



Being a true Republic

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(Mains GS 2 : Indian Constitution—Historical Underpinnings, Evolution, Features, Amendments, Significant Provisions and Basic Structure.)

Context:

The Preamble to the Constitution declares that India is a '**Republic**' which shows that India has a form of government in which "supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives" and the country is considered a "public matter", not the private concern or property of the rulers.

Anti-monarchical:

- The Greeks defined monarchy as the 'rule of one (mono)', a form of government where one person rules and all others obey; one is sovereign, all others his subjects.
- In Indian context it is associated with the hereditary rule of Maharajas and Maharanis but in the Greek definition of the term, it also covers rule by modern dictators (autocracy).
- Perhaps the most pernicious quality about monarchy is that it subjects people to the whim and fancy of one person, to his arbitrary will and he becomes judge and jury, makes and executes laws, decides when they are violated, and rewards and punishes as he pleases.

Collective interest:

- The English word 'republic' is derived from the Latin 'Res publica' i.e. the public thing which translates in the political domain into decision-making in the open, in full view of all.
- A republic then is associated with what we today call the 'public sphere', an open space where people put forward claims about what is good for the community, what is in collective interest.
- After discussing, debating and deliberating upon them, they reach decisions about which laws to have and what course of action to take, thus a republic offers 'government by free and open discussion'.

Breeds slavery:.

- Monarchy entails surrender to the arbitrary power of another person, allowing whimsical intrusion in our choices, living at the mercy of the master. It breeds slavery.
- Those who live for long periods under subjection of others tend to develop slavishness and lose a vibrant sense of their own agency and capacity to think for themselves or make decisions about their own lives.
- For this reason, Gandhi used the idea of Swaraj to challenge not only political colonisation by the British, but the colonisation of our minds because rule by one makes people unfree and enslaves.

Political liberty:

- For republic-lovers, political liberty means not unbridled freedom to do whatever one pleases (negative liberty), but to live by laws made by citizens themselves, that are a product of their own will, not the arbitrary will of others.
- This explains why republics have a constitution generated by a deliberative body of citizens which provides the basic law of the land, the fundamental framework of governance.
- The phrase "We, the People" in the Constitution is not a mere literary embellishment but central to a republican constitution.
- The willingness to live by self-made regulations but enforced by public power or the state also means that those who value a republic are not against states *per se* but against those that take away our political freedom.

A separate commitment:

- The word 'republic' covers all that is meant by the term 'democratic' and our own Constituent Assembly initially took the view that since the word 'republic' contains the word 'democratic', it may be unnecessary to use both.
- This would have been in keeping with the French republican tradition where the two terms are used interchangeably.

- However, after announcing its commitment to sever its links with an external, imperial monarch, and with all existing and future claims of local rajas and make India a republic, B.R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru conceded that since an undemocratic republic is conceivable, a separate commitment to democratic institutions is necessary.

Wise decision:

- It was wise to keep both terms in the Preamble as the idea of the republic conveys that decisions shall be made not by a single individual but by citizens after due deliberation in an open forum.
- But this is consistent with a narrow criterion of who counts as a citizen as in ancient India probably aristocratic clan-republics existed which were far from democratic.
- In ancient Greece, slaves, women, and foreigners were not considered citizens and excluded from decision-making.

Make inclusive:

- Indeed, for many Greek thinkers, democracy had a negative connotation precisely because it was believed to involve everyone, including plebeians, what we contemptuously call 'the mob'.
- What the term 'democratic' brings to our **Constitution** is that citizenship be available to everyone, regardless of their wealth, education, gender, perceived social ranking, religion, race, or ideological beliefs.
- The word '**democracy**' makes the republic inclusive as no one is excluded from citizenship.

Vigilant citizens:

- A republic must have perpetually vigilant citizens who act as watchdogs, monitor their representatives, and retain the right to contest any law or policy made on their behalf.
- By going beyond mere counting of heads, the term 'republic' brings free public discussion to our democratic constitution and gives depth to our democracy.
- It is mandatory that decisions taken by the representatives of the people be properly deliberated, remain open to scrutiny, and be publicly, legally contested even after they have been made.

Conclusion:

When the farmers peacefully challenged the three farm laws, they exercised not only their democratic rights but also exhibited the highest of republican virtues.