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Slow and unsteady

- Democracy has been a hurdle to India's development

Commentarao - S.L. Rao

The death of Lee Kuan Yew raises the question once again whether his model of authoritarian democracy could have given India faster progress. During the 31 years when Lee was prime minister, followed by the 20 years when he was senior government advisor, with his son cast in the same mould (as prime minister), Singapore saw average income rise 100 times, investments from across the globe, a widely-respected civil service and world-class infrastructure. A small British imperial outpost had become a global trading and financial centre.

In many ways, Singapore is a police state but one with the most comfortable amenities. Newspapers are bland because there are strict restraints. Severe punishments ensue for littering or spitting or urinating on roads. Defamation laws are so stringent that they have bankrupted or made many Singaporeans fugitives. Many have languished in jail. But there are good jobs for all, excellent health and education services and superb infrastructure. Since water is a problem, Singapore has some of the world's largest desalination plants to get fresh water from sea water. Ministers and civil servants are very well-paid and the jobs are much sought after. Any malfeasance is subject to severe punishment. One does not hear of corruption among government functionaries as one does about India's politicians and bureaucrats.

So, did India take the wrong route after independence by having universal suffrage for a largely illiterate, poverty-stricken, rural and agriculture-based population? India subsequently reduced the voting age to 18. Should India have confined the vote to the literate and older people?

The answer today is clear and the question is risible. Ramachandra Guha in his *India after Gandhi* and many other analysts have proved that. The Mahatma made a nation out of a very disparate people. The leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Abul Kalam Azad, B.R. Ambedkar and C. Rajagopalachari led India towards democracy and universal suffrage. They combined their ideas with building, respecting, supporting and sustaining the institutions of the legislature, judiciary and a courageous executive. They fought for the principles of freedom (life, property, expression, religion) in the Constitution. Thus they made the idea of nationhood work and got people to recognize that in their unity lay their strength and prospect of prosperity.

At the time of Independence, India was a caste-ridden society. At least till the 1980s, caste and community were essential to vote-banks. The Congress based its election calculations on these vote-banks. Other parties followed. After the dismal failure of the anti-Congress government of the Janata Party because of the petty ambitions of Charan Singh and

Chandra Shekhar, Jayaprakash Narayan's followers, in particular the two Yadavs - Mulayam and Lalu - built their own vote-banks. V.P. Singh emerged as the messiah who resurrected the Mandal report that gave reservations in government jobs to other backward classes. The Supreme Court capped all reservations at 50 per cent for scheduled castes and tribes and OBCs. The number of jobs were inconsequential, but it helped in consolidating the vote.

Meanwhile, the voters were showing that they understood the power of the vote. State electorates after every election gave new parties the power to govern them. Anti-incumbency - which meant that voters were giving an opportunity to another party because the incumbent party had failed to deliver - saw changes at every election. As political leaders understood this, they developed economic incentives. These ranged from the "*garibi hatao*" of Indira Gandhi to increasingly subsidized food grains, kerosene, cloth, electricity, fertilizer to farmers and so on. The last United Progressive Alliance government introduced the rural employment guarantee scheme, committing to minimum employment for each rural family. These were all giveaways that did not build lasting assets. They were meant to persuade voters to allow a party to continue in office.

Other governments built roads, dams, irrigation canals, storage, separate agricultural feeders for electricity, brought in industries, improved education and health opportunities. Elections in the 21st century have shown that in Gujarat, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the same party has won more than once. As Gopal Kadekodi writes in a recent *Economic and Political Weekly* article, a vote was no longer a matter of self-esteem, showing moral superiority or a source of satisfaction. Voters understood that they could now evict non-performing governments and retain performing ones. In recent years, the Bharatiya Janata Party has won power by concentrating on governance and development by focussing not so much on caste and religion as on class and regional factors. Voters too are not responding on the basis of caste or religion, although Muslims continue to look for saviours to protect them.

Indian voters have realized the power of their votes. Voter turnout has been around 65 per cent in each election (rising from 44.87 per cent in 1951 to 66.4 per cent in 2014). People have prospered. Life expectancy at birth went up from 31.7 years in 1951 to 69.6 years in 2011-15. Urbanization rose from about 17 per cent in 1951 to 31.7 per cent in 2011 as people sought to improve livelihoods; per capita income went up from Rs 7,824 in 1951-52 to Rs 61,564 in 2011-12, registering an annual growth rate of 13.57 per cent. Such socio-economic transformations do not seem to have made much change to the voter turnout. There is, in fact, evidence that there is an inverse relation of being well-to-do with voting.

The downside of universal suffrage had been the need to woo votes on the basis of caste and community. However, the reduction of the voting age to 18 appears to have reduced the impact of such appeals in comparison to those of giving opportunities and building capabilities, be it for education, health services, improved living conditions or enhancing livelihoods. Many state governments have responded by spending increasing sums on economic and social projects.

These expenditures certainly added to peoples' well-being, but far less than they would have had not a great deal of money been stolen through corruption or bad targeting of beneficiaries. The bid to improve defence capabilities added to corruption. Imported

equipment were preferred to local production. The free media did little to expose and reduce such corruption. Attempts by Indira Gandhi to control the media during the Emergency and Rajiv Gandhi's efforts to introduce legislation for the same purpose could not curtail press freedom. But greed for money and power have done so. The ponderous judicial system favoured the well-off and powerful. Corruption entered the judiciary as well.

Elections have become increasingly expensive and the preserve either of the wealthy or the corrupt or of those willing to repay of the investment they have made in the process. Political parties collect vast sums of money and are not monitored. Parties in power take commissions for favours rendered and also divert government funds for their profit. Penalties for these are insufficient and need years to be proved. The media that is supposed to be the watchdog is quite ineffective in exposing these thefts.

The problem is not democracy or universal suffrage. It is the ability of politicians and bureaucrats to design schemes for government spending in a way that makes theft of funds possible.

India would never have survived as a nation had someone like Lee been its leader. But democracy, in the way that it has developed in India, is a hurdle to development. We must have tough limits and monitoring of election-funding, strong punishment for corruption and speedy trials. India must follow Singapore in paying ministers and bureaucrats exorbitantly, and punish them severely for stealing. It should insulate the judiciary and apply the same corruption rules to it and the executive at all levels of government, including municipalities and *panchayats*. India must do away with the discretionary powers of the government, establish transparent mechanisms for government spending and drastically reduce the role of the public sector.