Dealing With Deficient Democracy

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Abstract: *This is an essay to provide an over-view of the successes and shortcomings of the 75 years of Swaraj Yatra (journey of freedom) of India. A sustainable Constitution, political integration, national defence, building of democratic institutions, reorganisation of political geography on linguistic lines, promoting gender justice, ensuring representation of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, protection of the religious minorities, self-reliance in food production, decline in poverty, illiteracy and fertility rate, federalization, decentralization of state-power, and shift from communalism and Westernization to secularism and modernization have been listed as the significant achievements. It underlines seven failures – development deficit, governance deficit, legitimacy deficit, democracy deficit, citizenship deficit, nation-building deficit, and environmental deficit. The paper concludes by emphasising the need of paradigm shift to discourage liberalization-privatization-globalization (LPG) prescribed by The World Bank and to advance towards realization of the UNDP sponsored sustainable development goals (SDGs).*

Introduction

India has completed 75 years of Swaraj Yatra. It has been guided by five imperatives as stated in the Preamble of the Constitution of India – justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and unity and integrity. The Indian narrative of 'democratic nation-building' is an outstanding example of amazing successes and colossal failures due to the nature and magnitude of socio-cultural heterogeneity related with language, religions, caste and tribe. Colonial metamorphosis of the Indian society and culture between 1757 and 1947 as a colony of the British Empire added certain unique complexities (Cohn, Bernard S. (1987). It has addressed the issues of centre-formation, state-building, federalization, decentralization and nation-building in its own way which separates it from the European examples of nation-states and the Chinese way (Mukherji, P. N. (1994), Eisenstadt and Hartman (1994), Rudolph L. I. and S. H. Rudolph (2008).

On the one hand, eminent sociologist M. N. Srinivas has argued that social change in India has taken place through two key processes – 'Sanskritization' and 'Westernization'. They promoted changes through the sociological process of reference group behaviour. (Srinivas, M. N. (1966). On the other hand, Noble laureate V. S. Naipaul, a Trinidadian British author of Indian origin, has given an 'intimate outsider's' view with literary flavour. According to Naipaul, the dynamics of social and political developments in India has gone through three phases – firstly, India entered the comity of nations in the 1950s as 'an area of darkness' (1964). Secondly, by 1975, it was recognised as 'a wounded civilization' (1977). Finally, it looked like a zone of million mutinies by the 1990s (Naipaul, V. S. (2016).

Theorising the Indian engagement with freedom and social change, Yogendra Singh has underlined the togetherness of orthogenetic and heterogenetic sources of social change in the primary and secondary institutions and processes. He has emphasised the need to look at India as an example of 'crisis of success' (Singh, Yogendra (1973). It is agreed that India has achieved several goals in terms of political integration, economic modernization, technological progress and

social development. But there has been less attention and discussion about the fact that Indian nation-state has also accumulated significant deficiencies. Some of the deficiencies were inherited from the British Raj. A list of 18 such problems were identified by Gandhi in 1946 as the agenda of constructive programs for nation-building (Gandhi, M. K. (1946 / 1959). It included the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations, removal of untouchability, village industries, status of women, education, sanitation, health care, cattle improvement, economic equality, the Indian languages, Kisans, labour, Adivasis and students. The others have been cumulative results of the three post-colonial paradigms of development – i. the industrialization oriented mixed economy paradigm (1947-67), ii. the State-centric nationalization paradigm (1969-1977), and iii. The market-oriented LPG (Liberalization-privatization-globalization) paradigm (1992-2024). There was a phase of short-term trajectories between 1977 and 1991 which culminated into the adoption of the LPG paradigm from 1992.

II. The Achievements of Swaraj Yatra

First of all, it is important to register that India has been politically successful in terms of promoting Constitutional unity in the face of deep socio-cultural diversities. There were 565 princely states at the time of independence. Most of them were hoping to get recognised as 'independent country' after the 'transfer of power' in 1947. The challenge of political integration was further complicated by the British Raj sponsored 'partition' of British India and creation of Pakistan before departure causing nationwide communal violence and a large number of 'refugees' (Nearly 10 million people were forced to move from newly created Pakistan to India). India also suffered 4 wars with Pakistan (1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999) and a territorial aggression by China (1962).

Economically, it is a matter of appreciation that India has made remarkable improvements in terms of life expectancy, fertility rate, self-reliance in food production, poverty alleviation, spread of literacy, gender ratio, urbanization and contribution in the global economy. The life expectancy increased from 40 years in 1951 to 72 years in 2021.

The fertility declined from 5.9 in 1955 to 1.3 in 2024. In the area of food production there was a 'Green Revolution'; it has increased nearly six-fold from 50 Mn tonnes in 1950-51 to 314 Mn. Tonnes in 2021-22. Similarly, the milk production has registered a great advancement from 17 Mn. Tonnes in 1950-51 to 210 Mn. Tonnes in 2021 which allows a legitimate claim of 'White Revolution'. There were 80% people in extreme poverty in 1947. According to Arjun Sengupta Committee Report (2009), even in 2007, 77% of the people in India were living with $ 2/- per day income. It generated a significant debate about the problem of poverty and its measurement. It is reported that this ratio got reduced to 21.9% in 2017 due to the changes introduced in the economy since the adoption of the LPG paradigm.

The literacy rate has improved from 12% in 1947 to 81% in 2015. It got accelerated with inclusion of the right to education as a fundamental right for all children between 6 and 14 years of age in 2009. The gender ratio changed from 946 women to 1000 men in 1951 to 1060 men to 1000 women in 2024. India was 17% urban in 1947. But it increased to 36.6% in 2023.

Contribution of agriculture in the national economy was about 54% and it engaged 60% of the workforce in 1950-51. It changed to 17% share in the economy with employment of 52% of the labour force in 2021 due to diversification of the economic zone. The share of manufacturing has increased from 11% in 1950-51 to 15% in 2021-22. There has been enlargement of the service sector from 33% in 1950-51 to 53% in 2021-22. There was also remarkable change in the foreign trade – from a total of 7.9 billion Rupees in 1947 to 77,196 billion Rupees in 2021-22. The Indian contribution in the global GDP also improved from 3% in 1947 to 8.5% in 2017.

Socially, Indian society was able to maintain togetherness of continuity and change while negotiating transition from Westernization to modernization. There was legal recognition of the need of socio-cultural reforms to meet the Constitutional mandate. Therefore, it was an explicit promise in the preamble of the newly

drafted Constitution of India about establishing a system of justice – political, economic and social based upon equality of status and opportunity. Thus, there was a thrust for addressing the discriminations based upon the twin traditions of inequalities - the caste system and gender-based inequalities. It was translated in practice through a 'democratic revolution' led by Dr. Ambedkar since 1930s towards creating consensus for the provisions of 'reservation' for the Scheduled Castes (15%) and the Scheduled Tribes (7.5%) in education, government jobs, and all the legislative bodies. It was further augmented in 1992 by the provision of 27% reservations in educational institutions and the government jobs for the socially and educationally backward classes on the basis of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (1979). There is also a national commitment to provide 33% reservation of seats for women in the legislature from 2029.

There were four major challenges in the context of deepening of democracy in India on the eve of independence – linguistic diversities, local self-governance, religious plurality and gender discriminations.

The question of linguistic communities was addressed by establishing a national commission for linguistic re-organization of the Indian states which assured territorial space and political recognition for nearly all of the major linguistic groups in the Indian population. But much more is needed to be done to protect and promote the Indian languages as reported by the Peoples' Linguistic Survey of India (2014).

There was a significant Constitutional amendment in 1992 to empower the rural and urban bodies of local self-government to introduce decentralization of state power (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act). It has been a step towards a three-tier system of democratic governance to allow the village councils, city municipalities and district boards to become more empowered. The process was further extended through the enactment of the *Provisions of Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 (PESA-96)* and the *Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006* which recognized the

rights of the indigenous forest-dwelling communities over local resources.

The legacy of religious diversity was negotiated through secularisation of the newly established 'post-colonial State' and adoption of the Gandhian way of respect for all religions (Sarva Dharma Sambhav) in the cultural sphere. The Union government set up a National Minorities Commission under the Minorities Commission Act, 1992 to protect six religious groups from exclusion and discrimination – Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians. The problems of education, employment and political representation of religious minorities, particularly the Muslims, have been given a fresh priority in the light of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee (2006).

The issue of gender justice was given due significance in the political process through the provision of simultaneous Constitutional right to vote to all men and women. But the report of the national commission to study the status of women in India (Government of India (1976)] alarmed the society about prevalence of large gaps between men and women in terms of education, health, employment and legal rights. Given the prevalence of patriarchy in the Indian society, it needed a series of women movements for special measures to reduce the gender gap in sex-ratio, education, employment, legal rights and political representation. Violence against women has become increased awareness about the need for gender justice.

III. About The Deficiencies

There are several ways to look at the prevailing deficiencies in the Indian endeavour of democratic nation-building after 75 years of India's independence. It ranges from *4Es* (energy, employment, education and environment) to a Millennial List of the 10 worst problems – 1. Unemployment, 2. Food and water security, 3. Political freedom, 4. Educational opportunities, 5. Social safety and well-being, 6. Corruption, 7. Chronic poverty, 8. Social and communal conflicts, 9. Ethnic violence and international conflicts and 10. Climate change and depletion of natural resources. Additionally, there is importance

of having a glance at the global ranking of India on major parameters of progress. Meaningful insights can also be availed by looking at the conclusions of the studies of the academic experts.

According to United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 2023-24, India was found to be at 134th rank in a total of 193 countries which places it in the Medium Human Development category. According to the Global Hunger Index, India has slipped from 107 in 2022 to 111 in 2023. It was ranked 71 out of a total of 113 countries in terms of Global Food Security index. In the Gender Gap Index, India was placed at 161st rank in a total of 180 countries. India is reported to have slipped from 150 to 161 rank between 2022 and 2023. India was found to be at the top in terms of arms import. Corruption wise it was at 93rd rank (8 ranks lower than in 2022). It was ranked 3rd most polluted country and Delhi was found to be the most polluted capital city.

There are many studies which have found serious problems with the Indian democracy such as 'rise of ethnic democracy' (Christophe Jaffrelot), 'passage to despotism' (Debashish Roy-Chowdhry and John Keanne), and 'democratic backsliding' (Sabyasachi Das). It has been called 'defective democracy' and 'electoral autocracy'. Rising inequalities and concentration of wealth has been underlined as the most serious deficiency which has caused 'the rise of Billionaire Raj'. According to Nitin Kunal Bharti, Lukac Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi, there has been phenomenal increase in the number of billionaires in recent years in India; from 1 in '91 to 52 in 2011 and 162 in 2022. They further report that the top 1% of the population owns 40% of the wealth of India, the richest 10% are owners of 76% of the national wealth while the bottom 50% own just 7%. Provision of free food grains to 800 million men and women, monthly stipend for all adult women, and subsidizing a rural employment guarantee scheme (MNREGA) are also evidences of resourceless existence of the under-privileged millions of citizens.

Using the sociological lens, it is not difficult to identify atleast seven deficits at the present juncture of the Indian journey of Swaraj –

1. Development deficit, 2. Governance deficit, 3. Legitimacy deficit, 4. Democracy deficit, 5. Citizenship deficit, 6. Nation-building deficit, and 7. Environmental deficit. Let us look at each of them closely:

1.   **Development Deficit -** Poverty is considered as the most critical indicator of development deficit and 381 million people in India were found to be suffering with multi-dimensional poverty (income + education + living conditions) out of a total of 1400 million people in 2021. But it is more intensive among the Scheduled Tribes (50%) and the Scheduled Castes (33%) than the OBCs (27%) and the General population (14%). Similarly, child-worker (more than 10 million), physically challenged persons (2.5 % of the population), female-headed households, old age people (60 years+; more than 10% of the population) and illiterate sections of our country are found left out of most of the developmental initiatives.

In territorial terms, there were 793 districts constituting 28 states and 8 union Territories in 2024. Out of which 283 districts are listed as 'backward' districts. From educational point of view, 324 districts are counted as 'backward'. In 2013, 210 out of these backward districts spread over 10 states were classified as 'left-wing extremism (LWE) affected'. Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Meghalaya, Rajasthan, Odisha and Nagaland have more poverty than the others. These states together contain 57.7% of the total population of India.

2.   **Governance Deficit** – Lack of transparency, absence of accountability, insufficient representation, weak vigilance, erosion of institutional autonomy, corruption and criminalization of politics together create governance deficit in any democratic set-up. India has been battling the problem of corruption at high places since 1960s. Appointment of Santhanam Commission in 1963 and establishment of Central Vigilance Commission (1964) were the first post-colonial initiatives to address the problem of governance deficit. Introduction of Right to Information (2005) was a significant milestone in promoting transparency, checking corruption and citizen vigilance.

Total Revolution Movement led by Jaiprakash Narayan (1974-75), Jan Morcha mobilization by V. P. Singh (1989-90) and Jan Lokpal Movement led by Anna Hazare (2012) were quite significant peoples' movements against corruption in governance. Vohra Committee Report (1993) was one of the first eye-openers about the silent spread of criminalization in politics, bureaucracy and judiciary. But there has been no significant improvement in the state of affairs in the legislative, bureaucratic and judicial bodies. For example, there were 30% members in the Indian parliament in 2009 with serious criminal cases. It increased to 34% in 2014 and 43% in 2019. It has increased to 46% after the Lok Sabha elections of 2024, according to the report of Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR).

3.   **Legitimacy Deficit** – Free and fair elections are the basis of legitimation system of state power in India since independence. But the election process is increasingly polluted by misuse of state machinery and increasing role of nexus between four 'M's – majoritarianism, money-power, media and muscle power (Milan Vaishnav (2017). Alluring voters by offering money and adopting other unethical means is becoming an all-party and all-India phenomenon. It is further devalued by engaging in fake news, hate speech, casteism, regionalism and communalism.

Use of unethical means to influence voters' choice is eroding the legal basis of election system. There are increasing complaints about the functioning of the Election Commission and the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). It is reducing the authenticity and efficacy of the elected representatives. It is also weakening the democratic institutions with increasing role of Dhan Shakti (money power) and marginalization of Jan Shakti (peoples' power).

There have been citizens' initiative for electoral reforms since 1970s. A number of recommendations have been put forward through the reports of Justice Tarkunde Committee (1974), Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990), Indrajit Gupta Committee (1998) and Jeevan Reddy Committee (2004). There are continuous campaigns for electoral reforms to restore the purity of the legitimacy system by civil society bodies like Citizens for Democracy (CFD), Peoples' Union for

Civil Liberties (PUCL), Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and several others. But there has been no improvement so far, except a few marginal reforms like introduction of voters I. D. and declaration of the basic information about the candidates.

4.   **Democracy Deficit** – Democracy is not only a political system based upon 'one person, one vote' but a way of life where the people are voluntarily engaged in the public affairs. They live with differences. Given the prevalence caste-centric social power pyramid and the economic structure Dr. Ambedkar had emphasised the need of urgent socio-economic reforms to sustain democracy while submitting the final draft of the newly written Constitution of India.

In the later years, there was rapid increase in family-based political parties after the split in the Indian National Congress in 1969. Nepotism, coupled with personality politics, has become the all-pervasive basis within all newly established political parties since 1971 Lok Sabha elections. It got accelerated after the collapse of Janata Party in 1980.

Today, there is absence of 'internal democracy' and prevalence of 'personality politics' in most of the regional political parties. According to section 29 A of Representation of the Peoples' Act, 1951 all political parties must submit their constitution for registration with the Election Commission. But there is no compulsion to follow democratic processes in the internal affairs of the party.

Under-representation of women and declining number of the minorities in the Lok Sabha and the provincial legislative bodies is a cause of serious concern in the context of growing gap between representation and government. The share of women in the Lok Sabha has declined from 14.4% in 2019 to 13.6% in 2024. The 18th Lok Sabha has 74 women and 469 men members. Number of Muslim members has come down from 26 (2019) to 24 (2024) which amounts to 4.4%. On the other hand, there were only 2.3 Lakh Crorepatis in India, but they have occupied 93% seats in the new Lok Sabha. There were 88% members from the Crorepati section of the population.

5. **Citizenship Deficit** – There was change in the legal status of the Indian people from 'subject' to 'citizen' after the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1949. It became the basis of a supra-local community around the institutions and processes of newly established sovereign authority in the form of Republic of India. Informed and concerned 'Citizenship' is necessary for the legitimacy, stability and authority of all democratic nation-states (Alexis de Tocqueville).

The citizenship-building in India was supposed to be carried out through education, media, political parties, interest groups and civil society bodies. It was hindered because of the slow progress of education in the first fifty years after independence. At the same time, 'citizenship' was found to be at odds with pre-existing forms of identities like caste, clan, religion and language because of the ascendance of the nation-state sentiments (Dipankar Gupta (2014).

The thinness of citizenship in India is demonstrated by the fact that more than 1 lakh persons are found to be renouncing their citizenship every year since 2011. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, the following numbers have left the Indian citizenship between 2018 and 2023: 1,34,561 (2018), 1,44,017 (2019), 86,252 (2020), 1,63,370 (2021), 2,25,620 (2022) and 2,16,219 (2023) (Rajya Sabha, Question number 2466, Answered on 10/08/23). Most of them are well educated and sufficiently skilled as they are found to be settling in the advanced industrial nations of North America, Europe and Australia and New Zealand.

6. **Nation-Building Deficit** – India is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious nation-state which has many obstacles in promoting 'we-feeling' among its people. At the same time, it has been a laboratory of socio-political experiments in conceptualizing the idea of 'nation' and nation-building. It has given rise to an interesting debate about the nation-ness of India – is India a civilizational nation-state or multi-national state or state-nation? Is it a nation in making or an unsustainable political formation in the long run?

The colonial rule created an administrative system of three presidencies (Calcutta, Bombay and madras), several provinces and a large number of native princely states (565) which evolved in 100

years between 1757 and 1860 according to its political convenience. It caused rise of linguistic nationalism all over the British Empire which became the backbone of the Indian national movement. Then it was subjected to a brutal partition by the British Raj on the basis of 'two-nation' theory anchored in the religious differences between the Hindus and Muslims in 1946-47. But it failed to sustain itself as Pakistan faced eruption of cultural revolt in East Pakistan which fractured it on linguistic and territorial lines to give rise to a new nation-state - Bangladesh in 1971.

India contains at least five kinds of 'national' trajectories based upon languages, religions, castes, tribes and 'ethnicities' within a civilizational framework which was mutilated by two centuries of colonization. Today India is engaged in re-inventing itself on the basis of simultaneous advancement of three 'D's – development, democratisation and decolonization. But it is also facing a large number of identity issues since independence due to high proclivity about 'othering' which makes the policymakers and the people aware about existence of nation-building related deficits. From the Khalistan militancy in Punjab in the 1980s and rise of Hindutva mobilization in 1990s to the Meitei-Kuki clashes in Manipur in 2023 are manifestation of this generic problem.

7. **Environmental Deficit** – The issue of ecological depletion and environmental crisis is a major global problem which is included in the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But the environmental deficit of India has become more alarming since the pursuit of the LPG paradigm. It is no ordinary news that Delhi has become the most polluted capital city in the world and 63 cities of India are listed among the 100 most polluted cities on earth. It is equally disturbing that India has been ranked 176th out of 180 countries by Global Nature Conservation Index in 2024. There has been loss of 2.33-million-hectare tree cover in India since year 2000. India has lost a total of 19% tree cover in the last decades. Every year 18000 sq. kms. area of forests is getting destroyed due to wildfire.

There are five major aspects of the environmental deficit – 1. Air pollution – India is the third largest air-polluter in the world today. We

are putting 2.65 billion metric tonnes of pollutants in the atmosphere every year. Air pollution is contributing to 70 million pre-mature deaths every year. 2. Water pollution – 70% of our surface water has become unhealthy for the humans and other living beings. Due to carelessness about water resource management, 21 cities of our country including Delhi and Bengaluru will face acute water problem. It will adversely affect 40% of our population. 3. Waste management – India is generating 272 metric tonnes of solid municipal waste, including 25,000 tonnes of plastic, per year. Only 5% is treated and 18% is used for compost. The Indian Government has announced a scheme of 100 smart cities which will have facilities of waste management. 4. Food and water shortage – The ecological crisis is impacting our agriculture production which offers jobs to 60% of the work force and food to every home. 5. Bio-diversity – There has been 84% decline in biodiversity in recent decades. The Himalayas, Indo-Burmese zone, the Sunda Land (including Nicobar) region, the western Ghats are most intensely affected regions in terms of biodiversity. Civil society protest about saving Ladakh is an outstanding example of the crisis.

IV. What Is To Be Done?

India is at a crossroad in terms of dealing with the deficiencies of our quest for evolving into a land of peace, progress and happiness on the basis of civic nationalism. There are four kinds of responses in the making about it – 1) Benign neglect, 2) Faith in technocentric solutions, 3) Dismissive denial, and 4) Constructive engagement. There is no need to dilate about the first three responses. They are short sighted to say the least. They are enjoying 'bliss of ignorance'. They can afford to live with 'the new normal' as far as possible and then opt for the exit route. According to the Government of India sources, 1,34,561 Indians renounced their citizenship in 2018, and this number has increased to 2,16,219 in 2023.

USA, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand are the preferred countries among such Indians.

What can be done by those who are willing to contribute towards solutions through constructive engagement? It is monumental failure

of our paradigm of progress adopted since 1990s. We started as self-confident nation of freedom loving people in search of inclusive development. But we are reduced to a helpless people trapped in a deficient democracy. It is time to recognise that the LPG paradigm is the root-cause of agrarian crisis, jobless growth, exclusion and discriminations and failure of urban-industrial complexes. It is a major challenge to get motivated to come together as concerned social scientists and patriotic citizens to go for paradigm shift from pro-LPG policies (as advocated by the World Bank and G-20 conclaves) to pro-SDG orientation as advised by the United Nations Development Program. It should be complemented by micro and macro inter-disciplinary studies of the causes and consequences of these seven deficits. To know the truth is our basic need today for any collective action. There is also need of information and communication network. It will alert the indifferent millions across the nation and strengthen our drive for urgent reforms in our democratic set up and urban-rural intersections.

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