

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRACY



Bordering on the Bay of Bengal, at the southern edge of Bangladesh and of West Bengal in India, there is the Sundarban—which means “beautiful forest.” That is the natural habitat of the famous Royal Bengal tiger, a magnificent animal with grace, speed, power, and some ferocity. Relatively few of them are left now, but the surviving tigers are protected by a hunting ban. The Sundarban is also famous for the honey it produces in large clusters of natural beehives. The people who live in the region, desperately poor as they are, go into the forests to collect the honey, which fetches quite a handsome price in the urban markets—maybe even the rupee equivalent of fifty U.S. cents per bottle. But the honey collectors also have to escape the tigers. In a good year, only about fifty or so honey gatherers are killed by tigers, but that number can be very much higher when things don’t go so well. While the tigers are protected, nothing protects the miserable human beings who try to make a living by working in those woods, which are deep and lovely—and quite perilous.

This is just one illustration of the force of economic needs in many third world countries. It is not hard to feel that this force must outweigh other claims, including those of political liberty and civil rights. If poverty drives human beings to take such terrible risks—and perhaps to die terrible deaths—for a dollar or two of honey, it might well be odd to concentrate on their liberty and political freedoms. Habeas corpus may not seem like a communicable concept in that context. Priority must surely be given, so the argument runs, to fulfilling economic needs, even if it involves compromising political

liberties. It is not hard to think that focusing on democracy and political liberty is a luxury that a poor country “cannot afford.”

### ECONOMIC NEEDS AND POLITICAL FREEDOMS

Views such as these are presented with much frequency in international discussions. Why bother about the finesse of political freedoms given the overpowering grossness of intense economic needs? That question, and related ones reflecting doubts about the urgency of political liberty and civil rights, loomed large at the Vienna conference on human rights held in the spring of 1993, and delegates from several countries argued against general endorsement of basic political and civil rights across the globe, in particular in the third world. Rather, the focus would have to be, it was argued, on “economic rights” related to important material needs.

This is a well established line of analysis, and it was advocated forcefully in Vienna by the official delegations of a number of developing countries, led by China, Singapore and other East Asian countries, but not opposed by India and the other South Asian and West Asian countries, nor by African governments. There is, in this line of analysis, the often repeated rhetoric: What should come first—removing poverty and misery, or guaranteeing political liberty and civil rights, for which poor people have little use anyway?

### THE PREEMINENCE OF POLITICAL FREEDOMS AND DEMOCRACY

Is this a sensible way of approaching the problems of economic needs and political freedoms—in terms of a basic dichotomy that appears to undermine the relevance of political freedoms because the economic needs are so urgent? I would argue, no, this is altogether the wrong way to see the force of economic needs, or to understand the salience of political freedoms. The real issues that have to be addressed lie elsewhere, and they involve taking note of extensive interconnections between political freedoms and the understanding and fulfillment of economic needs. The connections are not only instrumental (political freedoms can have a major role in providing incentives and information in the solution of acute economic needs),

but also constructive. Our conceptualization of economic needs depends crucially on open public debates and discussions, the guaranteeing of which requires insistence on basic political liberty and civil rights.

I shall argue that the intensity of economic needs *adds* to—rather than subtracts from—the urgency of political freedoms. There are three different considerations that take us in the direction of a general preeminence of basic political and liberal rights:

- 1) their *direct* importance in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of political and social participation);
- 2) their *instrumental* role in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including the claims of economic needs);
- 3) their *constructive* role in the conceptualization of “needs” (including the understanding of “economic needs” in a social context).

These different considerations will be discussed presently, but first we have to examine the arguments presented by those who see a real conflict between political liberty and democratic rights, on the one hand, and the fulfillment of basic economic needs, on the other.

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST POLITICAL FREEDOMS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

The opposition to democracies and basic civil and political freedoms in developing countries comes from three different directions. First, there is the claim that these freedoms and rights hamper economic growth and development. This belief, called the Lee thesis (after Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, who formulated it succinctly) was briefly described in chapter 1.

Second, it has been argued that if poor people are given the choice between having political freedoms and fulfilling economic needs, they will invariably choose the latter. So there is, by this reasoning, a contradiction between the practice of democracy and its justification: to wit, the majority view would tend to reject democracy—given this choice. In a different but closely related variant of this argument, it is claimed that the real issue is not so much what people actually choose, but what they have *reason* to choose. Since people

have reason to want to eliminate, first and foremost, economic deprivation and misery, they have reason enough for not insisting on political freedoms, which would get in the way of their real priorities. The presumed existence of a deep conflict between political freedoms and the fulfillment of economic needs provides an important premise in this syllogism, and in this sense, this variant of the second argument is parasitic on the first (that is, on the truth of the Lee thesis).

Third, it has often been argued that the emphasis on political freedom, liberties and democracy is a specifically “Western” priority, which goes, in particular, against “Asian values,” which are supposed to be more keen on order and discipline than on liberty and freedom. For example, the censorship of the press may be more acceptable, it is argued, in an Asian society (because of its emphasis on discipline and order) than in the West. In the 1993 Vienna conference, the foreign minister of Singapore warned that “universal recognition of the ideal of human rights can be harmful if universalism is used to deny or mask the reality of *diversity*.” The spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry even put on record this proposition, apparently applicable in China and elsewhere in Asia: “Individuals must put the state’s rights before their own.”<sup>2</sup>

This last argument involves an exercise in cultural interpretation, and I shall reserve it for a later discussion: in chapter 10.<sup>3</sup> I take up the other two arguments now.

#### DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Does authoritarianism really work so well? It is certainly true that some relatively authoritarian states (such as South Korea, Lee’s own Singapore and post-reform China) have had faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones (including India, Costa Rica and Jamaica). But the Lee thesis is, in fact, based on very selective and limited information, rather than on any general statistical testing over the wide-ranging data that are available. We cannot really take the high economic growth of China or South Korea in Asia as a definitive proof that authoritarianism does better in promoting economic growth—any more than we can draw the opposite conclusion on the basis of the fact that the fastest-growing African country (and one of the fastest growers in the world), viz., Botswana,

has been a oasis of democracy on that troubled continent. Much depends on the precise circumstances.

In fact, there is rather little general evidence that authoritarian governance and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial in encouraging economic development. The statistical picture is much more complex. Systematic empirical studies give no real support to the claim that there is a general conflict between political freedoms and economic performance.<sup>4</sup> The directional linkage seems to depend on many other circumstances, and while some statistical investigations note a weakly negative relation, others find a strongly positive one. On balance, the hypothesis that there is no relation between them in either direction is hard to reject. Since political liberty and freedom have importance of their own, the case for them remains unaffected.

In this context, it is also important to touch on a more basic issue of research methodology. We must not only look at statistical connections but, furthermore, examine and scrutinize the *causal* processes that are involved in economic growth and development. The economic policies and circumstances that led to the economic success of East Asian economies are by now reasonably well understood. While different empirical studies have varied in emphasis, there is by now a fairly agreed general list of "helpful policies" that includes openness to competition, the use of international markets, a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms and public provision of incentives for investment, exporting and industrialization. There is nothing whatsoever to indicate that any of these policies is inconsistent with greater democracy and actually had to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism that happened to be present in South Korea or Singapore or China.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, in judging economic development it is not adequate to look only at the growth of GNP or some other indicators of overall economic expansion. We have to look also at the impact of democracy and political freedoms on the lives and capabilities of the citizens. It is particularly important in this context to examine the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major disasters (such as famines), on the other. Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs, and to demand appropriate public

action. Governmental response to the acute suffering of people often depends on the pressure that is put on the government, and this is where the exercise of political rights (voting, criticizing, protesting and so on) can make a real difference. This is a part of the "instrumental" role of democracy and political freedoms. I shall have to come back to this important issue again, later on in this chapter.

#### DO POOR PEOPLE CARE ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL RIGHTS?

I turn now to the second question. Are the citizens of third world countries indifferent to political and democratic rights? This claim, which is often made, is again based on too little empirical evidence (just as the Lee thesis is). The only way of verifying this would be to put the matter to democratic testing in free elections with freedom of opposition and expression—precisely the things that the supporters of authoritarianism do not allow to happen. It is not clear at all how this proposition can be checked when the ordinary citizens are given little political opportunity to express their views on this and even less to dispute the claims made by the authorities in office. The downgrading of these rights and freedoms is certainly part of the value system of the *government leaders* in many third world countries, but to take that to be the view of the people is to beg a very big question.

It is thus of some interest to note that when the Indian government, under Indira Gandhi's leadership, tried out a similar argument in India, to justify the "emergency" she had misguidedly declared in the mid-1970s, an election was called that divided the voters precisely on this issue. In that fateful election, fought largely on the acceptability of the "emergency," the suppression of basic political and civil rights was firmly rejected, and the Indian electorate—one of the poorest in the world—showed itself to be no less keen on protesting against the denial of basic liberties and rights than it was in complaining about economic poverty. To the extent that there has been any testing of the proposition that poor people in general do not care about civil and political rights, the evidence is entirely against that claim. Similar points can be made by observing the struggle for democratic freedoms in South Korea, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma (or Myanmar) and elsewhere in Asia. Similarly, while

political freedom is widely denied in Africa, there have been movements and protests about that fact whenever circumstances have permitted, even though military dictators have given few opportunities in this respect.

What about the other variant of this argument, to wit, that the poor have *reason* to forgo political and democratic rights in favor of economic needs? This argument, as was noted earlier, is parasitic on the Lee thesis. Since that thesis has little empirical support, the syllogism cannot sustain the argument.

#### INSTRUMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL FREEDOM

I turn now from the negative criticisms of political rights to their positive value. The importance of political freedom as a part of basic capabilities has already been discussed in the earlier chapters. We have reason to value liberty and freedom of expression and action in our lives, and it is not unreasonable for human beings—the social creatures that we are—to value unrestrained participation in political and social activities. Also, informed and unregimented *formation* of our values requires openness of communication and arguments, and political freedoms and civil rights can be central for this process. Furthermore, to express publicly what we value and to demand that attention be paid to it, we need free speech and democratic choice.

When we move from the direct importance of political freedom to its instrumental role, we have to consider the political incentives that operate on governments and on the persons and groups that are in office. The rulers have the incentive to listen to what people want if they have to face their criticism and seek their support in elections. As was noted earlier, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press.<sup>6</sup> Famines have occurred in ancient kingdoms and contemporary authoritarian societies, in primitive tribal communities and in modern technocratic dictatorships, in colonial economies run by imperialists from the north and in newly independent countries of the south run by despotic national leaders or by intolerant single parties. But they have never materialized in any country that is independent, that goes to elections regularly, that has opposition parties to voice criticisms and that permits newspapers to report

freely and question the wisdom of government policies without extensive censorship.<sup>7</sup> The contrast of experiences will be discussed further in the next chapter, which deals specifically with famines and other crises.

#### CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE OF POLITICAL FREEDOM

The instrumental roles of political freedoms and civil rights can be very substantial, but the connection between economic needs and political freedoms may have a *constructive* aspect as well. The exercise of basic political rights makes it more likely not only that there would be a policy response to economic needs, but also that the conceptualization—including comprehension—of “economic needs” itself may require the exercise of such rights. It can indeed be argued that a proper understanding of what economic needs are—their content and their force—requires discussion and exchange. Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the processes of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open debates and interchanges are permitted or not.

The reach and effectiveness of open dialogue are often underestimated in assessing social and political problems. For example, public discussion has an important role to play in reducing the high rates of fertility that characterize many developing countries. There is, in fact, much evidence that the sharp decline in fertility rates that has taken place in the more literate states in India has been much influenced by public discussion of the bad effects of high fertility rates especially on the lives of young women, and also on the community at large. If the view has emerged in, say, Kerala or Tamil Nadu that a happy family in the modern age is a small family, much discussion and debate have gone into the formation of these perspectives. Kerala now has a fertility rate of 1.7 (similar to that in Britain and France, and well below China's 1.9), and this has been achieved with no coercion, but mainly through the emergence of new values—a process in which political and social dialogues have played a major

part. The high level of literacy of the Kerala population, especially female literacy, which is higher than that of every province of China, has greatly contributed to making such social and political dialogues possible (more on this in the next chapter).

Miseries and deprivations can be of various kinds—some more amenable to social remedy than others. The totality of the human predicament would be a gross basis for identifying our “needs.” For example, there are many things that we might have good reason to value if they were feasible—we could even want immortality, as Maitreyee did. But we don’t see them as “needs.” Our conception of needs relates to our ideas of the preventable nature of some depravations, and to our understanding of what can be done about them. In the formation of these understandings and beliefs, public discussions play a crucial role. Political rights, including freedom of expression and discussion, are not only pivotal in inducing social responses to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves.

#### WORKING OF DEMOCRACY

The intrinsic relevance, the protective role and the constructive importance of democracy can indeed be very extensive. However, in presenting these arguments on the advantages of democracies, there is a danger of overselling their effectiveness. As was mentioned earlier, political freedoms and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness would depend on how they are exercised. Democracy has been especially successful in preventing those disasters that are easy to understand and where sympathy can take a particularly immediate form. Many other problems are not quite so accessible. For example, India’s success in eradicating famines is not matched by that in eliminating regular undernutrition, or curing persistent illiteracy, or inequalities in gender relations (as was discussed in chapter 4). While the plight of famine victims is easy to politicize, these other deprivations call for deeper analysis and more effective use of communication and political participation—in short, fuller practice of democracy.

Inadequacy of practice applies also to some failings in more mature democracies as well. For example, the extraordinary depriva-

tions in health care, education, and social environment of African Americans in the United States help to make their mortality rates exceptionally high (as discussed in chapters 1 and 4), and this is evidently not prevented by the working of American democracy. Democracy has to be seen as creating a set of opportunities, and the use of these opportunities calls for analysis of a different kind, dealing with the *practice* of democratic and political rights. In this respect, the low percentage of voting in American elections, especially by African Americans, and other signs of apathy and alienation, cannot be ignored. Democracy does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria. The opportunity it opens up has to be positively grabbed in order to achieve the desired effect. This is, of course, a basic feature of freedoms in general—much depends on how freedoms are actually exercised.

#### THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF OPPOSITION

The achievements of democracy depend not only on the rules and procedures that are adopted and safeguarded, but also on the way the opportunities are used by the citizens. Fidel Valdez Ramos, the former president of the Philippines, put the point with great clarity in a November 1998 speech at the Australian National University:

Under dictatorial rule, people need not think—need not choose—need not make up their minds or give their consent. All they need to do is to follow. This has been a bitter lesson learned from Philippine political experience of not so long ago. By contrast, a democracy cannot survive without civic virtue. . . . The political challenge for people around the world today is not just to replace authoritarian regimes by democratic ones. Beyond this, it is to make democracy work for ordinary people.<sup>8</sup>

Democracy does create this opportunity, which relates both to its “instrumental importance” and to its “constructive role.” But with what strength such opportunities are seized depends on a variety of factors, including the vigor of multiparty politics as well as the

dynamism of moral arguments and of value formation.<sup>9</sup> For example, in India the priority of preventing starvation and famine was already fully grasped at the time of independence (as it had been in Ireland as well, with its own experience of famine under British rule). The activism of political participants was very effective in preventing famines and in sharply condemning governments for allowing open starvation to occur, and the quickness and force of this process made preventing such calamities an inescapable priority of every government. And yet successive opposition parties have been quite docile in not condemning widespread illiteracy, or the prevalence of non-extreme but serious undernourishment (especially among the children), or the failure to implement land reform programs legislated earlier. This docility of opposition has permitted successive governments to get away with unconscionable neglect of these vital matters of public policy.

In fact, the activism of opposition parties is an important force in nondemocratic societies as well as democratic ones. It can, for example, be argued that despite the lack of democratic guarantees, the vigor and persistence of opposition in pre-democratic South Korea and even in Pinochet's Chile (against heavy odds) were indirectly effective in those countries' governance even before democracy was restored. Many of the social programs that served these countries well were at least partly aimed at reducing the appeal of the opposition, and in this way, the opposition had some effectiveness even before coming to office.<sup>10</sup>

Another such area is the persistence of gender inequality, which too requires forceful engagement, involving critique as well as pointers to reform. Indeed, as these neglected issues come into public debates and confrontations, the authorities have to provide some response. In a democracy, people tend to get what they demand, and more crucially, do not typically get what they do not demand. Two of the neglected areas of social opportunity in India—gender equity and elementary education—are now receiving more attention from the opposition parties, and as a result, from the legislative and executive authorities as well. While the final results will emerge only in the future, we cannot ignore the various moves that are already being made (including proposed legislation that would require that at least a third of the members of Indian parliament must be women, and a schooling program that would extend the right to elementary education to a substantially larger group of children).

In fact, it can be argued that the contribution of democracy in India has not, by any means, been confined to the prevention of economic disasters, such as famines. Despite the limits of its practice, democracy has given India some stability and security about which many people were very pessimistic as the country became indigestible in 1947. India had, then, an untried government, an undigested partition and unclear political alignments, combined with widespread communal violence and social disorder. It was hard to have faith in the future of a united and democratic India. And yet half a century later we find a democracy that has, taking the rough with the smooth, worked fairly well. Political differences have largely been tackled within the constitutional procedures. Governments have risen and fallen according to electoral and parliamentary rules. India, an ungainly, unlikely, inelegant combination of differences, survives and functions remarkably well as a political unit with a democratic system—indeed held together by its working democracy.

India has also survived the tremendous challenge of having a variety of major languages and a spectrum of religions—an extraordinary heterogeneity of religion and culture. Religious and communal differences are, of course, vulnerable to exploitation by sectarian politicians, and have indeed been so used on several occasions (including in recent years), causing much consternation in the country. But the fact that such consternation greets sectarian violence, and that most of the substantial sections of the nation condemn such deeds, provides ultimately the main democratic guarantee against the narrow factional exploitation of sectarianism. This is essential for the survival and prosperity of a country as remarkably varied as India, which may have a Hindu majority, but which is also the third largest Muslim country in the world, in which millions of Christians, along with most of the world's Sikhs, Parsees, and Jains, live.

#### A CONCLUDING REMARK

Developing and strengthening a democratic system is an essential component of the process of development. The significance of democracy lies, I have argued, in three distinct virtues: (1) its *intrinsic importance*, (2) its *instrumental contributions*, and (3) its *constitutive role* in the creation of values and norms. No evaluation of

the democratic form of governance can be complete without considering each.

Despite their limitations, political freedoms and civil rights are used effectively often enough. Even in those fields in which they have not yet been very effective, the opportunity exists for making them effective. The permissive role of political and civil rights (in allowing—indeed in encouraging—open discussions and debates, participatory politics and unpersecuted opposition) applies over a very wide domain, even though it has been more effective in some areas than in others. Its demonstrated usefulness in preventing economic disasters is itself quite important. When things go fine and everything is routinely good, this role of democracy may not be badly missed. But it comes into its own when things get fouled up, for one reason or another (for example, the recent financial crisis in East and Southeast Asia that disrupted several economies and left many people destitute). The political incentives provided by democratic governance acquire great practical value at that time.

However, while we must acknowledge the importance of democratic institutions, they cannot be viewed as mechanical devices for development. Their use is conditioned by our values and priorities, and by the use we make of the available opportunities of articulation and participation. The role of organized opposition groups is particularly important in this context.

Public debates and discussions, permitted by political freedoms and civil rights, can also play a major part in the formation of values. Indeed, even the identification of needs cannot but be influenced by the nature of public participation and dialogue. Not only is the force of public discussion one of the correlates of democracy, with an extensive reach, but its cultivation can also make democracy itself function better. For example, more informed and less marginalized public discussion of environmental issues may not only be good for the environment; it could also be important to the health and functioning of the democratic system itself.<sup>11</sup>

Just as it is important to emphasize the need for democracy, it is also crucial to safeguard the conditions and circumstances that ensure the range and reach of the democratic process. Valuable as democracy is as a major source of social opportunity (a recognition that may call for vigorous defense), there is also the need to examine

ways and means of making it function well, to realize its potentials. The achievement of social justice depends not only on institutional forms (including democratic rules and regulations), but also on effective practice. I have presented reasons for taking the issue of practice to be of central importance in the contributions that can be expected from civil rights and political freedoms. This is a challenge that is faced both by well-established democracies such as the United States (especially with the differential participation of diverse racial groups) and by newer democracies. There are shared problems as well as disparate ones.