

Can historical  
parallels be drawn  
between democracies  
and dictatorships?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

History is more than a string of events and a relationship between them. We are involved with a subject which deals with some eternal truths and generalizations.

We are really involved with the same basic phenomenon which repeats themselves in different contexts and at different periods of time. The range of historical events ranges from the bizarre and inexplicable, like the burning of Rome, to the more mundane, such as the fall of governments and the formation of alliances and treaties. Is it strange that the burning of the Rome at the time of Nero, is so oddly similar to the burning of the Reichstag many years later in 1933? Perhaps not, when we compare the two persons who were responsible for both these acts. Both were dictators, both were insecure, both usurpers in their own right. Both hated a community which was fated to suffer immeasurably till they saw better days.

Both were narcissists and both loved to be loved. Both were betrayed in their last days. Both loved to be thought of as artists, the one as a musician (if historical records are to be believed) and the other as a slighted and unrecognized painter. In what seems to be one of the most important focal areas of historical interest- kinds of governance- there seems to be similarities which transcend time, age, context and political situations. In the historically present, there seems to be two basic surviving forms of governance: democracy and dictatorship. The one is based on the individuals by the majority of people.

The other is based on the choices and contribution of one person, who is a self proclaimed leader and has assumed powers without the consent of the

electorate. The emphasis in the latter case, is on the choices made by the dictator, on his perception and on his vision of the future of his state. The second has been designated by many social psychologists, in particular by the father of analytical psychology, Jung, as a pathological state. He, more than any other analytical psychologist, had understood the implications of the political developments taking place in the Nazi state during the period between the two wars interpreting the coming of the Nazi dictatorship as an abdication on the part of the self, he had, in words which may not be correct politically, and culturally termed the Nazi as a blond beast, (die blond Bestie) who had blindly submitted to his unconscious “ Germanic” inclination to abdicate personal responsibility in favour of the following the “ mass”: the result of which was an unforeseen destruction, but more important perhaps, the annihilation of over half of Jewish community.

Where do we draw the line between democracy and dictatorship in practical terms? That a democracy can be malevolent as a dictatorship cannot be ruled out. But it is rather difficult in a true democracy, for reasons we shall elaborate later on, to fool the public. A malevolent leader in a democracy can be identified quite easily, though this may not always happen. And upon this be removed, though this too may not always happen.

A true democracy is self-corrective, which a dictatorship is not. This does not preclude the fact that a democracy cannot be perverted and deviated from its objective of a governance. A self-corrective mechanism does not automatically ensure longevity or permanence. Self-corrective mechanisms can be subverted, as in the Indian scenario, where an emergency was

proclaimed by the Indira Gandhi Government from 1975 to 1977, after amending the constitution.

History tells us that many common trends can be seen in democracies although these democracies have been separated by time and distance. Similarly dictatorships ranging from the Roman to the present time have shown similar trends. Hence the objective of this study; to study the parallelism in various democracies and dictatorships through time. We look at various phases of a government in the world like, patriarchy, tribalism, feudalism, despotism, constitutionalism, democracy, dictatorships, as being separate evolutions or forms applying hap-hazard, helter-skelter, to particular races, circumstances, and conditions. However we often fail to see the underlying pattern of unvarying design of the various phases of a government, especially of the latter two types mentioned above (since in this essay we are dealing with those two).

Essentially what we will see in this essay is a widespread exhibit of the various stages of growth and decline of the two types of governments. A perfect example of the whole completed cycle of governments is Rome, for instance. The various stages through which Rome went are as follows- primitive tyranny, republicanism, decay, dictatorship, monarchy, and destruction, are as clearly marked in the Republic, the Consulate, the Empire, and the Fall. We will begin by looking at patterns of five typical types of dictatorships and the people who led them: what fuelled the dictatorships, the kind of people, the kind of leaders, the social needs etc. The five dictatorships taken under consideration are the Alexandrian type of

dictatorship in Macedonia, the Roman type under Caesar, the Stalinist type and the Hitlerian type.

This will be useful in finding parallels with five major democracies in the world. The five major democracies chosen are; Greek, Roman (the free period), the Swiss period (19th century), American democracy (18th century) and the Indian democracy (20th century). Due to our short sightedness in history, our perception of dictators like Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini is always evil, cruel and harsh. On the other hand our perception of dictators like Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon is great, courageous and noble.

This can be true to a small extent however when we study deeper into these dictators we find more similarities in their personalities than one would think of. There are differences, no doubt, however most arise from their different births, different time periods, difference in the situation of the country and people. Alexander was throned at the age of 20 after his father, Philip II, king of Macedonia, was assassinated in 336 BC. He had already showed his capabilities as a ruler at the age of 16 when he was left in charge of Macedonia as regent, with the power to rule in Philip's name in his absence to Byzantium to fight rebels.

Once in power, like all other dictators, he quickly disposed of all conspirators and domestic enemies by ordering their execution. This one of the characteristic that is seen in all dictators. Julius Caesar, in order to declare himself dictator of Rome, ensued a civil war in which he defeated the republican force in Greece, Thapsus in North Africa, Munda in Spain and ultimately Pompey, the leader of the republicans and former king of Rome.

This left him as the undisputed master of Rome and enabled him to make himself consul and dictator. Due to Napoleon's brilliance as a military strategist he was appointed commander-in-chief of the ill equipped French army in Italy. His ability as a militarist enabled him to defeat many armies and the Austrian army several times.

He became increasingly popular; he used his popularity to organize a coup in 1797, which removed several royalists from power in Paris. And in 1799 a coalition against France formed in Europe, Napoleon took opportunity of this situation and returned to Paris from Egypt where he had been sent on an expedition. A coup d'état made him first Consul of France, making him the most powerful man in the nation. In order to consolidate his power he disposed any royalist who seemed to pose any threat to his position.

Hitler and Stalin, more recent dictators also showed similar methods of consolidating their power either before or after their position as a dictator. Once in power (by chance), Adolf Hitler wanted to be a dictator and not a mere puppet of Hindenburg (president of the Reichstag) as was intended. So he convinced Hindenburg to declare Emergency after the Reichstag Fire in which he had all authority to use his power. He took this power to get rid of all communists and other leftist opposition and made sure that power shifted from Hindenburg to himself. It wasn't long before that he declared himself the Mein Führer (Dictator/Leader) of Germany. In order to consolidate his power even further he executed any opposition or sent them to concentration camps, he had henchmen and the secret police to carry out the job.

The Knight of Long Knives is a famous example of Hitler's execution of his own henchmen who seemed to pose a threat to his position by their increasing popularity. The "show trials" are other examples. Stalin's execution of enemies and opposition started during his struggle for power after Lenin's death. His main contenders to power were Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev. Event though Trotsky was considered more popular and capable than Stalin, very cleverly Stalin was able to switch that around.

He started it by uplifting his image at Lenin's funeral where he gave a speech praising Lenin and tactfully sidelining Trotsky out of the ceremony by giving him the wrong date for Lenin's funeral. He soon assassinated Trotsky and the other two contenders, putting himself as the only leader for Soviet Union. Again like other leader discussed previously, Stalin started purges to get rid of opposition and anyone who threatened his position. The purges started with the Kirov Murder in 1934, a man who was very popular and posed a threat to Stalin's position. In fact Stalin's purges are so infamous that books like Animal Farm is a satire to the actual Purges carried out by Stalin. All the dictators had a common goal that is to consolidate their power however the difference was in the manner and situation under which they did it that portray some as great and others as usurper.

For example, Alexander who was noble and a Prince by birth, was already loved by the commoners and is given the authority to finish off anyone who poses a threat to his right as a king. Julius Caesar was also a noble, which again earns him the respect and love of the people. Rome was also in an anarchic state which demanded a powerful and ruthless person like Caesar to protect it from foreign invasion, even though his disposal of opposition is <https://assignbuster.com/can-historical-parallels-be-drawn-between-democracies-and-dictatorships/>

not fully justified because he did kill Pompey (king of the country) which shows his selfish desires, Caesar is forgiven because of his popularity with the mass. Napoleon is considered a hero because the royalists failed to satisfy the people and Napoleon was able to.

The situation of these countries and the mentality of the people was such that it demanded people like Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon. Here we can dispute the myth that people are always unhappy in dictatorship and all dictators are cruel. They purged political opposition, not commoners hence they are heroes. This is a contrast to Stalin and Hitler. They purged any kind of opposition of the slightest doubt, be it political or social, they spared no one, hence they are perceived as villains.

Even their rise to power was through devious ways and they were not genuinely popular with the mass but only to certain sections. Culture and Science flourished during the Macedonian, Caesarian and Napoleonic times, whereas the opposite is true for Hitlerian and Stalinist times. This difference is because of the different backgrounds that the dictators come from. For example in the case of Alexander, being a prince was educated by the renowned philosopher, Aristotle. He received a thorough training in rhetoric and literature and stimulated his interest in Science, Medicine, and philosophy, all of which became of the utmost importance for Alexander in his later life. In contrast to that, Hitler was brought up in very humble conditions, received little education, unsuccessful in his field of interest; painting.



He was also subjected to racism for being of “ non-German” origin. However the one thing that qualifies them as dictators is their undisputed position and their vision for expansion of their country. Expansion is one aim that all dictators have had from the pre-Christian era to the 20th century. This desire to be big comes from their ambition. It is an inborn quality that these dictators had and at times was fuelled by an influence, for instance, in the case of Alexander and Napoleon the influence and driving force was their mother. By the age of 33 (when he died), Alexander had conquered Athens and Thebes and the rest of Greece, he further expanded his empire to Persia and Egypt and almost conquered the north of India.

However he was a true intellectual, tolerant of all cultures; he married a Persian woman, encouraged intermarriages, and debated with Brahmins about several topics in India. He also encouraged all forms of Art and Science. Hence it was not only his military genius that earned him the title of “ Alexander the Great” but also his other qualities. Napoleon Bonaparte was another military genius who expanded to Italy, France, Egypt, Austria, Poland and Russia.

In the battles with Austria, he used the world’s first telecommunications system, the Chappe semaphore line, implemented in 1792. He also used artillery innovatively as a mobile force to support infantry attacks. Hence he earned the title of “ Le Petit Corporal” meaning The Little Corporal. Caesar’s empire is also renowned for it included France, Belgium, Greece and Britain in the Roman empire. His period was full of glory and wealth for Rome.

Hitler’s and Stalin’s expansion is a known fact as it is talked about till date.

The reason why their expansion is seen villainous is because it was done for just self-interest, not at all for the country, which explains their unpopularity within the country till date. Their villainous image is contributed by their other acts like the execution of half the population of the Jewish family and the death over 100, 000 workers in a single 5 year plan. Even the fact that Stalin modernized Russia in a period of 5 years and Hitler made Germany the most powerful country in the world is sidelined because of their other attributes. These are the dictators and dictatorships that are mostly spoken about. Despite their time difference, location and circumstance we see the patterns in each the dictatorships.

Now we can explore the democracies to see a pattern in them. It is important to note that all the dictatorships mentioned above was not replaced by another dictatorship, at least not a dictatorship as powerful as the previous. The reason is simple and obvious for any democracy. If the people are to rule, the people must be intelligent, educated; above all, self energized and possessed of very high development at best. It is the inevitable trend of a dictatorship to destroy these qualities - never very highly developed at best.

And so a dictatorship leads to a democratic weakening, which in the next emergency calls for a still stronger dictatorship, and so on and so on until central control becomes fixed. If the new autocracy is vicious, and the spirit of independence still lives in the people, sooner or later new revolts eventuate and the cycle is repeated again, such was the case in America and India. However in countries that have seen democracy from the very beginning, it is no doubt that the people are well educated and intelligent.

When we think of civilization where culture, science, literature, religion first  
<https://assignbuster.com/can-historical-parallels-be-drawn-between-democracies-and-dictatorships/>

evolved simultaneously, we think of Greece. Hence it was Greece that first introduced a type of Government that we now refer to as a democracy, which was followed by Romans.

The single greatest political innovation of the ancient Greeks was the establishment of the polis, or “ city-state”. The overwhelming importance of the polis in the evolution of European political structures is betrayed by the word “ political” itself: derived from the word polis, “ political” etymologically means “ of or relating to the polis.” Around the beginning of 800 BC, the Greek speaking people who lived on the Greek peninsula, the mainland, and the coast of Asia Minor, developed political units that were centrally based on a single city. These city-states were independent states that controlled a limited amount of territory surrounding the state. The largest of these city states was Sparta, which controlled more than 3000 square miles of surrounding territory. The small size of the city states, allowed for continual experimentation with political structures and one such structure from which the modern society is highly influenced by is democracy, individual city-states were small enough that the free male citizens constituted a body small enough to make policy decisions relatively efficiently.

This system closely resembles the Indian form of democracy ages ago in the rural areas called the Panchayat. It is not surprising that all democratic countries originated their government from the basic concept of the city-states. Later Rome also had the same system, hence it’s colonies like France, Britain, Belgium and Italy is perhaps also influenced by this sort of a system, modified and polished now into proper governments. It would be incorrect to state that democracy is modern type of government, especially <https://assignbuster.com/can-historical-parallels-be-drawn-between-democracies-and-dictatorships/>

since the concept of it has been around since civilization started. It often begins after a monarchy.

All the Greek city-states began as monarchies. In their earlier stages, they were ruled by a basileus, or hereditary king. The Greeks living in those city-states, however soon tired of the kings, many of which were overthrown in the eighth century BC. This goes back to our theory about the repeating cycle of overthrowing an unwanted government to form a new one, often a democracy, if there is a spirit of Independence in the people. So after this, in Greece, a variety of political alternatives were experimented with in place of the basileus: these included oligarchy, timocracy, tyranny, and democracy. However in the United States in the 18th century and in India in the 20th century after gaining back independence from the British, did not need to go through any experiments, because this was done by the Greeks way back in the eighth century and the world had already recognized the best option, which was, democracy.

Both India and America are democracies, which have been running successfully for many years. India's democracy resembles the British government because of their influence on the country for 200 years. On the other hand, the American democracy is further modified to suit the need of their country and resembles more closely to the Greek democracy because of their several division of states. Both these democracies originated after a vicious British Rule and both these countries went through a war of Independence. Another successful democracy is the Swiss democracy established in the 19th century. Switzerland is famous for its neutrality in

international conflict; this is because it is one country that sits at the crossroads of several major European cultures.

The diversity of cultures stretches from the Germans, French, Italian and Romansch. This can be explained by the fact that Switzerland was invaded many times by foreigners who left a bit of their culture behind after overthrown by another invader. The last of it's invaders was none other than Napoleon, he invaded and annexed much of the country in the 1797-98, replacing the loose confederation with a centrally governed unitary state. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 re-established the old confederation of sovereign states and enshrined Switzerland's status of permanent armed neutrality in international law. In 1848, after a brief civil war between Protestant liberals seeking a centralized national state and Catholic conservatives clinging on to the old order, the majority of Swiss Cantons opted for a Federal State, modeled in part on the U. S.

Constitution. The Swiss Constitution established a range of civic liberties and made far-reaching provisions to maintain cantonal autonomy to placate the vanquished Catholic minority. The Swiss amended their Constitution extensively in 1874, establishing federal responsibility for defense, trade, and legal matters, as well as introducing direct democracy by popular referendum. To this day, cantonal autonomy and referendum democracy remain trademarks of the Swiss polity.

The situation that led to a democracy in Swiss is similar to the situation in India. By that sense we mean the diversity of people who live in these two countries. India is famously known as a secular country that accepts most of

the religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism) and has a diverse culture. It is not a coincidence that both these countries adopted democracy and also run it successfully. Hence we can state that a democracy works well when the population of a country is diverse in their culture, religion and language. So far we have looked at democracies, which are successful and established for a long time.

However this is not always the case and there have been democracies or attempts of a democracy which have failed miserably in the past. The attempted democracies chosen to break the myth that “Everybody is always happy in a democracy” are the French Proclamation of a republic in the 18th century, the German “revolution” in the 19th century and the Weimar Republic in the 20th century. What makes the above statement a myth are the two words “everybody” and “always”. In a democracy decision and laws are constantly created and amended on different issues which result in different outcomes. With the ongoing issues that circle the government and the public, it is impossible to keep everyone happy always.

This is best expressed by Abraham Lincoln in a quote which states: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” The proclamation for a republic in France after the revolution failed miserably in the 18th century. The reasons for this failure are many. In around 1793, the Convention had approved a new constitution. This was extremely democratic; this guaranteed the right to vote to all male adults and provided for a plebiscites on important questions.

However this new government seemed extremely manipulative and corrupt. The French had engaged themselves in wars with several of the neighboring countries who disliked the idea of the French revolution and the brutal murder of the king and his family. During this time of war, the plebiscite was kept in abeyance while the war crisis continued- and was never introduced.

Government remained chiefly in the hands of the Committee of Public Safety, whose decisions the Convention rubber stamped for fear of the consequences of acting otherwise-for example, it sanctioned 11, 250 decrees, without giving so much as one of them a second reading. France was in no state for a democracy, it was chaotic and there was no harmony in the way people thought. Only a section of the population was organized and literate enough to run a democracy but were often manipulative and corrupt.

They needed a benevolent dictatorship, which soon came in the form of Napoleon Bonaparte. Revolutionary movements for a democracy was started in Germany with the years 1848-51. This was during the reign in Federick William IV accession to rhe throne of Prussia. With the bad harvests, starvation, and typhoid epidemics of 1846-47, the liberal demands had become more urgent and new all -Prussia parliament soon put forward requests for freedom of expression, trial by jury, an income tax, and a single National German Parliament elected by the people for the whole of Germany, wished simply to enlarge the powers of the Confederation Diet. The Kaiser refused but soon fell out with this newly called Prussian parliament and dissolved it. .

.... to be finished.

Another example of an attempted democratic government is the Weimar Republic, which was formed after the Kaiser over overthrown after the first World War. The main failure of the Weimar Republic was it's inability to make the people happy. Germany was extremely humiliated after the WWI and felt that the Republic was unable to regain it's image. The ultimate hit was the Wall Street Crash and the collapse of the economy.

The Nazis here took the opportunity to provide solace to the public. Hitler gave speeches about what the Germans wanted to hear. Hitler's nationalistic approach and ability to conveniently blaming the allies for the state of Germany won him the votes and popularity of the people. The people wanted solace more than the right to vote, however they did not realize that this would turn out to be a dictatorship.

Like France in the 18th century they were looking for a more efficient, benevolent kind of a rule not a chaotic democracy that provided them with nothing.