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### Reimagining Democracy in India: Civic Literacy and Political Participation

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# **SOCIAL ACTION**

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## **Changing Caste Equations and Assertion of Other Communities**

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(Last date to receive articles : 15 February 2024)

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*July-September 2024*

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## Reimagining Democracy in India: Civic Literacy and Political Participation

### I

The assessment of democracy depends on the indices used to measure it. There are mainly two models of indices regarding democracy: first, related to the institutional, procedural democracy; second, related to the substantive or effective democracy. The former views democracy in terms of the presence of the institutions of democracy, political parties and other associations or organisations, periodic elections, universal adult franchise, leadership, etc. The latter does not consider institutional/procedural/electoral democracy as a comprehensive indicator of democracy. Electoral democracy is minimalist, marked by many factors inimical to substantive democracy.

Alternatively, substantive democracy views the phenomenon of democracy in the light of its disaggregation and diffusions, redistributive justice, human capabilities and entitlements (education, health, infrastructure, etc.), social capital (trust, values, norms), civil society, human rights and dignities, governance (participation, accountability, efficacy, transparency, etc.). These are contingent on development as development, in turn, is contingent upon democracy.

The impetus of the debate on democracy in India has been the transition, consolidation and deepening of democracy. The first two issues dominated the discussion during the first two decades of democracy in the post-independence period, and the deepening of democracy became an issue of focus in recent years. The assertion of various identities/new social movements – the process of democratisation, has contributed to the project of deepening democracy.

The debate on the relationship between democracy and development has addressed two questions: are they compatible? Or are they inimical to each other? Democracy is possible if people in a society have the entitlements and possess capabilities that enable them to participate in the democratic process. Freedom, an essential ingredient of democracy, promotes development in terms of entitlements and people's powers.

The architects of modern India (Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Ambedkar, etc.), especially Nehru, who was PM for 17 years, attempted to build an India that is democratic, secular, liberal, inclusive, and with the welfare of all. However, there has been a paradigm shift under the majoritarian Hindu nationalist regime to make India illiberal, exclusive, and undemocratic and water down the concept of citizenship to minorities.

People often say with pride, "I am not interested in politics". They might as well say, "I am not interested in my standard of living, my health, my job, my freedom, my future or any future". If we mean to keep control over our world and lives, we must be interested in politics. If you do not take an interest in the affairs of your government, then you are to live under the rule of fools!

It is time to reimagine India along the lines of the architects of modern India by engaging our citizens in civic literacy and political participation in procedural as well as substantive democracy through every channel available at the individual, community, and entire country levels.

## II

The articles in this issue are of two types: theoretical and empirical. Rudra Prasad, Sitaram Kumbhar and Joby Joseph deal with a theoretical perspective reflecting on the status of civic literacy and political participation in India. The remaining papers by Moamenla and Lipokrenla, Anurekha, Minu Jose, Siji, Jaimon and Vijay deal with empirical data-based reflections and case studies.

In his article, Rudra Prasad deals with a digital dimension of democracy, saying it is a double-edged sword. It is used to promote fake news and misinformation about political life and poses a crippling impact on democracy. Having its focus on electoral democracy rather than substantive democracy, media, muscle, money, and machine undermine the latter. Democracy, in reality, remains primarily electoral, and the country is perpetually in election mode at Assembly and General elections. The issues of employment, education, health and price rise stay in the clouds.

Sitaram Kumbhar highlights the importance of civic literacy and political participation in a democratic society like India. Though one does not find a correlation between the two, civic literacy plays a colossal role in the democratic consolidation and institutionalisation of democratic culture.

He deals with the role of formal education in instilling civic literacy in a developing country like India with its diversity and promoting a sense of respect for fellow human beings and respect for the rights of others and the rule of law. Civic literacy can equip citizens with the knowledge and skills to identify and address problems with legal frameworks, political institutions, and checks and balances, thereby making thoughtful decisions.

Joby Joseph provides a perspective on the nuances of low and high civic participation by considering electoral involvement, engagement with neighbours, volunteering, political action and social media management. He also highlights the inadequacies and insecurities of Indian democracy and challenges in political participation, such as the role of violence during elections.

Moamenla and Lipokrenla examine the role of civic education of youth in electoral democracy. The degree of election participation has much to do with the voter's enlightened understanding of the political system. The absence of political knowledge may lead the young to abstain from voting. This article examines the young people's level of political awareness and the factors that account for differential political knowledge.

Anurekha Chari Wagh discusses the classroom as a site for instilling feminist civic literacy in students, promoting critical thinking regarding political knowledge. Political knowledge deals not only with the political system and its institutions but also with values enshrined in democracy, especially the Preamble of the Constitution. She illustrates the above with illustrations from her experience in the classroom.

Given the diversity of India and its social categories, Minu Jose examines the most marginalised group, the Scheduled Tribes of Wayanad district in Kerala, with empirical data and their representation in elected political bodies. She also highlights the inter-tribal differential representation in such bodies, thereby calling for measures to enhance their civic literacy, leading to an improved political model. Specifically, she draws attention to the disinterest that educated tribal youth have towards active politics.

In his exploratory study conducted in five districts of Kerala with several student organisations affiliated with political parties, Siji shows that membership in such organisations contributes to heightened political awareness, leading to greater political participation. He makes valuable recommendations to facilitate this process unhindered by government and university bodies.

Jomon and Vijay Sansare take the reader to four model villages in Maharashtra, where participative democracy promotes active citizen engagement in collective decision-making for the collective good. This promotes self-help and ownership and bridges the gap between elected members and the citizens. Of the four villages, Ralegan-Siddhi of Anna Hazare has become well-known in India. This article ends with suggestions for creating and sustaining substantive, responsive and participative democracies.□

**Lancy Lobo**  
Guest Editor

# Contours of Indian Democracy from the Point of View of Political Participation and Civic Literacy: A Critical Reflection

**Rudra Prasad Sahoo\***

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## *Abstract*

*The biggest strength of Indian democracy is that it survives despite numerous fault lines. However, critics remarked that the quality of democracy remains very low. The quality of a democracy essentially depends on political participation, civic literacy, and others. The success of a democracy in a more substantive sense depends upon these essential features. This article explores the contours of Indian democracy by examining determinants like political participation and civic literacy. The argument built into the piece is that active political participation and civil literacy would shape the qualitative aspects of democratic politics in India and explain in detail how they can shape and reshape the potential of citizens and societies. This is presented critically here.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Civic Literacy, Political Participation, Political virtue

## **Introduction**

The biggest challenge to Indian democracy and democratic government throughout the world today is the extreme form of polarisation along political and ethnic lines, coupled with the rise in economic and social inequality. If we reduce democracy to just a set of institutions arranged to govern society, then we fix democracy with some form of codified rule. In such a condition, the rule of law is an essential feature of democratic societies. But it is not sufficient.

Just focusing on the technical aspect of democracy by studying the rule of law, election, representation, and institutions merely gave a glimpse of the idea of how democracy operates in a given society. However, the qualities of democracy thrive on the pillar based on political virtues, which

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rest on civic literacy and the active political participation of citizens. Enhancing the quality speaks about the successes or failures of democracy. Most academic debates and scholarly writings on Indian democracy focus on theorising about Indian democracy and more on consolidation of democracy, institutional oversight, and poor governance. But little or no emphasis has been given to developing a more participatory political culture, improving the quality of Indian democracy. Hence, this article explores more substantive aspects of Indian democracy from a critical perspective to enhance the quality of Indian democracy.

To elaborate more, this article is organised in the following manner. The first section explains the conceptual aspects, such as civic literacy and political participation. The second section discusses how these concepts help democracy by focusing on enhancing the qualitative aspect of democracy. The third section critically reflects the role of civil literacy and political participation in the context of Indian democracy to make India from a functional democracy to a robust democracy.

### **The Concepts: Civil Literacy, Political Participation**

In recorded history, democracy is a practice that was first found in ancient Greece. It has changed since then with changing times. From direct democracy to representative democracy is a long march. The nature and character of democracy are evolving from different ideological perspectives. There is no standard canon to measure democracy, so there is no single definition. Thinkers and philosophers shape it through their reflections based on their experiences.

The idea of democracy that shaped the twenty-first century was heavily drawn from John Dewey's writings on *democracy and education*. For John Dewey, democracy is a mode of associated living and communicated experience (Skof, 2011). This transformative concept goes beyond the classical idea of liberty. Dewey's conception of democracy and liberty is based on communication; one member's progress has value for the experience of other members.

Dewey's above-mentioned account of democracy searches for a new way of imagining a culture of communication. In his work on *freedom and culture*, he stresses human nature and how human nature constantly interacts with environmental conditions in the production of culture. Culture flourishes in communities where individuals enjoy unrestricted private and public freedom (Skof, 2011). Here, he stresses a democratic attitude rather



than a democratic institution. Citizens' orientation towards democratic perspectives is one of the critical features of democratic citizenship. This democratic attitude is shaped by active participation in political life, and adequate knowledge about political life and its operation will be acquired through civic literacy.

### **Civic Literacy**

The first and foremost question that grapples with our minds is what constitutes civic literacy and why it is important in a democracy. The present time is coterminous with the digital era, where every minor issue has become headline news due to the spread of the internet and social media. This digital technology is, to some extent, the bearer of distorted and fake information. Fake news and misinformation about political life and democracy will cripple the very foundation on which democracy sustains and flourishes. Due to this alarming condition, civic literacy is indispensable in a democracy today to filter the correct information among its citizens about their political world.

### **What constitutes civic literacy?**

The most sought-after authority on civil literacy is Canadian political scientist Henry Milner, who explains in his book *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (2002) that civic literacy is "the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their political world" (Milner, part-1, 2023). People who possess a high level of civic literacy understand current issues well enough to predict how different policy solutions will affect their own individual interests as citizens as well as the interests of their communities and societies as a whole. In its simplest sense, civic literacy is a kind of political virtue that requires mastery of political knowledge by citizens, which will be reflected in their citizenship activities (Mulyono, 2020). Civil literacy is the most consistent way to measure a citizen's ability in relation to their country's performance.

Research explains that in many countries, there is a positive relationship between political knowledge, voting patterns, and voting outcomes (Milner, Part-11, 2023). In a more precise sense, the electoral system, public financing of campaigning, and robust media help people understand their political world much better. It is generally assumed that effective political choices made by citizens are due to their basic understanding of political life and the political system.

Milner's well-researched and often compelling argument on civic literacy is that it can be increased through three aspects: education, the use of mass media, and political institutions. Factual understanding of each nation's political structure and government and cognitive proficiency—learning materials for citizenship education in schools—are the indicators Milner subscribes to gauge the degree of civic literacy (Mulyono, 2020). All these variables influence the quality of democracy by encouraging citizens to participate in politics based on sufficient knowledge. This has the potential to improve democratic governance's effectiveness.

### **Why is it so essential to democracy?**

This civic literacy is essential to democracy and increasingly indispensable in the present time, where there is a decline in the political participation of citizens in a democratic world. Civil literacy has its relevance to the political participation of citizens. It essentially acts as a bridge between political information and political choice in democratic societies.

Not only does civic literacy help individual citizens acquire political knowledge, but it also helps citizens develop a rational attitude and choice to exercise in politics or a political environment to produce a more mature outcome.

This central question of Milner's thesis explains that civil literacy is "a condition for attaining certain social outcomes" (Milner, 2002). Civic literacy strengthens the civic attitude, a sense of political effectiveness, and a feeling that there is an obligation to participate in the political life of a given society. Civil literacy is all about the equal distribution of intellectual resources among its citizens. Milner observes that organisations with more intellectual resources are distributed equally and attain higher political participation (Milner, 2002). Civil literacy has a broader implication for sustaining democracy as a better form of government shortly. Civil literacy makes citizens engaged, discerning, and responsive to a democratic public. Civil literacy is about developing citizens' capacity for engaged citizenship and their potential to react in a way consistent with democratic values.

### **Political Participation**

Political participation as a concept has not only drawn considerable scholarly attention among social scientists, particularly from the discipline of political science, but it is also very relevant to gaining the qualitative potential of democracy. A pertinent question about political participation is why some people participate, and others do not. The answer is supposed to

be that the participant considers that their action will benefit them.

They are going by the narrow understanding of democracy as a political system or a form of government where the political participation of citizens is considered a cardinal principle. By definition, political participation, according to Verba et al. (1995), allows citizens in a democracy to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond.

### **Perspective on Political Participation**

Exploring the philosophical reflection of Rousseau, who contended that through active participation, citizens share a common conception of general goods and agree about how resources are allocated; for J.S. Mill, political participation is a kind of learning process to arrive at consensus judgment. Both express their views about small political communities (Salisbury, 1975). Scholars like Teorell (2006) put forward a systematic conceptual understanding and divided it into three folds. These are 1) participation as influencing attempts, 2) participation as decision-making, and 3) participation as political discussion.

The first perspective represented by political participation has an influencing potential. Thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and, in recent times, Robert A. Dahl expressed their view that it is an instrument to achieve a certain outcome. Parry and other scholars say that Verba and Nie's empirical work focuses on participation as just an instrumental activity through which citizens attempt to influence the government. (Parry, Moyser, Day, 1992). Verba and Nie developed a socioeconomic status model that expresses the view that socio-economically, people in the upper strata have a greater sense of political efficacy, and they participate in political life more actively because of their orientation.

Political participation in direct decision-making is the second perspective. The advocates of such a view state that participation widens the opportunity for direct decision-making. Pateman's idea of decision-making in the workplace and Gould's idea of speaking to local political institutions to have the power to decide local political issues and solve community problems advocate this standpoint.

The third perspective is Political participation as a political discussion. This conception of political participation expresses the view that participation is some collective endeavour, defining deliberation as a discussion. It is in the process of opinion formation rather than a procedure for reaching a

decision.

There is adequate literature explaining the correlation between civic culture and political participation (Almond and Verba, 1963) and between modernisation and participation (Lerner, 1958). Political participation as a concept within democracy depends on the institutional design, mainly how democratic or undemocratic the system is to facilitate citizen political participation, where citizens influence the political process and its outcome. This theme is dominated in Huntington's work advocating restricted participation in politically underdeveloped countries (Huntington, 1968). Another study supports that economic development is one way to expand political participation (Huntington and Nelson, 1976).

In addition, scholars such as Parry, Pateman, and S. Benn focus on the political participation of citizens as a kind of education in the decision-making process. This will develop a sense of competence and responsibility. Moreover, social networks and education contribute significantly to rising participation in a democracy. It is indeed true that political participation is higher when individuals and communities have greater access to education and information.

### **About qualitative aspects of democracy**

An effective democracy requires more than a free and fair periodic election, majority rule, and political institutions and rules of law. It is also more or less dependent on civic qualities based on citizens' political knowledge and using political expertise to produce an effective outcome. So, active political participation by citizens brings maturity to democracy and enhances its quality. In this sense, democracy has intrinsic, instrumental, and constitutive value.

Staffan Larsson (2001), in his study, has provided seven sets of criteria that address the qualitative aspects of democracy. These are as follows:

1. Equal participation
2. Horizontal relations
3. Deliberations
4. Knowledge that informed
5. Recognition of different identity
6. Internal democratic decision making
7. Action to form a society

In these seven types of features, equal participation in the political life of a nation is the most promising way to achieve quality democracy. Likewise, knowledge that is informed is nothing else but civic literacy.

When we talk about public life and political structure in a given political system called democracy, issues like equal political participation, a celebration of diversity, questions of equivalent value, and democratic decision-making need to be articulated more from the perspective of the quality of democracy in a given society.

Milner (2002) also expresses the view that a rising level of civil literacy will quantitatively and qualitatively enhance political participation. Civil liberty and political participation issues are penetrating and highly pertinent, even in the developed democracies of the world. Milner's study illustrates that Scandinavian countries, along with the Netherlands and German-speaking countries, are in a high-civic literacy category. English-speaking countries dominate the low-civil-literacy countries.

The primary measure of political participation in a democracy is voting in an election. Citizens can participate in the political process in several ways other than by voting. Involvement in an election campaign, joining political parties, and writing a petition are all examples of political participation. Political participation is both an activity and an attitude.

The qualitative dimension of democracy embodies the Kantian political theory of the Enlightenment, which emphasises using one's knowledge to develop opinions. Affirming legitimacy and authority is nothing more than respecting the democratic values of freedom, autonomy, and tolerance. It upholds the autonomous viewpoint and does not submit to power mindlessly.

### **Civic literacy, political participation and Indian Democracy: Critical reflection**

India, as a nation renowned for its riddles and paradoxes, will provide much illumination on the challenges and trends found in the democratic and development processes. India has satisfied the procedural requirement of democracy; however, it has not yet attained the qualitative aspect for which the proponent of Indian democracy has critically observed that the country's trend towards political participation is paradoxical. Scholars and proponents of political participation often assume that people from higher socio-economic strata vote more than those from lower socio-economic strata. However, in India, it is the reverse: people from lower socio-

economic strata vote more than the affluent section of Indian society.

The voting from lower sections in Indian elections may be increased due to the competence of the political parties, the emergence of new forms of participation, such as new social movements, and the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, which led to strengthening grassroots democracy and affirmative action, which resulted in the political assertion of historically disadvantaged sections of societies. All these developments represent a healthy trend towards further deepening of Indian democracy.

However, higher political mobilisation and higher electoral participation do not contribute to a participant culture. A meaningful rational participation is inevitable for achieving qualitative outcomes in a democracy. In contrast, in India, numerous parties are under total control of charismatic leaders, and even some big parties show no interest in promoting democratic political culture within and outside political platforms.

There has been a lot of development in Indian democracy that has caused resentment among its citizens.

First, Indian political tradition is not built upon a participant political culture, as Verba and others say about civic culture. It is generally found that if the tradition of democracy is strong and stable, citizens are free to express their views on common interests. This is what Barrington Moore's *The Social Origin of Democracy* talks about. In India, citizen political participation is voluntary, but participation and civil literacy are abysmal. One of the distinguishing features of Indian democracy is that political institutions are more concentrated on representation than participation.

Second, political participation is more frequently demonstrated by individual interest. In its true sense, political participation seems more about achieving the common good than personal interests. The educative potential of political participation must take root in civic literacy, where every citizen needs to know their rights, responsibilities, and duties as a democratic citizen. This is missing in Indian democracy, as explained by Parthasarathy and Rao (Bachtiger et al., 2018).

Third, institutional decay, as Maiorano also argues, is shallow. He says there are three factors responsible for this. First, the autonomy of the critical institutions of democracy, such as the Supreme Court and the Election Commission, is seriously compromised. Second, there is a threat to civil liberties and minority rights, and third, elections are accessible, but about

fairness, there is a question mark. The same set of observations is also found in the writings of Suhas Palshikar (2021), as he explains that India is experiencing a shrinking democracy.

India is presently dealing with significant obstacles in its attempts to uphold the rights of its people. Civic literacy is essential to political participation, the cornerstone of a democratic society. The elected official is acting in an autocratic manner. It's alarming how democracies operate these days. Take, for example, the government's most recent farm law legislation. Instead of defending farmers' interests, the government silenced the public in the name of violating public decency. Later, the government backtracked its decision, looking for future political gain to receive sympathy from voters in successive elections. The protests against the Citizen (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 2019 and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) are repeating the same stories. Furthermore, most opposition party members are put on the bar when they confront the administration over issues of accountability and transparency in government decisions about the interests of the people.

Fourth, India's growing discontent with democracy or erosion of democracy has been reflected in different reports and indexes. One such trend was found in a new report from the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute at the University of Gothenberg in Sweden. In its Democracy Report for 2023, it states that India has now been ranked 108th globally for electoral democracy. The report slammed India, one of the world's largest democracies, for descending into an electoral autocracy by curbing freedom of expression, indulging in government media censorship, and repressing civil society organisations (Sarkar, 2023).

While political representation has shown a relative increase in the number of people from marginalised communities, political participation also shows this trend. Still, participation is of the routine kind without any change in its qualitative domain. Moreover, people's involvement in different levels of decision-making is negligible or symbolic. Even a recent scholarly work vehemently talks about India's assertion that the BJP is a new kind of social experiment, and he calls it electoral fascism that has eroded our very selves and societies (Kumar and Mehta, 2022).

Hence, it is time for critical scrutiny of Indian democracy about how it will address growing socio-economic inequality on the one hand and the extreme polarisation of society along political and ethnic lines on the other.

Amidst this paradox, the hope is also culminating. A selected study provides new knowledge about political participation and the performance of democracy in Indian states. A survey by Anirudha Krishna shows how education and information can help overcome the disability to participation associated with being poor. Reviving democracy means active participation is a must. There are successful instances, particularly in Karnataka, where it was found that media, mainly radio information, reached remote villages where informed citizens participated actively in the local democratic government process. Even Kerala, which is at the top of the literacy rate, also found that people from the disadvantaged section also acquired essential skills to participate in democratic processes and successfully address social inequality (Krishna, 2006).

There are many studies referred to by Santhakumar, who specifically quoted Eidersveld and Ahmed (1975) and Kindo (2007) in the Indian context, that found a correlation between education and the development of political participation. The higher the education, the more it is about political participation, and a higher level of involvement is about more political awareness (Santhakumar, n.d.).

Deepak Nayyar (1998) has argued that there is an ongoing tension between economic development and political democracy in India. There are instances where poor people are included in the democratic participation process but are excluded from the market. In the same line, Atul Kohli made a critical comment about the state and Indian democracy from the point of view of the economy, saying it is giving more room to corporations and big businesses and neglecting the redistributive system.

India's citizens want an accountable and participatory government, and participation should be expanded to different democratic institutions so that people's trust will be generated and hope will sprout in India's democratic practice. This alone can help check India's extreme polarisation of political and ethical lines.

It is a fact that poor information or misinformation promotes exclusion in a political system. The country's constitution guarantees democratic rights. Even though people from lower socio-economic strata vote or participate more in political processes, enhancing poor and disadvantaged people's quality of participation in democracy should be assisted more widely through the provision of more information in the short term and more education in the medium term. A robust democratic civil society and civil rights movement moulded through civil literacy can check the growing



power of the state or elected authority. This will help to address the twin issues of Indian democracy, which are socio-economic inequality on the one hand and reducing extreme polarisation along political and ethnic lines on the other. Of course, institutional designs will also matter; for example, in the Indian case, we found that participation could be enhanced by decentralising village local governments further and by distributing authority more equally between elected chiefs and other representatives.

Participation in democracy depends on information availability from a regular and reliable source. This will be necessary to establish faith and improve participation in such situations. Scholars such as Huntington and Nelson (1976) make the fascinating remark that participation is either a device for the attainment of equality or merely a reflection of existing inequalities.

## **Conclusion**

Civil literacy is a citizen's source of power in a democratic society. In the age of digitisation, civil literacy enables us to focus on the importance of information, understand the legislative process, and participate in civil life more rationally. It also helps us to understand the local and global rationality of civil decisions much better. At the same time, it catalyses to reach coherent choices and actively participate in the political process for a better result.

A democratic civil society and civil rights movement are equally responsible against the state's excessive concentration of power and for democracy's sustainability and responsibility. India failed to deliver substantive demand. The reason best explained by Rajni Kothari is that when a state fails to provide stable and workable ties with societies, it increasingly relies on administrative power and coercion rather than democratic participation (Heller, 2000).

The general assumption is that democracy works better when citizens are active and organised. Nerja Chaudhury shared a fascinating observation about India's democracy in a book launch function about the book *India's Experiment with Democracy* (Quraishi, 2023). She said the more robust the prime minister, the weaker the institutions in our country, and the greater the concentration of power. How do we overcome the great contradiction Indian democracy is facing today, particularly realising the vision of the Indian Constitution on the one hand and the way democracy is practised today? The Indian Constitution, an incredible and inspiring document,

continues to guide and enlighten us with its noble and pious vision concerning an equitable and equal society. The solution lies in more rational and active participation in the democratic political process. This is more about empowerment and enrichment. Hence, celebrating constitutional values by the authority and common and adhering to its prescribed standard pave the way to realising the vision of quality democracy in India.

Analysing Indian democracy from the perspective of procedural or substantive democracy is a very vague explanation because procedural democracy is considered a tool to achieve substantial outcomes. So, active and informed political participation can check the growing misuse by elected autocrats. In the present situation, citizens' political involvement lays less hope in democracy. This results in a lack of empowerment and inclusion. The loss of hope must be renewable with more learning and active participation by fellow citizens so that a desirable outcome will be achieved soon. □

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