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CHAPTER 8: CITIZENS ROLES IN A DEMOCRACY

Sovereignty resides in and flows from the people in a democracy. They have a collective right to choose their governmental, political and electoral systems as part of self-determination. These precepts are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in modern constitutions the world over. For democracy to deliver, citizens must become informed about issues that can improve their lives. Barriers to citizen participation are multiple in every country. For full citizenship to be achieved, we must remove these barriers.

**CITIZEN/CITIZENSHIP**

The term citizen has an inherently political meaning that implies a certain type of relationship between the people and government. Citizens have certain rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decisions that affect public welfare. In ancient Rome, it was considered a privileged status to be called citizen because the status was not accorded to all inhabitants of the Roman Empire like slaves, serfs, etc.

Citizenship of a state may be acquired by birth or by naturalization. A man becomes a citizen of a particular state if his parents are citizens of that state or if he is born within the territory of the state. On the other hand, the process by which an individual may voluntary change his or her citizenship of a state to another state is known as naturalization.

Citizenship is divided into Civil, Political and Social citizenship. Civil citizenship refers to the rights necessary to protect individual liberty. Political citizenship is associated with participation in the democratic exercise of political power. Social citizenship embodies the claim that citizens ought to have access to those resources that allow them to live a civilised existence in accordance with the standards prevailing in the society.

Citizenship does not have just one definition, it means different things to different people. For example, Brannan argues that the concept of citizenship holds that citizenship is not solely comprised of passive membership of a political entity, but that being active is an essential of being a citizen. However Glover argues that there are three dimensions of active citizenship: ethical, integrative and educative citizenship. Ethical citizenship understands active participation in a collective strive towards the public good as an essential feature of citizenship. Integrative citizenship needs engagement in a wide sphere of participation that can go beyond formal political practices and institutions. Educative citizenship refers to the process that develops a moral, practical, and intellectual sense of self in individuals when they practice their citizenship. But whichever ways one looks at the concept, citizenship is a privileged status conferred by states on its people either by birth or by naturalisation.

**Citizens’ Rights**

Individual’s rights and liberties are the groundwork of the state since it exists to enable men to live and develop fully. In order to let the citizens have a share in the running of his/her government, a group of rights is very essential. A right may therefore be defined as a privilege or prerogative conferred by law upon a person or group. When a privilege is expressed within the framework of constitution of the state, it becomes a civil right.

**Democracy**

It has been etymology established that the word democracy is derived from the Greek word “demos” meaning people and “kratos” meaning rule, that is rule by the people. The concept of democracy first originated in Ancient Greece, but it was a limited institution that it exclude slaves, labourers and aliens from exercising political rights. The idea that all citizens, high or low, within the state are entitled to take part in the running of the affairs of the state was first advocated in England after the great civil war of the seventeenth century. The American colonies, having revolted against England successfully, developed democratic ideas and institutions as a way of life.

Abraham Lincoln, former American president, perceived democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Since there is no single definition of democracy however, what can be deduced from the various definitions of democracy are the following features:

* The fundamental rights of the citizen is guaranteed
* Independent and impartial judiciary
* Existence of rule of law
* Freedom of press, etc.

While the state provides rights and liberties, all citizens have duties to the state. Democratic citizens recognise that they not only have rights, they have responsibilities:

* A citizen in democracy should have the duty to vote.
* A citizen should be willing to pay taxes.
* A good citizen must have the duty to obey the law.
* A good citizen must refrain from destructive criticisms but must be prepared to offer constructive alternatives to government policies
* A citizen must refrain from interference with the rights of other members of the community.
* A good citizen must support public education in every way possible.

Besides the rights, citizens must be critical of what the government does. At the same time, while being critical, citizens must also not lose sight of the pursuit of public interest. A positive attitude should be maintained with development of the state being priority.