



THE NEW WAVE OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM: THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Zulafqar Ahmed

¹Zulafqar Ahmed is Doctoral Fellow at the department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University.

ABSTRACT

The crisis of liberal democracy is not new to us. It has been facing multiple crises during different phases of history. In the neo-liberal global order, liberal democracy has been facing several new challenges such as, unequal distribution of economic resources, widening income gap, authoritarianism, cynicism, and neo-liberal governability coupled with rising unemployment and militant attacks that has provided space to the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarianism across the globe and India as well. The crisis of liberal democracy is a global phenomenon in the sense that the Strongmen of 21st century are undermining it across the globe. Against this backdrop this paper try to decipher what are the factors which play pivotal role in the emergence of authoritarian populism across the world in general and India in particular.

KEYWORDS: Crisis, Democracy, Cynicism, Authoritarianism, Strongmen.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy has been the most suitable style of governance across the globe. Though, it has faced multiple challenges throughout the different epochs of history but despite of this, it managed to survive during the turbulent years only because of its self-correcting nature. Fortunately, it survived even during the tempestuous decade of 1920s when authoritarian regimes like Fascism and Nazism began to strengthening their footholds in Europe. The exquisiteness of this system unlike the other style of governance is; it accepts the criticism and provides space for deliberation and rectification. Ironically, liberal democracy got trapped into the crisis when we began taking it for granted. The Harvard university professor rightly pointed out in his book 'People vs. Democracy' that

"On the one side, we see the rise of "illiberal democracies" governments that claim to represent the "real" people of the nation, but have little regard for the individual or constitutional norms. Many refer to these movements as populist. At the same time, other flirt with what Mounk calls "Undemocratic liberalism", a style of governance which preserves rights but at the expense of democratic engagement and accountability."(Sitaraman 2018)

With the upsurge of populist movement in liberal democracy certain section of the society stated feeling deprived or marginalized that eventually instigated them against the ruling elites. In this obnoxious cycle of populists and marginalized; it is the liberal democracy which got assaulted. Political sociologist Larry Diamond warned of 'democratic recession'. He argues,

"His apprehensions were, since 2006, democratic breakdowns have increased, the quality and stability of democracy in major emerging nations like Turkey and Hungary has declined, deepening of authoritarianism in states like Russia and China, poor performance of democracy in US and other influential counties; and lack of will to promote democracy abroad."(Chung 2019)

There are many scholars like Larry Diamond, Yascha Mounk, Alen Toplisek, Daniel Ziblatt and Ziya Onis¹ who recently warned us about the crisis of liberal democracy. According to them, there are many crises which liberal democracy is facing today like, neo-liberalism, authoritarianism, populism, Globalization etc.

¹ These scholars have warned us about the crisis of liberal democracy and have suggested measures how to save it.



This article is framed as follows. I begin with the brief discussion that how Neo-liberalism is posing threat to the liberal democracy in Neo-liberal world order by reducing its political realms to the maximum extent and by undermining the decision-making powers of sovereign states. I also discuss how the increasing income gap between rich and poor is providing fertile grounds to the protests that are erupting against economic inequality and social injustice across the globe. Further, we emphasis on how neo-liberal policies of the governments are aggravating the complications and anxieties of the marginalized. In second part of the paper, I use ideological lens to understand that how the new wave of authoritarian populism is relentlessly undermining the core of liberal democracy. In this part special emphasis has been given on countries such as, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and India. Finally, I use multivariate analysis to show that how people across the globe are cynical about the functioning of democratic institutions in their respective countries.

NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The emergence of Neo-liberalism came after the world wide economic crisis of 1970s and the fiscal deficit faced by the developed countries.² Neo-liberalism was seen as a 'political project' to overcome these economic crises. This project made the new paradigm shift that state and society should not control the market rather market should control the state and society. It was based on the idea that economic rationality should be expanded to non-economic realms and institutions (Brown 2005). Generally, neo-liberalism aimed at to expand the economic rationality into every sphere of life and to reduce the moral and political decision into cost-benefits analysis that includes all aspects of social and political life into economic calculation. None of moral values and political decision of liberal democracy fit into this economic calculation.

The nucleus of neo-liberalism is to remove the state's regulation from market and to reduce the responsibilities of state from individual life. In other words, it curtails the political realm to the maximum extent and focuses more upon the expansion of economic realm in ever sphere of life. Neo-liberalism is

affecting each sphere of individual life; be it the political representation or social recognition of an individual. Neo-liberalism is gradually turning democracy into 'competitive oligarchies. Further, it augments the interest of ruling class by unfair policy making (Mounk 2018). Consequently, it leads to the erosion of democracy so the trust of people from the institutions of democracy. Neo-liberalism can't stop chaos and instability that arises from increasing inequality. It increases trust deficit between the people and government that eventually leads to the collapse of social infrastructure on which the foundation of liberal democracy relies. The liberal democracy in the era of neo-liberalism is unable to respond the political, economics, and social demands of public due to lack of policy orientation and financial resources (E.Stiglitz 2002).

So far, we have seen that neo-liberalism is posing threat to liberal democracy by gradually intensifying inequality, reducing political realm, undermining autonomy of policy-making, distorting and neutralizing representative institutions, creating crisis of legitimacy. Democratic governments find it difficult to respond the demands of people in the era of neo-liberalism, and people trust on democracy has been declining swiftly. Therefore, people's call for democratic reforms across the world is getting louder day by day.

WIDENING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Arguably, political and social equality is just a mirage without economic equality. The widening income gap between rich and poor in the neo-liberal world is quite perturbing. It is argued that no other style of governance can provide more conducive environment for capitalism to flourish than democracy. Due the advancement of capitalism the income gap between rich and poor is widening swiftly. The unequal distribution of resources in the neo-liberal world has grossly generated insecurities for the marginalized sections of society across the globe. The world Social Report 2020 says that

"Inequality in a rapid changing world comes as we confront the harsh realities of a deeply unequal global landscape. In North and South alike, mass protest have flared up, fueled by a combination of economic woes, growing inequalities and job insecurity. Income disparities and lack of opportunities are creating a vicious cycle of inequality, frustration and discontent across generations." (World social report 2020 2020)

² In 1970s the whole world witnessed economic crisis, especially, the countries like United States, Western Europe New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. Experts believe that these economic crises occurred due to the upsurge in oil prices.



Protests have flared up across the globe from the last few years. Although, each protest has had different trigger but the underlying frustration of all the protests is same. Almost, all the protests got triggered because of economic concerns which people have been facing in the neo-liberal world. Due to economic reforms (liberalization & privatization) welfare policies of the states have taken back steps. Unresponsive and ill-formed policies of governments are unable to meet the demands of masses which eventually generate cynicism among the masses regarding ruling dispensations. According to India inequality report 2018

“The wealth held by the richest 100 billions, increased from \$49 billion in 2004 to \$ 479 in 2017; the wealth held by the billionaires, increased almost 10 times in a decade. There has been a steady rise in the numbers of billionaires in 2004 to 46 in 2012 and 101 in 2017. India is fourth, behind USA, China, and Germany in the numbers of billionaires.”(India inequality report 2018)

In India’s case, from the post-economic reforms the gap between rich and poor has got widened. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi advised people to become ‘Atmanirbhar. To being atmanirbhar in the liberal democracy is convenient for elites but it would be brutal for marginalized. As Oshik Sircar pointed out in his recent article that “*India as a state is both, political organization and mercantile company.*”(Sircar 2020) This mercantile company has benefitted more to Crony capitalists than marginalized sections of the society.³

It is argued that economic inequality always leads to unrest in the society. If the economic resources of the country are distributed equally then there remain less chances of instability. The unrest often takes place in those counties where the income gap between elites and common citizens is wider. The unequal distribution of wealth and income would adversely affect the individual ability to actively participate in the democratic process. Consequently, it would generate procedural inequality to the extent that those who possess less wealth and income may not get the same benefits from the government’s schemes and policies as those who possess more wealth and income. Surely, equal distribution of economic resources would strengthen the democratic process and eventually it

would reduce pressure from the redistributive system. Moreover, it would restore the individual trust on the democratic institutions when a democratic regime would set a fair tax rate system for the purpose of redistribution.

RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM POPULISM

It was cultural theorist Stuart Hall who coined the term ‘authoritarian populism’ to refer it a specific kind of conservative politics. He argued that

“Authoritarian populism was characterized by the construction of contradiction between the common people and elites, which is then used to justify the imposition of repressive measures by the state. According to Hall, such a contradiction was constructed in part by depicting specific groups as ominous other – that is, as a threat to and an enemy of the interests of putative people. The Other-typically political dissidents and minority groups- is in made the target of repression and punitive discipline, all in the name of supposed common interest. In this process conservative forces tighten their grip on society and body politics, to the detriment, obviously, of democratic life.” (Nilsen 2018)

Although, the context of Hall arguments may be different but it proves true to countries like, India, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. The first strategy that populist leaders adopt is to create ‘mythical others’. They create something which made putative people believe that ‘mythical others’ could harm their interest. By keeping fear, anxieties, and threat of loss of pride in mind they eventually end up to elect strongmen as their protectors. These populists divide people between elites and masses and tell them if they come to the power then they will resolve all social, political, and economic problems. They continuously create enemies because when they get failed in fulfilling demands of the people then they fall back on this narrative that national enemies still exist⁴. Populists often attack those institutions which they believe may pose threat to them like, media is attacked because of exposing their ‘hidden agendas’ judges are ousted as making ruling against ‘popular will’ opposition parties are attacked as they are ‘anti-nationals’ or enemies of the nation. Jason Stanley rightly pointed out that

³ It has been noticed that the number of billionaires have increased tremendously across the globe since past few years and India is not the exception to this case, whereas, the economic conditions of marginalized is deploring with every passing day.

⁴ Victor Orban, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Donald Trump, and Narendra Modi are the best examples of populists who came to power by invoking all these tactics to manipulate majority of voters in their favor.



“Non-democratic rule has made this tactic of undermining the independent judiciary particularly salient, as both countries introduced laws to replace independent judges with the party loyalists soon after anti-democratic regimes took power officially, the justification was that prior practices of judicially neutrality were a mask for a bias against the ruling party. In the name of rooting out corruption and supposed bias, fascist politicians attack and diminish the institution that might otherwise check powers.”(Stanley 2018)

Populists tend to simplify politics and make people believe that solution of political and social problems is quite easy. They also create this discourse that if they come to the power then they will swiftly resolve all problems after considering public will. According to Muller,

“Populism is a ‘permanent shadow’ and ‘real danger’ to modern representative democracy. However, the widespread increase in populist powers in advanced, western democratic nations shares a special factor; the reaction against the helplessness and loss of legitimacy demonstrated by the liberal democracy at a time when globalization has significantly progressed. They seek to ‘repoliticize’ key matters that impact people’s lives, rising up against depoliticization, and warn of representative democracy’s failure to properly represent the people’ will through ‘the direct revelation of popular will’.” (Mounk, 2018; Mudde, 2015)

Since few years a new movement of authoritarianism populism has tightened its grip in different countries of the world. Authoritarianism populism coupled with far-right nationalism has emerged in the countries like Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey, USA and Netherlands. Recently, both Hungary and Poland witnessed swift transition from democratic state to authoritarian state. There has been a latent authoritarian force (fascism) in democracies like India, USA, Hungary, and Poland. Similar actions were taken in Turkey by the president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He dismissed more than 5,000 thousands Deans and Professors from their post in the suspicion that they were either having pro-democracy or pro-left

sentiments. It is argued that by that move he attacked the very idea of higher education and university. Dissenting voices were crushed in the fear of toppling of regime. It all doesn’t stop here, in 2017, when Erdogan won National Referendum he introduced a new educational curriculum for schools. The purpose of this move was to de-emphasis secular ideals and eliminates scientific theories that counter religious ideology.⁵

India is almost replica of what happened in above mentioned countries. In 2014, when Narendra Modi led BJP government took the rein of power then authoritarianism began casting its shadow on Indian democracy. As it’s argued, authoritarianism is inversely proportionate to liberalism. It adversely affects individual freedom such as freedom of speech, freedom of movement, dress/marriage food etc. Since past few years every freedom of individual has been crushed, universities were attacked, curriculum of the schools was changed, professors and journalists were charged in the fabricated cases. Moreover, the power-checking institutions of the state were crippled down. It won’t be wrong to state that a new kind of “*Surveillant state*” has been created which eventually amputated ‘*Liberal*’ from the Indian democracy.

Besides, there are some countries where populist party took over the charge like, in UK Independence Party was successful in initiating the Brexit referendum. The populist party of Sweden, Germany, Netherlands and Spain secured second or third party status in their respective general election. This is a new advancement in the field of politics as the influence of key political parties is declining and populists are setting up new agendas which are agreeable to all.

⁵ The very first thing populist do before the elections is they try to uproot the secular and democratic values of any society. They exploit the fault lines which exist between different groups so that the narrative of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ could be generated for ripening the maximum benefits.



Following are some states where either Populist Party or leader have got first or second majority in the parliamentary general election since the last few years.

States	Populists Party/Leader	Recent key political result
India	Narendra Modi	Prime Minister, 2014-2019-present. He got (303/543) seats in parliamentary general election of 2019.
United States	Donald Trump	Far right, political newcomer elected as the Republican Party candidate in the 2016 elections.
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdogan	In April 2017, a constitutional referendum resulted into 51.4% voting happened in favor of presidential candidate Recep Tayyip Erdogan
Poland	Law and Justice Party (PiS)	In 2015 general election. PiS got 235/460 seats in the House and 66/100 seats in the Senate.
Hungary	Victor Orban	Prime Minister, 1998-2010-present. His party got more than two-third parliamentary majority (133/199) in the April 2018 general election
Netherland	Party for Freedom	Far right, Anti-Muslim became the second largest party in general elections in March, 2017 with 13.1 percent of votes

Figure 1. Different states their populist parties or leaders and their recent victories in general elections.

Source: various reports and sources

GROWING CYNICISM

It is argues that success of any style of governance relies upon the trust which people pose on its institutions. The established democratic institutions are responsive to the aspirations and demands of the people. In the neo-liberal world, democratic institutions have become fragile which augmented insecurities and anxieties of the people. The strongmen of the 21st century are not actually defending the democracy rather they have utilized their respective positions in order to strengthen their regimes. In 2019, Pew research

organization conducted a survey in which opinions of the people were taken from different countries regarding their trust on democratic institutions. It was found from the different countries that those who described politicians corrupt were more dissatisfied than those who described them less corrupt. Satisfied and dissatisfied people's percentage regarding the working of democracy in their country has been shown in the following graph.

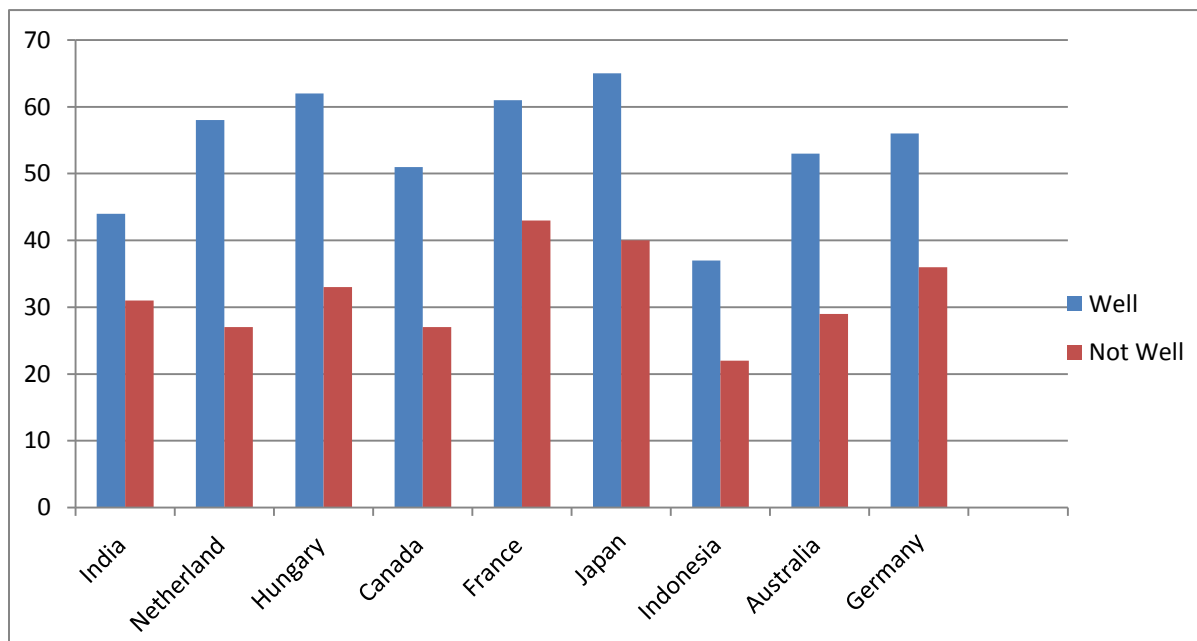


Figure 2. Opinion of People about Corrupt Politicians

Source (Pewresearch Organization 2019)

Note: The difference among people’s opinion is quite significant. It was find that approximately 40 percent of people said that democracy in their respective countries is functioning ‘Not well’.

In graph 2 percentages of those people have been shown who were satisfied or dissatisfied with the fairness of ‘Court system’ in their respective countries. Those who said courts are not fair were more

dissatisfied with the working of democracy in their country.

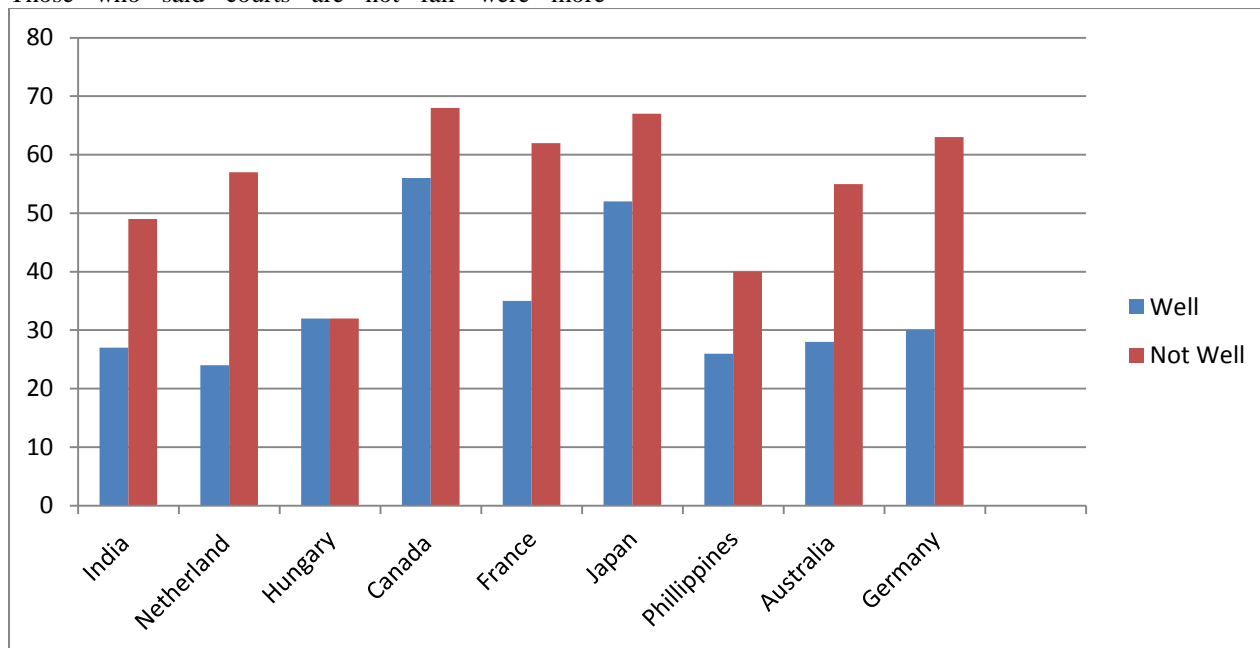


Figure 3. Opinion of People about Fairness of Court System

Source (Pewresearch Organization 2019)



Note: The difference among people’s opinion is quite significant. It was found that maximum number of people said that courts of their countries are functioning ‘Not well’.

In graph 3 Percentages of people are shown who say current ‘economic situation’ is bad are more dissatisfied with the way democracy is functioning in their countries than those who say current economic situation is good.

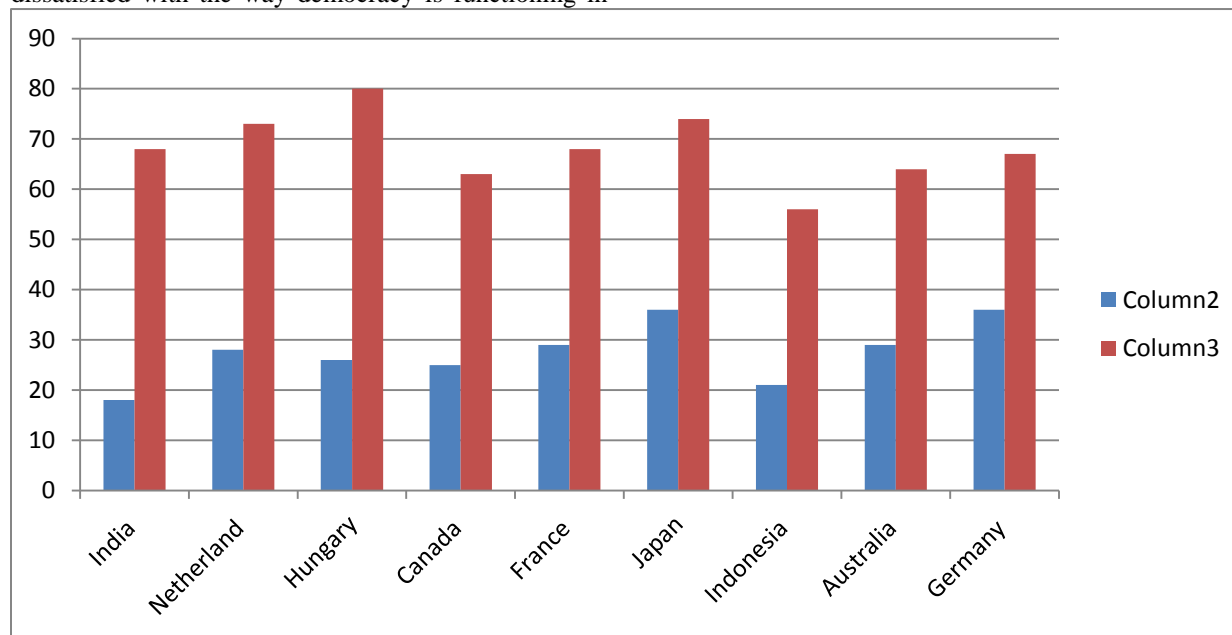


Figure 4. Opinion of People about their Current Economy

Source: (Pewresearch Organization 2019)

Note: The difference among people’s opinion is quite significant. It was find that the majority of people said that the ‘current economic condition is bad’ in their respective countries.

In graph 4 percentages of people are shown who think ‘free speech’ is not protected in their countries are more dissatisfied with functioning of democracy. Those who say rights of people to express their views in public are protected believe that democracy is functioning well in their countries.

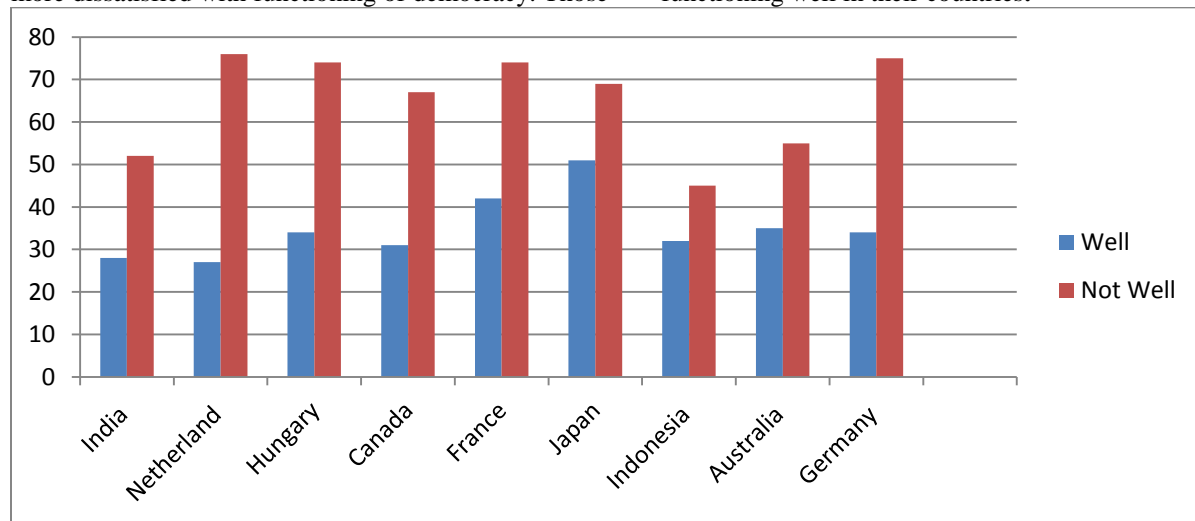


Figure 5. Opinion of People regarding the protection of ‘Freedom of Speech’

Source: (Pewresearch Organization 2019)



Note: The difference among people's opinion is quite significant. It was discovered that the majority of people said that 'freedom of speech' is not well protected in their respective countries.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, in many countries such as India, liberal democracy is on ventilator. Warning bells are ringing, telling us liberal democracy is on the path of demolition. Global economic crisis of 1970s, 2008-09, Occupy Wall Street movement provided us opportunities to learn something but it seems that we did not learn anything yet from these crises. Major threats that liberal democracy today faces are; populism, neo-liberalism, globalization. The globalization deeply embedded with liberal democracy is reducing the realms of politics and decision-making powers of sovereign states. People anxieties and frustration of people have grown; voices against globalization are getting louder. Populism itself is threatening liberal democracy by degrading its institutions which are considered as its main pillars. Harvard University political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt rightly pointed out in their book 'How democracies die' that "Most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals or soldiers but by the elected governments themselves" (Ziblatt 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that it is not Generals or Dictators who kill democracy rather it is demagogues who kill it by subverting the democratic institutions. Paradoxically, demagogues use electoral route to subvert the democracy and its institutions. Therefore, to rejuvenate the liberal democracy onus lies on the electorates to choose their representatives wisely. Simultaneously, we have to reassert our rights, reclaim our lost spaces, and have to forge the alliances among the marginalized sections of the society by cutting across caste, class, religion, and gender.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, Wendy. "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." In *Edgework: critical Essays on knowledge and Politics*, p-42. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
2. Chung, Jin Young. "Globalization and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy: The Political Dynamics of Neoliberalism and Populism." *The Journal of Inequality and Democracy Vol-2, no. 1* (June 2019): p-47.
3. E.Stiglitz, Joseph. *Globalization and its Discontents Revisited*. (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2002).
4. *India inequality report*. Oxfam India, 2018, p-7.
5. Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is In Danger & How To Save It*. (Harvard University Press, 2018).
6. Mudde, Cas. "The Problem With Populism." (February 17, 2015).
7. Nilsen, Alf Gunvald. "An Authoritarian India Is Beginning to Emerge." August 31, 2018.
8. Sircar, Oishik. "Critical Legal Thinking." *Postcolonial Liberalism's Double Binds*. (June 19, 2020).
9. Sitaraman, Ganesh. "Three crisis of liberal democracies." (March 17, 2018).
10. Stanley, Jason. *How fascism work: the politics of Us versus them. Vol. 1*. (New York: Random House, 2018).
11. *Why people are dissatisfied with how democracy is working?* Pewresearch organisation, 2019, p-4.
12. *World social report 2020*. UN: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p-4.
13. Ziblatt, Steven Levitsky and Daniel. *How Democracies Die*. (New York. Crown Publishing Group (NY), 2018).