

Democracy and illiteracy do not move together

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Essay

“The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of All”

—(John F. Kennedy)—

Democracy, in its true essence, is a system of governance where the authority rests with the people, exercised either directly or through elected representation. It thrives on principles of equality, accountability, freedom of choice, and informed participation in political and social decision-making. For democracy to

function effectively, citizen must not only enjoy the right to vote but must also be equipped with the knowledge and awareness necessary to make rational choices. In the context education plays a pivotal role, as it enlightens individuals about their rights, duties and the consequences of governance structures. On the other hand, illiteracy refers to the inability of individuals to read, write, or comprehend basic information. It is not merely the absence of formal education but also the lack of awareness, critical thinking, and civic sense. Illiteracy restricts citizens from engaging meaningfully in democratic process. It renders them vulnerable to manipulation, exploitation, and populist rhetoric, preventing the exercise of informed judgement. An illiterate society struggles to hold leaders accountable, challenge corruption, or demand social justice. Therefore, democracy and illiteracy cannot move together. While democracy demands an enlightened citizenry capable of informed participation, illiteracy breeds ignorance and dependency. Without education, democracy becomes hollow reduced to form without substance, vulnerable to failure, and unable to achieve its true objectives of liberty, equality and justice.

The political evaluation of

humankind reflects the gradual transformation of governance from primitive authority structure to modern democratic structure.

In early human societies, leadership was informal, often based on strength, wisdom, or kinship ties. As population expanded, tribes and clans developed customary rules, giving rise to monarchies and city-states, where centralized power ensured order but limited individual freedoms. With the growth of empires in ancient civilization like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, political institution became more more complex, incorporating laws, bureaucracy, and organized militaries.

The emergence of Philosophy in classical Greece introduced concepts of citizenship, justice and democracy, while Rome institutionalized republican ideals. The medieval period shifted authority toward feudal lords and the church, restricting civic participation. The Enlightenment, however, reignited ideas of liberty equality and the sovereignty, fueling revolutions that shaped modern nation-states.

Today political evolution continued, balancing democracy, globalization, and technology is shaping governance for the future.

"Democracy gives every man
the rights to be his
own Oppressor"

—(James Russell Lowell)—

Democracy stands firm on certain foundational pillars that ensure its stability and effectiveness. Among these, an informed citizenry is the most vital. Citizens who are educated and politically aware can make rational choices, resist manipulation, and hold leaders accountable. Without awareness, democracy risks becoming hollow, dominated by populism and exploitation. Equally important is the Rule of Law, which guarantees that all individuals, including those in power, are subject to the same legal framework. It protects rights, maintains justice, and prevents the misuse of authority. Another indispensable pillar is the conduct of free and fair elections, where people's will be reflected transparently through regular and impartial voting. This process legitimizes government and strengthens public trust. Finally, strong state institutions, such as independent judiciary, transparent parliaments, professional bureaucracies, and free media ensure checks and balances, continuity and the smooth functioning of governance.

when these pillars work in harmony, democracy thrives as a system that delivers justice, equality, and representation. Conversely, when any of them weakens, the entire democratic structure risks instability and failure. Thus, informed citizenry, rule of law, accountability through election, and resilient institutions remain the bedrock of a healthy democracy.

Here are some facts that highlight the relation of illiteracy with democracy and why these factors hinder between democracy.

Firstly, this fact reveals the democracy and illiteracy cannot move together, as illiteracy makes societies vulnerable to manipulation. In Pakistan, feudal politics demonstrates this reality, where illiterate masses are often bound by loyalty to landlords rather than guided by informed choices. Votes are secured through coercion, promises of basic needs, or exploitation of dependence. Similarly, in India, caste politics has long been used to divide and control voters, reducing democracy to identity-based allegiance rather than rational decision making. These examples highlight how illiteracy weakens

democratic values, enabling exploitation instead of fostering accountability and genuine representation.

"Democracy is the form of government in which the the free are rulers"

— (Abraham Lincoln) —

Secondly, as illiteracy often breeds corruption and bad governance. An uninformed electorate struggles to question misuse of power, enabling leaders to engage in nepotism, bribery, and embezzlement without accountability. In many developing countries, corrupt officials exploit public ignorance to secure votes through false promises or monetary incentives. This weakens institutions, undermines service delivery, and erodes public trust in democracy. Instead of transparency and merit, governance becomes centered on personal gain and favoritism. Thus, illiteracy not only distorts democratic participation but also sustains cycles of corruption and ineffective governance.

Thirdly, as widespread illiteracy often paves the way for authoritarianism. When citizens lack awareness and political consciousness,

they fail to safeguard democratic values, making societies vulnerable to strongman and military rule. Many African States, for example, continue to swing between democracy and dictatorship, as unformed populations are easily swayed by populist rhetoric, ethnic divisions, or promises of stability. Illiteracy weakens civic resistance and reduce accountability, allowing authoritarian regims to consolidate power. Thus, with out an educated citizenry, democracy struggles to survive, and authoritarian tendencies find fertile ground.

Fourthly, as illiteracy reinforces social inequality and excludes marginalized groups from political participation. According to UNDP reports, there is a strong interconnection between literacy, equality and democratic inclusion. Societies with higher literacy rates demonstrate greater political awareness, equal representation, and stronger institutions. Conversely, where illiteracy persists, women, the poor and rural populations remain sidelined, unable to exercise their rights effectively. This widens the gap between elites and ordinary citizens, concentrating power in a few hands. Thus, without education,

democracy becomes exclusionary, undermining equality and genuine representation.

Fifthly, illiteracy undermines democracy by eroding the integrity of election through a weak and opaque electoral process. In Pakistan's 2024 general election, the fairness score dropped to just **49%**, the lowest since 2013, revealing deep flaws in the system. Around 2 million ballots were discarded, often due to voter confusion and ballot design tactics that misled illiterate voters. Additionally, mobile and internet service shutdown on election day disrupted transparency and delayed result transmission, raising serious credibility concerns. These shortcomings, exacerbated by widespread illiteracy, enable manipulation and undermine the very foundation of democratic legitimacy.

Moreover, as development stagnates in the absence of education, without literacy, citizens cannot contribute to innovation, good governance or social progress, leaving nations trapped in cycle of poverty and inequality. **Thomas Jefferson aptly argued that "an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people."** His words underline that education

is not merely a tool for personal growth but the very foundation of democracy and national advancement. Illiteracy, by contrast, weakens institutions, hinders economic growth, and prevents societies from realizing their full democratic potential.

Additionally, as illiteracy leads to poor policy outcomes that hinders national progress. In societies where citizens lack education, there is little public demand for essential sectors such as health, education and economic reforms. Political leaders, therefore, focus on short-term populist measures rather than sustainable development policies. Illiterate voters are often unaware of their rights and unable to evaluate the performance of governments, allowing inefficiency and neglect to persist. Consequently, critical areas like public health, quality education, and economic innovation remain underdeveloped, weakening democracy and entrenching cycle of poverty.

Other than that, illiteracy sustains patriarchal culture and ethnic divisions, weakening democratic inclusion. In societies where education is scarce,

traditional powers structure dominates restricting women's political participation and reinforcing male control in decision making. Similarly, lack of awareness fuels ethnic and provincial rivalries, as seen in countries like Pakistan where literacy gaps deepen mistrust among provinces. Illiterate communities often fall prey to divisive narratives, prioritizing clan, tribe, or ethnicity over national unity. Such tendencies fragment democracy, exclude marginalized voices, and prevent the system from evolving into a truly representative and participatory model.

Lastly, as illiterate contribute to downturns in economic conditions. An uninformed citizenry lacks the ability to demand prudent fiscal policies, enabling governments to pursue unsustainable borrowing and populist spending. This often results in high debt burdens, weak productivity, and declining investment in development sectors. Illiterate societies are also less equipped to adopt modern technologies, innovate or compete in global markets, further aggravating economic crises. Thus, without education, democracy struggles to deliver economy stability, and nations remain trapped in cycle of debt, poverty and dependency on

external financial assistance.

Similarly, developing nations with high illiteracy often struggle to sustain democracy, facing corruption and poor governance. In **South Asia**, rural Pakistan reflects vote manipulation under feudal influence, while in **Sub-Saharan Africa**, Nigeria shows how illiterate electorates enable authoritarianism and graft. Illiteracy undermines accountability, weakening democratic institutions and perpetuating underdevelopment.

While the adverse impacts of illiteracy on democracy are evident, it is equally important to explore the underlying causes. Various socio-economic and cultural factors fuel illiteracy, creating lasting barriers. These impediments not only obstruct educational access but also weaken democratic participation and governance.

One of the primary factors leading to illiteracy is financial incapability, as poverty restricts access to quality education. Families struggling to meet basic needs often withdraw children from school, pushing them into child labor for survival.

According to UNESCO's Global Education monitoring report (2023), financial hardship remains the leading cause of school dropouts in developing countries, reinforcing cycles of illiteracy and weakening democratic participation.

Another major factor leading to illiteracy is the absence of suitable ^{education} policies and weak implementation. In many developing nations, education is often underfunded, poorly managed, and politicized, resulting in inadequate schools, untrained teachers, and outdated curricula. UNESCO's Education highlights for all monitoring Report highlight that inconsistent policies and lack of long-term planning perpetuate illiteracy, creating barriers to social mobility, economic growth, and meaningful democratic participation.

Unseen poverty is a significant impediment to literacy, as hidden struggles of low-income families often go unaddressed in policymaking. Children from impoverished households are forced into labor instead of schooling, perpetuating illiteracy. According to IMF's 2023 report, nearly 40% of Pakistan's population lives below the poverty line, limiting access to education. Such poverty-driven exclusion

prevents citizens from developing awareness, thereby weakening democratic participation and reinforcing cycle of inequality.

Similarly, over population directly contributes to illiteracy by overburdening limited educational resources. In densely populated developing countries, schools face overcrowding, teacher shortages, and inadequate facilities. Families with many children often cannot afford education for all. This strain reduces literacy rates, hindering human development and weakening democratic participation.

Socio-cultural and religious barriers play a crucial role in sustaining illiteracy, particularly in conservative societies. Traditions that discourage female education, early marriages, or caste-based discrimination often prevent children from accessing schools. In some cases, rigid interpretations of religion are misused to oppose modern education. According to **UNICEF**, such barriers disproportionately affect rural communities, limiting literacy growth, reinforcing inequality, and impeding democracy by excluding large segments of the population from participation.

How is it Possible for democracy to work with an illiterate people who are dying of hunger? But with that people we made a democracy work.

— (Indira Gandhi)

One effective way to mend the fault line between democracy and illiteracy is ensuring Universal access to free education, with special focus on rural and marginalized communities. Free and compulsory schooling can break barriers of poverty and inequality by bringing disadvantaged children into classrooms. According to UNESCO, targeted investment in rural education significantly improves literacy, enabling citizens to participate meaningfully in democratic process and strengthening governance through informed political engagement.

Another way to bridge the gap between democracy and illiteracy through political literacy programs, such as voter education, awareness campaigns, and civic training. These initiatives empower citizens to understand their rights, evaluate policies, and hold leaders accountable. Election commission-led voter education drives and NGO awareness campaign in developing countries have shown positive results. By promoting informed

participation, such programs. Strengthen democratic values, reduce manipulation, and ensure more accountable and transparent governance.

Government and NGO participation is vital to increase literacy and strengthen democracy. Government must allocate sufficient budgets, build schools, and train teachers, while NGOs can bridge gaps through community-based initiatives, mobile schools, and advocacy. In Pakistan and Sub-Saharan Africa, NGOs like BRAC and The Citizens Foundation have successfully expanded education access. collaborative efforts ensure marginalized group receive opportunities, fostering an informed citizenry capable of safeguarding democratic values and promoting accountable governance.

Technology-driven literacy initiatives offer innovative solutions to strengthen democracy by expanding access to education. E-learning platforms, mobile apps, and digital classrooms provide affordable learning opportunities, especially in remote areas. Program like Pakistan's

Teleemabad and India's Diksha app (democrati)x demonstrate how technology reduce barriers, improves literacy, and equips citizens with awareness essential for democratic participation and accountability.

Effective population management is essential for increasing literacy and strengthening democracy. Overpopulation strain limited educational resources, leading to overcrowded school and poor quality of learning. By promoting family planning, awareness campaign, and inclusive health policies, government can balance population growth with available resources.

According to UNEPA, controlled population growth significantly improves literacy rates, enabling citizens to participate more effectively in democratic processes and fostering long-term social and political stability.

Incorporating civic education into school curricula is a powerful way to mend the fault line between democracy and illiteracy. Teaching students about rights, responsibilities, governance and critical thinking fosters informed future citizen. Countries like Sweden and Denmark have successfully integrated civic education, producing politically aware population that actively engage in democratic process. Such early training builds accountability, reduces manipulation, and strengthen democratic culture by nurturing a literate, participatory citizenry.

Promoting literacy accountability and rule of law, as educated citizen better understand rights and responsibilities. Awareness enable them to resist corruption, demand transparency, and uphold justice, ensuring democracy thrives on equality, fairness, and institutional trust.

In sum, democracy and illiteracy cannot coexist, as illiteracy weakens participation, accountability, and equality, leaving space for corruption, poor governance, and authoritarianism. Evidence from developing regions confirms that Uninformed citizens are easily exploited, undermining democratic ideals. Yet, this gap can be bridged through universal education, civic training, technology-driven initiatives, NGO-Government collaboration, and effective population management. By investing in literacy, societies can nurture informed citizens, strengthen institutions, and ensure democracy fulfills its promise of justice, inclusion, and sustainable development for all.

"Democracy needs support, and the best support for democracy comes from other democracies"

—(Benazir Bhutto)—