Demands of Democracy and Demography For Nation Building

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy and demography have a unique relationship. Demography is increasingly becoming a critical source for defining the very scope of democracy as it is practiced in India. Such a relationship needs to be understood with a contemporary perspective so that demography becomes a contributor to sustain democratic culture and traditions and retains diversities as a source for strengthening unity. In fact, demography should provide strategic inputs for the success of democracy in the country. Demographics in no nation is static. It is constantly changing and evolving. So also the scope and meaning of democracy as relevant to the country. The ultimate objective of both is to ensure a more equitable society to live in with basic needs, freedom, equality and social justice. The correlation between power dynamics and demography is yet to be realized fully in India. Demography should help integrate people, not divide them. Democracy should in no way become a victim of demography. Demography should help increase representative character of democratic institutions and their responsibility and in fulfilling the basic needs and aspirations of people. Several correctives are called for towards that end - by the Government, by political parties and by civil society groups.

II. Scope of Democracy

Democracy is not merely electing representatives nor winner taking it all. So far our view and practice of democracy has been limited to voting periodically as if it is the means and the end of democracy. Free speech, free press and freedom of association are necessary but not sufficient conditions to strengthen democratic culture given the kind of diversities in socio-economic conditions of India. It is representative character of electoral process, accountability, responsiveness and performance of those democratic institutions which dictate the extent and character of democracy. Electoral process and free press (media) are two basic institutions, which are indicative of velocity of democracy. How representative are these institutions of the people of the country? How effective are they in fulfilling obligations and objectives?

Devolution of power to local communities is at the heart of the democratic process. But despite Panchayat Raj and Nagar Palika Acts a decade ago neither financial powers are passed on by State Governments nor responsibilities for some 29 subjects to village Panchayats. Certain realization recently that development hinges on a "responsive government", which in turn is possible with a more active electorate, has made the democratic process more dynamic and constantly evolving. Also, with unleashing of new social forces, active participation of hitherto deprived classes/communities has an impact on the democratic processes.

The press (mass media) in India is as free as in any democracy and, irrespective of inadequacies, has been a pillar and guardian of democracy in India. But in terms of realizing the goals of the Republic it could be far more concerned and reflective of the realities. One-third of adult population is still deprived access to all mass media and contents of news media are more of politics and corporates than of civil society. Advertising has of late

Table 1: Declining representative character of poll outcome: Lok Sabha winners

Won with votes of	1977	1980	1984	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004
Less than 40% of polled	6	84	28	66	115	170	107	100	109
41 to 50% of polled	62	157	136	160	215	224	257	223	213
More than 50% of polled	474	288	378	303	204	149	179	220	217
Total Seats	542	529	542	529	534	543	543	543	539

Source : CMS Analysis of EC Data

become the driving force rather than equity and developmental concerns of the country.

On three counts the electoral process has not come up to expectations of a democratic system over the years. The first, fragmentation of polity continues to cause frequent uncertainties (instability) in the functioning of legislative bodies. The second, the representative character of the electoral process has remained static (see Table 1 & Table 2). In fact, the winner of elections, both in the case of Lok Sabha and Assemblies, hardly represent a quarter of total voters. Thirdly, yet even now one or other political party continues to come to and operate in power more or less on party lines rather than representing all sections/regions. As a result, credibility of elected Governments, of elected leaders and of efficiency of their performance for "greatest good of the greatest number" has gone down.

The decline of representative character of electoral process should be particularly emphasized. In the last ten elections to Lok Sabha much less than of half of those elected were with less than half of the votes polled which has remained static at less than 60 percent. This is despite increased education levels, mobility and economic prosperity. It is even worse in the case of State Assemblies (Table 2). The principal party heading the Government in the States hardly received 40 percent of votes polled. This in turn accounts for much less than a quarter of total voters. In fact, the principal party heading the Government in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa – the ones least developed – has the support of hardly one-fifth of voters, even assuming that voter's lists are

comprehensive enough. In Uttar Pradesh, in 48 of its 85 Lok Sabha seats, the one elected received less than 35 percent votes polled. In the Assembly, the fact was that, in 2002 only 16 of 403 MLAs were elected with more than 50 percent of votes polled, whereas 105 were elected with less than 30 percent of votes polled (Table 4). What kind of accountability could be expected from such

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elected representatives to larger body politic and for taking on larger issues at stake in the respective States. And yet there is no attempt to initiate political reforms to make electoral process more representative and arrest the continued fragmentation of polity.

Table 2: Declining Representative Character of Parties in Power in the States

State Name	Year	Principal Party in Power	% of votes polled
Andhra Pradesh	2004	INC	38.56
Orissa	2004	BJD	29.40
Rajasthan	2003	BJP	39.19
Madhya Pradesh	2003	BJP	42.50
Punjab	2002	INC	35.81
Chattisgarh	2003	BJP	39.26
Uttar Pradesh	2002	SP	25.41
Bihar	2000	RJD	28.34
Karnataka	2004	INC	35.27

Source : CMS Analysis of EC Data

VOTER TURNOUT FOR LOK SABHA POLL
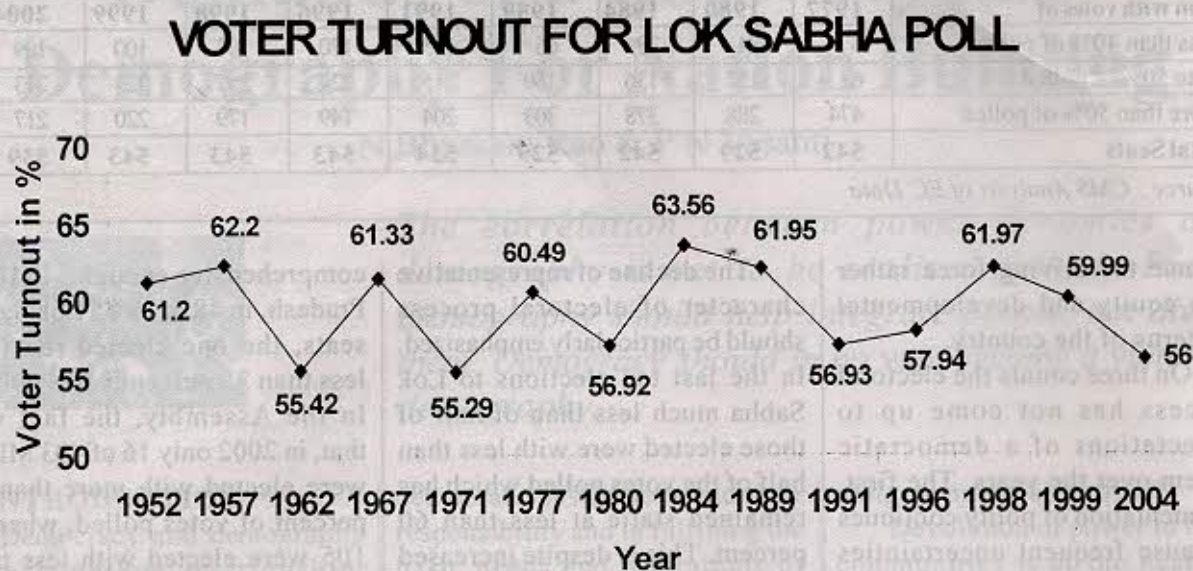
Source : CMS Analysis of EC Data

Despite change in the composition of demographics and lowering of voting age (to 18 from 21 years) in 1989, the percentage of voter-tussrnout remained almost static over the 14 general elections for the Lok Sabha (Chart 1). Also, women voters while they comprise nearly half, have very low share in the State Assemblies and Lok Sabha - not even 15 percent. This is despite electoral process increasingly becoming a "number game".

The preoccupation of political parties has been on numbers, splitting communities and compromising on whatever ideology otherwise proclaimed on "at any cost" rational. Thus, ideology no longer differentiates parties. As a result (of all this) caste and community, on the one hand, and money and media power, on the other, have become the contributors of electoral outcome, not so much the concern or performance in terms of larger goals of the Republic. In the process, personalities rather than parties and image rather than performance have become the factors of democratic process. The irony is that this situation is not visibly changing for the better as could be expected with increased educational levels, economic prosperity, exposure to media and significant ease in conducting elections (in terms of proximity of voting booth, time needed to caste vote, ease in voting, etc).

Party centric elections are being extended to Panchayat elections at Zilla, Block and village levels, thereby fragmenting the very process all across. "Party less democracy" advocated by Sarvodaya leader Gora some 40 years ago seems more relevant today atleast for district, block and village levels. "Party less" does not however mean negation of political parties or campaign. The contests will be more on issues, needs and for larger representativeness. Perhaps it is time that we reconsider this system for local bodies.

As democracy is under political party-centric trap of electoral system, the mass media is under a "rating trap" where what interests matter more than what is in the interest of readers/viewers. Mass media is concerned and pre-occupied with those having "deep pockets" and

Table 3: How Representative the Ruling Parties: The case of Uttar Pradesh

Won Assembly with	1991	1993	1996	2002
Less than 30% of votes polled	96	31	19	105
31 to 50% of votes polled	279	351	359	282
More than 50% of votes polled	44	43	47	16
Total MLAs	419	425	425	403

Source : CMS Analysis of EC Data

immediate gratification rather than long term implications. If this is how the two most important institutions of democracy – electoral system and free press – operate, how can democracy be (expected) to get consolidated and yield larger goals of the Nation?. No wonder that enthusiasm is flagging in electoral politics in so many different ways even among educated and to the extent of certain political groups opposing the very system of elections and even democracy. And, why the overall reach of mass media has stagnated despite all that proliferation and growth in the media. That is how a larger section of people today remain "untouched" and "unaffected" today by institutes of democracy.

III. Demands of Demography

Demography is about classification of divisions in a population based on every conceivable characteristic, not just age or sex or occupation or even place of living or number of children but all of them and more. It is not only about divisions in a population but also about homogeneity. Demography provides more reliable insights into emerging trends. Demography has double-edged potential as to its implications and use.

Lack of appropriate data on population sustains myths and prejudices. But having voluminous demographic data should not cause more of all that, particularly in the context of religion, caste, employment,etc. Dramatization of unadjusted statistics yields to myths and stereotypes and breeds divisionary trends. Demography should provide opportunity to understand and appreciate India's religious and cultural diversities. As a social responsibility, this should be a joint endeavour of academics, the media, political, religious "leaders" and civil society. The need is more inter-disciplinary research with issues confronting us today going beyond Census data. Such an exercise has to transcend demography and should include anthropology, sociology, economics and more than just quantitative analysis to yield explanations as a powerful tool to uncover injustices, inequalities, imbalances, entitlements, etc.

Publication of religion wise sex ratio in population of 0 – 6 years, as in 2001 Census, has several positive leads to take on at policy and programme levels for social development. But it was used primarily for comparison and contrast with a political perspective and interest and has hit media headlines. It should not add to negative portrayal of any one community and drive them take political postures. Unadjusted release of figures for religious population as in 2004 is bound to provoke fear and propagate a constant myth of catastrophic decline in the population of another community as has happened. Are we heading for more of such willful misuse of demography for electoral advantage ,and communal prejudices?. In the absence of a public debate of such reports with demographic implications and public understanding, demographics will continue to be used more for driving divides in the country.

Mass media's exaggeration of Census and such other demographics in recent years has added to the problem including the degree of the very credibility of such data. Scary headlines in the media headlines "dangers of demographic war" like "concentration of Muslims increases threat", "RSS sees "demographic war",etc. are bound to add to the problem. As such news media need to be lot more sensitive to their treatment of any demographics.

Censuses and such other reports are used in the country today less to resolve the contradictions, reduce inequalities

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and remove myths, but more for perpetuating them so that they become advantageous in electoral politics. Realizing such negative implications, the Government had stopped bringing out caste wise data some years ago. But State Governments recently have taken up caste wise, counting, formally or informally, opening a pandara's box full of agitations for a "share in the pie" by caste, sub-caste, religion, and region wise. Demography has also not helped to improve representative character of our electoral process.

On health, education and childcare we as a nation have not fared satisfactorily. Apparently because we continued to use Census in a limited sense of a

"population control" from a political perspective rather than gender, justice, women's autonomy, quality of living, reproductive rights, etc. Social development issues have not received the kind of public concern despite so many demographic reports and alert and expertise in this regard. Despite knowing increasing percentage of children in the total population and their needs, what have done with regard to school infrastructure and the like?. Declining ratio of female (to male) has not attracted as much attention as decline in the growth rate of certain castes or religious groups.

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Demands of politicians and religious and caste leaders seem to be far more and as if they are awaiting for new demographic reports of any kind. Reservation of seats in the elected bodies for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes adds to this dimension. No sooner this round of polls are over in February 2005, the work on reorganization of constituencies of Lok Sabha and Assemblies based on Census data of 2001 would restart it was deferred on pressure of out going members of 13th Lok Sabha. Planners do not seem to be as alert and active in using demography as politicians are. Despite research has indicated that differences in reproductive behaviour is less to do with religions and more to do

with education, economic and occupation levels, demography is used for electoral advantage at the cost of ignoring real issues at stake for a majority of people cutting across the divides. Demography is being used less for uniting people. At the out set of Census operations several years ago, some 1700 religious communities were identified which were regrouped into less than 100 in 1950's. But more recent developments since "Mandalization" of politics based on fragmentation of castes/ communities into sub-groups appears as if we are heading in the reverse direction. What the State Governments are doing in this regard, not jut the Gujarat, and the frequency with which the party in power is changing these days, complicated the demographic scene more, if not much maligned for the divides.

Mudunuru (3500 population) in Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh may serve as an example. Mudunuru is a middle class nationalist village with history of playing active role as one community in the freedom movement and immediately thereafter. The village gave shelter to a rationalist movement 50 years ago and even Mahatma Gandhi visited the village in 1932 for entry of Harijans into Siva temple. Today, the village economically better off has two statues of political leaders and 8 religious (4 Hindu and 4 Christian churches) of different denomination. While these religious places look brand new, the High School looks deserted,

two elementary schools continue without a building and the public library is disintegrating. The village has no Primary Health Centre. The village, which acted as one community for years, is now divided into caste and sub-caste territories each fighting for its own supremacy. Each calls out the number of houses his or her caste/community consist of (as a vote bank) and eagerly awaits for the next round of opportunity of an election. Mudunuru village today reflects demographic divides in the country.

IV. Strategic Considerations

There is need for a paradigm shift in the very thinking, attitudes and priorities of political parties the mass media and other institutes of democracy. Equally important is the need for active citizenry. Economic reforms alone will not guarantee their advantages to citizens nor achieve the goals of the Republic. Such reformist outlook is needed in matching proportion towards electoral process and media of information also.

We plead for a four-pronged effort: mindset of people, revamping the education system, reforms in electoral process and bridging the divides. Mindset of people at large cannot be addressed without a shift in the paradigm of media operations. Today's media content indicates as if in this country everything is Government, political parties and corporates. The shift has to be in favour of micro initiatives, dynamics of informal sector, civil society contribution. The focus has to be on tomorrow and the next generation. Social development and Human Resource Development cannot be

expected to be any different without addressing these aspects. Recent public opinion surveys indicate that generally it is felt that "past is better, present is not sure, future is bleak". Optimism and hope, not cynicism, should be promoted all across the population, cutting across the divides. This is what the President A P J Abdul Kalam does when he speaks.

Primary Education: Values, rights and responsibilities cannot be brought to centre stage without a shift in the priorities in primary education. First and foremost we have to achieve universal education much faster. With only half of rural habitations having primary schools (of 1 – 5 classes) in 2001, how can we expect?. In

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fact, it is worse in this regard in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. Passivity in citizens cannot be converted into activism without wide spread movements in the context of delivery of social services, use of pubic utilities and for implementation of infrastructure projects. Dependence syndrome of citizens and civil society on Government for simple local deeds need to be reversed. Public participation and cooperative endeavour should be evident. Panchayats at Zilla to village level should become the focal points for implementation and initiatives. Despite more educated we have become more religion and caste oriented today than some years ago?. What happened to efforts to spread scientific temper in people?.

The divides of all kinds need to be bridged. Despite availability of urban facilities in rural areas, migration from rural and small towns has not stopped. Unity features among people is what need to be harnessed in a big way. Pride in "unity in diversity" aspect need to be revived instead of trying to homogenize people. Television could be an effective instrument in this regard. We are not doing much in this regard.

Reforms in the electoral system, starting with the very functioning of political parties is pre-requisite for any improvement in their representative character. Should we politicize and polarize people in otherwise cooperating communities or should we reconsider elections at Zilla Parishad and village level on non-party basis. "Whip system" in the Assemblies and Lok Sabha requires a relook to make democratic system more vibrant and performance oriented.

V. Conclusion

The negative role of demographics in sustaining democracy needs to be understood and addressed so that strategic considerations could be taken up appropriately and promptly towards consolidating representative character of our electoral process. Analysis as well as interpretation of demographic data and the very methodology of such exercises should gradually become sensitive to their double-edged potential. Demographics should go a lot more into in formulating strategies for realizing the objectives of various policies and programmes and the goals for future. Only then

the electoral process becomes meaningful for majority of people of the country. Considering the sensitivities of demography to emotionalize polity, agencies concerned should go all out to be vigilant and prompt in addressing apprehensions of various sections of people. The credibility of Census operations is as important as functioning of any other democratic institution or organization. Every effort should be made for more transparency in the operations of Census and such other demographic exercises.

We need a lot more interdisciplinary "futures studies" in the country in the context of various critical dimensions of democracy like elections, inner party democratic norms reservations, etc. Our view and vision of democracy should not remain shortsighted or single tracked. Devolution of power to local bodies should be concern of all political parties to make poll process truly representative. Consolidation wave should also benefit democratic process and institutions. Mass media should reflect grassroots far more and be concerned about conflict-resolution and the unity-in-diversity character of the Republic. Summing it all, If demography is about fragmentation of a population on as many dimensions, democracy is about holding them together by reaching out, involving and empowering them.

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