

IS DEMOCRACY ANOTHER WORD FOR ANARCHY?

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'Demos' in Greek means the people, which is why democracy means the rule of the people. Autocracy means the rule of a ruling elite, monarchy means the rule of a sovereign and mobocracy means mob rule, i.e, virtual anarchy. But what exactly are the people, who are the demos? Britain has a mélange of Celts, including Welshmen and Scotsman, the Gaelic Irish of Ulster, Anglo-Saxons, Norsemen, Normans and all the other myriad races which invaded and ruled ancient and medieval Britain and, more recently, the immigrants who came from Central and Eastern Europe to escape Hitler, the West Indians, Africans, Indians, Pakistanis and a multitude of other Asians, not to mention the Arabs, Cypriots and others who have made Britain their home. Because of the preponderance of the white population the demos of Britain had a certain British identity which subsumed the constituents of this demos and gave it a political identity and homogeneity. The non-white later day British have intruded on this homogeneity, but in the form of government, democracy, the British demos has shown a remarkable consistency. As a nation and as a people there is a noticeable unity in Britain, Scottish ultra nationalism notwithstanding.

In the case of the United States of America this unitary identity is even more remarkable because the entire nation is built out of migration over the past two hundred years. The only nigger-in-the-woodpile has been the nigger, the Black people of African origin whose dark skin marked out the blacks for discrimination and worse. The miracle is that even this has changed and today the country has a President whose father was a native Kenyan and who himself falls in the category of 'black'. In the melting pot of America even the once despised black is at last undergoing a process of assimilation unheard of in any other country. A truly American demos has at last emerged, whose rule cannot be anything but democracy. It is often flawed, but at no stage does it stray very far from Lincoln's definition of government of, for and by the people.

Let us come to India. In terms of geography and territory the Indian sub-continent has been recognised from times immemorial as an entity called "Bharat". This transcends the concept of India as a nation because before the British came it was subdivided into many national entities and after they left it is now three nations – five if we include Srilanka, and Myanmar which were once governed from India. There was also a common identity of the Sanatan Dharma, or Hinduism, the form in which it is popularly recognised. The Vedic and Upanishadic strain was common to all the people of the sub-continent and the teachings of Adi Sankara created a pilgrimage link that joined together all the people from the extreme North to the extreme South, the Eastern Marches to the Western seashore. The nation-state was a creation of the British, but the people who, in the midst of myriad diversities, acknowledged their own unity, were an uniquely Indian phenomenon. To that extent the demos preceded the democratic polity in the western sense.

There is a supreme irony to this. As soon as the modern nation-state called India was born and a Westminster style democracy was adopted as our form of government, the regionalism of diversity that had merged in the nation-state began to re-emerge as a rival to national unity. This took many forms, including militancy, insurgency and separatism, especially in the tribal dominated North East. Fortunately the State responded to this with firmness, humanitarianism and spirit of accommodation. Gradually a greater understanding of regional aspirations has emerged and once the insurgents began to realise that they cannot defeat the Indian State through violence, things came under control. Mizoram is peaceful, as is Tripura. Nagaland is once more manageable. The Khalistan Movement in the Punjab has

died down and even in Jammu and Kashmir the situation is better. Even Naxalite insurgency will be controlled and neutralised. Our democracy has the strength to handle all forms of violence and to defeat violent efforts to overthrow the state. What we need is patience, effective police action, but always a door which is open even to militants and insurgents to once again engage with society as a whole. Such violent movements will not lead to anarchy because the State will not permit it.

But there is another far more dangerous form of hostile diversity which is threatening the unity of India. This is the growth of motivated regionalism in which splinter groups of legislators are putting immense pressure on government to pander to their baser instincts, surrender to their every whim under threat of defection and, one way or the other, expect to be paid and their pockets filled if government is to survive. They thereby negate every principle of governance which guides government in delivering good government to the people. The selfish interests of these splinter groups are paramount and must be catered for and never mind good government for all. This has resulted in widespread corruption just to feed these politicians, total paralysis of decision making and framing of policies which would be of long term national benefit and demoralisation and consequential deprofessionalisation of the civil services, which are now either incapable of or undesirous of rendering sane advice to government and certainly ineffective in implementing policies which, in any case, are generally non-existent. Rapacious politicians, an indecisive government and an inefficient and ineffective civil service are a dangerous, perhaps lethal, combination which can only destroy the country and give birth to anarchy.

Let us see what forms anarchy has taken in our democracy. Pramod Mahajan once summed up our emerging political scenario. He said that during a visit of a parliamentary delegation to China when Deve Gowda was Prime Minister, the Chinese asked Pramod to define democratic government in India. He said, "I represent the largest party in Parliament, but we have no representation in the Cabinet. (Pointing to the Congress member of the delegation) He represents the second largest party, which also has no place in the Cabinet. (Pointing to the sole member from Goa) He is the only representative of his party, but he is a Cabinet Minister".

In the present UPA-II government DMK enjoys a position of influence totally disproportionate to its parliamentary strength. The TMC can and does claim its pound, perhaps even a tonne, of flesh. When the nuclear deal was being negotiated the Congress made a Faustian deal with BSP and the Samajwadi Party to survive the withdrawal of the Left's support. Even in the spectrum allocation case (2 G scam) the wrong doings of the DMK Telecommunications Minister were tolerated to an inordinately extended degree on the grounds of the compulsions of coalition. A coalition can insist on an equal say for all partners, but it cannot be stretched to condonation of criminality. Unfortunately as good government recedes and survival becomes the sole objective, democratic government gives way to political lawlessness, which is also a form of anarchy.

Dissent is crucial to any democracy, but there are limits even to dissent. For Medha Patkar to say that development cannot be an excuse for ruination of a whole section of society whose land is acquired is not only legitimate but also humane and socially justified. For the Narmada Bachao Andolan to say that they will not allow any dam to be built is excessive and unjustified. To go further and to say that land cannot be acquired at all and the State's Right of Eminent Domain must be surrendered is totally wrong. Surrendering to such a demand is undemocratic and anarchic because those who would benefit from a project also have rights, which are being denied to them by the weak-kneed policies of government. Governance demands listening to everyone, making equity central to all decision making and then taking a balanced view. It cannot adopt the Chinese method of displacing thirty lakh people forcibly to build the Three Gorges Dam, but this does not mean that Sardar Sarovar should not be built

despite the fact that it has brought over twenty lakh acres of parched land under irrigation and taken water to over 50 thirsty cities and towns in Gujarat.

Yet another form of anarchy is the ready surrender by politicians and officials to every street agitation. The excuse given is always “Janata ki pukaar”, or the voice of the people. The classic example of this is the Bhopal scenario in 1972-73 when the Bhopal Municipal Corporation established two dairy zones described by the World Bank as five star hotels for buffaloes and insisted that cattle owners shift their animals out of the city to the designated areas. A crowd of several hundred cattle and cattle owners descended on the Chief Minister’s house, equipped with loudspeakers and other amplifiers. A panicky Chief Minister telephoned me and told me to immediately stop our action. I told him that whereas there were about 500 buffaloes milling around, there were only about 50 cattle owners, whose numbers were exaggerated because of the noise generated by the loudspeakers. A minor street protest almost caused the entire campaign to make the city cattle free to collapse and all because of 50 people, 500 cattle and a loudspeaker or two. The people of Bhopal were solidly behind us, but a street protest almost won the day for a tiny group of persons pushing their own selfish agenda.

Bandhs, rasta roko, chakka jam, disruption of traffic, violence against anyone with a contrary view, communal strife on trifling issues, armed take over of large areas as the Naxalites have done, the ease with which people break the law while the administration stand-by helplessly, all in the name of exercise of democratic rights, are not legitimate forms of dissent. In fact they are a form of fascism on the one hand because they deny other citizens their rights and a form of anarchy on the other hand because they weaken government, disturb the public peace and allow one group to hold the rest of society to ransom. When government loses its ability to govern because it will not stand up against anarchy, then in fact it helps in the destruction of democracy because it abandons the demos in favour of a section of people with narrow self-interest.

Democracy means that government will be resolute in policy and its implementation and if this finds temporary disfavour with the people they will vote the party out of power. So what! Five years on there will be another chance. Ideology cannot be compromised because there is short-term loss. Democracy is all about a long-term view based on ideology which itself is sensitive to the voice of the demos. It is certainly not a game of immediate expediency which changes and chops at the howling of a mob. That leads to anarchy and, as happened in the post Weimar Republic Germany, the emergence of the extreme right wing in the form of the ultra fascist Nazi Party and the imposition of a tyranny that made Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan appear like innocent choir boys. India cannot, must not, permit its politicians’ self-centred perception of democracy to push it towards a state where governance weakens to the very edge of anarchy.
