or Akbar who strengthened the structure of liberal values, and yet, they cannot be called democrats. For democracy does not entertain what John Locke called “the appeal to Heaven”. The idea of people’s participation in the structuring of political deliberation where each citizen should not merely have an equal formal right to contribute to it, but a real substantive opportunity to do so has assumed new meanings in the context of the internet revolution and round-the-clock electronic media coverage.

The ties between democracy and the role of individual citizens within public deliberation has assumed importance. It acknowledges both the personal entitlement of people to try to persuade and the cognitive advantage of inserting all potentially relevant considerations

into decision-making. It is, however, clear that no system can equalise power among citizens in political deliberation, but these developments constitute an advancement over other systems and give a new voice to the people.

Here it needs to be mentioned that democracies provide strength to the free market economy. Markets rest upon the twin institutions of private property and freedom of contract. Market systems, however, do not rest on thin air. They depend critically upon the use of State monopoly of power; first to protect the holders of property from depredations of wrongdoers, and next to enforce the contracts that facilitate the transfer and re-combination of human and physical assets.

The basic protection offered to property rights does not undermine the ideals of deliberative democracy. Politics is not just about expression, sentiment, and education. It also depends on the practical problems that give rise to the apriori need to deliberate. The institutions of represen-tative democracy provide that facility.

IV. Democracy Finds Fresh Roots

THE Athenian democracy contributed significantly both to the form and understanding of some essential features of democracy. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that the neighbouring countries of Greece like the areas that are now France, Germany or Britain were either inspired by or influenced in their management of human affairs by this experiment.

The democracy that was practised by the Licchivis at Vaishali also did not influence the drafting of the Indian Constitution. The Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, B.R. Ambedkar, saw little merit in drawing on that old and strictly local experience in devising the Constitution for modern Indian democracy. It is another matter that Athens, the Licchivis and the Buddhists mahaviras held frequent dialogues on public issues. Important social and religious matters were discussed. The first Buddhist council was held in the sixth century BC at Rajagriha (modern Rajgir) shortly after Gautam Buddha's

death. This tradition was also a feature of social and political behaviour in many parts of the world.

During the colonial era, several countries benefited from the introduction of the institutions of assemblies and councils, courts of law and democratic aspirations for liberty, equality and fraternity. This was greatly strengthened in India by the Freedom Movement and the Indian National Congress. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, B.R. Ambedkar, Rajendra Prasad contributed immensely to democratic processes and secular ideals. Mahatma Gandhi held that:

'Democracy is the art and science of mobilising the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of various sections of the people in the service of common good of all.'

Another major contribution to strengthening the democratic processes emanated from a free and independent Press, a tradition that took roots in Europe and the USA since the 17th century. A free media not only give us information, but also plays an important role in giving a

voice to the neglected and disadvantaged. In fact, an independent and objective media contributes to public reasoning. This places a high responsibility on the media—something that they have not always appreciated.

The working of democratic institutions, however, depends greatly on the activities and imagination of leaders and members of the public in utilising opportunities for realising their potential in a constructive fashion. Towards this, we have to think about democracy not only in terms of elections and ballots but also as a 'government by discussions'. In his famous book, Theory of Justice, John Rawls calls it ' the exercise of public reason'. He goes on to assert 'the definitive idea for deliberative democracy is the idea of deliberation itself. When citizens deliberate, they exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public political questions'.

V. The Essentials of Democracy

THE satisfactory working of democracy needs (i) high calibre of politicians; (ii) the availability of choices through both competition

among rival political parties and leaders about programmes as well as consensus among them on overall direction of national policy; (iii) a civil service of good standing and tradition to assist the political leaders on all aspects of policy formulation and administration; (iv) a culture of respect for differences and diversity of opinion; and (v) a positive attitude that shuns criticism for the sake of criticism.

Political parties are essential for democracy. The world view of political leaders is important since they shape political parties and also determine the future course of action. The role of leaders in representative democracy is dependent upon the support that they get from the electorate, particularly at the time of voting. The permanent bureaucracy is expected to help the political leaders both in the formulation of policy and their effective and timely implementation.

The political leader has to be a generalist and a person who has the ability and interest to involve himself with the problems of the people; a person who would devote his time to the party, and when called upon to take executive responsibility in government, be in a position to

formulate policies and programmes that could benefit the people in general.

The quality of political leadership is very significant—leaders are accountable to the people and are empowered by the people to take policy decisions. A leadership that understands people's problems and has the imagination and skill to lead them in order that plans and programmes are properly formulated and implemented is indeed an essential part of representative democracy. Such an imaginative leadership also strengthens the democratic society.

Power, along with glory, remains among the highest aspiration and the greatest reward of human beings. In all societies and at all times, the exercise of power is regarded highly and the trappings that go with it are enjoyed profoundly. One of the disturbing trends in constitutional democracy is the fact that those who exercise executive power at times enact laws to sub-serve their own interests. This leads to formulation of new laws and occasionally even amendments in the Constitution. The working of Indian democracy too has shown that amendments to the

Constitution and enactment of the laws, at times, have been undertaken to advance the interest of the ruling elite. Fortunately, in India's case, corrective measures have been applied either by Parliament itself or by the Supreme Court. This drama goes on. For example, the present political conflict in Thailand owes its origins to the fact that the Thaksin Government amended laws and even enacted fresh ones to further the economic interests of his own and that of his colleagues. Apparently, there was no violation of law but supremacy of the rule of law was quietly replaced by rule by law.

It goes to the credit of the framers of our Constitution and to the distinguished judges and lawyers that they have established the primacy of the rule of law in India after most acts of deviation in this behalf.

The control over the levers of political power in democracy is a key factor. The power elite is composed of men and women who transcend the environment in which ordinary men and women live. They are in positions to make or influence decisions having major consequences.

The working of democracy ensures mobility among members of the elite group. Over the years, the working of democracy has also facilitated religious and caste leaders, members of the media, artists and scholars to join this group. The composition of the power elite in a democracy has clearly established that celebrity-hood can be acquired.

The nature of the democratic universe is greatly determined by these factors.

VI. The Nature of the Democratic Universe

ALL those who aspire to rule or govern should recognise democracy as the principal guarantor of political legitimacy. In the process, democracies can entertain conflicting ideas and approaches. We have people who believe and practise the notion that markets and commercial pursuits are better secured in a democratic rule. On the other hand, there are those who swear that democracy alone provides a credible covenant for egalitarian and inclusive social order.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet empire in the last decade of the twentieth century provided new

vigour and impetus to the spread of democracy in Europe. The Arab Spring of the second decade of the present century is securing a similar objective in several parts of Asia and Africa. Democracy Index of 2011: Democracy Under Stress, prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), has indicated that 167 countries (which include 165 UN member States) have adopted some democratic form of governance. Democracy has been under pressure in many parts of the world. The EIU has formulated a detailed set of norms to evaluate the functioning of democratic States. The analysis of the EIU appreciates that free and fair elections and civil liberties are necessary pre-conditions for democracy. But they are unlikely to be sufficient for a full and consolidated democracy if unaccompanied by transparent, and at least, minimally efficient government, sufficient political participation and a supportive democratic political culture.

Democracy as a set of values retains strong appeal worldwide. Despite setbacks and overall stagnation, surveys by Freedom House, another think-tank, and EIU show that most people in most places still

want democracy. Trends such as globalisation, increasing education and expanding middle classes tend to favour the organic development of democracy.

It is not easy to build a sturdy democracy. Even in long-established ones, democracy can corrode if not nurtured and protected. Nations with a weak democratic tradition are, by default, vulnerable to setbacks. Many non-consolidated democracies are fragile and socio-economic stress has led to backtracking on democracy in many countries. The underlying shallowness of democratic cultures in many countries on account of weaknesses in political participation and political culture has been exposed.

The years beginning from the last decade of the 20th century to the end of the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the sharpest rise in living standards that the world has ever known. There was a phenomenal expansion in the middle class accompanied by equally sharp increase in income disparity between the few rich and the many poor. In this context, the massive and effective protests against autocratic rulers and

against corruption by the youth belonging to middle class families in different countries contribute an interesting phenomenon of contemporary history.

Studies dedicated to the working of democracy in different parts of the world have established that large sections of people in several major democratic countries have lost confidence in the working of the democratic institutions of their country. A high proportion of citizens in these nations believe that democratic institutions have declined since they largely work for the power elite comprising political leaders and officials, and top businessmen and their corporations. The redeeming feature, however, is that the decline in the confidence in the working of democratic institutions has not been accompanied by a decline in confidence in the concept of democracy. The Arab Spring has clearly established that.

It is remarkable that in many countries of the Arab world, groups of educated middle class youth thought independently, planned independently, and executed their programmes of protest without the

encouragement or endorsement of political groups or political leaders. Time magazine put it picturesquely when it said ‘millions protest, Armies stand down, dictators leave’. In a historical context, it is also interesting to note that this happened two decades after the end of communism as an alternative to democracy.

The proponent of the Arab Spring in country after country are well aware that democracy operates through elections in which political parties play a vital role. They also realise that electoral politics is messy and it is difficult to obtain votes on individual merit. And yet, there is consensus amongst the youth in these countries that democracy is a new culture and that they have to get used to it.

Protests in several established democratic countries are aimed at eradication of corruption and for securing equality of opportunity and dignity to the common people, and not against the idea of democracy. This is a new spirit, and if properly channelled, it can strengthen democracy, not only in India, but also in Europe and the USA where the youth too want changes.

The character of governance during the past 100 years has undergone significant qualitative changes. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were several competing forms of polity management. This included monarchy, military-dictatorship, non-military dictatorship, colonialism and democracy; added to these were fascism and communism. It is true that democracy succeeded over all these other forms of governance.

It is, however, not everybody's contention that democracy prevailed only because of its own strength. The success of democracy was hugely contributed to by the misdeeds and abuse of power by other systems of governance. For example, Germany twice misjudged its strength—first as a monarchy; and second, as a fascist nation-state. Japan did the same. The Soviet Union too succumbed to similar pitfalls. In fact, these authoritarian systems over-reacted, took too many opponents militarily and also mis-governed their people. Time and again, the economies of these countries could not bear the burden of political competition. The collapse of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet

Union in the 20th century are shining examples in this behalf. By the first decade of the 21st century, the triumph of democracy over other forms of governance became clear all over the world. Today even dictators and autocrats would like to style themselves as democrats. Two instances in this behalf are instructive. First, while addressing the Australian Parliament on October 24, 2003, the Chinese President, Hu Jintao, declared that 'democracy is the common pursuit of mankind' and 'all countries must earnestly protect the democratic rights of the people'. He went on to assert that 'in the past twenty years and more, since China embarked on the road of reform and opening up, we have moved steadfastly to promote political restruc-turing and vigorously build democratic politics under socialism.' Second, in 2004, Libya's Colonel Gaddafi in a conversation with Tony Blair explained that his country, too, was a democracy. He drew an imaginary circle in the air, then said: 'This is the people and (placing an imaginary dot in the centre) here am I. I am their expression, and that is why in our democracy political parties are not required.'

In the 21st century, democracy is faced with two major challenges. The first emanates from the forces of Islamic Jihadism; and the second from the success of authoritarian capitalism, as practised in China and Russia.

Islamic Jihadism has disturbing qualities, but is geographically and demographically unlikely to be a "replacement system". The bigger threat to democracy would come if major democracies like the United States of America; the countries of the European Union; Japan and India fail to manage their societies well either physically or economically. On the other hand, if China or Russia do better economically and become more stable politically, democratic governance will look feeble and its intellectual position will decline.

If democracies are mismanaged, cannot deliver good governance and economic fairness and growth, authoritarian capitalism will be a formidable challenge. In fact, this may emerge as the most serious challenge to democracy in the coming decades. The anticipation of such

a situation casts a special responsibility on demo-cratic countries to get their act together soon.

It needs to be appreciated that just because democracy enshrines a better set of ideas (more humane) it is not enough to sustain its position. It has to deliver—especially in today's world. Just proclaiming its virtues will not be enough. And the present triumph of democracy could be undercut by authoritarian capitalist nations-indirectly assisted by the divisionary pressures of Islamic Jihadism India is justifiably called the world's largest democracy in view of the significant size of the electorate and the frequency, regularity, and significance of competitive elections. We need to look into the Indian democratic scene in some detail.

VII. The Indian Scene: Challenges and Possibilities

ON August 15, 1947, India was formally declared a democracy with the right to vote given to all persons irrespective of caste, creed, gender, education and property qualifications.

In his famous Tryst with Destiny speech at midnight that heralded freedom, Jawaharlal Nehru set this challenge brilliantly. He posed: "What shall be our endeavour?" He answered: " to bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation; and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman".

The need was to demonstrate that unity in a highly diverse country could be built by respecting its differences in terms of religion, language and ethnicity, and that democracy itself would become a uniting factor. This democracy, popularly referred to as Lok Sahi, would empower all Indians and help build 'the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell'. The minorities, particularly the Muslims, would have full dignity and all rights for Indian democracy had to be Secular.

The task of building an equitable socio-political order that the newly established Indian democracy demanded was not easy. The

founding fathers of the Constitution of India, who were products of a sustained freedom movement of epic character, were painfully aware of the layers upon layers of cruelty in Indian society. Deprivation of people in the name of religion, caste, and gender was widespread notwithstanding the freedom and equality of opportunity proclaimed by the new law of the land. The partition of India on religious lines—that preceded the declaration of Independence—was not only a political failure, but also a civilisational failure. I am, however, aware that some civilisations have the strength of taking corrective measures but one cannot visualise a time-frame for these measures.

Indian society had long neglected the tribal people, and was indeed oppressive towards the Dalits. B.R. Ambedkar (popularly known as Baba-saheb), the most important leader of the Dalits, realised that the members of his community could not secure justice in a society where Hindu scriptures institutionalised untouchability and inequality. He, like other Dalit leaders before him, encouraged religious conversion for securing social justice and equality, and himself led a large band of

followers to embrace Buddhism to escape religious tyranny. It must also be said of the greatness of Ambedkar that he did not chase the path of revolution. He asserted that the battle of the Dalits for social and civic rights could not wait for a revolution to take place at a future date in history. It had to begin at once. Towards this, he prescribed Constitutionalism.

The coming of democracy not only brought changes in the lives of the Indians, but also fundamentally altered the nature of democracy itself. Hitherto, many thinkers, especially in the West, perceived economic development to be a fundamental pre-condition of democracy. The establishment of democracy in India challenged the traditional view that democracy requires certain a priori conditions, like economic development, high levels of literacy and a common language—for Indian democracy has blossomed in the midst of poverty, illiteracy and diversity. Democracy created a new nation-state of equal citizens in India. The Indian system of parliamentary democracy soon became a

model for countries newly emergent from colonial rule in Asia and Africa.

Among several strengths of Indian democracy is the fact that elections are held at regular intervals in a free and fair manner based on universal suffrage-and also that the transfer of power from one political party or coalition to another takes place in a normal fashion. In many countries, elections are postponed or delayed and the transfer of power involves violence.

Indian democracy has moved beyond holding periodic elections and now demands good governance. Good governance, as I perceive it, means securing justice, empowerment, employment and efficient delivery of services. Good governance does not occur by chance. It must be demanded by citizens and nourished explicitly and consciously by the nation-state. The elected representatives of the people and the permanent civil service have enormous responsibilities to discharge in this behalf.

Indian democracy, however, entertains caste, ethnicity and religion and during elections, money and muscle power play significant roles. However, the traditional belief that by keeping the poor poor and the weak weak, the leaders can guarantee their next election victory is no longer valid. Thanks to the media, people are getting increasingly aware of the role of power-brokers and middlemen who tamper with the institutional framework and the system to enrich themselves. No wonder there is a clamour for the elimination of corruption and unearthing of black money. It is true that the State controlled develop-mental system did not succeed in eliminating poverty and illiteracy. And yet, the alternative model of market economy, which is rapidly becoming fashionable in India, is unable to include most of the poor and dispossessed among its beneficiaries. In fact, the poor are well aware that new India's malls and market complexes are open to them but are not meant for them.

Both Rajendra Prasad, the President of the Constituent Assembly, and B.R. Ambedkar were deeply conscious of the continued need to

have dedicated people who would be called upon to implement the Constitution. On November 25, 1949, Ambedkar stated in the Constituent Assembly: “The working of the Constitution does not depend wholly upon the nature of the Constitution. The Constitution can provide only the organs of the State such as the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The factors on which the working of these organs of the State depend are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics. Who can say how the people of India and their parties will behave.”

There are people who believe that it is a myth that India’s political classes submit themselves to accountability at every election. They allege that elections are manipulated in a manner whereby leaders are elected through a system of patronage politics that favours some sections of the population at the expense of the majority. Democracy, therefore, does not always result in quality delivery of goods and services to the entire population. Non-inclusive growth is also related to patronage politics.

In view of the deep-rooted social and economic inequities of centuries, India cannot blindly follow the capitalist model of growth that puts excessive reliance on market forces for such a model may, in the long run, undermine the stability of Indian polity. And yet, rapid economic growth is essential to meet the aspirations of the Indian youth. Placed in these circumstances, the leaders have to devise ways and means that secure both fast growth and an approach that combines Gandhian ethics with a democratic temper.

In response, innovations are taking place in the government, in the market and in the civil society. Social and political processes are getting increasingly interlinked, changing the character of the elites in the countryside. As a result, the high caste elites of the 1950s have gradually yielded space to intermediate caste landholders and businessmen and also holders of adminis-trative and political offices. In future, the nature and content of good governance would undergo changes in tune with rising expectations and fresh demands of the people.

As a people, we Indians are extremely loyal to the family, to our caste or ethnic group, to our religion and belief systems. Thanks to the freedom struggle and representative institutions, we are also loyal to democracy. At times, to preserve these various loyalties, we tend to use short-cuts and undermine the rule of law and indulge in unsavory acts or even promote illegality. We forget that this sabotages democracy and the fundamental rights and duties of the citizens as enshrined in the Constitution of India.

In India, we are living at different levels of development in a multi-layered society. In several areas of the country, there are structures that characterise pre-industrial societies as people are dependent on raw labour power and extraction of primary resources from nature. Side by side, we also have industrial society edifices in respect of the economy, occupational systems and stratifications based on Western models of society and economy. India also has features of a post-industrial society—a most modern phenomenon prevalent in highly industrialised

countries. What counts in the post-industrial society is the quality of manpower which has access to information and can think ahead. Fortunately, we have professionals who are equipped by education and training to provide skills which are increasingly in demand in post-industrial society.

In this dynamic and layered situation, the Indian nation-state has to mediate between the landless labourers and the landholders; between capitalists and the workers; and between the interests of the professionals and captains of corporate organisations as well as conflicts among and in these communities.

Today, the nation-state is also expected to play a decisive role for two fundamental reasons. First, it must create an atmosphere of peace and stability to facilitate trade and commerce. Second, our socio-political order has to accommodate the claims of new social groups that are clamouring to establish their rights and role in polity and society.

An area of important challenge to public policy relates to the relationship between technical and political decisions. The political leaders will need to be adept in the technical aspects of policy formulation in view of its importance to the economy and polity.

The democratic orders of the future will have to devise ways and means for inclusion of disadvantaged groups and meet their demands for more amenities in politics, education and health care. Once this happens, the character of our political culture too will change. Different countries will make different responses to meet this challenge according to prevailing local situations. But such questions need to be continuously kept in view as these constitute the core of the conception of public policy and democracy. History is moving fast these days in terms of demography, culture, urbanisation and expansion of human consciousness. All these changes, accompanied by phenomenal rise in expectations, are posing unforeseen challenges. Our leadership is required to make policy choices in several economic, social, and external and cultural arenas in order that we can successfully synergise

our strengths and ability for technological innovation, problem-solving skills and political vision.

The singular achievement of Indian democracy has been to keep India united as a polity and to keep its vast market functioning. The architecture of the constitutional democracy has prevented extremist organisations and their leaders from wrecking the ship of the Indian State. But unfortunately, it has not been able to prevent the pressure of these groups.

Serious questions are now facing us. Can India's democracy rise up to the task of effecting improvement of its service delivery systems; accommodate the dispossessed and marginal communities in its policy-making systems; and impart them skills to become beneficiaries of the market mechanism? Is it possible for our democracy to enable us to invest more in the country's long future? We have shown imagination during the Freedom Struggle and in the early years of the Republic in solving our major problems. Can we do this now as well?

There is a widespread dissatisfaction with the pattern of economic growth in the country. It is true that the rate of economic growth has increased considerably which was undreamt of 20 years ago, and yet, a large number of people are being left out from economic betterment. The most serious manifestation of this state of affairs is Naxalite violence which is prevalent in over 160 out of 600 districts in the country.

At places, administration and political institutions have become ineffective and fragile. Both the law and order machinery and service mechanisms are subjected to manipulation by politicians and economic power groups. The system itself is ineffective and marked by widespread rent-seeking. The justice system is also dilatory and beyond the common man's reach. If democracy means the opportunity to play a meaningful part in realising one's potential in life, this spirit of democracy does not appear to prevail in many parts of the country. It is true that the genius of Indian culture helps strengthen the democratic processes in India, but

this needs to be supported by improvements in social and economic environment for the people.

It is true that a number of measures have been taken to empower the common people. The Constitution of India itself provides for affirmative action in respect of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. The Constitution was amended to provide for Panchayati Raj in the rural areas and self-governing local institutions in the urban areas. As a result, we have in the country 3.3 million elected representatives in these bodies, of whom more than one million are women. And among these women, over 86,000 hold office as President and Vice President of these bodies. Assuming that for every elected office in these bodies there are three contenders, we have then over 10 million stakeholders of democracy—an arrangement that secures continuation of the democratic processes in India. The Right to Information given to the people is another step that has empowered them.

Another favourable feature in India is the increased participation of the common people in politics. Discussions of politics in the urban centres as well as in the rural areas are on the rise. People value their political rights and opportunities and exercise their votes in the elections to Panchayats, State Assemblies and Lok Sabha regularly.

Democracy and Economic Development

There is a widespread belief that political systems play a decisive role in economic success. A dialogue with the leaders of the think-tanks and economic barons in Washington D.C. or New York would make known that democracy and capitalism are not only superior systems, but they also go in hand-in-hand with economic prosperity. One would hear similar voices in the capitals of the European countries. India, too, is slowly acquiring that tone notwithstanding the fact that socialist ideas are still highly valued as against that of market capitalism.

There are the opposite views as well. And these are located not only in authoritarian countries, but also in democratic ones. In their perception, well-managed authoritarian systems produce rapid economic growth. They cite the successful development stories of South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore in this regard. To this impressive list, China is being added.

It is being widely argued that democracy is not conducive to economic growth. Populism and promotion of ethnic and group interests do not allow economic freedom to reach the people. Democracies do not have the skill, as some eloquently put it, to get out of this 'dark valley'.

In many parts of the globe, democratic politics is seen as impeding the decisive action needed to expand economic possibilities. Enlightened citizens view the democratic institutions as being guided by the rich and corporate houses to further their interests—not acting to promote the welfare of the common people. This state of affairs is being challenged from the US to Europe to Japan and to India. Citizens are growing impatient and, at times, even contemptuous of some leaders.

Democracies also sustain inequality. For example, there are several layers of life in India. The glitter and glamour of cosmopolitan cities reminds one of Western capitals, while villages bereft of electricity and potable water, and faceless towns establish that things have not changed much despite rapid economic growth in the economy during the last two decades and more. A closer look, however, gives some hope. The populous States of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have commenced their journey on the path of development. Bihar's economy is growing at an 11 per cent rate annually, the second fastest in India. The States of the Indian Union also have acquired political and economic clout in recent years.

The stability of democracy in the coming decades in India needs to be seen in the context of its demography. The demographic scene in India shows that by 2020, the average Indian age will be 29 years as against the average European age of 49 years, and the Chinese age of 37 years. If India succeeds in giving its youth quality education and skills, the democratic governance will get new strengths. Today, the youth has

a choice between world-class engineering colleges and joining Naxalite camps. The Naxalite option needs to be effectively denied to the youth of India in order to secure an assured future of democratic form of governance.

However, in view of India's recent economic success, there are several persons who believe that democracy is vital for economic growth. It is being forcefully advocated that the growth that India enjoys today was facilitated by the introduction of political decentralisation and improved governance. And contrary to conventional wisdom, India stagnated in the past not because it had too much democracy, but because there were too many controls.

If India, with its vast cultural and geographical diversity, coupled with widespread democratic arrangements, can embrace a high rate of economic growth, then no other country need to ponder over a trade-off between economic growth and democracy.

The ground realities establish that authoritarian control, per se, is not an advantage and yet, at the same time, failure to arrive at a decision in democracy does not at all help economic success.

Notwithstanding China's impressive economic accomplishments, most Indians believe that our democratic system provides a unique strength. They also believe that democracy is not the cause of our poverty, and that an effective leadership which believes in massive job creation can succeed in eliminating it. An inclusive democracy needs to combine the philosophy of a strong nation-state with pluralism. The States have to be capable enough to ensure quality delivery of services to the people and to maintain peace and order. An inclusive democracy needs more effective government and more space for markets.

Outlook

Over the millennia, India has entertained social inequality and worse in the name of upholding the 'Varnashrama Dharma'. This social stratification was seriously challenged during the freedom struggle. The constitutional democratic system during the last six decades and more

has gone for constructing a non-discriminatory society and polity with considerable success. Today, we are faced with another massive challenge of economic inequality accompanied with inflation, graft and denial of basic amenities to the poor people. Will Indian democracy grapple with this rising economic stratification in society or will it simply move on oblivious of this phenomenon and its possible adverse impact on the democratic process itself?

One is aware that 'million mutinies' are taking place almost on a daily basis in India. The need is to go for 'million negotiations' that would ensure that the government, market and civil society work together for the empowerment of the poor and the dispossessed.

VIII. Towards Future

IS democracy destined to be universal or will it fade away and be substituted by another ideal? Will democracy be able to succeed in the 21st century? Will democracy triumph over the forces of religious fundamentalism and authoritarian rule?

Democracy has attracted criticism right from the beginning. The famous Greek thinker, Thucydides, called democracy of Athens an 'effeminate government', while Amrapali, the royal courtesan—who invited Buddha to her house for dinner against the wishes of the Vaishali Republic—publicly ridiculed the then prevailing system of democratic decision-making. In fact, from Thucydides to Karl Marx and beyond, democratic governments have been accused of incompetence, short-sightedness, selfishness, corruption, and worse. In recent years, democra-cies have been ridiculed as being hand in gloves with the bourgeoisie and the capitalists. The quest for ideal democracy is a near-impossibility. It is full of deficiencies and it has no built-in guarantees. It is marked by widespread corruption and internal power struggles. The durability of democracy is by no means certain.

It is also widely believed that democracy is the best form of government that the human mind has so far devised. Democracy promotes creativity at the local level by promoting local initiatives and ideas. It creates a way of governance that has global relevance. And yet,

democracy is not a kind of theology that needs to be blindly obeyed—democracy allows rational enquiry and criticism. It emphasises persuasion and dialogue, and maximises deliberations among the people. It also needs to be appreciated that there are no alternatives to democracy presently in circu-lation. The situation was somewhat different in the 1920s and 1930s when communism was considered as an alternative to democracy. The Chinese model of a one-party system, market-led economic growth, and tight State control has not caught the imagination of the people either in the Arab world, or in Asia or Latin America.

People have expectations. Democratic gover-nance, in particular, often promises to do more than it actually can do. This gets amply reflected at the time of elections. Against this background, if society is not vigilant, elections could be used by authoritarian leaders in the manner that Hitler and the Bolshevik leaders did. The success and spread of democracy in the 21st century will depend upon the delivery of quality services to the people, and provision of a corruption-free

political, administrative and business environment. We do believe that politicians, civil servants and business leaders have the ability to learn, and it is certainly not impossible that they will start to listen to the public voices formulated by the enlightened citizens.

There is a natural tendency to be optimistic when we discuss the future of democracy. Can we presume that the future of democracy will automatically be bright? One is not very sure. For the sustenance of a democratic system, it is essential to have an alert citizenry. The citizens have to be mentally prepared to engage in movements, even civil disobedience movements, to keep democratic institutions functioning in terms of the ideals of democracy. It is important to have multiple organised voices of citizens, of the media and NGOs. The key institutions of democracy—the judiciary, the media, the Election Commission, the audit organisation, and the Public Service Commission —need to remain independent. The civil servants must have freedom to work for securing public good.

Democracy is a precious ideal that tries to establish equality among man and woman, man and man, and woman and woman. It creates a government by publicly elected representatives through the secret ballot. Its goal is to install an independent judiciary, guarantee press freedom and an impartial electoral machinery.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of the Soviet Union soon after, many democracy watchers believed that the world has ushered itself into an era of democracy and freedom. Francis Fukuyama particularly, called it the end of history. He believed that we have reached: "The end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

This is, however, not true as several nation-states like China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others are not willing to embrace Western liberal democracy as 'the final form of human government'. Several democratic countries too have developed their own norms which are conducive to the genius of the people of that land and have not adhered

blindly to the Western model and so have thus indigenised democratic systems and practices.

The twentyfirst century is vastly different from the twentieth century. Humanity as a whole has become more sensitised to gender, racial and religious inequality and inequality of opportunities. Migration and demographic trends mean that pluralism will be required for peace and domestic stability. It is in this context that I have advocated the Bahudha approach, both within India and in the global arena. This celebrates diversity, inculcates an attitude of listening to others with respect, and strengthens an environment of dialogue. The Bahudha approach entails that people should be encouraged to have multiple identities in terms of language, ethnicity, dress, gods and rites and modes of expression.

At the End

Three events of 2010-11—popularly known as The Arab Spring; India Against Corruption; and Occupy Wall Street, mentioned earlier—have been part of my intellectual concerns in recent months. I have

followed these events with keenness with different perspectives—as a life-long student of politics; as a civil servant in the largest democracy of the world for nearly four decades; and as a constitutional head of the strategic border State of Sikkim (a State that embraced Indian democracy after 333 years of monarchal rule). These events of mass distur-bance in established democracies have raised questions as to whether the disenchantment with the malfunctioning of democratic institu-tions and rising expectations of the people would lead to eclipse of democracy itself.

Another concern emanates from the disappea-rance of the ideals of communism from the erstwhile Soviet Union. The Chinese Communist Party too has deviated from the thoughts of Marx, Engels and Mao to embrace market capitalism. The rule of Guardians, that Plato had once envisioned, still remains an Utopia. However, the ideals of a socialist society—that is equitable and just—continue to inspire many people all over the world. Similarly, the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and justice would continue to be the guiding lights for mankind. And yet, it

is realistic to hold the view that democracy cannot sustain itself only on the basis of its ideals. On other occasions, I have entertained the idea as to whether human ingenuity would devise a better alternative to what we have and call it by another name other than liberal democracy or parliamentary democracy. No definite answer has come to me, or probably to any other person. This, however, does not mean that alternatives are not already present deep down in the human consciousness. It may perhaps take considerable time for them to emerge.

Forecasts about the future forms of governance are not in fashion. Here we are talking about something which may evolve. It is thus not amenable to futurology, and yet we have to warn ourselves as most gurus and forecasters involved with the business of looking at forms of governance are willing to give the ruling elites what they want. It is, therefore, not unlikely to hear one set of answers that is favourable to democracy in India, and another completely different version in China. In fact, democracy needs no astrologers. The time has, however, come

for political leaders, jurists, enlightened citizens and others, who are concerned about the future of democracy, to look closely at the challenges facing democracy in their country, and devise ways and means to remedy the shortcomings in the working and structure of democratic governments.

The author, currently the Governor of Sikkim, is a distinguished scholar, thinker and public servant. His latest book is *Bahudhā and the Post-9/11* World (OUP: 2010).