

Democracy Is Not Egalitarian **Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar**

"Free people are not equal (in income). Equal people are not free."

So said a poster at a workshop I once attended of the Centre for Civil Society. It touched a deep truth: democracy is not egalitarian.

Two weeks ago, I wrote in these columns that the argument for capitalism and democracy was the same---that they are highly flawed systems, but the alternatives are so much worse. Democracy provides a market for political goods, and capitalism for material goods. Markets empower consumers to bring down the most powerful politician or businessman by shifting their votes or purchasing power to rival politicians and businessmen.

One of my colleagues immediately objected that the two markets were very different. Our office messenger, Jokhan Lal, and tycoon Dhirubhai Ambani have the same voting power. But they have very unequal power in the market for goods. Two other people told me that the distribution of votes is egalitarian, but not of money.

Now, no two markets are identical. I agree that the markets for political and material goods do indeed have many differences. But it is simply untrue that democracy is egalitarian and capitalism is not. Neither is.

Jokhan Lal and Dhirubhai Ambani have one vote each. But is their political power is equal? Is their ability to influence people and outcomes equal?

Votes may be equally distributed in a democracy, but political power is not. And the gathering of egalitarian votes depends critically on inegalitarian money and organisational power. Entry barriers in politics are high because new parties lack the money and patronage networks of established ones.

Politics has, arguably, a greater concentration of power than business. Political dynasties can be more entrenched than business dynasties: look at the Gandhi family. Every politician promotes his relatives rather than grass-roots workers. An NGO, Loksatta, estimates that 10,000 political families monopolise two-thirds of all seats in legislatures. Many parties are personal fiefs: Mulayam Singh Yadav is the SP, Laloo Yadav is the RJD, Navin Patnaik is the BJD. Nothing egalitarian about it.

We must distinguish between producers and consumers. Sonia Gandhi is a producer of political goods, Ambani is a producer of material goods, Jokhan Lal is a consumer of both. Jokhan Lal can no more aspire to Sonia Gandhi's position than Ambani's.

However, Jokhan Lal can more easily become a producer of material goods than political goods. He can more easily become a handloom weaver farmer or street hawker than an elected member of a village panchayat. Panchayati raj has given us 3 million producers of political goods. But markets have given us hundreds of millions of producers of material goods and services.

Democracy arose from the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Liberty empowers you to do as you please, and that includes using your talents to become rich. Equality, however, requires

some constriction of liberty: the state has to take from some and give to others.

There has always been tension between these two pillars of democracy. It has been resolved typically by aiming for equality of opportunity rather than outcomes. Fundamental rights are granted to all citizens, including equality of votes and equality before the law.

Over and above equality of opportunity, democracies seek to provide basic goods for all (like primary education and health), and subsidies and safety nets for the poor and distressed. They make special provisions for all sorts of supposedly deserving groups. Politics is in large measure about the distribution of these benefits.

Democracies reduce extreme disparities by taxing the rich and subsidising the poor. But they do not aim at equality of outcome, as communist regimes do.

Many outraged leftists see this as a betrayal of the people by elites. But if indeed the masses wanted complete equality, they would have voted in parties that would ensure this. They never have. Inequality worries left-wing professors more than ordinary people.

Disparities are huge and widening between Bihar and Maharashtra. But the Bihari villager sees clearly that his foes are the local village bosses, not industrialists in far-away Maharashtra. For the Bihari villager, Maharashtra and Punjab are not rich oppressors but welcome refuges. He can migrate to these states, earn far more money and learn far more skills than in Bihar, and take these back home. The greater the disparity between Bihar and Maharashtra, the bigger is his bonanza. For the poor villager, these disparities are a blessing, not a curse.

Besides, ordinary people value freedom much more than equality alone. They have always fled from forced equality, despite its superficial attractions. Many people climbed the Berlin Wall to flee from egalitarian east Berlin to inegalitarian West Berlin. Nobody fled in the opposite direction.

Again, many people braved shark-infested waters to swim from Mao's egalitarian China to inegalitarian Hong Kong. Nobody swam in the opposite direction. Not even left-wing professors.

So, remember the words with which I began this column. Free people are not equal. Equal people are not free.

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