

Original Article

Role of Citizens in Democracy

Atul Mohanrao Babar

A/P - Mahud BK, Tal-Sangola, Dist- Solapur. Maharashtra

Manuscript ID:
BN-2026-030204

ISSN: 3065-7865

Volume 3

Issue 2

February 2026

Pp. 18-20

Submitted: 10 Jan 2026

Revised: 20 Jan 2026

Accepted: 09 Feb 2026

Published: 28 Feb 2026

DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.19844304](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19844304)

DOI link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19844304>



Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://bnir.us>



Abstract

Democracy is a system of government based on the will of the people, where citizens play a central role in shaping governance and ensuring accountability. This paper examines the meaning of citizenship and the essential role citizens perform in a democratic society, particularly within the Indian context. It highlights the importance of active participation through voting, civic engagement, membership in civil society organizations, and the responsible exercise of rights and duties. The study emphasizes that democracy thrives only when citizens uphold values such as equality, freedom, secularism, social justice, and mutual respect. It also discusses the importance of constitutional mechanisms such as the Right to Information Act, 2005 in strengthening transparency and accountability. The paper concludes that responsible, informed, and proactive citizen participation is fundamental to sustaining a vibrant and effective democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Citizenship, Citizen Participation, Accountability, Voting Rights, Civil Society, Democratic Values, Indian Democracy, Rights and Duties, Governance

Introduction

A citizen is a person who, by place of birth, nationality of one or both parents, or naturalization is granted full rights and responsibilities as a member of a nation or political community. A person who, due to place of birth, naturalization, or other reasons (for example, citizenship of parents) is a member of a political community or of a civil state, such as a country or state, and is entitled to all the civil rights and protections thereof and owes allegiance to its government. Democracy literally rules by the people. The word democracy comes from the Greek word's "demos", meaning people, and "kratos" meaning power; so, democracy can be thought of as "power of the people": a way of governing which depends on the will of the people.

There are so many different models of democratic government around the world that it is sometimes easier to understand the idea of democracy in terms of what it definitely is not. Democracy, then, is not autocracy or dictatorship, where one person rules; and it is not oligarchy, where a small segment of society rules. Properly understood, democracy should not even be "rule of the majority", if that means that minorities' interests are ignored completely. A democracy, at least in theory, is government on behalf of all the people, according to their "will".

Today there are as many different forms of democracy as there are democratic nations in the world. No two systems are exactly the same and no one system can be taken as a "model". There are presidential and parliamentary democracies, democracies that are federal or unitary, democracies that use a proportional voting system, and ones that use a majoritarian system, democracies which are also monarchies, and so on. One thing that unites modern systems of democracy, and which also distinguishes them from the ancient model, is the use of representatives of the people. Instead of taking part directly in law making, modern democracies use elections to select representatives who are sent by the people to govern on their behalf. Such a system is known as representative democracy. It can lay some claim to being "democratic" because it is, at least to some degree, based on the two principles above: equality of all (one person – one vote), and the right of every individual to some degree of personal autonomy.

Many people feel a sense of commitment to their neighborhood and are actively involved in activities to improve the quality of life there. This is called 'citizen participation'.

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Address for correspondence:

Atul Mohanrao Babar, A/P - Mahud BK, Tal-Sangola, Dist- Solapur. Maharashtra

Email: atulbabar11@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Babar, A. M. (2026). Role of Citizens in Democracy. *Bulletin of Nexus Journal*, 3(2), 18–20.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19844304>

For example, local residents engage in voluntary work, organize litter-clearing campaigns, set up collectives to purchase solar panels or form local care cooperatives. They may also be involved in the decision-making about the municipal budget. As local residents become more involved in public life, the role of government needs to adapt and take greater account of initiatives in the community. This is called 'government participation'. It means local authorities playing a more supportive role, for instance by providing facilities or making them available. In addition, municipalities can use neighborhood budgets to help residents get things done in their area. Democracy means government of the people and answerable to the people. A good democratic government is possible only if people are aware of their rights and duties. Our country follows the system of representative democracy. People elect their representatives to run the government. Elections for both Central and State Legislatures are normally held every five years. In case the government falls earlier, election may be held early.

Generally, it is believed that the government rules the people who have to respect the political authority and obey it. They are there to be governed. The people who are citizens in a democratic system like India cannot and ought not remain passive and treat themselves as governed. In fact, a democracy can be successful and vibrant only when citizens imbibe and reflect in their mindset, thinking and behavior the basic values like equality, freedom, secularism, social justice, accountability and respect for all. They have to appreciate the opportunities for their desired roles and play proactive roles to actualize the goals of democracy. The opportunities as democratic citizens are available in all democracies, but they vary from one democratic system to another. Indian democracy in the modern sense began after a long period of colonial rule. Although the democratic system started just after independence in 1947, its socio-cultural settings were and still are not in tune with the democratic culture. India is a vast multi-cultural, multi-lingual, truly plural society, which in many respects still carries the characteristics of traditionalism. At the same time it is trying to absorb the values of modern democracy. Even now many think that the government has to rule and do everything, and if things are not happening in an expected manner, it is only the government which is to be blamed. The democratic government in India is run by the representatives chosen by its citizens. In that sense, every citizen is responsible for how the governments functions at different levels: national, state and local. Hence, every citizen has to play a

critical role and use every opportunity for doing so. The key role of citizens in a democracy is to participate in public life. The most commonly observed opportunity of participation is exercising the right to vote during elections. In order to vote wisely it is necessary that each citizen listens to and knows the views of different parties and candidates, and then makes his or her own decision on whom to vote for. In many cases the percentage of voting is still low. The Election Commission is doing its best to educate the people about importance of participation in elections. Participation in a democratic polity, however, is not confined simply to participation in elections only. A vital form of participation comes through membership of political parties and more importantly, active membership in independent non-governmental organizations, that are known as civil society organizations. These organizations represent a variety of interests of different groups such as women, students, farmers, workers, doctors, teachers, business owners, religious believers, human rights activists. Such organizations and people's movements help to bring political awareness about different issues among the people.

Participation in the political process is not enough. Citizens have to make the democratic system responsive and responsible. The Constitution makes the executive responsible to the legislature, but citizens are needed to ensure that the Parliamentarians, Members of State Legislatures and their representatives in Panchayati Raj and Municipal Institutions are accountable. The instruments created by the Right to Information Act, 2005 enable citizens to play their role effectively. Citizens have an obligation to become informed about public issues, to watch carefully how their political leaders and representatives use their powers, and to express their own opinions and interests. When citizens find that the government is not living up to its promises; they can point it out through media, make recommendations and demands accountability from the government. If the government still fails to fulfill promises, citizens may protest, carry out peaceful Satyagraha, civil disobedience or non-cooperation campaigns to make the government accountable. Citizenship is more than voting or making the system accountable. Many people tend to regard democracy as a system where literally everything is allowed. And every person has the freedom to do whatever one desires. This often leads to a complete chaos that devastates the order of the society rather than improving it. In that way it leads to the opposite effects of democracy. A citizen has to accept that freedom is never absolute. If you have a

right to do certain things, you have also the responsibility to ensure that your actions do not infringe upon the rights of others. For a successful working of democracy, citizens' participation is a must. The corrective measures to meet the challenges can be actualized only when citizens play a proactive role. The citizens must respect the law and reject violence. Every citizen must respect the rights of his or her fellow citizens, and their dignity as human beings. No one should denounce a political opponent as evil, just because of holding different views.

People should question the decisions of the government, but not reject the government's authority. Every group has the right to practice its culture and to have some control over its own affairs, but each group should accept that it is a part of a plural society and democratic state. When you express your opinion, you should also listen to the views of other people, even people you disagree with. Everyone has a right to be heard. When you make demands, you should understand that in a democracy, it is impossible for everyone to achieve everything one wants. Democracy requires mutual cooperation. Groups with different interests and opinions must be willing to sit down with one another and negotiate. If one group is always excluded and fails to be heard, it may turn against democracy in anger and frustration. Everyone who is willing to participate peacefully and respect the rights of others should have some say in the way the country is governed. It is also important that citizens must assert their opinion, as in a democracy not asserting your opinion also means that you are agreeing with the decision which you may consider improper.

Conclusion

Democracy is not merely a system of government but a way of life that depends upon the active involvement of its citizens. A successful democracy requires informed, responsible, and vigilant citizens who participate not only in elections but also in public discourse and community development. In India, the functioning of representative democracy places significant responsibility on citizens to elect capable leaders and ensure accountability at national, state, and local levels.

Citizens must exercise their rights wisely while fulfilling their duties with sincerity. Respect for law, tolerance of diverse opinions, peaceful protest, and commitment to social justice are essential for strengthening democratic institutions. Instruments such as the Right to Information Act, 2005 empower citizens to demand transparency and good governance. Ultimately, democracy flourishes

when citizens actively contribute to nation-building, uphold constitutional values, and work cooperatively toward the common good.

Acknowledgment

I express my sincere gratitude to all those who have inspired and supported me in preparing this paper on "*Role of Citizens in Democracy*."

I am thankful to the eminent thinkers and scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar, Amartya Sen, and Max Weber whose writings and ideas on democracy, governance, and social justice have provided valuable intellectual guidance.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my family and well-wishers for their constant encouragement and support throughout the completion of this work.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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