

NOTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY AN EXPLORATORY STUDY*

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A concept of democracy is still vague in this country. A hazy understanding has produced a parody of democracy. Therefore the question as to how people perceive democracy has not been studied properly and vigorously. This study proposes to determine the meaning of the term democracy and to know the areas where there is unanimity.

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Variety in contemporary views about any concept or ideal is inevitable. Likewise the term "democracy" was used to mean different things in different periods of history. Furthermore, it was variously defined by varied individuals in the same period of time.¹ As a consequence, in its long evolutionary course, it has enormously grown in meaning, scope and details. It has modified itself many times in the past to suit the tone and temper of the changed times. That's why democracy of the nineteenth century was not the democracy of the eighteenth. But, however, the use of the same term suggests that there is a core of meaning which remains identical inspite of variations in the concomitant elements. This makes the studies of the meaning of democracy interesting and meaningful.

The Indian Constitution (1950) declares the country to be a Sovereign Democratic Republic. We are pledged to be a full-fledged democracy in the future. The entire nation is passing through training in democracy deliberately in certain spheres and unconsciously in others. As a hazy understanding would produce, at best, a parody of democracy, the development of democratic ideals has become one of the most paramount concerns of our country men.

But, what is democracy? On this question, we, like the builders at Babel, find ourselves

speaking strange tongues. Some consider it only a beautiful dream which can never achieve substantial realization while others proclaim that it is a "bourgeois fraud".

The question of how people, in general, perceive democracy has not as yet been subjected to rigorous study. A recent publication² reveals that out of 83 theses and 2,858 dissertations, approved by the Indian Universities for the doctorate and masters' degree in education during the period 1939-1961 only one doctoral thesis and two masters' dissertations have a direct bearing on democracy.

The Need.—The recent Chinese aggression stirred us all but ideological war cannot be fought with sentimental attachment to a vague concept. Needed, then, is a constant renewal of informed and devoted loyalty to the fundamental principles of democracy. A citizenry thoroughly aware of the meaning and implications of democracy alone would dare face courageously any attack, ideational or physical. Hence, need for such an investigation is self-evident. A nation pledged to the pursuit of democracy needs assessing what the citizens mean by such an important concept which has become almost a cliché of approbation.

The Purpose.—The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) to determine what educated people understand by the term democracy,

*This paper is a summary of the dissertation submitted as a requirement of the Advanced Course in Research Methodology of the National Institute of Education, Delhi, in 1963.

and (2) to know the areas where there is considerable unanimity or otherwise. It purports not to prove anything but intends to illustrate a method which may provide clues and lead to further investigative action.

The Method.—As the population under study was scattered, and the time and funds available were limited, the questionnaire method alone seemed a best feasible approach. The study was conducted through a systematic procedure involving these steps:

- (a) Compiling stimulus statements from different sources about democracy;
- (b) editing these statements;
- (c) organising them into questionnaire form;
- (d) submitting the questionnaire to the sampled population of educated people for recording their responses; and
- (e) analyzing the collected data to discover the manifold notions about democracy and major areas of unanimity or otherwise.

The Sample.—Instead of covering a large random sample of educated adults in general, 484 respondents of eight selected groups of educated people, fairly well-defined by occupation or organizational membership were contacted in group situation, individually or by mail. A total of 383 (79.5%) completed questionnaires were returned; out of which 251 (65.5%) were considered for tabulation and analysis. The eight groups represented in the study were: College freshmen (first-year students); College sophomores' (second-year students); future-teachers (B.Ed students); teacher-educators (lecturers of a teachers' training institute); university teachers; secondary school principals, medical practitioners; and journalists. One hundred fifty eight (62.9%) respondents were males 93 (37.1%) females.

The median age of the group was 24 years. One hundred three were under 20 years, 50 between 20-29 years, 53 between 30-39 years, 24 between 40-49, and 21 over 50 years. One hundred forty six were unmarried, 102 married, 2 widowed and 1 was separated. One hundred ninety four were Hindus, 12 Muslims, 15 Sikhs, 14 Christians and 16 were of other religious groups. One hundred fifty respondents were non-earners. The median monthly income of the earning members of the groups was Rupees 618.7. Three had monthly income below Rupees 300, 26 between Rupees 301-500, 33 between Rupees 501-700, 22 between Rupees 701-900, 15 over Rupees 1,000 and 2 did not report their monthly income. Sixty-six were congress-minded, 3 P. S. P.-minded, 13 Janasangh-minded, 9 communist-minded, 132 non-party or independent and 28 were interested in other political parties.

The Tool.—The design of the instrument was derived from the questionnaires developed by Dr. John R. Berry.³ The revised questionnaire contained finally chosen 80 stimulus statements which were related to the eight discernible facts of democracy viz. popular sovereignty; fraternity; liberty; equality; faith in people; duties and obligations; unique nature of individual; and miscellaneous. The questionnaire began with an "Orientation" and was organized in three distinct parts :

- (1) The first section of 40 factual statements—the respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered these statements essential, desirable, undesirable or not-related to the concept of democracy as they visualized it.
- (2) The second section of 40 opinion statements—the respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or

strongly disagreed with the ideas or ideals contained in these statements.

- (3) The section entitled "Sampling Data" had eight items, personal in nature, chiefly designed to obtain information by which the main groups of respondents could be distinguished.

The questionnaire was evolved through a systematic procedure. To eliminate the biasing influence of the handwriting and to keep the recording clear and legible, the respondents were asked to put a check mark or enclose within a square any one of the fixed responses. Stimulus statements were compiled from widely scattered sources and covered most facets. This contributed to the validity of the questionnaire.

It did not seem practicable to compute the reliability of the questionnaire by means of test-retest method. As an alternative, 28 pairs of non-identical statements (14 in each section) were included for checking the internal consistency. The results of these checks indicate that the questionnaire can be treated as fairly reliable.

THE FINDINGS :

- (a) There was no stimulus statement of which there was 100% acceptance or rejection.
- (b) There were 35 statements on which there was considerable unanimity i.e. 75% better acceptance or rejection.
- (c) There were 23 statements on which acceptance was 75% or more. There

was only one statement on which acceptance was 96%.

- (d) There were 12 statements on which rejection was significant i.e. acceptance was 25% or less. There were 4 statements which were rejected forthright i.e. accepted by less than 13% of the respondents.
- (e) There were 30 statements which revealed lack of unanimity among the respondents. Though these were agreed upon by a good majority (one-fourth to three-fourths of the total respondents) yet a considerable proportion (atleast one-fourth) of the respondents expressed disagreement with these.
- (f) Fourteen statements were such that atleast a significant proportion (75% or more) of the total respondents accepted these but atleast one group of respondents expressed diversity on these.

Conclusions .—The study reveals that there was considerable unanimity among the respondents on certain facets of democracy, viz. popular sovereignty, equality, liberty and faith in people. Nevertheless, there still were differences of opinion in the matter of practical application of these general principles of democracy. There was sharp diversity on the concept of social equality and freedom of action. One should, of course, be ready to admit that there is a high degree of uncertainty as to the extensions of any wide generalizations from these results.

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