

Public Opinion and Indian Democracy

Public opinion has been ignored by the democratic government in some of the countries of the world. Policies are implemented despite the fact that the people do not like them. Is it possible for any democratic government to ignore the public opinion when theoretically it is supposed that the government must bow before the people? No government can afford, they say, to flout the wishes of the people without becoming unpopular. But in the present-day world propaganda suppresses public opinion and keeps the people in a state of either submission or ignorance or apathy.

Russell, in one of his essays, '*Fear of Public Opinion*', points out that this fear is the cause of unhappiness in the world. He argues that in this world there are profound divisions, may be, on the basis of beliefs or ideologies. Owing to these differences a person develops tastes and convictions which may not be according to the convictions and beliefs of the others. So such a person finds the ideas of the other sect somewhat different. The result is that the person feels unhappy and succumbs to it. This attitude of acquiescence is bad. It is more tyrannical towards those who fear it than towards those who feel indifferent to it. This line of argument might be true of an individual but cannot be considered politically expeditious. In a country where people are elected it is necessary that the elected people should be responsible and responsive to the public opinion.

Sometimes in the name of moulding public opinion in the channels of progress, the government ignores it and also wants that people should not apply their thinking to any problem which can only be imposed from outside. In the case of individuals the fear of public opinion may stunt growth but in the case of a government it gives strength to it. Fear of the criticism and the fear of what newspapers may write may be a hindrance in the smooth working of the government but it can be an effective check on the wild actions of the people in power. Not denying the fact that newspapers now-a-days indulge in the witch hunting of the medieval days and they choose to make a scapegoat of even harmless persons. So the people in power may take the plea that as newspapers indulge in wild remarks they should ignore them as far as possible. Moreover, newspapers, they think, represent sectional interest or political prejudices. Whatever might be the defects in the working of the newspapers it is necessary that if they represent public opinion they must be cared for. Without caring for public opinion it will be very difficult for the people to repose their confidence in the government.

Sometimes the government in order to suppress the public opinion adopts coercive methods. But experience shows that the more public opinion is

suppressed the more powerful it becomes; it will only wait for an opportunity to find an outlet. But immediately after this suppression people start nursing ill-will against the party in power. Publicity which is carried on a massive scale cannot make the people to forget their own feelings. So they vote the party out of power. Public opinion cannot be suppressed so easily. Fact emerges out of not one incident to one action rather it is the result of the total impact of the political, social as well as the cultural life of the people conditioned, opposed or adhered to by the people in power. So it has a seat deeper than the chance emotions or the wayward prejudices or the ill-conceived notions. It starts at such deeper level bringing changes even on the surface. Such a public opinion becomes the part of the thinking of the people and their mental attitude towards life and its problems. A common man has his own morality which, of course, partakes of the social milieu and he always tries to judge the actions of the government in that very context. That is why it is necessary that the government should abide by the wishes because it derives its strength from the people, their convictions and their beliefs.

Organised public opinion if unnecessarily suppressed always results in agitations, protests and demonstrations. The lovers of peace may think that demonstrations do a lot of harm to the peaceful atmosphere and create a number of problems for a common man. No government can afford to suppress these outward manifestations of the public opinion by considering them unwanted. Some of the governments may succeed in convincing the people that national interests are jeopardized by these types of actions. But they forget that the national interests are represented by the public opinion itself and it will be distortion of facts to say that national interests are the interests of the people only. The government must bow before the public opinion which is never wrong.

According to W. Dobb, "Public opinion refers to people's attitude on an issue when they are members of the same social group." It is relatively homogeneous expression of preference by members of a group concerning issues which concern the group as a whole. Now there are various agencies through which public opinion organizes itself. According to Bryce, "There types of people play an important role in the formation of public opinion." Firstly, there are those who seriously occupy themselves with public affairs whether as members of the legislatures or journalists or professors. Second type of people are those who are comparatively passive in their interests in politics. They listen read and form judgements upon the facts presented to them. Lastly, there are those citizens who are indifferent to public affairs; they generally follow the opinion of their environment, their neighbourhood or their class or their place of work. Such people are generally attracted by personalities. Apart from these, political parties with the help of propaganda organize the public opinion. Similarly, the press plays an important role in shaping or reshaping public opinion. Educational

institutions, cinemas, associations and legislatures are the three factors which organize as well as express public opinion. But sometimes all of these agencies may not be ethically sound. So they may create a number of problems. The superstitions and religious conservatism, communal outlook and absence of liberties, lack of education and political maturity, political indifference are some of the significant hindrances in the formation of the public opinion. In India many factors contribute to giving a disfigured shape to the public opinion. Rather the opinion was imposed upon the people and they were asked to subscribe to that very opinion. A sound public opinion can be formed if people have free access to facts and there is scope for calm reflection and matured judgement. Apart from it, individuality or independence of character, freedom from rigidity, trade unions and linguistic groups are the other important hindrances in the formation of public opinion. In India the public opinion should be developed properly because only then democracy can establish itself.