

# SARVODAYA DEMOCRACY

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**The main features of real democracy as given by the Sarvodaya thinkers, mainly Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan, are as follows:**

**Welfare Society and not Welfare State** Centralisation is one of the worst enemies of real democracy even when it takes the garb of the welfare state, which has come to be looked upon as a political ideal or rather the logical end of political democracy. Sarvodaya thinkers are not opposed to welfare of the people but to the welfare state which robs individuals of their initiative. In place of the welfare state Sarvodaya thinkers envisage a society wherein the people themselves plan and carry out welfare work for themselves. The task of state authority is confined to inspiring and encouraging them in this responsibility and to rendering help when they need it.

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This unique attitude of abhorrence makes Sarvodaya thinkers different from many other proponents of real democracy.<sup>1</sup> The Sarvodaya thinkers are not attracted to power politics, which increases the authority of the state, but to people's politics (Lok Shakti) which seeks to build up the strength of the people and thereby to create a more sturdy and lasting social and political order.

**Decentralisation of Economic and Political Power** The experience of Sarvodaya supporters has shown that democracy and centralisation of power cannot go together. Political decentralisation has also found support from many Western writers. For instance, G.D.H. Cole almost expressed a Sarvodayan view in writing:

"I am neither a Communist nor a Social Democrat, because I regard both as creeds of centralisation and bureaucracy, whereas I feel sure that a Socialist Society that is to be true to its equalitarian principle of human brotherhood must rest on the widest

possible diffusion of power and responsibility, so as to enlist the participation of as many as possible of its citizens in the task of democratic self-government".<sup>2</sup>

Decentralisation as advocated by Sarvodaya thinkers does not mean chaos. It takes fully into consideration the needs of modern times and it is in the light of the conditions prevailing in today's world that they advocate decentralisation. The present trend towards increasing centralisation is fraught with dangers both in the national and international spheres. In the former, it is likely to lead to totalitarian tyranny because the people are deprived of the capacity to resist those in authority. Centralisation means participation in the work of government by only a small number of people, and this results at first in irresponsible criticism of those in authority and later on in apathy and indifference towards politics itself. The whole system fails to create proper political consciousness. Hence, political decentralisation is needed to make citizens realise duties and responsibilities and involve them in the decision making process as well as in the implementation of the decisions. Internationally the consequence of centralisation is still more unfortunate. The fate of the world has come to hang in the balance upon the decisions of a few, who are burdened with too much responsibility. This is very dangerous and it must change in the interest of democracy and humanity. Thus decentralisation is the prime need of the hour. It would reduce the burden on the few and induce a habit of thinking and a sense of responsibility in the multitude.

The opponents of decentralisation contend that it would lead to a narrowing of vision and sympathies. Sarvodaya thinkers do not agree. They maintain we have ample scientific inventions at our disposal to keep the masses enlightened and conversant with the world situation, and to make them realise their duty towards the world. Sarvodaya thinkers are in favour

of full use of scientific inventions for broadening people's outlook.

**Decisions by Consensus of Opinion** Sarvodaya thinkers do not agree with the principle of majority rule. This principle, an axiom of Western democracy, originated — as pointed out by Erich Fromm — in opposition and as an alternative to the minority rule of a king or feudal lords. It was then presumed that it was better for the majority to be in the wrong than for the minority to impose its will on the majority.<sup>3</sup> It does not, however, mean that the majority is always right or that it has a right to impose its will on the minority. The experience of the working of the majority principle has shown that the majority can be more tyrannical than the greatest of tyrants. Hence Sarvodaya thinkers insist on the principle of consensus. According to Ernest Barker, in a true democracy the government will depend "on the mutual interchange of ideas, on the mutual criticism of the ideas interchanged and on the common and agreed choice of the idea which emerges triumphant from the ordeal of interchange and criticism".<sup>4</sup> Real democracy demands that all decisions should not merely be the decisions of the majority but they must reflect compromises in which all the ideas are reconciled and are acceptable to all.<sup>5</sup> It is in this spirit that Vinoba Bhave advocates the principle of consensus. If decisions are arrived at by consensus, most of the ills of majority rule can be done away with.

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The critics of this principle opine that the consensus system provides a minority with a veto on all decisions. While this danger seems to be real in the present state of people's habits and psychology, these habits can be changed. They are based on the wrong assumption that there are conflicting

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interests in society and there is nothing like a common good. By proper training and education people can be made to look at things from the point of view of the common good and not to press their opposition too far against any overwhelming majority. This view is supported by the fact that all over the world, pre-individualist societies managed their affairs by methods which aimed at and achieved such decisions on all matters of common concern. It was the rise of industrialised self-consciousness which destroyed the old social unity, but now it is again being realised that society is an organism whose health demands that it should act as a whole.

**Partyless Democracy** Though regarded as a sort of 'must' for democracy, one of its greatest internal difficulties and one which has brought it to ill-repute is the institution of political parties. The aim of Sarvodaya is to shape and develop the body politic on a pattern in which the existence of parties would be ruled out. The whole system of political parties is inconsistent with the fundamental approach of Sarvodaya. A party, as its very name implies, stands only for a part of society. It is a sort of conspiracy against the rest of the people. Allegiance to a party is inconsistent with loyalty to society, with the good of all, which is the fundamental aim of Sarvodaya. And the existence of political parties works against democracy, for, as M.N. Roy pointed out, with the rise of the party system, the idea of popular sovereignty became a constitutional fiction.<sup>6</sup>

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This theoretical objection to the existence of political parties finds practical confirmation even in the advanced and politically conscious democracies of the West. The experience of India after independence has been far more unfortunate. In their anxiety to win power, parties have intensified casteism, linguism, provincialism and other tendencies inimical to the progress and unity of the country. The partisan spirit enters into every problem, making it more complicated. Mutual recriminations and bickerings have wasted the national energy and disgusted the

people. All this ultimately reacts on the prestige and popularity of democracy itself. That this is **not** only so with an underdeveloped country like India is borne out by the remark of the reputable British scholar Ernest Barker:

"Purity has revolted against corruption, patriotism has revolted against inefficiency added to corruption, and in the name both of purity and of patriotism, party politics and democracy at large have been brought to the bar of judgement."<sup>7</sup>

The charge sheet against political parties is a long one. One of the very serious charges is that the system is immoral in that it gives birth to demagoguery, undermines political ethics and puts a premium on unscrupulousness and an aptitude for manipulation and intrigue. The rigidity of the party system makes individuals act against their conscience. Advantage is taken of the passing moods and passions of the people. Local grievances are exploited and policies advocated with a view to gaining or retaining power even if they are against the public good.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the effect of the system on the public is not wholesome. It kills talent, initiative and sensitiveness for moral values, and justice in the ordinary person. It emasculates the people and reduces them to sheep who have only to choose their shepherds to look after them. The political parties have become the real arbiters of people's destiny.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, they are anti-democratic. Their internal structure is essentially autocratic or oligarchic. Their general development tends to emphasise their growing deviation from democracy, since it is towards centralisation, tightening of discipline and transformation of representatives into voting machines. Parties lead to the rule of caucus or coterie.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, the whole system does not lead to the good of the people. It involves waste of energy and has all the dangers of sectarianism and fanaticism. It creates dissensions where unity is called for.<sup>11</sup>

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These evils are admitted by all. How-

ever, differences arise over the desirability of the abolition of the system itself. The general tendency, both in India and elsewhere, is to point to the indispensability of the system and the advantages that accrue from it and to advocate a reform of the system and not its complete abolition. It is commonly argued that political parties are essential for the successful working of representative democracy. It is a twentieth century mechanism designed to solve the problem of how to bring the people, the new mass voters, into political community.<sup>12</sup> In a large country the alternative would be chaos. Parties, it is argued, are essential to educate the voters, to utilise the machinery for building up the kind of society desired, and if in opposition, to act as a watch-dog of democracy. They do all this by framing political issues for the public, selecting candidates, establishing a collective and continuing political responsibility. They serve as agencies of civic education and keep the interest of the people alive. It is feared that without them the individual would be atomised.<sup>13</sup> It would be difficult for the voter to make choices among the various candidates. The motley crowd elected to the legislature would have no binding ties among its members, so that legislation and government would become impossible. Moreover, political parties are bound up with class differences and it is not possible to abolish them. The American Fathers thought that they could do without them, but were proved wrong. Hence, a partyless democracy is a mirage and any attempt to make it a reality would be dangerous.

Such are the various arguments against the abolition of political parties. What is recommended instead, if change is needed, is only the reform of the system. It is argued that other institutions like panchayats<sup>14</sup> and cooperatives also have defects, but their abolition is not recommended by the Sarvodaya proponent. Why then suggest a special treatment for the party system? Let it also be reformed, something which is possible. All this merits a close examination.

Now the need and the advantages claimed for political parties are refuted in practice. It is highly doubtful if they really educate public opinion. Instead, they exploit the lack of political consciousness, the ignorance and the prejudices of the voters. As Aldous Huxley

says, "The political merchandisers appeal only to the weaknesses of voters, never to their political strength. They make no attempt to educate the masses into becoming fit for self-government, they are content merely to manipulate and exploit them".<sup>15</sup>

It is also doubtful if an opposition party can serve as a corrective to one in power. The experience is that the opposition with its eyes on the seats of power suffers from defects similar to those of the party in power. Hence, it is incapable of purifying it. Real education of the public and purification of political life can only be brought about by a body of sacrificing and alert people who keep themselves above the struggle for the acquisition of authority.<sup>16</sup>

No doubt, political parties do serve some purposes, and that is why the system finds advocates. But their disadvantages far outweigh their advantages, and this is all the more true in India. Maurice Duverger admits that the pluralist system of parties, when applied to countries with archaic social structures in which the mass of the people are uneducated, prevents the establishment of true democracy.<sup>17</sup> There are certain problems which ensue from a backward economy as well, and they demand a national front based on agreement over the fundamentals of national policy but with full freedom of expression on matters of details. The Sarvodaya thinkers are attempting to get the advantages of a national front or the single party system through the voluntary cooperation of the leaders themselves, and not through the legal abolition of the pluralist system.

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A new way to do politics has to be discovered. It should be able to provide people with more direct channels to express their will, to educate and enlighten them. A partyless democracy based on mature citizenry would not lead to chaos. People can well express themselves on public affairs through other political, economic and educational organisations. It is a mistake to

think that unless parties are there, there would be as many voices as there are representative. In every situation, alternatives are limited, and representatives would automatically group themselves around those alternatives. There is no harm in it and these groupings can well change from issue to issue. Of course, all this would mean the abandonment of some present pet notions. It would not be possible to have a one party cabinet with joint responsibility and to maintain the convention that the cabinet must resign when its advice is not accepted by the Parliament. It can function like a non-party cabinet.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the practical objections against non-party democracy are not insuperable. To argue that parties are formed because people differ on socio-economic problems is to forget that if differences are there, agreements are also there. It is for us to emphasise the one or the other. The world has arrived at such a stage of development that to emphasise the differences can only prove unfortunate. However, there is need to proceed cautiously, and to make people politically mature enough before full change is made. That is why Sarvodaya thinkers do not insist on complete and immediate abolition of the party system, but suggest a cautious programme. Vinobaji stressed the need for a third group which would assume no political office, but which would influence all political parties. At the same time he desired the various political parties to cooperate in a common programme for all-round development of the country.

**Indirect Elections**

A standard argument for the need of a party system stresses the point that the method of direct voting in huge constituencies means the voters are not acquainted with the candidates. But the existing method of voting directly for candidates in large electorates is not conducive to a sound and healthy democracy. It is so expensive that monied interests or large sectional organisations like trade unions contribute to the party coffers and thus exercise an undue influence on policies. Not only does a poor independent candidate have no chance under the system, but the whole process involves a huge waste of energy. Many good and capable people dislike standing for these elections, so that the

general calibre of the persons elected is not high.<sup>19</sup> People with criminal records and criminal cases pending against them enter the legislatures. Hence, most of the present Sarvodaya thinkers favour, like Gandhiji, the substitution of direct elections by indirect elections except at the village level.

**The New Polity**

The Sarvodaya thinkers propose to reconstruct the polity in accordance with their basic ideas. In that polity, decentralisation would replace the present centralisation; instead of the welfare state, the people themselves would create their own welfare system; decisions would be arrived at not by majority vote but by consensus of opinion; political parties would not exist and the system of present direct elections would be substituted either by indirect elections, or by a modified form of direct elections. This polity would rely less on the police and army, and as time passes, its coercive aspects would become less and less important. The initiative would lie with the common people and the fate of the country would not be in the hands of a few individuals. However, Sarvodaya thinkers do not describe their polity in details, although Jaya Prakash Narayan discusses the underlying principles and indicates a general pattern of political organisation.<sup>20</sup>

The structure proposed by Sarvodaya thinkers is pyramidal in form, with its base the general village body composed of every adult villager. The villagers elect an executive called panchayat to run the village administration by consensus of opinion.<sup>21</sup> Its resolutions have to be passed unanimously. The general body has all the state powers, including regulation of village exports and imports. The village arranges for its own education, medical service and judiciary.<sup>22</sup>

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Several primary village communities would join in an integral regional community to tackle common problems and to promote common aims. Village panchayats would be integrated into regional panchayats,

village cooperatives into regional cooperatives, primary schools into regional higher schools and so on. The regional body would not be a superior body to control and interfere in the internal administration of the primary communities which, while enjoying delegated power, would be fully sovereign in their own regions. Regional communities would federate themselves into district communities, district communities into provincial communities and provincial communities into a national community. The last would attend to such matters as defence, foreign relations, currency, regulation of imports and exports, and interprovincial coordination and legislation.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the political structure would rise storey by storey from the foundation. The members of the regional and district bodies would be elected indirectly, while those of provincial and national panchayats would be elected either indirectly or through a modified system of direct election. The representatives would be elected as good 'Independents' and not on any party basis.

Jaya Prakash Narayan would vest the executive authority at the primary level in the panchayat with power to delegate it to individual members or to small committees. At the regional level the Panchayat Samiti would be the executive body and it would function through committees. The same would apply at the district level. However, at the provincial and national levels, the respective legislatures would appoint committees as executive bodies, responsible to them. These committees would be small workable bodies with powers to co-opt experts. Each committee would have a chairman and a secretary, and to coordinate the work of different committees, there would be a coordinating committee with one representative from each committee. Its decisions would be binding on all committees. As such, there would be no ministers, chief-ministers or prime ministers.<sup>24</sup>

The presidents of these different bodies would have no administrative functions. However, if the democratic apparatus breaks down, they would have extraordinary emergency powers at their levels. The president of the National Assembly would also be the Supreme commander of the armed forces and responsible to the Sabha

(Assembly) for national defence. S/he would be assisted by a defence committee, of which s/he would be the Chair.<sup>25</sup>

The legislative powers would belong to the panchayat or the Sabha at its particular level. It would have the power to lay down rules or laws for the management of its affairs provided they do not conflict with the interest of other committees at the same level or with the rules and laws laid down by communities or Sabhas at the higher levels. In the work of administration, the committees would be assisted by paid servants, appointed at each level by the corresponding authority created for the purpose by the representative body concerned and on terms laid down by the latter. It would be the sovereign right of these communities to appoint and dismiss them.<sup>26</sup>

Jaya Prakash Narayan, however, has not indicated what departments of administration are to be entrusted to these various communities. He only says that police, justice, taxation, social service and planning, should all be decentralised to the maximum extent possible. In the beginning the top will have to show courage in handing over maximum powers to the communities but as the people become trained and acquire self confidence, the process of decentralization should become normalised and begin to operate from below. It is not envisaged that the whole structure will come into existence all at once. The foundation will have to be laid and then the structure built from below stage by stage.<sup>27</sup>

The above scheme of Jaya Prakash Narayan aroused a great deal of interest and evoked all sorts of opinions ranging from general approval to strong disapproval.

The proposed polity has been criticised on several grounds. First, the fundamental idea of decentralisation is questioned. It is argued that it would result in chaos if pursued to its logical limits. Secondly, even if there is a strong case for decentralisation, it is doubtful if it would be possible to have such a society, when the whole trend is against it. Moreover, the very existence of a defence organisation would lead to centralisation. Thirdly, such a polity would bear the seeds of communist and fascist tyranny and would be detrimental to human freedom. Fourthly, government by committees might be

workable at lower levels, but it would weaken administration at the national level. Fifthly, since political parties would cease to function, the mind of the masses would remain uneducated in the affairs of the world — all the more so, because they would be kept aloof from outside contact in their self-sufficient local committees. Sixthly, the polity forgets the real conditions of Indian villages, which are torn by mutual distrust, suspicion, caste and class conflicts. Such conditions would make unanimous election to village panchayats and decisions by consensus of opinion impossible. Consensus may even result in the nullification of all progressive legislation and in tyranny. Lastly, this polity is based on the belief that participation in government means being free. But not all people are interested in ruling themselves. Some may even chafe under a participatory democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Sarvodaya thinkers hold that these criticisms are largely a product of innate human conservatism and the fear of the unknown. New experiments have to be made even if they involve some risks. The rapidity with which the world outside is changing demands an equal adaptability on our part if we are to avoid calamity.

### Methods

Sarvodaya thinkers have also discussed the methods by which such a polity would be established. They are clear that such a polity can never be established by law or violence. Whenever changes in the political system are brought about by law and violence, real power goes to those who have power to make laws or use violence; it never goes to the people. If we want power to really go to the people, we will have to devise new methods for bringing about change in the system.

Sarvodaya thinkers have recommended four methods for ushering in real democracy. They are a new system of education, constructive work, satyagraha<sup>29</sup> and planning. A new system of education will teach new values to the people necessary for introducing and sustaining a nonviolent society, free from exploitation and oppression. Constructive work will encourage and enthuse people to start people's action. Satyagraha will enable people to stick to truth and compel others by their moral force to do the right thing for the community and to refrain from acts of exploitation and injustice. Finally,

planning from below will involve people in fulfilling the felt needs of the people. Such planning will not start from the top; it will commence from the bottom and involve people in the processes of planning and implementing various plans of their development. It may be noted here that the sarvodaya thinkers attach the utmost importance to the people who will be the harbingers and sustainers of the new system. No doubt the methods are as revolutionary as the concept of real democracy itself.

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### Conclusion

The plan of sarvodaya democracy is based on a free and flexible ideology which welcomes and assimilates all that is good in others. It synthesises the best in Western democracy with the best in communism within the category of humanistic socialism. It preserves all that is valuable in modern thought and practice. It fulfils a great need of the modern age. The world today requires both peace and revolution and the sarvodaya model appears to be the only ideology which gives hope of a peaceful revolution.

People everywhere are demanding a change in the form and content of democracy. Different people with different orientations are demanding changes in the political system according to their requirements and circumstances but all seem to be fed up with the evils of representative democracy — use of money power in elections, moral degeneration of the people as a result of fraud played upon them during election campaigns, party politics, groupism and factionalism, delay in taking decisions, corruption at all

levels particularly in high places, suppression of people's liberties, etc. Only the Sarvodaya model of true democracy can cure the present day democracy of its ills. That is the reason why the scheme of decentralisation has also found support among Western thinkers.

If this kind of real democracy is to flourish, certain conditions must accompany it. Our attitude towards power has to undergo a change, and youth, women and weaker sections of society must be involved in the political processes. It should also be remembered that such a polity can be established and sustained only by nonviolent methods. War and democracy are incompatible. So long as there are wars and war preparedness, real democracy cannot be established. To fight a war, particularly a modern war, a huge concentration of power is required, which is a negation of democracy and all that democracy stands for.

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In the conditions prevailing in our times, it is not possible to predict when such a society based on real democracy will be established. What, however, we can say for certain is that the present representative democracy has lost its relevance in modern times and that it is no better than dictatorship so far as people's welfare is concerned. Hence there is widespread discontent among the people of all countries against their system of government. The very behaviour of today's politicians is throwing up people of courage and vision in every country to oppose the present trend towards centralisation. It is these people of courage and vision who hold the key to the form and shape of future social institutions and organisations.

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11. Gora, **Why Gramraj**, Sarva Sewa Sangh, Varanasi, 1958, p. 51.
12. Duverger, *op.*, cit., p. VI.
13. See Finer, H., **The Theory and Practice of Modern Government**, Macmillan, 1954, p. 362.
14. A village council which decides local issues and disputes without the aid of the state apparatus.
15. Huxley, A., "Tyranny over the Mind" in **Amrit Bazar Patrika**, Allahabad, 24 December, 1958, p. 4.
16. Vinoba Bhave, **Lokniti**, Sarva Sewa Sangh, Varanasi, 1955, p. 29.
17. Duverger, *op.*, cit., p. 280.
18. Mashruwala, *op.*, cit., p. 8.
19. Narayan, Shriman, **One Week with Vinoba**, Sasta Sahitya Mandal, New Delhi, 1956, p. 49.
20. Narayan, *op.*, cit., p. 98.
21. *Ibid.* p. 91.
22. Vinoba, *op.*, cit., p. 41.
23. Narayan, *op.*, cit., pp. 56-58.
24. *Ibid.* pp. 98-100.
25. *Ibid.* p. 100.
26. *Ibid.* p. 101.
27. *Ibid.* p. 103.
28. Tandon, *op.*, cit., p. 144.
29. Satyagraha literally means 'holding on to the truth', and it indicates truth force or soul force. By holding on to the truth, one can fight injustice and wrong in any field of life: social, economic or political. Gandhi used three forms of satyagraha: non-cooperation, civil disobedience and fast.