

The test of democracy is the freedom of criticism

The word democracy is derived from a conjunction of two Greek words “demos” meaning people and “krasi” which means rule. Thus democracy is when people choose to rule themselves or in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “government by the people, of the people, for the people”. Obviously everyone in the country cannot possibly take part in the government so the people elect those by whom they want to be governed.

Any opinion against the existent state is criticism. Criticism can be of two types- constructive and destructive. The purpose of constructive criticism is to improve the system for the good of all. This is a positive approach. Destructive criticism is usually criticism for the sake of criticism. It is a negative approach which is disconcerting at the individual level and destructive in general.

People represent all shades of opinion and include all pressure interest groups who want rules of governance to their liking. When opinions clash, the elected few come in for criticism. Similarly, the elected few too do not always consider public interests before they act. This too evokes criticism. If the elected representative truly wants to serve the people and has their interests at heart, he will welcome criticism which shows up defects and shortcomings. However, he must be willing to admit that he was wrong and must be willing to change. It is the rare individual who has the courage to admit he was wrong. Finding criticism offensive and unpleasant, and because they have the power to do so, the rulers stifle free criticism. If criticism is silenced democracy ceases to have meaning. The people no longer rule themselves but are ruled by a group of men by force and democracy becomes confused with plutocracy.

As mentioned earlier criticism is of two types, positive and negative. It is positive criticisms that is the true test of democracy. Merely allowing criticism full rein does not mean that democracy is thriving. Negative criticism is harmful for a democracy as it negates all attempts at good governance. Criticism too must be responsible and serve a definite purpose. It must aid and not hinder the process of governance.

Constructive criticism is a must for all democracies. It encourages public participation in the government, which is the hallmark of any democracy. Moreover, it compels the politicians to accept responsibility for their actions and gauge public response. It is a system of feedback by which the public pulse can be felt. The forum for criticism, namely the press and other media, public gatherings and meetings, etc, must be encouraged in any democracy. When these forums are alive and active only then can democracy thrive.

