

The next step in democratic evolution is overdue

India must change, from a darkening elected authoritarianism to building institutions for citizens' inclusion in governance



ARUN MAIRA

The human body, like a nation, is composed of structures and processes. A bony skeleton holds it together. Processes such as breathing, blood circulation and the formation of new cells give the body life. When vital processes become weak, the body becomes unhealthy even if the frame is strong. And when they cease, overpowered by infection, life ceases, and the bones remain to be buried.

Elements of a democracy

A democratic nation, or any nation, is also composed of structures – its constitution and laws. What distinguishes democratic nations from authoritarian ones is the liveliness of citizens' participation in the governance of their nation. In healthy democracies, citizens participate effectively in the shaping of the policies and laws by which they are governed. Democratic constitutions provide elected assemblies for citizens' representatives to shape new policies and pass laws.

Open-minded deliberation in these forums is necessary to meet the requirements of democracy. It is also essential for finding good solutions for systemic problems which must be considered from many perspectives. When these forums become chambers for close-minded partisan politics, they cannot find solutions to the complex, systemic problems that all nations must address in the 21st century: climate change, historical inequities, increasing economic inequalities, and violence brewing

with discontents within. The U.S. houses of Congress seem hamstrung by party politics; debates in the Indian Parliament have degenerated into floor battles with missiles; and, citizens of many European democracies are dismayed by the performance of their elected institutions.

Constitutions, elections, and assemblies are not all that a democracy needs to function. Though this is what the simplistic U.S. vision of converting nations to democracies – on the heels of its armed interventions in many nations – seems to suggest. Democracies have life from what happens outside the elected chambers and what happens between elections.

People who belong to different political factions, practise different religions, and have different histories within the history of their nation, must listen to each other, and learn to live democratically together every day of their lives. Therefore, what healthy democracies need most of all are processes of democratic deliberations among citizens themselves.

Widening fissures

Sadly, the cracks in the Indian nation dividing 'people like us' from 'people not like us', are widening in institutions at the top as well as in relationships on the ground. Majoritarian electoral systems of democracy will harden these divisions in India, as they are in the United States. Therefore, stronger processes are urgently required for democratic discourses amongst citizens themselves to bind the national fabric before it frays further.

The media, which used to provide space for diverse perspectives to be heard, is divided along partisan lines. And social media, touted as a saviour of democracy by enabling citizens to freely listen to many points of view, has turned out to be a hardener of divisions.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Smart algorithms have created echo chambers of people who like each other, and who do not listen to those in other chambers, and lob hate bombs at each other across the walls.

Discussions of India's chronic problems that cry for new solutions have descended into debates about whether the origins of the problems were in the times of the National Democratic Alliance or the times of the United Progressive Alliance. It seems that in any discussion about what ails the country, whether in Parliament, the media, or social gatherings, one must be seen to either support the political dispensation in power, or its opposition. There is little room for thoughtful, non-partisan deliberations among citizens.

Taking a new step

It is time for the next step in the evolution of democratic institutions. Kalypto Nicolaidis of the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, says, "Consent of the governed is about more than periodic elections or referenda. The process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been for the last 200 years: a struggle to expand the franchise. This time around, it is a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all

its forms." A civil society movement, Citizens for Europe, has proposed a solution: a European Citizens' Assembly – a permanent transnational forum for citizens' participation and deliberation.

Words of caution though. Citizens for Europe explains the drawbacks of purely online methods, which civil society groups in Europe have tried, viz., "the risk of accentuating ideological cleavages and excluding groups affected by the digital divide". Online forums must be supplemented by real meetings. On the other hand, merely putting people together into a room does not create conditions for thoughtful deliberation. Elected assemblies everywhere are cleaved along partisan lines. James Madison, a framer of the U.S. Constitution, had anticipated this. He wrote in Federalist paper No.55, "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob." It is not just the quality of the people in the room that matters. Citizens' meetings, online or offline, must be properly designed and professionally facilitated to enable all points-of-view to be listened to for new insights to emerge.

Return to the analogy of the human body. The human body is a complex system composed of many complex organs and processes – the heart, the brain, the liver, digestion, respiration, self-healing, etc. Breathing is a very simple process – it is the first one that a baby learns as soon as it emerges from its mother's womb. Yet, we forget how to breathe well as we grow up. Yoga teaches us that learning to breathe well can tone up all the complex systems of the body and mind.

The missing dialogues

Human societies are also complex systems, composed of many formal institutions, and many pro-

cesses of interactions among people. Listening like breathing is a basic process.

We have forgotten how to listen well, especially to "People Not Like Us". In schools we are taught how to speak well and win elocution contests and debates. There are no lessons in how to listen well, and no prizes for the best listeners. We listen only to "what" others say; we do not listen to understand "why" they believe what they do. Often, we stop listening even while another is speaking, mentally preparing our ripostes to win a debate. Dialogues to understand are not debates to win. They are explorations of complex issues by combining the knowledge of diverse people.

Monocultures of thought can be as sterile as monocultures in Nature. Diversity in the composition of the participants is essential for ensuring that complex issues are fully understood and new insights can emerge. However, diversity of opinions can create cacophonies unless the deliberations are managed well.

The time has come to learn to listen well, not just speak well; and to conduct dialogues, not debates. The assemblies Emperors Ashoka and Akbar conducted centuries ago in India provide some role models. Technologies of democratic deliberation have advanced since the times of the Athenians, Ashoka, and Akbar, as James Fishkin explains in *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. The soft power of India, the world's most richly diverse nation perhaps, will increase when it returns from the presently darkening elected authoritarianism to lead in the evolution of institutions for citizens' participation in democratic governance.

Arun Maira is the author of 'Listening for Well-Being: Conversations with People Not Like Us'