KEITH ROBY MEMORIAL LECTURE
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DEMOCRACY HAS TRANSFORMED INDIA
INDIA HAS TRANSFORMED DEMOCRACY*
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I consider it a great honour to deliver the 2010 Keith Roby Memorial Lecture. I am extremely grateful to the Keith Roby Foundation and the University of Murdoch for inviting me to give this prestigious lecture this year.

Dr. Keith Roby was a great teacher who believed that science and religion could contribute greatly towards resolving major contemporary issues such as the dilemmas surrounding environment, energy, resources and genetic engineering. Being a Foundation member staff of the Murdoch University, Dr. Keith Roby’s pioneering role in the area of ‘Community Science’ - to apply science to the community’s real and human needs is remembered today as his seminal contribution. While science and religion were two guiding motives in Keith’s life, his vision was for a “just, participatory and sustainable society”. In the context of this vision I have chosen the theme: “Democracy has transformed India, India has transformed Democracy” for today’s lecture.

Democracy is the most discussed issue today. No other system has contributed as much to human advancement as democracy. It is the universality of the democratic idea that the world has seen greater strides in the past two decades or so. But despite its vast expansion, democracy no longer enjoys an unchallenged position. The number of democratic countries, after a period of expansion has now declined to 116. This has happened because, according to Larry Diamond of Hoover Institution, “democratic transitions are becoming less frequent and the incidence of democratic breakdown has been increasing in the last decade. If we count not only blatant reversals of democracy - by either military or executive coup - but also incremental degradations of the democratic process, about one of every five democracies that has existed during the third wave has been reversed.

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And the vast majority of all the democratic reversals (30) that have occurred during the last 35 years have occurred since 1999 - nine in the last three years.”¹

But the crisis in democracy is not a crisis of democracy. And the crisis of democracy can be addressed by having more democracy, not less.

What is today’s India? This ancient land, with all its diversities of language, religion, culture, social stratification (caste system) is a unique country in the world attracting the title: “Incredible India”.²

When India became independent in 1947, the country opted to be a democratic nation. The Constitution of India says in its Preamble “We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all; Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation”. In 1950, with a population of 360 million, of which 171 million (47 per cent) below the poverty line and with all possible contrasts and contradictions there were more skeptics than optimists about the success of democracy in India. But today India is the largest democracy in the world and the democratic process and democratic institutions have transformed India beyond recognition. The country has shown that it has not only an efficient election system in place but also a mature electorate.

The widely held view in the 1950s and 1960s was that rich societies were fit to be democratic than underdeveloped or poor countries. In societies without racial or ethnic diversities democracy would be successful.

¹ Diamond, Larry, “Remarks to the Convening Group of the Community of Democracies”, Krakow, 2 July 2010.
² “it is …astounding that the most diverse nation on Earth, with hundreds of languages, all religions and cultures, is not only surviving, but thriving. The nation where Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were born, which is the second largest Muslim nation on Earth; where Christianity has existed for 2,000 years; where the oldest Jewish synagogues and Jewish communities have resided since the Romans burnt their 2nd temple; where the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile reside; where the Zoroastrians from Persia have thrived since being thrown out of their ancient homeland; where Armenians and Syrians and many others have come to live; where the Paris-based OECD said was the largest economy on Earth 1,500 of the last 2,000 years, including the 2nd largest only 200 years ago; where 3 Muslim Presidents have been elected, where a Sikh is Prime Minister and the head of the ruling party a Catholic Italian woman, where the President is also a woman, succeeding a Muslim President who as a rocket scientist was a hero in the nation; where a booming economy is lifting 40 million out of poverty each year and is expected to have the majority of its population in the middle class, already equal to the entire US population, by 2025; where its optimism and vibrancy is manifested in its movies, arts, economic growth, and voting, despite all the incredible challenges and hardships”. (See Mitchell, V., “The Indian Elections”, New York Times, 15 April 2009.)
The hypothesis was that in multicultural, multi-linguistic, multiethnic communities with large minority communities, conflict and tensions were perpetual and democracy would never work. More than five decades ago Selig Harrison had concluded about India that “The politics of national survival will clearly not conform to Western conceptions of “democracy” and will almost certainly, at one time or other, appear “totalitarian”… … the odds are almost wholly against the survival of freedom and that in “most dangerous decades” the issue is, in fact, whether any Indian state can survive at all”.

But India proved the prophets of doom wrong. When it was a poor country, India had the best elections and maximum democracy possible and today after six decades India has emerged as one of the leading economies of the world. I would like to argue that the one critical reason for India’s emergence is India’s vibrant democracy.

Despite poverty and illiteracy India rejected the widely held view that a country must first become economically fit for democracy. East Asia and Latin America and many others did precisely that. India decided instead to become economically fit through democracy. India’s democracy extended the hand of democracy globally. That led Bernard Levine of London Times to say: “If democracy in India fails, the end of democracy itself will be in sight.”

There are skeptics still. When the elections to the 15th Parliament were announced early last year, a leading newspaper – The Times of India - began a column ‘dance of democracy’. But at the same time there were many who argued that the 2009 elections would lead nowhere, the elections will result in instability, chaos and waste of time and resources. Those skeptics were again proved wrong.

The free media, freedom of speech, independent judiciary and vibrant civil society make all the difference to Indian democracy. The elections, whether it is at the local government level or to State assemblies or Parliament, they have turned to be political, social and even cultural events; most hotly debated, intellectually stimulating and in many cases trend-setting. The heat thus generated contributes immensely to free and fair elections. We have made the best use of the electronic voting system and information technology. During the last parliamentary elections, 11 million electronic voting machines were used. On the day the votes were being counted, there were so many hits on the Election Commission site that its server collapsed!

3 Harrison Selig, India the most dangerous decades, Oxford, 1960 p.338.
A new ‘political culture of elections’ has come to stay in the country. With an electorate of 714 million in such a complex society, to conduct free and fair elections is not easy. The independent Election Commission which is a quasi-judicial body sets the code of conduct, and it is respected by all. The elections are conducted efficiently with hardly any complaints against the Election Commission.

Nearly 60 per cent of the electorate votes in the Parliamentary elections, much more in the state assembly elections and the highest in local government – Panchayat (Village Council) — elections. The elections in India prove that the ordinary people want freedom, peace and development. For instance in Jammu & Kashmir State in the last Assembly elections the voter turnout was more than 60 per cent and in some constituencies it touched more than 80 per cent. The heavy polling in the four phases was a clear triumph of democracy despite the campaign for boycott of election by some anti democracy elements. Poor people are concerned about their livelihood and they have now developed faith in democratic system than ever.

The role of left parties in strengthening democracy in India also needs special mention. In the two left bastion states: Kerala and West Bengal, the Communist Party of India Marxist CPI(M) won 38 seats (Kerala 12 and West Bengal 26) in the 2004 Parliament elections. The Left parties were powerful partners in the previous Union government, which was a coalition (United Progressive Alliance -UPA) headed by the Congress party. It must be said to the credit of the Leftists that their critical support and advice on anti people policies whenever UPA leaders brought up such measures saved our economy from serious catastrophe. For instance, during the extraordinary enthusiasm of some in the government to open up our economy to unbridled markets, the Left put a brake on the government. Moreover, the Leftists have always lifted the standard of debate in Parliament. Incidentally the average wealth of Left MPs in this Parliament is Rs. 39 lakhs (3,900,000) while that of Congress Rs. 6.86 crore (68,600,000) and BJP Rs. 3.06 crore (30,060,000).

Secularism versus religious fundamentalism is a constant tension in India although the Preamble to our Constitution declares that India is a “secular republic”. We have successfully tried to defeat religious fundamentalism through the democratic process. The defeat of BJP led NDA in the 2004 parliamentary elections has sent the message that people of India support a secular set up. Communalism and politics of sectarianism are not the need of the time. That has been doubly proved when several regional or state parties got a thumping majority in the Assembly and Parliament after parting company with BJP.

The presence of people with criminal antecedents and money power in elections has created an unsavoury situation. Of course both elements have found substantial representation in the present Parliament. In the lower house of the Parliament (Lok Sabha), there are 150 alleged tainted Members and 300 millionaires.\textsuperscript{7} But there is a difference. Money power and muscle power are not the sufficient condition to get elected. Many millionaires and mafia leaders have lost the election. For instance, several convicted MPs in the previous parliament fielded their wives on different party tickets. But all of them lost. This is a good trend and the enlightened electorate in India has begun to show the door to the antisocial elements as well.

It may also be noted that the present Lok Sabha has more women MPs than ever-10.7 per cent while the previous percentage was only 8.7. A bill has been introduced in the Parliament to ensure through affirmative action, 33 per cent seats for women. Soon one third of the members in Indian Parliament - 182 in Lok Sabha (Lower House) and 84 in Rajya Sabha (Upper House) - will be women. A notable feature is that there are 81 MPs this time who are below 40 years. Young people are coming forward to work and participate in the elections.

In India politicians cannot always create a fiefdom through patronage while they are in Parliament. This is clear from the fact that only 33 per cent of the sitting MPs got elected this time; 67 per cent are new faces. Today there are 84 Lok sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (former untouchables) and 47 for the Scheduled Tribes.

Another interesting trend is the wide acceptability of the coalition politics in India. In the last election, for the 543 Lok Sabha seats, 369 political parties put up 8,070 candidates. But only 36 parties have succeeded in sending one or more MPs to the Lok Sabha and 17 parties are part of the present coalition, including outside support.

Sincere and people oriented leaders are coming to the centre stage, peace and development have become the war cries (e.g., Kashmir). Secular society is what people want. India is also rapidly recognizing the importance of women in political leadership. The voters support men of integrity. The present prime minister of India, Prof. Manmohan Singh, who was an academic of international standing, is held in high esteem in India because of his tremendous integrity.

It was in 1993 the local governments (Panchayats and Municipalities) became part of the Constitution and thus “institutions of self-government.”

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
When the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced the 64th Constitution Amendment on 15 May 1989 to give constitutional status to the village councils, it was a historic step. Not only the Gandhians, but all those who were insightful enough to see ‘power to people in the rural India’ as a necessary condition for a prosperous democratic India, rejoiced. Since 1993 a silent revolution is taking place in our villages. Elections are taking place every five years. More than one million women (33 per cent of the total number of local government representatives) are getting elected; eight states have now passed laws giving 50 per cent reservation for women in the local governments. Excluded sections of our society, the Scheduled Castes (the former untouchables) and Scheduled Tribes today known as *dalits* (oppressed class) are getting inclusion in local governance. The Panchayats as local government has come nearer to the people. All states have State Finance Commissions and State Election Commissions. Of course there are many deficits as well.

Nearly 3 million members are being elected to the panchayats and municipalities every five years - 542 District Panchayats, 6094 intermediate (block) panchayats and 232,855 Village Panchayats and more than 2000 municipalities - making India the largest and most intensely democratic country in the world.8

Moreover, the third tier of government has radically changed the meaning and content of grassroots democracy in India.

**Challenges**

India’s democratic process is facing several challenges as well.

First and foremost is what may be called muscle power and money power. This happens both overtly and covertly. In the elections from local government to Parliament level, forces of various kind find their expression with pull and push factors. Law enforcement agencies are there but always they may not succeed. In some areas mafia and gangsters are influential. Election in India is quite expensive and therefore millionaires and billionaires are active players in the election process.

Second, the caste division in Indian society is playing a negative role in the democratic process. People in many areas vote, based on their primordial loyalties and not on ideology. The leaders cultivate caste groups as their vote banks through patronage. In India there are many caste-based political parties also. The national parties transcending caste or communal identities have a big role in changing the face of caste politics but it is relatively slow.

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Third, extreme deprivation and underdevelopment creates fertile ground for extremism and militancy. Although Indian economy is growing, often it is the middle class which is the beneficiary. Many of the tribal areas and regions where the Scheduled Castes are in a majority, development does not reach there; governance give way to lawlessness. These deprived sections of society embrace Maoist ideology and violence. In India out of more than 600 districts, nearly 200 districts are affected by what is known as extremist “naxalite movement” in some form or the other.

Fourth, many a time law enforcement agencies like Police, Security Forces go beyond their mandate and create serious discontent among ordinary people. “Encounter Killing” is a term widely used in India. The middle class is paranoid of the extremists and justify the encounter killing which is extra judicial. Today the Naxalite areas and Kashmir are facing serious problems because of this trend. As Kingshuk Nag puts its. “This has terrible consequences for democracy and rule of law. The consequences can be well imagined since, in a civilized nation, lawlessness cannot be countered by lawlessness.”

A major issue in India is corruption. Often we find that that the nexus between the officials and politicians result in corrupt practices, money not reaching the target groups and often siphoned off by the rich and powerful. But today an active civil society, a free media with a powerful television network and legal instrumentalities like Right to Information (RTI) have begun to bring down the corruption level in the country. All this is possible because of the democratic ethos in India.

So how has India transformed democracy?

India’s tryst with democracy has transformed the country. But India too transformed democracy in many areas. I would like to underline a few areas wherein India has made a difference to democracy.

India has exemplified a model; “democracy and development go together.” The economic growth and development can be intertwined with active, institutionalized democratic system and governance. Evidently, only in a deep rooted democratic structure an inclusive development can be discussed, debated and implemented.

According to latest reports India may soon catch up with China’s pace of growth as the world economy shows signs of recovery after a year of downturn with the emerging markets at the forefront of the revival, says noted French economist Guy Sorman. The Indian growth strategy is rooted in democratic institutions that have seen a relatively more even distribution of wealth. “Thus

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10 The Economic Times, New Delhi, 30 June 2010.
the free market in India represents a consensus choice; not something that an enlightened despot imposed from the top,” argues Sorman. “When India fought for Independence under Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership, they wanted development – not stagnation and poverty in the name of diversity of civilizations, “. For Gandhi, “development was good and just only if it raised the standard of living of the poorest……. An alliance between an export-oriented strategy and grassroots development will protect India from a backlash against globalization” says Guy Sorman.11

In India along with the economic development, inclusive growth and inclusive governance has become the catch word. India is struggling in every sense to demonstrate to the world how inclusive growth and inclusive governance can work in a democracy. What Mani Shankar Aiyar, the then Union Minister said in 2008, reflects the conviction of many leaders. He said, “I speak for the inconsequential Indian, the unsuccessful Indian, but also for the Indian who crucially determines the outcome of the democratic process. It is only if governance reforms at the grassroots become the handmaiden of economic reforms, as hinted at in sections of the Eleventh Plan that we might hope to preserve the stability and sustainability of the democratic process. That is a political imperative. It is also, I trust, an ethical imperative that we will respect.”12

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has made it clear in his first statement after getting elected that “growth will be our main focus. And when I mean growth, I mean inclusive growth that will carry everyone along, including the underprivileged in the country.”13 Many a programme like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), affirmative action for Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes, Tribals in the areas of education, health, employment as well as public distribution system of essential articles for those below poverty line reflect this commitment.

Inclusion of excluded communities in the institutions of democracy and governance is another good practice that the world can learn and benefit. It began with problems and prejudice but today it has become a norm. In the first Parliament there were 98 Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs) Members and now the number is 131. Nearly 850,000 SCs/STs are getting elected to the local governments and according to the proportion of their population in the area, they are also heading these Panchayats and Municipalities.

According to Susanne H. Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, political power in the states, and the center has moved from the upper caste into the hands of the lower castes. “In early post-
independence elections, social prestige translated readily into political power. Upper-caste patrons could tell their lower-caste dependents how to vote … [Today] the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) and dalits - together about two-thirds of the population – have displaced the upper castes in the seats of power in many state cabinets. At the turn of the twenty-first century, lower-caste chief ministers are no longer rare… The logic of “one person, one vote” in free and fair elections has put power in the hands of the more numerous lower castes.”

The contribution of decentralized governance through regular elections and democratic institutions have immensely contributed to this aspect of inclusion of excluded communities. Of course it has created many conflicts and tensions but in a traditional society when it transforms, conflicts are inevitable.

The major achievement of India was that it took all efforts to institutionalise democratic process from the very beginning. Through institutional innovations, India has made seminal contribution towards deepening democracy. I have already spoken of the Election Commission. The National Human Rights Commission, National Women’s Commission, Minorities Commission, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission at the federal and state levels have made democracy meaningful to the common masses.

India has world’s second largest Muslim community in the world and they have in the six decades since independence “contributed immensely to the growth of the modern, secular, civilizational state that is India” and every Indian is proud of the fact that “the Indian Muslim has greatly enriched Indian architecture, literature, the performing and fine arts, crafts, theatre, cinema, cuisine and fashion.” In today’s frightening trend of extremism and militancy, it is widely acknowledged that the roots of this trend is nearly absent in India. The main reason being deep rooted democracy in the country. Without any religious barriers, all can enter all realms of life especially politics, contest elections, hold democratically elected offices.

The following graph depicts the intertwining of development of democracy and economic growth in India.

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This graph shows the growth of economy along with the development of democratic process in India with two measurables: democratic process calculated in terms of electoral performance i.e., percentage of voting in the parliamentary elections and economic growth in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the first elections to the parliament in 1951-52 the voter turnout was 44.87% and in the recent elections in 2009 it became 58.19%. The graph clearly indicates that during the undemocratic regime (political emergency 1975-77), the GDP also declined. When the democracy returned after 18 months, the economy resumed its increasing rate. From then onwards it has been on an increasing trend with an increasing democratic values. Even during the slowdown of the world economy, India held the ground with the GDP touching today 8.8 per cent. Thus the correlation between democracy in a country of diversity and economic development is clearly manifested in India.

India has also been constantly inventing and re-inventing democracy by creating more stakeholders in the democratic polity.

**Conclusion**

According to a global ranking of the transition processes – state of democracy and market economic systems as well as political management – in 128 countries, conducted by Bertelsmann Stiftung and Centre for Applied Policy Research, Munich University, in India “Electoral democracy has long since become the only game in the town; even radical political forces abide by its rules and do not seek power through extra parliamentary means. Elections are free and fair, civil rights are
guaranteed, extra-constitutional veto powers are nonexistent, military is under strict civilian control, the media enjoy considerable freedom of expression and civil society is lively… [India] … has undergone a dramatic (second) democratic upsurge in the last two decades, as regional organizations emerged and the lower castes in the follow up to the Green Revolution. … … secondary powers, such as the Supreme and High Courts, the election commission and the president have become more proactive in carrying out their duties”. 16

Thanks to India’s democratic credentials that India’s rise is seen as a success story that can be replicated while China is seen from a different angle. No model is, of course, perfect. But there is a lot that one can learn from India, how it has managed its diversities. A land of “million mutinies” has now become a land of billion aspirations.

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