

Democracy, meritocracy and social development



Meritocracy is a pillar of democracy.

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SULAV CHOWDHURY

DEMOCRACY has been defined across the globe as the best medium for running the state machinery. The scope of human freedom and action allowed in a democratic system speaks volumes for its suitability to the political environment of the nations of the world. The ethos of a democratic administration personifies the sentiment of the common masses, and this always makes space for them to protest against the wrongdoings of the government.

The human rights concept that has permeated through the global psyche has made it possible for a democratic system to take root. However, democracy may wilt or wither away in absence of meritocracy.

Many may argue against the relevance of meritocracy in the socio-economic ambience

in the chaotic world order as it has been criticised as a myth which merely serves to justify the status quo; merit can always be defined as whatever results in success. Thus, whoever is successful can be said to merit (deserve) success, rather than success being in fact predicated on rational, predetermined criteria of merit.

Despite the negative connotation of the word, there are many who are of the opinion that a meritocratic system is an authentic auxiliary for a democratic system. The reason for is that a meritocratic system is more just and more productive than other systems, and that it allows for an end to distinctions based on what are said to be "arbitrary" criteria such as race, wealth and social connections.

Michael Young's satirical book, *Rise of the Meritocracy*, where the system of meritocracy

was first broached, shows that one's social place should be determined by one's IQ and effort. In this book, the social system ultimately leads to a social revolution in which the masses overthrow the elite, who had become arrogant and disconnected from public sentiment. This scenario is a brighter outcome of democratic magnificence.

The debacle of the autocratic regime in 1990 in Bangladesh shows us that awareness of the public helped them understand the effects of oppressive and tyrannical state policy. This awareness is indicative of social meritocracy that democracy puts forth. Early utopian socialist thinkers too advocated meritocracies based on equal opportunities for all individuals to realise their own potential for the benefit of society as a whole.

Interestingly, today's democratic practice espouses people's freedom unconditionally, and that gives them the scope to hone, harness and husband their skills for the welfare of the society. Thus, social development is expedited.

Social Darwinism is a social theory which holds that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is a model, not only for the development of biological traits in a population, but also as an application for human social institutions -- the existing social institutions being implicitly declared as normative.

The Peter Principle says that in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence, and that meritocracy promotes individuals based on the ability to perform their prior assignment, not the new assignment. This sentiment or belief brings Social Darwinism to the front and indicates that society without supremacy of merit might encourage social incompetence to grow, resulting in intellectual sterility that weakens the social fabric.

This will impede economic development and slow down the social changes that are needed to keep pace with modern social architecture. Plato's concept of the ideal government presented in his *Republic* is, in that sense, innately merit-based social calculation of development.

Meritocracy also ensures establishment of rule of law in the society. Countries like Bangladesh -- where economic solvency at the individual level is painfully low -- get caught up in monetary expansion over social justice as economic dependency or strength determines, overtly or covertly, social status. But meritocracy abhors the putrefaction of ethical values.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius advocated a meritocratic system of government and society. Han Feizi, who was famous as the foremost proponent of the absolute rule of law, proposed legalism in the absolute state, which strikingly contained numerous meritocratic elements.

Another legalist, Shang Yang, implemented legalist and meritocratic reforms in the state of

Qin by abolishing the aristocracy and promoting individuals based on their skill, intelligence and initiative. This led to the armies of the Qin gaining a critical edge over the other nations that adhered to old aristocratic systems of government. Legalism, along with its anti-aristocratic, pro-meritocratic ideals, remained a key part of Chinese philosophy and politics for two millennia, although after the Qin Dynasty it was heavily diluted.

But meritocratic governance within the bureaucracy has remained a keystone of Chinese government all the way to the present. This can be most clearly seen in the use of standardised "imperial examinations" to determine entry into the official class, which began in the Sui Dynasty. Legal probity and integrity are of the essence if any country intends to ensure social justice to promote democracy. Bangladesh too, given its political leadership being confined to feudalistic attitude and imprudence, should cling on to legal chastity to allow its nascent democracy to flourish.

However, what Noble Laureate economist Amartya Sen said in *Merit and Justice* -- an essay in the book *Meritocracy and economic inequality* by Samuel Bowles, Steven N. Durlauf -- cannot be denied. He argued that meritocracy had some elementary tension in (i) the inclination to see merit in fixed and absolute terms, and (ii) the ultimately instrumental character of merit -- its dependence on the concept of "the good" in the relevant society.

There is a connection between how society looks at the notion of good and its resultant reaction in the society. However, the suitability of meritocracy in a democratic ambience cannot be beyond question because conceptualisation of a good society, as defined by Amartya Sen, includes the absence of serious economic inequalities. In the characterisation of instrumental goodness, including the assessment of what counts as merit, note would have to be taken of the propensity of putative merit to lessen -- or generate -- economic inequality. Dr. Sen comes to the decision that, in such a situation, the Kenneth Joseph Arrow rewarding of merit cannot be done independent of its distributive consequences.

Yet, the aspiration of meritocracy to strengthen the pillars of democracy -- no matter how chimerical the desire seems to be -- should not be smothered. Meritocracy must be able to bring in dynamism in the legal structure, and will result in social justice. Once social justice is ensured, social development cannot be far away as it provides the necessary impetus to the development imitative without having to question the integrity of the project implementation process. That is how meritocracy helps democracy to be stable and solid.

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5 scary fast foods set to kill you

PEOPLE once laughed at me because I thought a "nutritionist" was a person who lived on nuts. But then I met one and found I was right.

My nut-eating friend Jenny was frothing at the mouth the other day. "One of the world's most notorious rogue nations has developed new weapons of mass destruction," she warned. "They will eventually be responsible for thousands of deaths around the world."

But she wasn't talking about any member of the group of places she once referred to as "the Axle of Evil." She had made a list of the five most dangerous foods released this year.

Curiously, they all came from one country -- the United States. Yeah. I was surprised, too. She reeled them off in reverse order of horror.

Krispy-kreme-burger

At number five was the Krispy Kreme Donut Burger -- a fatty patty in the middle of a pair of ultra-sweet sugar-coated snacks.

Burger pizza

At number four was the Burger Pizza, now available at Burger King in New York, at 2,000 calories a go.

Beer bites

At number three was Fried Beer Bites: little dough pockets of beer, deep-fried.

KFC-double-down

At number two was the KFC Double Down, a "sandwich" of two chicken breasts around two strips of bacon and two slices of cheese.

Jenny described it as "a lump of fatty protein topped by a lump of fatty protein topped by a lump of fatty protein topped by a lump of fatty protein, etc." I added: "And eaten by a lump of fatty protein."

Fried butter

Number one on her list was Fried Butter, a new snack consisting of a lump of fat cooked in fat.

It was a powerfully delivered speech. But there was just one problem. Her small audience consisted entirely of males.

I'm sorry, but most guys like American food.

Indeed, her list of food items had left us slipping around in our own drool, some literally.

"American food may not be the healthiest in the world," one of the guys said. "But it is pretty much Perfect Guy Food."

But just to show her that men aren't complete reprobrates, we did a scientific survey on a well-known female diet mystery.

If a woman eats a single 100-gramme piece of chocolate cake, she will instantly put on at least 500 grammes of excess weight. How is this possible?

We interviewed a large number of women (two) and received 100% agreement that this actually happens. "One mouthful of sacher torte and whoomp! I'm the Michelin Man," said one medium-size female.

Shocked, I phoned a doctor, expecting her to say that it was impossible. But she didn't. "What happens is that a woman who eats chocolate cake finds herself suddenly filled with sugar and guilt," she said. "The two combine in her stomach to cause severe bloating. Bang. She's the Incredible Hulk."

By this time, the guys had lost interest in health issues.

They were discussing applications for Fried Beer Bites, which had caught their imaginations.

"You could have a pack on your desk, like normal snacks," said one. "And you could consume beer all day, right in front of your boss."

"You could have them in a cereal bowl for breakfast," said another.

Jenny said it would not be healthy to consume beer from morning till night.

"You're right," I told her. "For health reasons, we'd have to take regular breaks for food. A couple of rounds of Krispy Kreme Donut Burgers would be perfect."

All the guys nodded.

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In the throes of violence



Violence still shatters the peacefulness.

It looks as if the whole valley has come on to the streets, the angry young men leading the mob. Maybe it is a particular group of people which is instigating them, but whatever its number it is a determined lot. And it would be foolhardy not to take into account their anguish, particularly of those who have lost their dear ones in the firing.

KULDIP NAYAR

I recently interacted with some Kashmiri young men in Delhi. There was no doubting their indignation and exasperation. The killings in the valley, almost 90 since June, were very much on my mind and I wanted to know what could be done.

"Why don't you leave us?" one said. Another was more specific. "We want azadi." What is the population of the valley? "Please include Muslim areas in Jammu and Ladakh." This would come to about one crore or a little more. They said: "It is not a question of numbers but one of feelings. We just do not want to be part of India." Yet another said, "We do not want to be

part of Pakistan either."

I vainly argued how a country with one crore population could sustain itself without any help from either India or Pakistan. "There is the entire Muslim world to help us," they said.

I told them that this bothered me and that bringing religion into their protests showed that they wanted to establish another Muslim state on India's border.

What would be the repercussions in India, which was trying to stay above the waters of communalism and remain secular? Their reply: "We want azadi."

I have not visited Kashmir for more than six months. Yet I have kept myself quite up to date by watching on television several incidents of

stone-pelting, burning of government buildings and firing by security forces. (The Indian media has been covering the events in detail.)

It looks as if the whole valley has come on to the streets, the angry young men leading the mob. Maybe it is a particular group of people which is instigating them, but whatever its number it is a determined lot. And it would be foolhardy not to take into account their anguish, particularly of those who have lost their dear ones in the firing.

New Delhi and Kashmir's chief minister Omar Abdullah believe that anger could be assuaged if the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA), which gives extraordinary powers to the military in a disturbed area, is amended suitably or abolished.

The problem has been politicised and New Delhi has known it all along. That it should have been sorted out by this time goes without saying. The more a solution is delayed the more knotty the problem will become.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's remark that there was need to address issues of trust deficit and government performance cannot remedy the situation.

By shifting the responsibility of its follies to the ruling National Conference, which with all its limitations has stood by New Delhi from day one, New Delhi is only proving that it has committed one mistake after another, without realising that it would have to pay for its lapses some day.

Each time an economic or employment package is considered a panacea for all troubles. The challenge from the days of Sheikh Abdullah is how New Delhi gives Srinagar a sense of identity without letting Kashmir translate that status into independence?

That there is no alternative to talks goes without saying. But the talks with the type of fundamentalists who are in the forefront will be difficult to conduct because they are the ones who incite people in the name of religion. They have pushed Kashmirayut, a pluralistic concept, to the back burner and brought fundamentalism to the fore.

Yet New Delhi has to separate these elements from those who want to rule democratically and in a pluralistic way. But this does not mean that India has all the time to sort out the fundamentalists. Ultimately, it depends on what New Delhi is willing to offer in terms of political