

We the People

Expanding the Idea of Democracy

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Part 1

Most people believe that democracy means voting in an election every 5 years. Elections in a representative democracy is of course an essential part of the very idea of political democracy, but that doesn't mean that the idea of democracy is limited to this right to vote. Moreover, every country takes pride in calling themselves a democracy, no matter how far away they are from it in reality, precisely because of the moral superiority and immunity that the idea of being democratic provides them.

The notion of democracy has evolved over time from direct democracy, in which the people directly deliberate and decide on legislation to representative democracy, where the people elect representatives to that, such as in parliamentary or presidential democracy. Most decision making of democracies works on the principle of majority rule, though other decision-making approaches like supermajority and consensus have also been used to increase inclusiveness and broader legitimacy on sensitive issues and counterbalancing majoritarianism. In present liberal democracies, the constitution limits the majority and protects the minority through enforcement of individual rights. Democracy differs with other forms of government where power is either held by an individual, as in autocratic systems like absolute monarchy, or where power is held by a small number of individuals, as in an oligarchy. Democracy focus on providing opportunities for the people to control their leaders and to remove them without the need for a revolution. The primary aspect of a representative democracy is the political right of universal adult franchise.¹

Having the right to elect a representative in a periodic election isn't the limit of political democracy. In a deeply hierarchical society where there is rampant inequality with respect to access to resources, social and cultural capital, expecting the representation to be fair and inclusive of the marginalized is deeply problematic. Affirmative action policies to ensure proper representation of marginalized and backward classes is one way to ensure justice in the democratic process. But even that constitutional right of proper representation isn't followed and the established hierarchies remain unopposed. Since elected representatives win election based on economic, social and cultural capital and with corporate backing, they lack the incentive to create policies for welfare the people who elected them in the first place. The assured term of 5 years after an election gives them ample impunity to create policies the way they want to, without proper consultations with the people. Since representative democracy functions by electoral victories, they just have to placate the dominant groups to keep their power, completely undermining the interests of the marginalized.

Legal equality, political freedom and rule of law have been identified as important characteristics of a democracy. These principles are reflected in all eligible citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to legislative processes and judiciary. But when the society is deeply governed by social hierarchies of caste, class, gender and color, and most of the oppressed sections are underrepresented in these institutions of governance, *democracy* becomes a mere word on paper. The legal and political rights in a democracy can only be a reality when the hierarchies are abolished and every individual has equal access to justice. Any state institutions created in such a hierarchical society will recreate and protect those hierarchies as the people occupying

¹ A. Tangian, "Analytical Theory of Democracy: History, Mathematics and Applications," *Studies in Choice and Welfare*, 2020.

the positions of power will almost always come from the dominant groups. They will use the state monopoly on violence to brutalize any assertions that challenges their privilege.

Is it democracy to feed people fake news and manipulated propaganda to reap political dividends and divert people's attention from failures of the ruling class and issues that actually affect people? How can it be a democracy when capitalist corporates have monopoly over every news, stories, movies, content and media that the public consumes and they also control the internet traffic and steal peoples' data for their own profit. These mediums are not democratic when we can only see representation of dominant caste/gender/race groups and we being bombarded with their historic and cultural narratives. Democracy is not people just sitting there having no say in what they consume, it is when each individual has equal power in creating and developing these narratives and stories and gets equal access at creating, publishing and propagating it. Democracy isn't when people are constantly fed false narratives so that they don't threaten the existing hierarchies. The increase in fake news and conspiracy theories and general mistrust on experts is due to this monopoly on knowledge and means of communication by limited groups. We can't blame people for believing in fake news because they are actively kept away from accessing and learning themselves. Then these 'experts' lament saying that people don't trust them anymore and is going behind fake propaganda. The only counter to fake news is to democratize all knowledge and make the process transparent rather than asking people to blindly trust few experts. If the elected representatives of the people believe that people cannot be trusted with the truth, then the whole foundation of democracy is at risk. For a democracy to function properly, it is essential that the government respects the people and take them seriously. Furthermore, in order to exercise their democratic rights properly, the government should be transparent to the people and provide all the information that people demand.

A democratic society should first democratize access to information for everyone. The control on the generation and flow of knowledge and information should not be allowed to be limited to few people or dominant groups. A true democracy makes sure that each individual has access to create new knowledge, have mediums of communicating that with others and also have access to every knowledge created by others before them and those around them. Invention of printing press and creation of internet are considered as two of the major events that made democratization of information possible. But even today, the research conducted by public money is inaccessible to general public and are monopolized by large publishing firms, who gatekeep scientific knowledge from being available to everyone. In such a world, websites like Libgen² and Scihub³ which provides free access to millions of research papers and books, without regard to copyright, by bypassing publishers' paywalls is a step towards democratizing knowledge. This rapid opening up of research knowledge has allowed millions of people to expand their own understanding and use that knowledge to improve their lives. The advantage of providing open access to knowledge is visible from the technology boom in the internet era that allowed thousands of people to access, edit and create new technologies, software and applications more easily and at a faster pace. The common misconception of celebrating a few billionaires for technological advancements in the IT era is misguided. It was the collective effort of thousands of people who had access to free knowledge, made possible by internet which made this giant leap in terms of technological progress. Massive open collaboration projects like Wikipedia shows the power

² "Library Genesis," [Online]. Available: <https://libgen.is/>.

³ Sci-hub. [Online]. Available: <https://sci-hub.ren/>.

of people to create and distribute information and the ability of the modern technologies like internet to democratize knowledge. Scientific institutions should open up provide all the knowledge in an open platform like arXiv server⁴ so that everyone who is interested can access and use it. The open-source model allows people to participate directly in development of software, rather than just be a consumer, through contributing opinions and modifications for free. Similarly, Arduino⁵ and littleBits have made electronics more accessible to people of all educational backgrounds and ages. The development of 3D printers also has the potential to increasingly democratize production. This spread of knowledge of and ability to perform high-tech tasks has started to challenge previous conceptions of expertise which was believed to be a realm of the upper class/caste. The Internet has been recognized for its role in promoting increased citizen advocacy and government transparency. But for these technologies to be used in a democratic way, they need to be released from corporate patents and capitalist control.

Another aspect of a democratic society is that every individual has to be provided the ability and means to pursue the education he chooses for his own intellectual and creative desires. The quality of education obtained shouldn't depend on the race, class, caste, creed or color but just on the will to pursue it. A society that treats education as a business and pushes kids to child labour cannot be a democratic society. We have seen how the digital divide created by the COVID pandemic restricted access to education for millions of children, while the kids of dominant groups continued with paid online education businesses. The current system of education is only to ensure that elite groups have monopoly over knowledge production and recreates the Brahminical system once again through exclusion of marginalized sections. Democratic education aims to remove the hierarchical power structure between teachers and students. It centers the ideal of democracy as both the goal and a method of instruction in teaching. It brings democratic values to education and can include self-determination within a community of equals, as well as such values as justice, respect and trust with the students' voices being equal to the teachers.⁶ Democratic governance of schools implies the active participation of the entire school community, including the students, in the collective decision-making processes that define the school like the curriculum, appointment and dismissal of teachers, creation or amendment of rules and general expenditure.⁷ It also provides students the autonomy to manage their own learning process than be completely pushed under the authority of teachers. When teachers lose their coercive power over students, issues like sexual harassment and assault, torture and discrimination will be reduced as students doesn't have to worry about backlash for calling them out. Children should be taught about conflict resolution mechanisms in democratic decision making and should experience democratic participation so that they can become active participants in the control and organization of their community.⁸ Studies on Democratic schools in UK, Israel, US and Australia indicates that democratic schooling produces greater motivation to learn, increased interest in

⁴ "arXiv.org," [Online]. Available: <https://arxiv.org/>.

⁵ "Arduino," [Online]. Available: <https://www.arduino.cc/>.

⁶ Y. Waghid, *Pedagogy Out of Bounds: Untamed Variations of Democratic Education*, 2014, p. 33.

⁷ "Sociocracy in Schools Map," [Online]. Available: <https://schoolcirclesfilm.com/sociocracy-in-schools/>.

⁸ G. D. Baker, R. M. W. Travers and M. V. Cassell, "Progressive Education Association (U.S.). Informal Committee on Evaluation of Newer Practices in Education," in *New Methods Vs. Old in American Education: An Analysis and Summary of Recent Comparative Studies*, 1941.

science, higher self-esteem, increased success in higher education and more respect for students with disabilities among students.⁹¹⁰¹¹¹²

When we actually understand what democracy means and how vastly it can and should be practiced, we come to the realization that the world we see around us is anything but democratic. Be it any social, economic, political or cultural interaction the individual participates, there exists hierarchies of gender, caste, religion, color, class, creed, cuisine, language, culture and nationalities. There is always a dominant group who controls power in each of these hierarchies who exploits the underprivileged. We need to realise that existence of these hierarchies and our failure to identify and destroy them shows how far we are from being in a democratic society.

Who produces and who consumes the creative and intellectual works depend a lot on the hierarchies present in the society. The visibility provided to intellectual and creative works done by different individuals from different social sections of the society are different due to the inherent hierarchies present. This is why knowledge produced by Bahujans or indigenous communities is considered inferior to the so called 'classical' and 'pure' works produced by Brahminical society. When there is a monopoly of a dominant caste in deciding the quality of work, the aesthetics of the marginalized won't be regarded as a great work of art by these art critics and savarna audience while any work that fits within their idea of art will be celebrated. This leads to a reinforced mechanism that systematically erases the creative outputs of the marginalized sections. A true democracy identifies the value of these diverse cultural expressions by making sure that all sections have access to enjoy and evaluate the work and the verdict is never decided by an exclusive dominant group.

Our social and personal life is full of taking away decision making power from others. Kids are taught to respect authority without questioning and trust the decisions taken for them by others. This culture is reinforced in inside our patriarchal families where the male head of family does all the decision making for the women and children, in our schools where teachers unilaterally decide everything with no input from students, our academia where professors have complete control on the discourse and life of the students, our workplace where the boss have complete control over workers and decides everything, and our social and political institutions which decide on polices and laws without any deliberation with the people who will be impacted by it. Unless we instill the habit of democratic decision making where everyone gets to take part in decisions and policies that affect their own life, people will always look for benevolent leaders to delegate that responsibility to. This search for a savior and leader builds the cult of hero worship which encourages a blind allegiance towards a leader even subverting their own self interests. Democracy cannot exist in a hierarchical society where accumulation of power is justified using Brahminical, patriarchal myths of superiority of few over others. We should not any system which concentrates power in the hands of a few and makes the decisions for us. A complete democratic society should be the ideal that we should aim for and constantly work towards moving closer to it. Only if we clearly prefigure that world we wish to live in, can we identify

⁹ D. Vedder-Weiss and D. Fortus, "Adolescents' Declining Motivation to Learn Science: Inevitable or Not?," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 199-216, 2011.

¹⁰ "Democratic Schools," Alternatives to School, [Online]. Available: <https://alternativestoschool.com/articles/democratic-schools/>.

¹¹ P. Gelderloos, *Anarchy Works*, 2010.

¹² "The Hannam Report."

the issues that are currently prohibiting us from being a democracy. Once we identify the issues that are limiting us, we can work towards establishing a more democratic system step by step.

Part 2

Democracy is incomplete when it is not expanded to include economic, social and political realms in the world we live in. Economic democracy proposes to remove decision-making power from a few corporate shareholders and transfer that power to the workers, customers, suppliers, and the broader general public.¹³ When a few capitalists control the decision making, they prioritize profits over worker welfare, environmental impact, dislocation of communities, and broader harm to the public. Capitalism results in economic crisis due to reduction in effective demand as people are unable to earn enough income to buy its output production.

Corporate monopoly of common resources typically creates artificial scarcity to keep the prices from falling. We have seen corporates destroy food and other essential items rather than redistribute it to people who need them so that the prices can remain high. Any attempts by public to democratize the economy for satisfying the common need is opposed by the few capitalists who control the governments and can undo any sort of political action against them. The tax policies which reduce corporate taxes and provides tax waivers to billionaire capitalist monopolies and simultaneously increase indirect taxes which are to be paid by common people shows the control these corporations have in deciding government policies. They also systematically attack social welfare schemes by reducing funds to public education and healthcare, thereby paving the way for a complete takeover of these services by private monopolies. Giving clearances without any environmental impact assessment to construct industries which destroy forests on tribal lands and using state institutions to evict and displace indigenous people are all part of this private oligarchy's control over politicians, bureaucracy and judiciary.

Economic democracy means that all the resources used for production of goods and services is owned collectively by everyone and the dividends obtained is also distributed equally among everyone. Worker Cooperatives, community farming etc. are some the models of production which embodies the idea of collective ownership. Many of the jobs which people do today aren't necessary because most of them can be easily automated using machines or computer software. Capitalist system uses this technology by reducing the workers causing rise in unemployment. This issue arises because the machinery and technologies of automation are monopolized and owned by the capitalist class even though the development of these technologies came as a result of collective human knowledge through generations. Thus, this control of the means of production and automation technologies by the capitalist oligarchy ensures that all wealth created using them goes only to the capitalists while 99% of the human population has to live on scraps these capitalists throws at them.

Due to this huge economic inequality, capitalists can easily influence government decisions because they have total control on politicians, media, internet, and public discourse. They use the state and state apparatuses like police to protect their property and hegemony over the resources and continue to exploit the masses. The common people are deliberately fed misinformation that stops them from realizing that they are not living in a democracy but a capitalist plutocracy. The

¹³ J. W. Smith, *Economic Democracy: The Political Struggle for the 21st century*, Radford, VA: Institute for Economic Democracy Press, 2005.

funding of conservative political regimes by these capitalists ensures that people believe established social and economic hierarchies are justified and they end up blaming minorities, dalits, immigrants, and other marginalized sections for their lack of resources. When political parties openly try to destroy constitutional democracy and feed the idea of a non-existent glorious history to people, they too will aspire to be subjects under a benevolent monarchy instead of a democracy.

The issue the world faces is not the lack of resources due to overpopulation, but it is an issue of huge inequality in ownership and distribution of the resources. The world is producing more products and resources than is necessary to be consumed by all the people. There is more than enough food to feed the current population, but still half the world is malnourished. There are millions of houses not inhabited in a world which has millions of homeless. This happens when we don't extend the idea of democracy into economy, farming, industries and business sectors. One of the reasons why people are not able to proceed with deliberations and participation in policy making is due to the fact that people don't have time to spend in educating themselves about core issues that matter to them. Poverty, patriarchy, Brahminism and capitalism strives to keep people occupied with religious indoctrination, fake propaganda, hyper nationalistic myths, and menial labour. This keeps them away from understanding and learning how to assert their rights as individuals and participate in the democratic process.

In order for a democracy to work, the citizens need to be free to pursue their intellectual and creative passions and have time to discuss and study about the issues that affect their life on their own. This can only be achieved only by an economic democracy where the resources are collectively used for the betterment of each and every one rather than just for making the 1% richer. All production models should be owned collectively where decisions are democratically made, rather than by the tyrannical structures found in today's business models. Creation of community owned farms, co-operatives societies, workers' co-operatives and other collective democratic models of decision making and functioning need to be encouraged. Economic democracy strives to eliminate the income inequality and seeks to control means of production by everyone instead of by an oligarchy.

Industrial democracy refers to the organization model in which workplaces are run directly by the people who work in them rather than being controlled by a few capitalists who own the means of production.¹⁴ Each enterprise should be controlled by those who work there and they should make all decisions about organization, discipline, production techniques, and the nature, price, and distribution of products. Problems of authority delegation should be solved by democratic representation. Management is to be chosen by the workers and not selected by a board of directors elected by stockholders. Ultimate authority should rest with the workers, following one-person, one-vote principle. This will ensure that workers' interests and welfare are the priority. The Spanish Mondragon Corporation works in the principle of workers' co-operative and has shown that when workers control the decision making, it results in greater productivity, worker satisfaction, higher wages, and equality for female workers.¹⁵¹⁶

¹⁴ P.-J. Proudhon, *What is Property? Or, an Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, 1840.

¹⁵ "Co-operative Culture," Mondragon, [Online]. Available: <http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/ENG/Co-operativism/Co-operative-Experience/Co-operative-Culture.aspx>.

¹⁶ R. Wolff, "Yes, there is an alternative to capitalism: Mondragon shows the way," *The Guardian*, 24 June 2012. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/24/alternative-capitalism-mondragon>.

In the current economy, essential work is mostly the jobs which are paid the least. Most of the exploitation that happens to workers inside a firm occurs due to the power hierarchy that oppresses them. Workers are exhausted and anxious about job security, making them vulnerable to coercion and exploitation at meagre wages. Decentralizing and democratizing this power is the only way to destroy this hierarchy. Building a cooperative economy is one step to reclaiming the wealth we all collectively create. The Capitalist system concentrates economic and political power in the hands of a few. The solution to this unequal concentration of power is to distribute ownership of productive assets across the entire population. Within a property-owning democracy, widespread use of worker-owned cooperatives, employee ownership of firms, redistribution of lands to marginalized communities and universal basic income are some of the ways to ensure democratization of economic power and creating an equitable society.

Social democracy incorporates the idea of social justice which ensures that individuals receive their due dignity and inclusion in society. It emphasizes breaking barriers to social mobility, the creation of safety nets and economic justice. Social justice assigns rights and duties to the institutions of society which enables people to receive their basic benefits. The relevant institutions include social insurance, public health, public education, public services, labor laws, land rights, and forest rights to ensure fair distribution of wealth, and opportunity. It aims to destroy the oppressive social hierarchies like racism, brahminism, xenophobia, ableism and patriarchy. Social democracy means providing equal representation and dignity to the marginalized and oppressed sections in the society and creation of a society free of these hierarchies.

Participatory democracy expands on the idea of democracy where citizens have the power to make political decisions. Representative democracies limit the power of people such that even if it functions properly, the representatives are free to formulate policies and make decisions for people and cannot be removed from power until the next election which occurs every 4 or 5 years. Increasing corruption and nepotism by elected leaders, corporate funding of election campaigns, fake news, propaganda, lack of adequate representation of marginalized sections and rise in inequality are all causing people to lose trust in electoral models of democracy. Participatory democracy tends to reduce the dependency on politicians and advocates greater citizen participation and more direct representation than representative democracy. It ensures that citizens get the opportunity to participate in decision making on matters that affect their lives.

All modern constitutions declare that people are sovereign, the ultimate source of government authority. The people are implicitly entitled to directly participate in law making and its implementation. The exercise of democratic control over the legislative system and the policy-making process can occur only when the public is educated about their rights and have knowledge of the issues they are deliberating on. Greater political participation can in turn lead the public to be better at decision making and will further help them accomplish higher qualities of participation. It will also counteract the widely spread myth of lack of faith in citizen capacity. It rests on the core idea that the person who is experiencing the effect of these decisions knows and understands the issues associated with it than politicians and bureaucrats who are completely disconnected from the real-world implications.¹⁷

The Paris Commune of 1871 and Revolutionary Catalonia in Spain during 1930s implemented participatory democracy. Porto Alegre, one of the largest cities in Brazil experimented with Participatory democracy in its budgeting on public investment called the Participatory Budget

¹⁷ J. D. Wolfe, "A Defense of Participatory Democracy," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 47, no. 3, p. 370–389, 1985.

where citizens participated and voted directly on how the public money should be allocated on various projects through neighborhood, regional and city-wide assemblies.¹⁸ Participatory budgeting led to phenomenal increase in the quality of life of its citizens by increasing basic amenities like sewer and water connections, schools and increased citizen involvement. In 2011, Ireland authorized use of Citizens Assembly, “We the Citizens,” as a participatory democratic body to discuss amendments to the constitution by deliberation and referendum. Decisions to legalize gay marriage and abortions were passed by these participatory democratic bodies.¹⁹ In 2019, France created the Citizens’ Climate Convention (CCC), a dedicated citizens’ assembly to discuss climate change.²⁰ The UK, like France, also held a citizens’ assembly in 2020 to discuss paths to address climate change.²¹ Switzerland uses participatory democracy under which all laws written by the legislature has to go to referendums. Swiss citizens may also enact popular initiatives: a process whereby citizens can put forward a constitutional amendment or the removal of an existing provision, if the proposal receives signatures by one hundred thousand citizens.²²

E-democracy is used to describe a variety of proposals made to increase citizen participation through technology and mostly rests on using smartphones and internet. Online Open discussion forums provide citizens the opportunity to debate public policy while facilitators guide discussion. Online deliberative polling provides citizens the opportunity to deliberate with peers online before answering a poll question.²³ It is thought to be a better way to assess public opinion while encouraging increased citizen awareness on policy issues. Online referendums give citizens greater decision-making power by giving them the ultimate choice in the passage of legislation. Citizens can use referendums to engage in policy-making power if they are allowed to draft proposals to be put to referenda. E-democracy is only possible when every citizen has access to the technology to convey his decisions. Town meetings are a local participatory democratic means to provide all residents with legislative power. It ensures that local policy decisions are made directly by members of the town/village without any representatives. With its open-source software, *DemocracyOS* allows citizens to engage in proposing, deliberating and voting on policy issues that are relevant to them, providing the opportunity to engage in democratic discussions. It has been used in Tunisia to debate its national constitution, by the Federal Government of Mexico to develop its open government policy, by the youngest parliamentarian in Kenya to consult his constituency and by the Congress of Buenos Aires.²⁴

Consensus democracy is characterized by a decision-making structure which takes into account a broad a range of opinions, as opposed to systems where minority opinions can potentially be ignored by vote-winning majorities. Consensus decision-making encourages participants to develop and decide on proposals with the aim of acceptance by all. All participants contribute equally to create a shared proposal and amend it into a decision that meets the concerns of all

¹⁸ C. Ross, *The Leaderless Revolution: How Ordinary People Can Take Power and Change Politics in the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

¹⁹ D. M. Farrell and J. Suiter, *Reimagining Democracy*, Cornell University Press, 2019.

²⁰ L.-G. Giraudet, B. Apouey, H. Arab, S. Baeckelandt, P. Begout, N. Berghmans, N. Blanc, J.-Y. Boulin, E. Buge, D. Courant and A. Dahan, “Deliberating on Climate Action: Insights from the French Citizens’ Convention for Climate,” 2021.

²¹ C. M. R. Wilson, “Getting Climate Citizens’ Assemblies Right,” Carnegie Europe, 5 November 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/11/05/getting-climate-citizens-assemblies-right-pub-83133>.

²² W. Linder and S. Mueller, *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*, 2021.

²³ G. Smith, *Democratic innovations : designing institutions for citizen participation*, Cambridge, UK, 2009.

²⁴ “DemocracyOS,” *DemocracyOS*, [Online]. Available: <https://democraciaos.org/en/>.

group members as much as possible rather than competing for personal preferences. It results in better decisions which address all potential concerns, better implementation through greater cooperation and can foster greater group cohesion and interpersonal connection. Consensus democracy is embodied in countries such as Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Lebanon, Sweden, Iraq, and Belgium, where consensus is important for preventing the domination of one linguistic or cultural group over the minority.²⁵ In Canada, the territorial governments of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut operate on a consensus model. The Dutch uses a model of consensus democracy called the Polder model which is thought to have developed historically from different societies living in the same land reclaimed from the sea, who were forced to cooperate, because without unanimous agreement on shared responsibility for maintenance of the dykes and pumping stations, the polders would have flooded and everyone would have suffered.

The model of Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) has earned widespread support for its implementation of direct democracy based on an anarchistic, feminist, and libertarian socialist ideology promoting decentralization, gender equality, environmental sustainability, social ecology and pluralistic tolerance for religious, cultural and political diversity.^{26,27} Rojava has been the most democratic system in Syria, with direct open elections, universal equality, respecting human rights within the region, as well as defense of minority and religious rights within Syria. The region has a new social justice approach that emphasizes rehabilitation, empowerment, social care and transformative justice over retribution.²⁸ The autonomous region is ruled by a coalition which bases its policy ambitions to a large extent on the democratic libertarian socialist ideology of democratic confederalism and has been described as pursuing a model of economy that blends co-operative and market enterprise, through a system of local councils having minority, cultural and religious representation.

Rojava has the highest standard of living throughout Syria. By creating a political entity opposed to the capitalist nation-state, Rojava experienced an original experience of democratic, decentralized and non-hierarchical society, based on feminist, ecology, cultural pluralism, co-operative sharing economy, and participatory politics and consensual democracy. It is a model of participatory democracy built on the self-government of local communities and the organization of open councils, town councils, local parliaments, and larger congresses, allowing citizens and communities to exercise a real influence over their common environment and activities. In Rojava, each position at each level of government includes a “female equivalent of equal authority” to a male. At the local level, citizens create Peace and Consensus Committees, which make group decisions on minor criminal cases and disputes. There are separate committees which resolve issues of specific concern to women’s rights like domestic violence and marriage. The region’s civil government has been hailed in international media for human rights advancement in the legal system, women’s rights, ethnic minority rights, freedom of Speech and Press and for hosting refugees.

²⁵ A. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms & Performance in Thirty-six Countries*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

²⁶ A. Shahvisi, “Beyond Orientalism: Exploring the Distinctive Feminism of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava,” *Geopolitics*, pp. 1–25, 2018.

²⁷ J. Jongerden, *Rethinking Politics and Democracy in the Middle East*, 2012.

²⁸ C. Ross, “The Kurds’ Democratic Experiment,” *The New York Times*, 30 September 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/the-kurds-democratic-experiment.html>.

Democracy, in simple terms, is actually having a say in every decision that actually affects you. It embodies the very idea of liberty, equality and justice in its highest and most egalitarian interpretations. Every individual has the right to dignity, participate equally in decision making, create and access knowledge, is entitled to a share of the technological progress and freedom to pursue their own intellectual and creative avenues. We must learn from the expanded ideas of democracy and look into how different forms of democracy are practiced in different societies all over the world. That knowledge will help us imagine and work towards creating a new way in which our society should be organized and function, where these oppressive hierarchies can cease to exist and we can coexist peacefully.

Part 3

People normally blame democracy by saying it is not a good model of governance citing the issues that plague our country like poverty, corruption, unemployment and under-development. They believe that we are facing these issues because we are a functioning democracy and somehow it is the democratic process which is causing this backwardness and inequality. They simply equate voting for one of the available contesting parties or politicians as the sole idea of democracy. What these people fail to realise is that it is because of the existence of some limited sense democracy that we enjoy even some basic constitutional rights. The way forward to making the society more egalitarian is to expand the idea of democracy into every social, economic and political sphere, also including employment, education, information, entertainment and healthcare. The backwardness that we see as a socio-economic society is due to fact that we are limited in our idea of democracy, not because we “have too much of democracy” as the CEO of NITI Aayog commented. The assertion for democracy by voiceless and oppressed will always threaten the existing hierarchies and those in power will always try to taint and malign the idea of democracy at each turn. This is done to instill a disdain for democracy in the public narrative so that people will willingly surrender themselves to the authority of the powerful.

The core idea of democracy is decentralization of power. It aims to dismantle all existing power hierarchies in society and distribute the power equally amongst everyone. This means that all decision-making will have to include opinions from every member who will be affected by the decisions. The people/social groups who monopolize power want us to believe that our current socio-economic woes are completely the fault of the public who are either too selfish or too ignorant to decide the best course of action for the society. They control and dictate every significant decision in our life imposing their will on us through oppressive laws as politicians, through caste practices as savarnas, through patriarchal cultural indoctrination as men and workplace exploitation as capitalists. Yet, they try to propagate the narrative that we are getting exploited because democracy as a concept is flawed and decision-making should not be left to the people. They give us an illusion of democracy through the festival of elections, which have actually given some power to people, but, in a vastly unequal society with hierarchies controlling each aspect of our live and with a few people from dominant caste/class/gender holding massive amounts of power, the power actually held by the vast majority through elections is actually very limited to create a force that can dismantle this power inequality. They cleverly keep us fed with fake news and fabricated propaganda to confuse and disunite us into hating and fighting against each other, which they watch from their power positions and enjoy, like romans watching gladiators. Unless

we realise the true meaning of democracy and start asserting and practicing it as true ideal to live by in all aspects of our life, we can never create a society that embodies “liberty, equality, fraternity.”

Data published by Credit Suisse in 2018 state that the richest 10% Indians own around 80% of the country’s wealth, while the less-privileged 60% own less than 5%. This huge inequality stems from the lack of economic democracy. Politicians are working round the clock to create laws that makes sure that money flows from hands of public to multibillionaires. We have seen the current government selling public assets to private capitalists in the name of Monetization Pipelines, basically serving these assets to them in a platter. This is a complete takeover of public services and utilities for capitalist exploitation which will result in increased consumer prices and lower employment opportunities and lack of job security. The lowering of corporate taxes for capitalists in the name of economic growth and subsequent increase in GST and fuel prices that affect the common citizens clearly shows the where the priority of the government is and whose interests they actually serve. This huge economic inequality pushes more and more people to seek informal employment every year. The informal sector consists of labor-intensive enterprises where laborers who are desperate enough to work for miserly wages in order to meet their subsistence requirements largely constitute the labour force. Since they operate outside of the jurisdiction of corporate law, workers are assured of neither job-security, social protection and face severe exploitation. The laws in the country are made in such a way that there are enough people who are poor and unemployed so that they can be easily be exploited at low wages by the privileged. The expendable nature of this labour force causes wages to remain at minimal levels, mostly lower than the legal minimum wage, depriving workers the capacity to accumulate significant savings. Due to the oversupply of cheap labour, employers have higher bargaining power to force workers and exploit them discarding labour laws and sexual harassment guidelines²⁹. According to ILO, only 6 % of those employed in India are in the formal sector, with the rest 94% in the informal sector. This informalization of workforce is worse in India compared to other South-Asian countries like Bangladesh (48.9%), Sri Lanka (60.6%) and Pakistan (77.6%) doing much better. Even social security policies like MNREGA have been systematically weakened by ruling powers to create more informal workers to be exploited by their corporate bosses. The new labour and farm laws are explicitly designed to further push people into desperation without any regard for human rights.

The Median monthly household income in India is under 20k Rs, and assuming a family size of 6, that amounts to under 100 Rs per capita per day. So, 50% of the Indian population, around 70 crore people survive on less than that amount. When most of the people cannot afford basic necessities like nutrition, clean water and air, housing, education and healthcare, the issue is the lack of democracy in allotting resources. Only through designing economic policies where interests and representation of people from informal sectors can we counter this trend of capitalistic exploitation and income inequality. Policies like Universal Basic Income where every individual is provided with enough money to cover his needs, Participatory budgeting in the local government levels where resource allocation decisions are taken by public deliberation instead of few politicians and bureaucrats, and encouragement and support for co-operatives that

²⁹ K. PUNIA, “Future of unemployment and the informal sector of India,” Oberver Research Foundation, 12 March 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/future-of-unemployment-and-the-informal-sector-of-india-63190/>.

operate democratically by members for creating products and services, can we address this mammoth inequality. Expansion of democracy in the economic sector is the only way to counter the increasing exploitation of the masses.

Majority of those employed in the unorganized sector comes from the Bahun communities as the Brahmin-Dwij class migrated to formal sector through government and corporate jobs³⁰. According to the 2011–12 NSSO statistics, the share of wage laborers among SCs was 63%. This is significantly higher than the values for other social groups (44% for OBCs, 42% for savarnas). Even among wage laborers, SCs have a much greater share of casual wage workers (32% of all casual laborers), which signifies higher job insecurity and lower wages. DBA communities are also forcefully coerced into employment in “unclean” and “polluting” work such as disposing dead animals, cremation, scavenging, sweeping, cleaning sewers and septic tanks. They continue to face threats of violence, eviction and withholding of wages if they refuse to do this work. Government encourages this discrimination while hiring people as sanitation workers, where a larger portion of the cleaning which includes cleaning sewers, unblocking drains, picking up dead animals and transporting garbage from the depots to the dumping grounds is still forced on the dalits, but restricts the savarnas to supervisory tasks. Even the private contractors, who are mostly savarnas, get the sewers cleaned by workers from the dalit communities at a minimal price. Even when there is an imminent risk, there is no insurance cover provided by the contractors. Many dalits have lost their lives while cleaning sewers, and yet there has been no change at the policy level³¹.

According to the Agricultural Census of 2015–16, only 9% of the total land is owned by Dalits and nearly 61% of the total land owned by Dalits is not more than two hectares. In a study of farm wage laborers, almost 71% reported being denied of work by savarnas due to their ‘polluting status’. In non-farm wage workers, about 52% reported denial of work due to caste background. The caste restrictions are mostly in domestic work such as cooking at high caste homes, serving food in restaurants, work in construction of temples and cultural and religious ceremonies. This exists even in formal sectors where about 22% reported savarna employers giving preference to persons of their own caste in employment and about 23% said high caste persons being selected with less qualification. A study by Thorat and Attewell in 2010 observed that for equally qualified SC and upper caste applicants, SCs had 67% less chance of receiving calls for an interview with a high percentage of less qualified high castes (undergraduate) receiving calls compared with the more qualified SCs (post-graduates). The situation is similar among migrant workers where the dominant caste migrants get work as drivers, skilled workers, office assistants etc. but Dalit community migrants are employed in more menial roles such as camel headers or dish washers where they undergo humiliation and corporal punishments from their employers³². Exploitative practices such as *beggar* and *halpati* are still prevalent where DBA people have to provide free labour for generations.

³⁰ K. S, “Caste management through feminism in India,” Round Table India , 6 August 2021. [Online]. Available: https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10164:at-the-intersection-of-feminist-and-anti-caste-movements&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132.

³¹ S. Jain, “Govt Sanitation Workers Now Come From All Castes in Rajasthan – But Discrimination Isn’t Over,” The Wire, 11 March 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://thewire.in/caste/rajasthan-sanitation-workers-government>.

³² S. Bailey, “Employment diversification among farm labourers: Caste perspective,” TIGR2ESS: Transforming India’s Green Revolution by Research and Empowerment for Sustainable food Supplies, 28 April 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://tigr2ess.globalfood.cam.ac.uk/news/employment-diversification-among-farm-labourers-caste-perspective>

Even the government jobs where reservation is constitutionally mandated are not implemented properly by the gatekeeping of these institutions by savarnas. Now, with the new wave of privatization of PSUs and push for contract labor, we see a further attack on affirmative action policies put in place by the constitution. This lack of dignity to communities and gatekeeping by savarnas can only be countered through policies of social democracy where the monopolizing of all decision-making power by one community or gender is dismantled. No democracy can survive when individuals are devalued on the basis of caste, race, gender, orientation and religion. Social justice is a core element of social democracy where every aspect of society is to be reclaimed by all communities. The common patriarchal savarna ownership of the means of production, their control over the governing boards of all decision-making bodies, their gatekeeping of lucrative sectors like industries, films, media, sports, and academia, and their control even in the dynamics of labour movements needs to be overthrown. The common narrative of DBA followers being led by savarna saviors have to change. People need to understand that democracy is about giving power to the people and not to a few leaders.

Majority of Bahujan women are employed in the unorganized sector, whose issues are completely ignored by savarna feminists in their clamor for *gender equality*. Most savarna women take no part in cultivation activities while DBA women have traditions of female farming either on their own land or as wage labor. The oppression faced by Bahujan women due to Brahminical patriarchy is cleverly reappropriated by savarna feminism to further their caste interests. This was evident when LOSHA was created by Raya Sarkar, a Dalit woman against sexual harassment in academia, sparking the #MeToo movement in India, but was immediately condemned by savarna feminists who later claimed to own the movement. Since savarna feminists gain power and privilege from their caste position, they only focus on issues that doesn't topple the caste hierarchy. They are always willing to fight for higher and equal pay for females in corporate positions but will still pay meagre wages to the Bahujan domestic help on whose labor and exploitation they thrive. This lack of focus on issues of Bahujan women in the informal sector by mainstream savarna feminism led to the decline of female labour force participation from 31% in 2005 to 20% by 2018, and have fallen even further during to the pandemic (ILO, ILOSTAT database). It should be remembered that one the most significant milestones in the history of women rights in India, the Vishaka Guidelines against sexual harassment in workplace, came as result of the fight and struggles of Bhanwari Devi, a Bahujan women. There cannot be proper implementation of these guidelines in the unorganized sector, where Bahujan women are exploited for their labor and sexually by the savarna employers unless there is workplace democracy where workers get to decide how policies are implemented.

In India, 71% female workers were employed in agriculture, followed by manufacturing (9%), construction (6%) and hospitality (4%). The emergence of women farmers to the popular imagination have been visible through the recent farmer protest. In states like Tamil Nadu, Manipur, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, women accounted for more than half of their agricultural laborers. Even though so many women are involved in agriculture, only 12% own the land they work on. Even among land owning women, close to 90 per cent of their landholdings fall in the category of small and marginal landholdings. Data on daily wages from the Labor Bureau show that wages received by women were 36% lower than wages received by men. Even when women undertake work, women from the dalit community never get same work that is offered to upper caste women due to the social stigma of untouchability. Rules about purity also restrict menstruating women to work in farms. On top this inequality and discrimination,

savarna landowners often ask the women to pay in terms of sexual services if they are unable to compensate for the land they till monetarily.

Dalit women have formed farmer collectives and cooperatives to overcome this caste hostility which affects their income, employment, education, and social support. They collect money among themselves, lease farmland, work together, and share the profit. The savarna landowners try to stop these collectives by avoiding lending farmland and boycotting them. Government should fund and support such women-led co-operatives³³.

A 2013 survey revealed that the top 7.18% of households owned more than 46.71% of the land and Dalits and tribal communities are largely landless. We need allotment of land for landless persons in rural and urban areas, and recognition of the rights of these communities over “commons” including pastures, grazing lands and waterbodies and stoppage of all transfers of such land to private agencies. We have to reinforce rights of people to forests and other forest resources³⁴. Land redistribution would have been possible if we lived in an economic democracy where the resources were distributed fairly to all and not with a few castes. When each family owns land and is provided with the resources like access to credit, machinery and technology, they won't be forced to sell their labour at meagre wages and coerced into exploitation. Economic democracy also ensures that the monopolization of resources by the dominant community ceases to exist as policies will prevent accumulation of wealth and creation of the billionaire class thereby reducing wealth inequality. Worker cooperatives ensure that there is no coercion by one group over others and all decisions are being made democratically. Promotion of the cooperative owned enterprises in rural and urban spaces, ensuring that agriculture is not submitted to capitalist corporates, but rather nurtured for its people's ownership-based employment, food security and ecological sustainability would be central to all economic democratic policies. Creation and promotion of women-led co-operative societies like Kudumbashree in Kerala, will go a long way in validating female agency. Redistribution of land will also help them in accessing benefits under multiple agricultural schemes that are only reserved for landowners. By democratization of technology, women can innovate machines to suit their needs rather than what is available now which are mostly designed for male use. Thus, we need to stop imagining democracy as the root of all evil and stop assuming that people lack the agency to decide what is good for themselves. Self help groups and co-operatives have emerged on their own in multiple places by people who were suffering oppression and discrimination and have shown that democratic set up in such collectives can be a strong force against power hierarchies that are present in our societies.

“It is not enough to be electors only. It is necessary to be law makers; otherwise, those who can be law-makers will be the masters of those who can only be electors.”

— Dr. B R Ambedkar

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ “The Land Question is an Unfinished Task of Nation Building,” *The Hindustan Times*, 16 August 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/brand-post/the-land-question-is-an-unfinished-task-of-nation-building-101629123474922.html>.

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