



लोकनीति

# THE WORKING OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY:

## A BALANCE SHEET

*Text of Rajendra Nath Barua Memorial Lecture delivered at JB  
College, Jorhat on 16 December 2011*

*Dr. Sandeep Shastri, Pro Vice Chancellor Jain University and National  
Coordinator, Lokniti Network.*

## DEDICATION

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*I would like to thank Dr Sandhya Goswami for having suggested my name for delivering this Memorial Lecture. My understanding of Indian democracy and politics has been greatly enriched by the many dialogues I have had with colleagues within the Lokniti Network. I would like to specially thank Yogendra bhai and Suhas bhai – cherished members of the Lokniti family - for the many sessions of dialogue and learning. I also would like to thank my many students who have allowed for a very academically stimulating atmosphere in the classrooms. Some of my most precious insights on Indian democracy were learnt with them and often because of them.*

It is indeed a rare honour and privilege to deliver the first Rajendra Nath Barua Memorial lecture at the JB College at Jorhat on the theme 'The Working of Indian Democracy'. It seems so appropriate to take stock of the working of one of the most vibrant democratic experiments, in the name of one of those great sons of this land, who contributed significantly to the establishment of strong democratic foundations in this country. Shri Rajendra Nath Barua ji was one of those stalwarts of the freedom struggle who strove relentlessly to make this nation a safe space for freedom and democracy for future generations.

A reading of his interventions in the debates in the Lok Sabha shows his intense commitment to

resolving the challenges faced by those people and regions that he represented. It would also be useful to record that at the height of the Quit India movement, Shri Barua ji then a police officer, was on the horns of a dilemma between his love for the country and the call of duty. He took the decision to disobey the instructions of his superiors resulting in his arrest. On his release, he actively involved himself in social work and legal practice. It is this selfless service, spontaneous sacrifice and sustained struggle of stalwarts like Shri Rajendra Nath Barua which has secured for us all the stability of institutions and democratic processes that has helped protect the 'shell' of democracy.



I wish to dedicate today's dialogue to his sacred memory. I congratulate the family and well wishers of Shri Rajendra Nath Barua ji for having instituted a Memorial Lecture in his honour. I feel humbled to be in an Institution, which owes a great deal to his efforts and stand on a platform that cherishes his memory.

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that the India of August 1947 is very different from the India of December 2011. Much has changed, not necessarily all for the good. Much has also remained the same, and we can count some of it as a positive sign. The celebration of the deepening of democracy, widening of the base of popular participation and the more recent vigilance with which citizens attempt to protect and hold

accountable the democratic foundations of society is part of the reason for celebration. The democratic deficit often mirrored not so much in the content of democracy but in the context of its functioning often stares us starkly in the face.

We seem to be electing our representatives in relatively free and fair elections. Yet the gap between the electors and the elected seems to be widening at an alarming pace. We as citizens, have voted out parties and leaders for failing to respect the mandate given to them. Yet, we have little choice in holding our governments or elected representatives accountable for what they do during the five odd years between elections. There seems to be a promise and expectation overload and a performance deficit.

At a recent dialogue on democracy at Bangalore, a leading political analyst Yogendra Yadav, made the point that the idea of democracy is expanding though the imagination of democracy is shrinking. How very true. We often miss the point that Yogendra ji makes because we mount our academic telescope to view democracy from `way above`. It may be a good idea to view it from `below` ... from the simple yet powerful lense of a common citizen.

A Report on the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) rightly asserted that the `cultures, practices and institutions of democracy have transformed the people of (the region) from subjects to citizens, as bearers of rights and

dignity... This gives rise to citizens' expectations that most of our regimes fail to meet`. Politics is central to the lives of even ordinary people in our country. Politics has an important resonance in the normal imagination of most people. Traditional and historical social identities have today assumed the status of political communities in most parts of our country.

Over six decades in the life of a nation it marks an important milestone to take stock of the journey covered and the path that lies ahead. In this age of "one-line" sound bytes and headlines, if one were asked to capture in one sentence, what the last sixty years<sup>(+)</sup> have stood for, it would be journey from an emphasis on "unity in diversity" to a focus on "unity through

diversity”. This fact is reflected in the nature of the political discourse, the “cut and thrust” of real politics and the emerging dynamics of Indian society today.

Let’s reflect on a single example. How do we as Indian’s look upon our sixty four years of experience with democracy? An overwhelmingly large number of Indian citizens are categorical in their assertion that preserving and further enriching the “shell” of democracy is one of our greatest achievements. All leading public opinion surveys endorse this point. When we take the discussion to the next logical point, what does this democracy mean to you; there is an astonishingly diverse menu of `responses` one is likely to receive. Truly, “who you are” defines “what democracy has

come to mean to you” in very significant ways!

While the upper class would generally see democracy as a bright “feather” in the Indian cap, they are often impatient with its “inability” to bring rapid economic progress. Their cherished dream is an India where the process of economic growth is insulated from the demands of a retrograde politics! For a typical middle class Indian, democracy is a good thing, politics is what takes and makes India backwards! Push them further, their democracy is one of rules, laws and courts.

The judiciary clearly becomes the “saviour” of democracy for these sections. An individual, who tries to beat the system rather than reform it, is showcased as a prime example

of success and a darling of the middle class. Today it has become fashionable to ridicule politics and lampoon politicians. For some sections, a better and democratic society means a society free of the filth and dirt of politics!

For the economically underprivileged, the gains of democracy lie in the “assertion of their presence” and claiming their legitimate place on the “table of political equality”. Yogendra Yadav has often defined this as the `politics of presence`.

Democracy we all endorse, albeit for different reasons. The window of democracy portrays different images depending on who you are verily a unity through through diversity! Six decades ago, the key architects of our constitution were also

guided by the principle of unity in diversity. A perusal of the speeches of Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly conclusively demonstrates the fact that his vision was of a system of not merely political equality but social and economic equality and justice. In one of his last speeches in the Constituent Assembly, Babasaheb warned that we would have a sham democracy if we did not create the strong foundations of economic and social justice in a diverse society like ours.

An indepth analysis of the speeches of Pandit Nehru evoked the spirit of building a unity amidst the manifold diversity. His historic “tryst with destiny” speech too, was a clarion call to forge unity amidst all its diversity. That was

beyond doubt the need of the hour. The structuring and working of all our political institutions reflected this spirit. A centre dominated federal system, a near one party domination, emergence of “consensus” politics was all an endorsement of this trend.

Today, we are witness to a sea change in the way these very same political structures operate. The emergence of Indian states as the new and real “centres of power”, a competitive multi party system, the inevitability of coalition politics are all verily a reflection of the entrenching of “unity through diversity”. Sixty decades after the dawn of independence, the happy and often legitimate co-existence of multiplicities in the political and socio-economic domain, is

celebrated by many and acknowledged by all. For some, this multiplicity reflects a maturity of the system for others it is a camouflage to cover up our hopeless inadequacies and failures.

Being an incorrigible optimist, I would vote for the more positive approach. A country endowed with the pluralism that we possess – which could be the envy of the world – needs to provide space for each identity to find legitimate expression. After all these years of freedom, these articulations of difference are not seen as a threat to the unity of the nation but provide proof of the rich array of genuine heterogeneity. The confluence is the by-product of an assimilation of variety rather than an assertion of the dominant – truly a movement

from unity in diversity to unity through diversity.

The balance sheet of democracy shows a host of potential assets and possible liabilities – the pace and need for liberalisation and privatisation, the nature and direction of politics, the need for reservations, the meaning and content of secularism to just name a few – a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives are articulated. Each voice has its space, each stand has its place, each position has a platform and within the limits of law, they all find legitimate expression.

This marks a celebration of diversity. From the churning of this diversity emerges (often in excruciatingly long and painfully cumbersome ways) the final policy outcome. Many may fault the process or the outcome but

in the long run this very same process assimilates all manageable differences. This unity through diversity, is our greatest strength after all these years of freedom. It was this unity through diversity that Shri Rajendra Nath Barua often pleaded for in his impassioned speeches in the Lok Sabha.

Let me conclude by drawing attention to some of the potential assets and possible liabilities that an audit of Indian Democracy reveals. First, the hazy picture on democracy for whom? From whose perspective do our leaders talk? Who is this *Aam Insaan* (I am consciously avoiding *Aam Admi* as it is a gender insensitive term) that all leaders and parties claim to represent and talk about? Talking about reforms has today become fashionable... Reforms

for whom? Reforms to benefit whom are questions that should be asked but are never asked. We face a fundamental challenge of dealing with an unaccountable system. Save voting them out of power at the end of five years, Our democracy would run a huge deficit if this clear lack of accountability is not dealt with. Secondly, Babasaheb Ambedkar had warned us that at Independence we created a political democracy. Social democracy was still a distant dream. It was a distant dream in 1947. It remains a distant dream even today. The inherent inequalities in society put certain groups at a disadvantage. While they may enjoy an equality of status in the democratic process this is often not translated into equality in opportunities for access and results. Thirdly, Indian democracy faces the

challenge emerging, ironically, from its successes. Success bring with it heightened expectations. The deepening of democracy brings in its wake new opportunities, new challenges and new aspirations. More often than not the system finds it difficult to do justice while negotiating with all the competing interests. This challenge is also seen in who participates. Fourthly and finally, the democratic experiment hinges on the ushering in meaningful social change and sustained political transformation. This is not about a short 100 meters race... it is about a marathon which requires not just strength and capacity but tremendous patience to carry all sections together. This is what Shri Rajendra Nath Barua aimed at achieving. The greatest asset of our democratic process



is the common citizen. Giving her the centre stage and shaping decision making around her aspirations and hopes would allow this asset to transform all potential liabilities into strong

assets to create a vibrant Indian democracy.

**THANK YOU**