

Is Democracy A Universal Concept?

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Abstract-The article looks into whether democracy can be used as a universal concept across cultures. This is because liberals are often accused of demanding a universal conception of democracy being acceptable to all cultures. This the article looks at the development of democracy or democracy like movements in countries such as china, Russia and some of the Islamic countries. Thus the article concludes that democracy is different in different contexts. Democracy worldwide today is largely a result of intermingling of indigenous culture with external influence. Or would it be apt to say that democracy has been accepted differently in different civilization. In an era of pervasive migration, media globalization and transnational information flow, democracy as a movement has gained momentum even though roots and meanings of each of these movements may be differ from nation to nation. While as post colonialist would say that colonize is inevitably shaped by the experience of colonization, similarly democracy gets shaped by the spirit of globalization. As a result a conceptions of distinct, singular, internal, homogeneous movement gives way to a model of hybridity, of borrowing and lending across porous cultural boundaries on the very notion of democratic nation

Key Words: Democracy, Universal, Liberty, Cultures.

I

The researcher in the article explore the need to understand whether democracy is morally desirable in all polities? Can democracy provide the answer or any other form of governance practiced in world can provide the rejoinder. Can democracy be considered a universal conception of governance or can countries like in middle east, Africa , china and Russia provide the lead to have their own kind of democracy?

II

Democracy is considered to be the best form of government these days but even in democratic countries the very thought behind democracy is not universally followed. Most of the countries in the world have adopted it. But before we understand this concept, we need to understand what is democracy? Here, first the researcher look at some of the basic principles on which a democracy is based.

Liberty

Some argue that the basic principles of democracy are founded in the idea that each individual has a right to liberty. Democracy, it is said, extends the idea that each ought to be master

of his or her life to the domain of collective decision making. First, each person's life is deeply affected by the larger social, legal and cultural environment in which he or she lives. Second, only when each person has an equal voice and vote in the process of collective decision-making will each have control over this larger environment. Thinkers such as Carol Gould (1988, pp.45-85) conclude that only when some kind of democracy is implemented, will individuals have a chance at self-government.

Democracy as principle of reasonableness and reciprocity

The basic principle seems to be the principle of reasonableness according to which reasonable persons will only offer principles for the regulation of their society that other reasonable persons can reasonably accept. The notion of the reasonable is meant to be fairly weak on this account. One can reasonably reject a doctrine to the extent that it is incompatible with one's own doctrine as long as one's doctrine does not imply imposition on others and it is a doctrine that has survived sustained critical reflection. So this principle is a kind of principle of reciprocity.

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Democracy as overlapping Consensus

When individuals offer proposals for the regulation of their society, they ought not to appeal to the whole truth as they see it but only to that part of the whole truth that others can reasonably accept. To put the matter in the way Rawls puts it: political society must be regulated by principles on which there is an overlapping consensus (Rawls, 1996, Lecture IV). This is meant to obviate the need for a complete consensus on the principles that regulate society. Moreover, it is hard to see how this approach avoids the need for a complete consensus, which is highly unlikely to occur in any even moderately diverse society.

Democracy as compromise among conflicting claims

On one version, defended by Peter Singer (1973, pp. 30-41), when people insist on different ways of arranging matters properly, each person in a sense claims a right to be dictator over their shared lives. But these claims to dictatorship cannot all hold up, the argument goes. Democracy embodies a kind of peaceful and fair compromise among these conflicting claims to rule. Each compromises equally on what he claims as long as the others do, resulting in each having an equal say over decision making. In effect, democratic decision making respects each person's point of view on matters of common concern by giving each an equal say about what to do in cases of disagreement (Singer 1973, Waldron 1999, chap. 5).

After looking at what constitutes democracy, I would look at how democracy has evolved over the centuries and its stages.

III

Stages of Democracy

Democracy as Blindness to Difference

Democracy and liberalism in some way linked principles. Democracy can't exist without liberalism and liberalism can't exist without democracy. Liberal democratic theory in its first stage was based on certain core principles. First, such assumptions is that democratic liberal theory is individualistic in asserting or assuming the moral primacy of the person against the

claims of any social collectivity. Second that it is egalitarianism or based on equality, because it confers on all such individuals the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of difference in moral worth among human beings. Third it is universalist because it affirms the moral unity of the human species and accords a secondary importance to specific historical association and cultural forms. (Kukathas;1992;108)

Historically these very characteristics formed the bedrock of Renaissance, reformation, French revolution and American civil war (some of the most eloquent articulation of democratic aspiration) which questioned social prejudice wherein class and race were used to justify exclusion and discrimination in the public and political domain (See Mahajan : 1998;2). Similar movement post independence was launched by Gandhi and Dr B.R Ambedkar against caste oppression in India. Slowly and gradually women movement added its voice and demanded right in democracy to vote. They further demanded right to freedom from oppression, right to work outside and against drudgery of work within the family. Dissenting religious groups for instance Catholics and Jews in England and protestants in France also employed the principle of equality to question their exclusion from public life. (Mahajan : 1998,2)

As far as theorizing about democracy was concerned, the notion of natural equality was supplemented by the idea that all persons as members of human species possess equal dignity and deserve the same respect and consideration. This perception has been derived from writings of Immanuel Kant whose reference to universal humanity bolstered the notion of equality, freedom and gave a new edge to the struggle of marginalized population. He spoke about individualism by highlighting that Enlightenment is about thinking for oneself rather than letting others think for you. In this essay, Kant also expresses the Enlightenment faith in the inevitability of progress. The most important belief about things in themselves that Kant thinks only practical philosophy can justify concerns human freedom. Freedom is important because,

on Kant's view, moral appraisal presupposes that we are free in the sense that we have the ability to do otherwise.

Thinkers like Rawls advocated Rawls that civil and political rights and primary social goods such as education and employment should not be distributed on the basis of ascriptive character that are arbitrary from moral point of view. Rights and benefits ,privileges and power, should be distributed in a manner that is blind to social differences. At minimum , justice requires a regime of fair equality of opportunity, ungendered by a system of equal rights and liberty for all citizens.

To Rawls since the difference among parties are unknown to them and everyone is equally rational and similarly situated, therefore we can view the original position from the standpoint of one persons selected at random. Thus Rawls theory differences at the outset from his thought. Thus while upholding the rule of law may require intervention in the affairs of individuals and groups, but liberal politics is not concerned with these affairs in themselves. Indeed it is indifference to particular human affairs or to particular pursuits of individuals and groups. Liberalism might well be described as the 'politics of indifference.(Kukathas;1998).

Thus logical conclusion of these principles seem to be color blind constitution, the removal of all legislation, the removal of all legislations differentiating people in terms of their race or ethnicity (except for temporary measures like affirmative action), extending the meaning of equality through supreme court cases, which are believed necessary to reach towards such a color blind society.

Democracy Defined as Respect to Otherness

However once civil and political rights were granted to all persons and class, color and gender were no longer the basis of excluding people from the political domain, thinking about differences underwent considerable change. Thus far the principle of equality had offered a criterion of inclusion and disenfranchised

population had used it to demand an equal voice in political process. But once this particular goal had been fulfilled , social differences began to resurface again and assert themselves without the accompanying fear of legitimizing discrimination.(Mahajan ; p7)

Increasingly in this changed environment attention was given on arguments by feminist, cultural and racial difference theorists who stressed on the notion of democracy as need to embrace difference. Thus democracy needs to incorporate otherness . This provided a critique of the liberal notion of equality. Infact the ideologues of the new ideal were critical of formal equality on the ground that it obliterated differences but also brought forth the aspect of distinct irreducible identities across color, creed, religion and gender. By categorizing the members of state as citizens the democratic polity ignored the difference between them.

Further liberal democracy emphasis on distinction between public and private sphere was critiqued by feminists and cultural/racial rights theorists. According to them, this led to establishment of secular public sphere where individual which was neutral and indifferent to differences in nature; the private sphere was one where multiple differences found place. This democracy during this phase saw view point of minorities and women being relegated to private sphere(while public sphere was where the dominant western Anglo Saxon norms operated as neutral in nature).According to them aim of equality or anti discrimination legislation is the production of sameness, ignoring differences in women and minority perspective.

Therefore when notion of difference is invoked by these groups what is being asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from others. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity (Taylor: 1994;p 82)

It was in keeping with the thought the emphasis

shifted from pursuit of illusionary goal of equality towards affirmation of irreducible differences of erstwhile marginalized groups. Such a notion has been powerfully presented within certain feminist, racial and cultural difference literature.

Democracy encouraged feminist to reclaim the feminine and women liberation lay in affirmation of their irreducible differences rather than in pursuit of illusionary goal of equality .Few of the most sophisticated works on the notion of difference have been result of writings of French feminists. Simon de Beauvoir can be considered a figure to whom all feminists owe some debt for introducing the question of a differently sexed body.

French psychoanalyst have been highly skeptical of attribution of a negative value to womens relation to language(that is they talk of how women s relation to language., where binaries are constructed-one term example man/mind/reason is given a positive value through being positioned as primary in relation to an opposite term which is negatively coded-women/body/passion) and of sexism implicit of the elevation of phallus to the place of transcendental signifier. Such a system according to Helena Cixous is referred as phallogocentric. Her writing seeks to disrupt this symbolic order. In line with this critique , Cixous in her work aims a blow at phallogocentric culture where it hurts the most and attacks it for marking women as the other, as different , as negativity (Cixous,1976).She questions the repression of feminine in culture and provocatively questions masculine language . Luce Irigaray takes as her point of departure an indictment of psychoanalysis for its almost total disregard of the female subject and therefore she speaks of relationship of women to women,by opening a space in which women “ speak female and speak to each other without the interference of men(Irigaray;1980)

Democratic system also encouraged lot of feminists to express opinion on difference between men and women.Apart from French feminists , radical feminists too describe how oppression takes place in democracy which is

largely patriarchal in nature.

Democracy as Diversity

Democracy as diversity was unleashed with a movement for multiculturalism in the seventies.It spread first in Canada and Australia to be subsequently followed in US,UK, Germany and elsewhere.Such a democracy fights for the rights of women and minorities in a new way by subverting the truth claims of all who exclude them.Such a democracy feels that fundamental concern is not economics but esteem, not income but identity.Therefore there is shift from sixties emphasis of political economy to identity politics.The focus of this kind of democracy is on the welfare of people or cultural groupings, which are seen as the source of the socially constructed identities of individuals.Therefore as against previous democracies stress on politics of indifference, the new democracy advocated a politics of difference , endorsing diversity not only as a fact but also as a value, albeit as most would stress cultural diversity.Difference is not merely to be understood as discrimination or as otherness in an absolute sense with no dialogue possible, but more so as representing diverse opinions and voices of marginalized groups-which were now not only race, religion, gender but also cultural difference between communities, their way of life, system or moral values, modes of dress and address which were to be weighed positively.

In this phase of democracy, theorists advocate politics of difference as against a politics of equal dignity. The politics of difference as Taylor explains it, does not merely allow traditions a run for their money,it is committed to their flourishing. Whereas politics of equal dignity focuses on what is same in all, the politics of difference asks us to recognize and even foster particularity as the first principle. Whereas the politics of universal dignity fought for forms of non discrimination that were quite blind to the ways in which citizens differ, the politics of difference often redefines non discrimination as requiring that we make those distinctions the basis of differential treatment.No culture is wholly worthless, that it deserves atleast some respect because of what it means to its members

and the creative energy it display, that no culture is perfect and has a right to impose itself on others and the culture are best changed from within.(Parekh,1999.15)

Thus today, democrats reflect upon the special but diverse needs of minorities, immigrants and indigeneous people. Not only opportunity for them to survive but also stress is on to provide minorities, Immigrants and indigeneous people.Group differentiated minority rights include people both as citizens and as members of specific community.Infact Chantal Mouffe through her notion of radical democratic citizenship challenges the liberal public/private distinction to bring out that there can be as many forms of citizenship as there can be interpretation of these principles.(Mouffe, 1998).

Further democrats emphasize on irreducible particularity and complex diversity characterizing the lives of non western world. For example several feminists like Chandra talapade mohanty show how category of third world women is appropriated by western feminists as ultimate proof of patriarchy and female bondage(Mohanty,1984)To Gayatri Spivak ,it is ludicrous to talk of specificity of female body. It follows that for a women that heterogeneity most importantly include the experience of her body, an experience which has been subject to the most rigorous male censorship down the ages and finds a particularly shocking but exemplary form in the practice of clitorodectomy.(Spivak,1987)further Sylvia Walby would point the fact that there are different sites of oppression and potentially different sites of struggle. Thus democrats would point out that sites of oppression of colored people may be different from those of white people.

Therefore as Anne Phillips would point out that questions of democracy and difference are the one's that lie at the heart of contemporary dilemma in democracy.(Phillips;1993)

IV

Different Democracies in Different Contexts

No where democracy is functioning in a universal fashion. Each country has its own

version of democracy. In this article I look at three regions, that is China, the Muslim countries , Russia and their take on democracy. Each region has developed its own version of democracy.For example in China ,Western constitutional democracy,"is feared because it would put the Communist Party under the rule of law, not above it. Other threats cited in the memo were promoting "universal values" of human rights, Western-inspired ideas of news-media independence and civic participation, ardently pro-market "neo-liberalism" and "nihilist" criticisms of the party's past.(New York Times) No one has expected China to become a democracy overnight or adopt a Western model. But in recent years there have been some tentative moves toward political liberalization. In 2011-12, for instance, villagers of Wukan in southeast China organized protests against land grabs and ended up forcing elections and driving out local leaders. Many hoped that Mr. Xi, who took office last year, would push even wider political reforms His goal is to expand market-driven reforms; this can happen only if he and other leaders relax state control and involve more Chinese and foreign investors in the economy. .

But China is deep into an economic transformation that depends on integration with the rest of the world. And the future success of China's economy depends on a steadily more open society of the sort that Chinese liberals and moderates are pushing for. Yet when it comes to the subject of representative democracy in China, For example, most westerners will be surprised to learn that China already holds more elections than any other nation in the world. Under the Organic Law of the Village Committees, all of China's approximately 1 million villages – home to some 600 million voters – hold elections every three years for local village committees.In September 2010, President Hu gave a speech in Hong Kong in which he called for new thinking about Chinese democracy. (Guardian , 2011)Said Hu "There is a need to ... hold democratic elections according to the law; have democratic decision-making, democratic management, as well as democratic supervision; safeguard people's right to know, to participate, to express and to supervise." Wen said that

without reforms of the political system, gains from reforms of the economic system would go down the drain. Political reform is necessary, said Wen, to sustain the nation's breakneck economic growth, including opportunities for citizens to criticise and monitor the government.

Most sinologists believe that if Chinese democracy continues to develop, it is unlikely to be an exact copy of the western model. Many are intrigued by the vision promoted by Confucian-inspired intellectuals like Jiang Qing, who have put forward an innovative proposal for a tricameral legislature. Legislators in one chamber would be selected based on merit and competency, and in the others based on elections of some kind. One elected chamber may be reserved only for Communist party members, the other for representatives elected by everyday Chinese. Such a tricameral legislature, its proponents believe, would better ensure that political decisions are made by more educated and enlightened representatives, instead of the rank populism of western-style elected factions. It's intriguing to contemplate China evolving into some sort of innovative democratic experiment, combining tricameralism with all the high-tech features of deliberative democracy methods to mold a new type of political accountability, as well as separation of powers. Daniel Bell, a Canadian-born professor of political theory at Tsinghua University in Beijing, says China may be groping toward "a political model that works better than western-style democracy". The debate over its form and definition as well as application was one of the major ideological battlegrounds in Chinese politics for well over a century. It is still a contentious subject. Andrew Nathan wrote in his 1985 study that "the Chinese have aspired to democracy as they understand it for a hundred years, have claimed to have it for seventy, and for the last thirty-five years have lived in one of the most participatory societies in history." In December 2008, more than 350 intellectual and cultural leaders, including Liu Xiaobo, issued Charter 08. The Charter said China remains the only large world power to still retain an authoritarian system that so infringes on human rights, and "This situation must change! Political democratic reforms cannot be delayed

any longer!

Further Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life But few Believe in U.S. Backed Democracy. More than a year after the first stirrings of the Arab Spring, there continues to be a strong desire for democracy in Arab and other predominantly Muslim nations. Solid majorities in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan believe democracy is the best form of government, as do a plurality of Pakistanis.

Indeed, these publics do not just support the general notion of democracy – they also embrace specific features of a democratic system, such as competitive elections and free speech. Enthusiasm for democracy tends to be generally less intense in Jordan and in Pakistan. It is consistently strong in Lebanon and Turkey. While democratic rights and institutions are popular, they are clearly not the only priorities in the six Muslim majority nations surveyed. In particular, the economy is a top concern. And if they had to choose, most Jordanians, Tunisians and Pakistanis would rather have a strong economy than a good democracy. Turks and Lebanese, on the other hand, would prefer democracy. Egyptians are divided.

One of the most prominent Islamic feminist irshad manji in her work establishes for the need of reform in Islam. Irshad had founded project ijthad, an initiative to renew Islam's own tradition of critical thinking, debate and dissent. Project ijthad is helping to build the world's most inclusive network of reform-minded Muslims and non-Muslim allies. Her basic argument is that the Koran is a complex, contradictory, human book. Its prescriptions are many and conflicting. "only group of Muslims with the actual freedom to question, criticize and debate has decided to retreat into victimology and appeasement. "She wants to embrace her faith by understanding it fully, by realizing its vision of human equality, by looking at the ancient Islamic tradition of Ijtihad, questioning, asking, and thinking". Even Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi writes that "We have to compare the Koran to other holy books. Before we judge Islam. A fair comparison will help us to discover that the Koran or

fundamental teachings of Islam are relatively progressive in relation to democracy and Islam. Takhayur is another concept which aims at eclectic choice from different schools of Islamic thought. Thus the one which is more favorable for rights of men and women need to be adopted.

“As far as Russia is concerned the country seems to have laws that limit the rights and freedoms of people, attack on the news media and organizations of civil society. At the same time, though, Russians were very negative about political exports from the United States — just 26 percent said they liked American ideas about democracy. While many Russians disagree with the Kremlin about who is behind the recent protests in Moscow and other cities, most agree that Russia's political future should be its own. Instead, Russian leaders have found it is far easier and more expedient to talk about already being a democracy while running a state that -- beneath the rhetoric -- remains as authoritarian as ever. The talk helps to insulate Moscow from the harsh criticism that is leveled upon states that reject democratic values. And it helps to disarm critics by holding out the possibility that tomorrow -- if not today -- the promises of democracy may yet become reality. Important institutions of democracy, such as fair and free elections, transparency of state structures and freedom of speech have been curbed rather than fostered since Putin's ascended to power. People confirm the need for Russia to find an alternative to the form of Western Liberal democracy. Russia was moving in the right direction in the 1990s, but with the arrival of Putin, democratic reform was reversed and an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian state was established. The second narrative argues that the failure of democracy in Russia is due to the conservative values of the Russian population and its underdeveloped political culture. “Society awakened,” in the democratic protests that erupted after the rigged parliamentary elections of December 2011. But the Putin regime responded “by manipulation, the purpose of which was self-preservation at any price.

V

Conclusion: Democracy as Intermingling of

Indigenous Culture with External Influence

Democracy worldwide today is largely a result of intermingling of indigenous culture with external influence. Or would it be apt to say that democracy has been accepted differently in different civilization. In an era of pervasive migration, media globalization and transnational information flow, democracy as a movement has gained momentum even though roots and meanings of each of these movements may be differ from nation to nation. While as post colonialist would say that colonization is inevitably shaped by the experience of colonization, similarly democracy gets shaped by the spirit of globalization. As a result a conceptions of distinct, singular, internal, homogeneous movement gives way to a model of hybridity, of borrowing and lending across porous cultural boundaries on the very notion of democratic nation. The concept of hybridity as Robert Young would note, makes difference into sameness and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer same, different no longer different, thereby engendering difference and sameness in an apparently impossible simultaneity. This means that democratic nations might be different in some sense but also similar in some. While differences need to be respected, similarities between democratic polities need to be fostered. As far as sameness is concerned some key elements irrespective of cultural milieu needs to be accepted. Thus metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notion of identity that is democracy but also address connection between subject by recognizing the affiliation, crosspollination, echoes and repetitions. Rather than demarcate certain concepts (modernity, equality, humanism) as intrinsically western and thus forever tied to enforcement of an imperialist agenda, recent theorists are attentive to diverse appropriation and re articulation of such vocabulary across various global site. Each civilization has evolved its own kind of democratic concepts.

The complex intermingling of indigenous tradition and external influence are such that discourses once linked to colonizers or the

western world may acquire very different meanings when adopted by colonized to challenge their own tradition. Thus recent readings of modernity have pointed to its internal complexities and uneven temporalities, arguing that white women and people of color have not been outside of modernity but have been shaped by and in turn variously have shaped its political, cultural and philosophical meanings.

Therefore the need is to look at various categories, that is ideology, women, race, culture, in term of difference with sameness and sameness with difference, a form of interface with the purity of such categories, therefore being more open to multiple and mutable concerns than does the appeal to incommensurability and otherness which necessarily leaves the realm of same untouched.

However point needs to be stressed that the new universalism that accommodates cultural, gender and plurality of other sorts in contrast to rainbow epistemology stresses towards communication of knowledge and a politics of global cohabitation rather towards global rainbow democracy.

For example Susan Stanford Friedman has recently made a detailed and compelling case for hybridity and Syncretism as a way of working through certain dilemmas and deadends in feminist theory. Steven Connor in fact points out that appeals to difference and incommensurability within poststructural theory always refers back to norms, values and universalizable assumptions. As against particularism, which is a self-defeating logic in order to build a more viable multiculturalism, the need would be as Laclau would point for formulating universal as an empty place the universalism is not one. It is not a preexisting something to which individuals accede, but rather the fragile, a shifting and always incomplete achievement of political action; it is not a container of a substantive content but all empty place. As Laclau puts it, the dimension of universality reached to equivalence is very different from the universality which results from an underlying essence or an unconditioned a priori principle. Rather than thinking of universal as something that is extra-political and that can be used to adjudicate political claims. We

should think it as a product of political practice. The authentic universal would really be inclusive of all people of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ideology. Need would be to look into the imbrications of the universal and particular, the matter being not choosing one over the other but articulating in a scrupulously political sense, the relation between the two, and how each is rendered impure by irreducible presence of others.

End Notes

1 The Indian constitution right of individual as well as right of collectivity example the right to culture unlike the US constitution

2 But the Indian constitution does not agree with this liberal principle and thus guarantees equal right to communities and culture.

3 In India while equality has been enshrined but positive discrimination has been provided for backward communities and women. So it is not liberal conception of indifference to discrimination.

4 However in Rawls later work, Political Liberalism, the political seems at last to come to the fore because problem of diversity appears to be directly confronted. He poses the question, how over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by, reasonable through incompatible, philosophical and moral diversity can exist? To him answer is provided by idea of an overlapping consensus that embraces all reasonable doctrine and is embodied in an ideal of political justice

Similarly Dworkin's desert island with its insurance scheme, Ackerman's spaceship journey to a new planet, all serve the purpose of ensuring that ascriptive group differences play no role in definition of justice.

5 Look Who's Afraid of Democracy, Editorial. August 27 2013, New York Times.

6 Steven Hill, China's tentative steps towards democracy 19 January 2011.

7 Charter 08 is a manifesto initially signed by

over 350 Chinese intellectuals and human rights activists. Amending the Constitution, Separation of powers, Legislative democracy, An independent judiciary, Public control of public servants. Guarantee of human rights, Election of public officials.,Abolition of Hukou system. Freedom of association, Freedom of assembly.,Freedom of expression.,Freedom of religion, Civic education, Free markets and protection of private property, including privatiz in enterprises and land. Financial and tax reform. Social security. Protection of the environment. federated republic. Truth in reconciliation.

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