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Test No. - 2122 (Essay Test-02)

1) To write an essay on the following topic -

"Information is the currency of democracy."

Recently, Indian Express (national daily), filed an RTI application to know the status of loan accounts given under Emergency Credit Line Guarantee scheme (ECLGS) to Micro, small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) during the COVID pandemic. The information received was distressing enough to be made available to common public through front page headline. - "majority MSME accounts under stress".

This information helped to throw light on stress of MSMEs which form the bulwark of our economy (employ 11 crore people) and also push the responsible departments to take action, which may otherwise (may) be complacent as overall ^{low} NPAs in banking system are at historical ^{low} level (FBI data).

The above example is just one illustration on the power of information and how it helps to reinforce democracy - in above case, economic democracy. This essay aims to further explore the importance of information for democracy from a multidimensional perspective.

We will first try to understand the technicalities of information and democracy and then establish how former is currency of the latter. We will analyse the current framework in India that support this, we will look at some of the challenges and then try to provide possible solutions as a way forward.

Let's understand democracy first

While every school going kid is aware of the common phrase that defines democracy — "of the people, by the people, and for the people", but very many understand its true power or exercise it in its complete essence.

After all, democracy is not merely a five year ballot and paper exercise (nowadays EVM), but it's a daily plebescite. It's not merely voting to elect our representative but also participating in governance process, holding the elected accountable for their actions and above all being an informed citizenry.

For truly participative, inclusive and consensus oriented governance architecture ensure democracy, and not just choosing our area's MP or MLA.

But the question then is, how can citizens participate in this daily model of democracy? The answer is to put their leaders accountable, to pressure them to take better decisions. And, the way to do that is getting the right information first.

Importance of Information

While Warren Buffet remarked that data is the new oil of 21st century, it was back in 18th century that Thomas Jefferson remarked information as the currency (of democracy). One can ^{only} ~~also~~ smile and realize how this quote has come of age. It's relevant now more than ever — especially for India, which is entering into Amerit Kaal of independence.

Information provides basic info and further details about day to day working of a government department. It provides information about its finances, how are they utilized, current projects, personnel shortages etc. etc. It has importance for all dimensions of our democracy.

For ensuring political democracy, it is perhaps sacrosanct. It helps to ensure that those elected are only subservient to the common masses that sent them to temple of democracy - Parliament. In the current day, issues like criminalization of politics (noted by 2nd ARC report) can only be dealt if we have more information. Information like candidates' assets, criminal antecedents, educational background guide masses to vote more effectively.

For economic democracy, information helps to uphold important financial institutions - Ministry of Finance, RBI, SEBI up on their toes. It's very helpful to prevent crony capitalism. Consider the example of 2G scam which was exposed by CAG (with help of budget data, it's mandated to audit).

Further for an economy which is mixed (of public & private sector), it's more important. Thomas Picketty agrees that inequality spreads due to anti-competitive nature of firms & poor rule of law. RTI applications on PSU misadventures can help prevent it.

For social democracy, information helps to uphold the mandate the welfare state. Consider the example of a small girl in Lucknow who filed an RTI

to Chief Minister's office to take action to remove the garbage near her premises that was preventing her to access schools.

As government provides / runs important schemes especially for the vulnerable sections of society, it's important to check their misfeasances and ensure effective utilization of public funds.

Apart from the traditional areas of checks on government; it's equally important to ensure accountability of judiciary as well. Consider the example of suo-motu released Annual Report by Odisha High Court which provides an insight into number of cases pending, state of judicial infrastructure, even number of cases ^(internal complaints) against judges as well.

Good Governance

UNDP while defining good governance provides important principles like rule of law, transparency, accountability, participation, inclusive process, consensus-oriented, effective and efficient. All these are linked to information.

It can be practised in two ways - proactively and reactively. In proactive method, government officers provide information (publish reports, data, files) on their own, while in reactive way, they provide it when asked from them (eg., through RTI application).

We analyse the current architecture in India.

India & Right to Information

While the constitution itself provides for right to information as a fundamental right (under 19(1)(a)), it has also been provided through a specialised sunshine legislation of RTI 2005. It provides the current institutional framework.

Thus, India follows a mix of proactive as well as reactive method of seeking information. In some cases, institutions like CAG, Parliamentary Accounts Committee, appropriation bill provides that government provides details of their accounts annually. In other cases, normal citizen can ask for information by filing an RTI.

Further there are institutions like Information Commission that uphold the citizen's rights and act against any errant public information officer.

However, there are certain challenges in enforcing this right in spirit. Recently, Sarkam Nagrik Sangathan also highlighted its fears in erosion of RTI.

Challenges

First, there are bureaucratic challenges to working ~~of~~ information commission themselves. They are ~~a~~ under-staffed and in many states ⁱⁿ hand-in-gloves with political machinery. Then there is ignorant attitude of certain public information officers.

Secondly, citizens themselves are not much aware of the process and also about their responsibility beyond choosing their representatives. They fear getting entangled into "dirty" politics.

Thirdly, the data architecture of government departments is not well evolved. There are issues in accessing

the data asked and many times the quality of data is not upto mark. Further, in many cases data is maintained in manual files & not digitally.

Lastly, a new issue of "sealed cover jurisprudence" and hiding/protecting data under official secrets Act also erode the power of RTI. 2nd ARC has called for its removal.

Way Ahead

Edmund Burke famously remarked that "greatest mistake one can do is to do nothing, thinking he can do so little". Nothing can be more in rectifying the current lacunae in seeking information.

It requires a whole of government approach with active participation from media and civil society organizations to take the relevant

reforms for strengthening RTI. 2nd
ARC recommendations in this context are
applicable. Further Parliament will be
better placed to take up the debate and
holistically reform the Act through relevant
amendments.

India is the oldest democracy
and as she reclaims her position of being
Vishwa Guru back, it's relevant to strengthen
the democratic processes back at home. This
can be a guiding light for world to follow.

2) To write an essay on the following
"Believe in power of argument rather
than argument of power."

David Letterman asked the young
Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala as to what
she would do if she were to meet the
person who shot her!? she replied that
while she initially thought of hitting him
with her shoe but she is now convinced
that she will forgive him and tell him
about the importance of education. She said
that she will argue with the Talib to allow
women to pursue education.

Malala Yousafzai believes
that with guns you can kill a few
terrorists but with education you can
kill terrorism. She aptly epitomises
the theme of this essay which argues for
debate, dialogues, discussion than power.

This essay thus aims to further allude to the importance of giving arguments and its power through various examples across time and space. We will first theoretically analyse what is the argument of power and then establish why power of argument is rather more.

We will evaluate in this essay why believing in power of argument is important today, given the multiple challenges we face today. We will conclude by understanding how arguments can be made more effective.

Let's begin with understanding the theoretical aspect of power & arguments.

Argument of power

There is an old saying in Indian villages - "Jiski Laadhe Uski Bhaais" (which translates to - the one who owns the stick, owns the bull). Historically, it has been

believed that the one who is more powerful is victorious. We hear about ancient rulers like Napoleon having huge armies equipped with infantry, weapons, horses and what not.

It has been argued that real battles are fought on ground, in the battlefield where the more powerful survives. Thus, we find plethora of examples of rulers waging war. Even Hitler thought that he could win the entire world in Blitzkrieg.

Well, history proves them wrong. It's not the mere powerful who win in longer run but the one who is more persuasive. We now understand the importance of arguments.

Power of argument

An argument is a counter opinion advanced to the opposite side to convince them to change their

values, view-points and ^{even} their attitude and behaviour in our favour. It emphasises on debate and discussion.

Consider the most famous debate between Adi Shankaracharya and Mandan Mishra, presided over by latter's wife. There were multiple philosophies and way of life at that time but the ~~time~~ too resorted to arguments & counter arguments to convince the other, rather than gathering their followers and beating each other up (which is sadly visible today).

It emphasises on peaceful settlement of disputes that is in everyone's favour. It provides for a long-lasting and more effective tool to find an alternative scenario of win-win rather than viewing it as a zero-sum

game.

We now establish how it's more effective than power and why we must believe in it.

Power's powerlessness

In ancient India, when Ashoka, a chakravartin samrat, won the Kalinga Battle, he felt that he had lost everything. Seeing the river of blood and mourning wives, daughters and sisters he realized the importance of Dhamma. 13th rock edict shows how he entered the phase of Dhammaghosh from Berigresh.

While arguing in favour of Dhamma - righteousness and duty of citizens, he could garner support of many not only within his kingdom but outside as well - Sri Lanka, South East Asia. We remember him today not for the battles he won but for his propagation of Dhamma.

In medieval India, Akbar showed the importance of dialogue & discussion, whilst maintaining a fine balance with strong army. He reached

out to the Rajput rulers and tried to understand their grievances rather than simply attacking them.

In modern India, Grandhi through his non-violent satyagraha guided the Indian freedom struggle and fought on right morals and principles instead of using power against oppressive imperial rulers.

As it's said that an army of principles can penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot. We now analyse why this is more relevant today than ever.

Relevance in present context

We face multiple challenges today, both of national and international level which can be effectively resolved with gs. arguments / dialogue rather than brute force.

Consider the current war in Europe between Russia and Ukraine. While some countries are supplying weapons to the belligerents, India believes in power of diplomacy and reliance on UN Charter to amicably resolve the dispute. Current deal brokered by UN to supply food grains from Black sea further euphemise the same.

Back at home, challenges like left-wing extremism, north-east insurgency can be better dealt with their approach of dialogued development. It is evident in multiple negotiations that Government of India brokered recently — Bru Agreement, Bodo Peace Accord, Karbi Anglong Agreement, ongoing discussion with NSCs(IN), reduction of AAFSPA.

Even radicalisation can be dealt with effective reaching out to those

brain-washed and providing a holistic
surrender-un-rehabilitation process.

Various programs in Jammu & Kashmir
like Mission Sadbhavana, Himayat, Kaushal
Vikas Yojana show the success of our
efforts in dialogue process.

Even challenge like polarisation,
intolerance can be solved when we
debate and provide each other with
alternate views. Death threats, hate
speeches, communal violence will only
worsen situation - there are only losers and
no winners. NCRB data points to 500% increase
in cases registered under Section 153A, clearly
power lies in argument which we are
failing to acknowledge.

At a personal level also, this
can bring wonders. Consider a parent
who beats up a child when he does
something wrong vs a parent who commends

The child that what he did was wrong.
Research has shown that positive reinforcement is a better and effective parenting technique than use of physical abuse (as matter of sight).

These examples clearly highlight the importance of using arguments. But we also need to understand that in some circumstances argument may not be effective.

Need for a fine balance

Rashmishah, by Dinkar Ji shows how Krishna goes to Duryodhan to convince him to give 5 groves (villages) to Pandava and avoid war. But he was not satisfied with the proposal and sought to teach a lesson to Krishna rather. What happened next was for the entire world to see.

Through this example we only want to highlight that many times power becomes a necessary evil and has to be used.

Thus, one must not shy away from using power if alternative options are exhausted. This is also the guiding principle of just-war theory. But this must be only after option of dialogue is no longer successful.

We, therefore, now study how arguments can be made more effective

[Effective persuasion]

Aristotle has emphasised on the three principles of ethos, logos and pathos equally. Thus, there must be a good mix of emotions, logic as well as facts.

It is important to use the five powers of persuasion. First is referent power - use of authority second is expert power - use of well established

facts, data-points which cannot be countered.
There is emotional power - one must struck
the right chord. Fourth is power of incentives,
so that people are motivated to act
in your favour. And finally, there is
coercive power - which implies use of sufficient
deterrent to stop acting against your
arguments.

Mahatma Gandhi famously said
that in little ways you can shake
the world. We must thus believe first
in power of argument before arguing
for use of power.