

Democracy of  
resisting oppression.  
an unbalanced  
insistence on



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Democracy assumes human beings to be basically good, rational and capable of self-restraint, assumptions that are often belied in reality. So, the freedom is often misused. Democracy prides itself on the freedom it gives to dissent. In what other system could one freely write a book on how to topple governments? However, this dissent can be carried too far, even to the extent of posing danger to the unity of the country and its social fabric. And then, a democratic system faces the dilemma of how to control it. Forced to use force, its hands are tied, for it cannot use too much of it; if it does, then democracy would die. But if it lets dissent go uncontrolled, then too it would be destroyed.

A liberal order gives basic autonomy to human beings and institutions but this often makes cohesive orderly living difficult. One cannot quite see how autonomy graduates into secessionist desires, but it often does. Groups, sub-groups, and even smaller groups begin to seek 'independence'. A legitimate question that comes up is: when and at what point should these subdivisions cease? We have seen this happening in the erstwhile Soviet Union, with each state and each enclave seeking independence. Such small entities may be quite enviable politically and could soon give rise to chaotic conditions. Democracy confers certain rights on the people.

But more often than not these rights are abused in the name of resisting oppression. An unbalanced insistence on one's rights without a corresponding realisation of one's duties creates indiscipline and disorder and, in reality, causes an erosion of the democratic principle. Liberty and equality are both basic to democracy but are not these two concepts intrinsically opposed? Can liberty which allows a human being to develop his

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or her individuality, expand mentally and acquire what he or she desires to the full, be reconciled with equality, which by its very nature puts a check on such individual aspirations for the welfare of a group, a community, a collectivity? Democracy resorts to 'positive discrimination' on the one hand, and turn a blind eye to monopolistic concerns, on the other, in trying to reconcile with such contradictions. The fact is that the success of democracy requires certain conditions. Individuals have to learn tolerance and understand that freedom is not unbridled but dependent on not harming another individual's well-being. Democracy demands from the common person a certain level of ability and character: rational conduct, an intelligent understanding of public affairs, independent judgement, tolerance and unselfish devotion to public interest. "Democracy assumes civic capacity on the part of its citizens," as pointed out by J. Bryce, "and this capacity involves intelligence, self-control and conscience.

"The citizens must be able to understand the interests of the community, to subordinate their own will to the general will and must feel their responsibility to the community. What happens in reality is that indolence makes itself felt in the neglect to study and reflect on public issues; private self-interest reveals itself in class legislation and corruption; party spirit kills independent judgement. Democracy is based on certain theoretical values but human imperfection prevents them from flowering in practice. Indeed, Sir Henry Maine, who went so far as to say that democracy can never represent the rule of the many because, as a rule, they merely accept the opinions of their leaders, was right. Parliament is rarely 'a mirror of the nation'; it does not truly represent every element and interest in the nation

in proportion to its relation to the whole. And as Voltaire said, " Equality is a myth—it is as impossible for men to be equal as it is impossible for two professors of theology not to be jealous of each other." Democracy contains within it the seeds of dissolution and decay, as well as of life and progress. It is very much possible that it may lead to the despotism of a collective mediocrity, resulting in the negation of freedom, the free play of self-interest, and the deterioration of individual and national character.

However, under favourable conditions, democracy encourages intelligence, self-reliance, initiative and social harmony by placing the ultimate responsibility for government on the citizens themselves; it makes authority a trust and ensures equal consideration for all. Democracy in reality calls for a balance between different forces, between self-interest and consideration for others, between rights and duties, and between individual freedom and the freedom of the fellow being. A successful democracy manifests a reconciliation of opposites.

If the balance is not achieved or is not maintained democracy appears to be a bundle of paradoxes.