

The ideological crisis of liberal democracy

Living a private life is simply insufficient. We badly need a commitment to public life



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

Liberal democracy was born with a design fault. Though a decent response to the existing social, cultural and economic conditions in which it took shape, it had inbuilt conceptual flaws that sooner or later were bound to run it aground. The very idea is destined to malfunction.

Negative liberty

For a start, the term ‘liberal’ in liberal democracy drew its nourishment from a particular conception of liberty which the philosopher Isaiah Berlin termed negative. The core idea of negative liberty revolves around the existence of a private sphere where an individual may do whatever she wishes, free from interference of state or oppressive social forces. Negative freedom is secured by limiting the capacity of states or social organisations to impose constraints on individuals. This is an excessively private conception of individual freedom: humans are concerned only with the satisfaction of their desires, indifferent to the shape of public life or the character of the state.

I do not belittle this idea. In conditions where powerful churches, caste organisations or the state is hell bent on controlling every aspect of a person’s life – who to marry, what kind of a family life to lead, what opinions to hold and what to eat – negative freedom is a precious good.

Yet, to delve further into the history of the idea of liberal democracy, these negative freedom-loving, liberal persons – the traditional middle classes – soon realised that limited governments on their own cannot ensure freedoms. These freedoms depend on certain kinds of state. Even governments restrained by laws but run by manipulative, self-serving, whimsical, power-hungry men can create political conditions that undermine these private freedoms. If so, lovers of negative liberty must, to some extent, take the reins of government in their own hands. Democracy is unavoidable. So, obsessed with private freedoms, still fundamentally disinterested in the



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art of government, they reluctantly invented a new form of government, representative democracy. How so?

Self-government is demanding. Assembling, deliberating and arriving at informed decisions on important public matters takes time and commitment. How can people occupied with producing, buying, selling, consuming and running their own lives in pursuit of private happiness also commit to running a government? They can’t. So, they do the next best thing: find those inclined to make politics their private business to become their representatives. For vast numbers of hapless people who can’t afford to get away from the daily grind of ordinary life and for those whose main purpose in life is the pursuit of personal happiness, there is virtually no time for public life or political decision-making. Their idea of political involvement is just too thin; the only time they can find for politics is during elections when they choose their representatives.

So, what is the basic flaw in liberal democracy? It is inadequately concerned with public activity, political liberty and wider community life. People almost wholly devoted to their private lives take virtually no interest in public institutions which can be easily manipulated to serve the private interests of the rich and powerful. Their small political freedoms can be stolen from right under their nose. Since they cannot muster the time or effort needed to learn about the traditions and heritage of their communities, these too can be easily destroyed before their own eyes.

To redeem themselves and their society, they need a sense of togetherness that helps build a vibrant political culture, one that is not exhausted by family love, or by narrow

community feelings such as those related to caste or religion. They need a commitment to a shared good that presupposes a strong sense of public spiritedness. In short, to better realise even their own personal goals, the negative freedom-oriented middle class needs to find the right balance between private benefit and public good, rather than allow one to be trumped by the other. Conversely, indifference to public life means that nasty political worms would gnaw at it, adversely affecting even their private life. A stronger concern for the public good is a necessary condition of negative liberty. By itself, the idea of liberal democracy is both insufficient and deficient.

Forging solidarity

Of course, most societies soon realise this. That is why liberal democracies worldwide have periodic bouts of public spiritedness borrowed from the republican tradition. People become active citizens, coming out on the streets; challenge the establishment; protest with purpose; show distrust for liberal democracy, questioning existing modes of political representation. They demand greater transparency and accountability in public life. They even show a strong will to take political decision-making in their own hands. But this deepening democracy can’t just be a one-off event like the Arab Spring or the anti-corruption movement that preceded the 2014 general election in India.

Moreover, democratic solidarity is not the only way to overcome problems of liberal democracies. This function can also be performed by nationalism – by its ethically informed, inclusive variant or by dubious nationalisms such as the exclusivist, hate-mongering, national

populism that is surging ahead today in different parts of the world.

However, forging solidarities, building public institutions, putting sustained pressure on governments to make informed, ethically grounded public decisions, and ploughing through historical material to sculpt traditions needs a lot of time and effort. Hate-mongering nationalism and populism, on the other hand, are manufactured easily and pay quick dividends. Spectacle prone, sensation-driven, playing on the fear, anger and frustration that grows in crisis-ridden liberal democratic polity, such nationalist populism can be generated by the empty rhetoric of a demagogue supported staunchly by an unprincipled, profit-seeking mass media. The contemporary crisis of liberal democracy is life-threatening, indeed!

How have things come to such a pass? Whatever else globalisation has done, it has reduced democracy to an electoral event and further deepened the privatisation of individuals. Liberalism in the era of globalisation has made people more self-obsessed, less capable of thinking about the common good or forging political solidarity, further in the grip of envy induced by feelings of relative deprivation. So far, new technologies such as cell phones and social media have only exacerbated this isolation of individuals. Rather than properly communicating with one another and trying to build a common mind on issues of common concern, all of us are busy expressing ourselves on Facebook or on WhatsApp. A cacophony exists of multiple voices talking past each other or venting their personal anger, paranoia or hatred at an imagined enemy. Fierce individualism and nasty nationalism are fueling each other. Caught within this diabolic syndrome, we risk losing even our hard-won negative liberties. Somewhere along the way, we have taken a wrong turn. Course correction and addressing the persistent crisis of liberal democracy will now require enormous collective effort and strong political will. And much hinges on whether the traditionally liberal, privacy-loving middle class will rise to the occasion and begin thinking of the public good.

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For a malnutrition-free India

Effective monitoring and implementation of programmes are required for the country to achieve its goal by 2022



SHOBA SURI

In this election season, it is important to keep promises made not just to voters, but also those made to improve the lives of children, the future of the nation. Despite programme commitments since 1975, such as creating Integrated Child Development Services and national coverage of the mid-day meal scheme, India continues to grapple with a high rate of undernutrition. Improving nutrition and managing stunting continue to be big challenges, and they can be addressed only with an inter-sectoral strategy.

Stunting has lifelong consequences on human capital, poverty and equity. It leads to less potential in education and fewer professional opportunities. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4, India has unacceptably high levels of stunting, despite marginal improvement over the years. In 2015-16, 38.4% of children below five years were stunted and 35.8% were underweight. India ranks 158 out of 195 countries on the human capital index. Lack of investment in health and education leads to slower economic growth. The World Bank says, “A 1% loss in adult height due to childhood stunting is associated with a 1.4% loss in economic productivity”. Stunting also has lasting effects on future generations. Since 53.1% of women were anaemic in 2015-16, this will have lasting effects on their future pregnancies and children. The situation further worsens when infants are fed inadequate diets.

Ambitious goals

The aim of the National Nutrition Strategy of 2017 is to achieve a malnutrition-free India by 2022. The plan is to reduce stunting prevalence in children (0-3 years) by about three percentage points per year by 2022 from NFHS-4 levels, and achieve a one-third reduction in anaemia in children, adolescents and women of reproductive age.

This is an ambitious goal, especially given that the decadal decline in stunting from 48% in 2006 to 38.4% in 2016 is only one percentage point a year. This promise calls for serious alignment among line ministries, convergence of nutrition programmes, and stringent monitoring of the progress made in achieving these goals.

The data available on stunting tell us where to concentrate future programmes. Stunting prevalence tends to increase with

age and peaks at 18-23 months. Timely nutritional interventions of breastfeeding, age-appropriate complementary feeding, full immunisation, and Vitamin A supplementation have been proven effective in improving outcomes in children. However, data show that only 41.6% children are breastfed within one hour of birth, 54.9% are exclusively breastfed for six months, 42.7% are provided timely complementary foods, and only 9.6% children below two years receive an adequate diet. India must improve in these areas. Vitamin A deficiency can increase infections like measles and diarrhoeal diseases. About 40% of children don’t get full immunisation and Vitamin A supplementation. They must be provided these for disease prevention.

Variations across States and districts

According to NFHS-4 data, India has more stunted children in rural areas as compared to urban areas, possibly due to the low socio-economic status of households in those areas. Almost double the prevalence of stunting is found in children born to mothers with no schooling as compared to mothers with 12 or more years of schooling. Stunting shows a steady decline with increase in household income. The inter-generational cycle of malnutrition is to be tackled with effective interventions for both mother (pre- and post-pregnancy) and child, to address the high burden of stunting.

In terms of geographical regions, Bihar (48%), Uttar Pradesh (46%) and Jharkhand (45%) have very high rates of stunting, while States with the lowest rates include Kerala, and Goa (20%). While nutrition has improved across all States, inter-State variabilities remain extremely high. The most significant decline has been noted in Chhattisgarh (a 15 percentage point drop in the last decade). Thus, the government can take lessons from Chhattisgarh. The least progress has been made in Tamil Nadu.

A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute shows that stunting prevalence varies across districts (12.4-65.1%), and almost 40% districts have stunting levels above 40%. U.P. tops the list, with six out of 10 districts having the highest rates of stunting.

Looking at this data, it is imperative to push for convergence of health and nutrition programmes right from pregnancy until the child reaches five years of age. This is doable. India must adopt a multi-pronged approach in bringing about socio-behavioural change. What is really needed is effective monitoring and implementation of programmes to address malnutrition.

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SINGLE FILE

An insidious poll trend

The cash-for-votes practice is no longer limited to the south. It’s time to think of ways to restore democracy

N. BHASKARA RAO



C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

In this general election, the Election Commission has confiscated cash, gold and silver, liquor, drugs and other items worth ₹3,205 crore, according to data published by the constitutional body on April 27, before the fourth phase in the seven phase-election began. At this

rate, we can expect more than twice this amount to be confiscated by the time the election comes to an end. This amount is much more than what was confiscated by the EC during the 2014 Lok Sabha election. What is confiscated is likely to be less than 5% of what is being spent by all the candidates and parties in this election. The total expenditure of this election is estimated to be about ₹50,000 crore, which is the highest amount for any election in the world.

Yet, no political party or leader so far has expressed concern about this trend and its threat to the fundamentals of our republic. Instead, candidates continue accusing each other of giving more cash for votes. I had pointed out based on field studies in 2009-2014 that the more the media coverage and the higher the number of crorepati candidates in the contest, the more the money that is expected by the voters. This is exactly what is happening today.

We should be concerned even more that the trend is no longer limited to being predominant in the southern States (other than Kerala), but has now become significant elsewhere too. According to the EC, if gold, drugs, liquor and cash are taken together, the total seizure is highest in Tamil Nadu by a wide margin, followed by Gujarat, Delhi, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. On confiscated cash alone, Tamil Nadu again tops the list, followed by Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and Maharashtra. Uttar Pradesh too is in the cash-for-votes race.

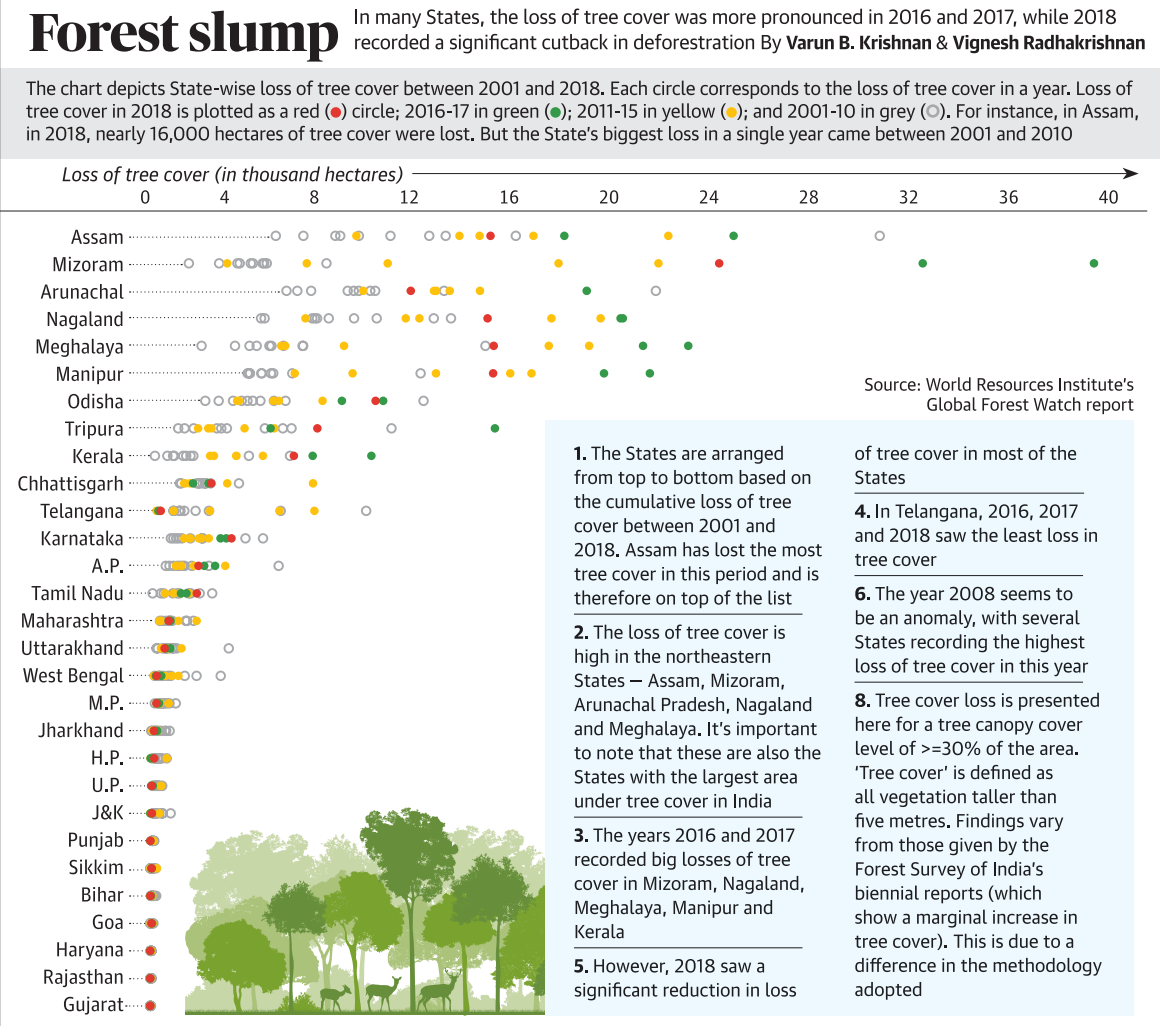
Two large-scale baseline studies of the Centre for Media Studies in 2005 and 2007 in 20-plus States and select studies since then in every round of elections reliably indicate that cash distribution occurred and may be on the rise irrespective of the socio-economic status of the recipients and the area in which they reside (urban or rural). Unless the demand side is addressed too, no policy initiative is likely to make a difference.

In this unusual paradigm how can we restore true representative democracy? One option is for the news media to play a positive and proactive role, which would require media houses to extricate themselves from conflicts of interest. The same could be said of corporates, which have become a major source of funding formally, yet there is also likely to be a strong informal nexus. Unless a course correction is made soon, the 2019 Lok Sabha polls will go down as a watershed election for the wrong reasons.

The writer is the author of the recent book ‘Sustainable Good Governance, Development and Democracy’



DATA POINT



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 30, 1969

Second rocket station in Nellore district

The Government of India has decided to set up a second rocket testing station and a satellite launching base for the purpose of exploration of outer space and for peaceful scientific experiments at Sri Harikota Island, near Pulicat Lake, in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. The second station is required for flight testing and evaluating the performance of the rockets which are being designed and developed by Indian engineers at the Space, Science and Technology Centre at Thumba. An east coast range is advantageous for launching satellites. The Andhra Pradesh Government has agreed to provide land on the island required for the purpose, as well as road and bridge facilities to provide access to the island. The first rocket launching station established in Thumba in Kerala State has been in operation since 1963. Situated about 80 Kms. to the north of Madras, and bounded by backwaters to the north and south, and the Bay of Bengal on the east, the 80 Sq. Km. island has been chosen by the Government of India after careful evaluation of the merits and demerits of a number of sites.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 30, 1919.

Disturbed Punjab Under Martial Law.

The following Press Communique is issued [in Lahore] by the Punjab Government: An interesting situation has arisen out of one of the recent order issued under Martial Law by the Officer Commanding Lahore Civil area. During the hartal a certain amount of gram seems to have been distributed either free or at low rates by the persons concerned in the agitation. When hartal was brought to an abrupt termination under military orders the local grain dealers forced up prices no doubt with a view to recoup themselves for the general cessation of trade during hartal though suspicion of other motives is not excluded. The recent order defining the maximum retail prices of atta has brought a very substantial relief to the poorer classes and for the last two days cries of “Martial Law KiJai” have been very freely heard in the city showing that the classes in whose interest the order was passed appreciate fully the benefit which it has secured for them.

POLL CALL

Uniform Swing

A uniform swing is the percentage swing in votes from one party to another. A uniform swing is viewed as a movement of the pendulum. Assuming a swing is uniform, then in theory, every seat up to the new point of the pendulum would change party. This definition applies to two-party systems and not to a multi-party system like India. Swings do take place in India in States and they can be reasonably uniform in a particular State, but not across the country.

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