

Democracy implies tolerance of dissent

POINTS TO DEVELOP 1. Democracy by its very nature incorporates a variety of Opinions and, by implication, accommodates dissent.

Minority views must be considered even if decision is by majority in a democracy.

Dissent has a positive role, and exists even in non-democratic systems.

Suppression of dissent is dangerous.

Extreme dissent is dangerous. So, checks put on various 'freedoms'

dissent in various spheres of public life- political, social, cultural.

Conclusion: without dissent, the system would not be democratic.

The ancient Greek word 'democracy' literally means 'rule by the demos '. The term 'demos' is generally translated as 'the people ', and the 'people' implies the whole population, particularly the adult population, of a tribe, a territory or a country. The entire population or the collectivist obviously comprise a multitude of individuals as units. It is well-known that no two individuals in a collectivity, mechanical or organic, can be alike, as their needs and aspirations differ even as their physical and mental composition differ. Naturally, their views, notions, beliefs and habits are not similar and yet the concept and practice of and the rule of/by the people, however disparate, is very much in existence.

In practice, by 'the people 'we mean the majority of the people. As such, in a democracy, whatever the majority is carried out by the entire population. This, however, does not mean that the majority is intimated to lord it over the majority. Rather, democracy thrives only on the willing co-operation of the minority and on the protection guaranteed to the rights and freedom, and tolerance of, if not agreement with, the views and beliefs of the minorities. It leaves much scope for dissent, i.e., there may be people who think differently from official ideas or the majority.

Dissent is not necessarily a negative concept; it offers an alternative to the prevailing ideas, institutions and system, and exists even in non-democratic system. The views of Boris Yeltsin were at one time expressive of dissent from the dominant and established socialist principle in what was then the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. There was always a dissenting voice against the monarchical form of government in Nepal. In a healthy, working democracy, the voice of the minority is given a full hearing, even if decision is by the majority.

Debate and discussion not only clear the air, but also help to bring about a compromise. There is a certain amount of accommodation of even opposing viewpoints.

Should the positive phenomenon of dissent be suppressed, there would be resentment and growing anger. Frustration would lead to a revolt against the established system. And finally, there might be a revolution, involving great violence, bloodshed and destruction of all sort. It is, would provide a ventilation of the different views and pent-up feeling, in the larger interests of democracy set-up.

Extremes of dissent can, however, cause havoc in any system, more so in a democracy. As such, it has always been advocated to fix a permissive limit of dissent. In a democracy, people enjoy various kinds of freedom; of economic pursuit, belief (political, religious and others), expression, association, etc. But these freedoms of individual or group of the people are not permitted to cause injury to another individual or the collectivity, or to be allowed to take roots, although some people may be tempted to support it on the grounds of dissent or an alternative system. For if democracy is for the people, dissent that goes against the people is general must be checked. One of the vulnerable aspects of democracy is that its liberality can be taken advantage of those very people who, in the end, subvert the system by suppressing voice of dissent if it goes against them.

In the political arena, one can witness dissent on two levels-intra-party and party. Intra-party dissent implies that though the party has a corpus of rules and discipline and a particular modus operandi, some party members may put dissenting notes to some of the provisions or may not agree with the style of functioning of the leadership. This dissent has to be accommodated by the leadership; otherwise the party will have an authoritarian image amongst the masses, or may split. At the sometime, the dissent should be expressed only on the party platform, not publicly; otherwise the party will be weakened. Similarly, democracy permits the establishment and continuation of political parties of various hues and views. If the strong suppress the weak, there will come a time when a one-party rule under a dictator would be established. . Thus, the democratic structure will collapse. Whenever the political parties in India showed an intolerance of dissent, they themselves broke up or the people were forced to experience a bitter bout of authoritarianism. The Congress Party broke several times (1969, 1977) and the authoritarian emergency ruled the country during 1975-77. The dissent in the Congress Party today is appropriately contained because of tolerance. The existence of various parties like Bharatiya Janata

Party, the Janata Dal, the Communist parties and the others national and regional parties clearly manifest the requisite tolerance of different points of view.

People in a democracy have freedom of vocation and economic pursuit to earn their livelihood. And this result in various vocation. Here, too dissent may appear, more specifically regarding the macro- economic or capitalism while yet others support nationalization and the socialistic approach. All the dissenting views have to be tolerated and given a hearing, even if not entirely accommodated within the official view. It is respect for opposing viewpoints that prompts ministers and official spokesmen to clarify or sometimes even modify policies and programmes, facilitating a wider plan of action.

In a democratic society, one group or class may differ should not interfere in that form of structure or resort to value judgement. As human nature has it, every form end composition of a social group is found comfortable by its members and any forcible attempt from outside to alter it would defeat the very objective of democracy. Should a particular group of Kerala or the North-East be asked to change its matrilineal form of family just because it does not conform with “mainstream” practice? Can democracy group upon other groups? ‘live and let live’ is a basic principle of democracy.

Cultural diversity is a common phenomenon in almost every part of the world; India is no exception. A variety of religion, custom, food habits, dress – styles, languages, dance and other art forms, exists in India. Some of the cultural units are just microscopic minorities and may appear to other as awkward and ridiculous. But we can never hope to keep the national fabric intact by making fun of them. A temple, a mosque, a church and a Gurudwara are equally sacred to the respective religions: one cannot stand or fall at the cost of another.

Hence, in a democracy positive dissension should always be tolerated. But the dissenters also should not try to impose themselves on others, that too by resorting to violent means, because that violates democratic norms. As democracy reflects the will and aspirations of the masses by projecting their arguments convincingly, the dissenters should also refrain from demagoguery. Only then can a healthy and true enjoyment of the freedom of expression- one of the pillars of democracy- be possible.

Given the nature and philosophy of democracy, we can infer that there

Is something wrong something missing, in the society or a country that claims to be democratic, but in which dissent is conspicuous by its absece.