

Democracy and Dictatorship

“DEMOCRACY SUBSTITUTES ELECTIONS BY THE INCOMPETENT MANY FOR THE CORRUPT FEW”

The 18th century poet, Alexander Pope correctly said, “For forms of government let fools contest, whichever administered best is best”. If dictatorship is the tyranny of one, aristocracy is the exploitation of the many and democracy is the cult of incompetence. A dictator is generally an efficient administrator whereas ministers, are inexperienced so bad administrators. Man has always been experimenting with political or social institutions with the hope to discover a perfect one. Democracy is the latest trial of man and may prove to be a failure. It is based upon many assumptions – people are adept in the art of governing themselves, they are basically good to make sacrifices, they are wise enough to know their rights and duties, their judgements are infallible. In indirect or representative democracy the voters are to elect their representatives by casting their votes. Majority opinion cannot be wrong because it is for the welfare of the largest number; greatest happiness of the greatest number is what democracy aims at. The only qualification which a voter is supposed to possess is the attainment of a particular age, i.e., when man possesses the power to hold independent opinion and has the capacity to discriminate and judge. Democracy is the ruling ideal of the day. But as Renan says, “Institutions are destroyed by their triumphs”.

In the case of aristocracy, dictatorship or monarchy, a few are the makers of the government. They have only self-interest in mind; common man for them is born to be ruled. These select few are corrupt in the sense that they can manage the affairs to their advantage, they can outwit others for coming to power, they can crush those who rise against them. In some cases they inculcate certain unbounded ambitions and for realizing them they mobilize all the resources. Democracy substitutes the appointment of the government by the few (with election) by many, who are, Shaw thinks, incompetent. It is half truth.

An electorate in a democratic state must be an adult with normal sense to exercise his right to vote. This qualification places too much premium on the rationality of a common man and also on his competence to make political judgements. At its face value the whole process of electing representatives is sound because even after elections the elected ones are responsible and responsive to the electorate. Experience shows that it is nothing more than, ‘cult of incompetence’ as Faguet would like to call it. The fascists accused democracy

of weakening the sense of national solidarity, of glorifying mediocrity and inefficiency. The communists claim that democratic system must break down for achieving social, political and economic equality. But the attack of the communists is restricted to a particular form of government because they themselves believe in mass participation. Apart from it democracy is very expensive form of government under which ten persons do in ten days what one man can do in one day. Shaw discovers that the electorate themselves are incompetent to do their job.

Howsoever politically awake a nation may be they cannot make an objective assessment of either the political situation or of the competence of the candidates. The biased reporting of the news, the commitment of newspapers to particular policies will never allow them to think independently, objectively and dispassionately. Their opinions are coloured and their judgements are vitiated by the carefully managed propaganda. Information about all the affairs is not available; news are suppressed, distorted and falsified. The ruling party has ample means to gear up propaganda machinery in their favour. If at all some pieces of correct information trickle down through the opposition parties, a common man is not prepared to give much credit to it. In the hearts of man is a hero worshipper and the people in power have more opportunities to build up their image before the public. When a person starts worshipping personalities, his judgement is blinded. Again, it is very difficult to have thorough understanding of the person to be elected; close contact with the person may not enlighten us much about his motives. Even if the voters form a bad opinion about the representatives, the government by doling out certain concessions can make them to forget the actions of the past. The memory of the public is very short and the people in power can exploit it. Moreover judgment depends upon one's education, environment and intellectual make-up. Here also the initiative lies with those who do not share the responsibility of power – the press lords, the political leaders and those who control the media of information and persuasion. Mob psychosis, their rational crowd-mind have always clouded correct judgement. According to Tocqueville, 'It is always more or less impossible for the people to discern the best means of attaining the end which they desire with sincerity. The people have neither the time nor the means which are essential for the prosecution of an investigation of this kind, its conclusions are hastily formed from a superficial inspection of the more prominent features of a question'. In fact people examine the question from many angles, involving so many interests, so the judgement is never sound. Otherwise also opinions of the people are composed of a series of partial truths and we cannot get at whole truth by adding all opinions numerically. According to Plato, only the best ruler can put these

partial versions together but in democracy there is no method to evolve it. The majority is swayed by the passions of the moment – masses obey the “impulse of passion rather than the suggestion of prudence and abandon a natural design for the gratification of a momentary caprice.” Clearly the electorate are incompetent to make judicious judgement.

The majority of the voters are incompetent to exercise their right to cast vote. Customs of the society, experience of the nation through ages, religious association and many other factors may hamper the exercise of rights. If religion has a firmer hold upon the mind of the people, they will be guided by the religious considerations. If history has taught them to elect a particular party they may be prejudiced in its favour. The success of a political party does not so much lie in the implementation of promises but in dazzling the people with manifestoes, in keeping them in a state of ignorance through effective propaganda. Communists correctly think that political liberty without economic equality is meaningless. A poor man's vote can be bought; he can be lured and can be influenced by propaganda. Democracy is a force in a poor country. Regionalism, sectional interests, linguistic groupism and provincialism make the voters incompetent electors.

Democracy places power in the hands of the common people to manage the affairs of the state. The psychologists regard an average man as a person possessing below average intelligence. In the U.S. the army conducted mental tests which indicated that 60% of the people are of average or below average intelligence. Under democracy people are supposed to understand and manage complex problems. They cannot understand the diplomatic moves, the subtle suggestions. That is why Lecky denounced democracy as the rule of ignorance and negation of liberty.

This is how Shaw would like to substantiate his point of view. But we should not forget that he is an idol breaker and throws conservative beliefs in the winds. There is some truth in his statements but not the complete truth. People have shown remarkable capacity to pronounce judgements. Aristotle, with all his wisdom believed that the aggregate virtue and ability of the masses was greater than the virtue and ability of a part of the population. If the mass of the people do not understand they should have common sense of appointing good administrators and legislators and of checking misbehavior of the latter. The people may not be able to decide complicated problems confronting the State but they have enough maturity to give the broad directions. Bryce who has been one of the most impartial and intelligent exponents of democracy says, that people do not rule but determine the policy. Public opinion is the safeguard for

democracy enjoyed by no other form of government. The growth of democracy in the world is evident from the growth of the system of initiative, referendum, recall and direct elections. Both, the gifts to the individual and demands on him, are greater than those of any another form of government.

Democracy as a government by the people should not be looked upon as a government by the ignorant people. Democracy itself is the biggest training ground for the citizens which makes them matured, self-confident, responsible and public spirited. As J.S. Mill said there is no better education than to be a citizen in a democratic state and participating in the democratic processes. Monarchy or aristocracy may be more efficient than democracy but the edifice built by them lasts so long as those, who are in power, are able to wield authority. The moment that hand becomes weak, the whole edifice falls like a house of cards. The reason being that monarchy or aristocracy rests on individuals or groups, continued availability of which is a matter of chance. The people in these two forms of governments remain unconcerned and, therefore, the moral aspect of the personality of the individual is never developed. It is only under democracy that the people are able to provide stability and permanence to their institutions. The British and the American histories are a clear proof of the soundness of governmental institutions based on the participation of the people. The greatest virtues of democracy lie in the fact that it is a self-government. The people know their own problems better than their rulers and therefore, they can solve them better themselves than those who are not from amongst them.