

THE NATURE OF DISSENT

Relevant for: Governance in India | Topic: Peoples' Participation/ Role of Civil Society in Governance

Disagreeing with each other is a fundamental human trait. There is not a single individual who does not disagree with something or the other all the time. Philosophers argue that a baby meaningfully attains its sense of the self — its recognition of 'I' and the concept of 'mine' — when it first begins to say 'no'. At a primordial level, we become individuals only through this act of stating our disagreement. There is no family without dissent between parents and the children, or between the siblings. A family which learns to deal with dissent rather than authoritatively dismissing it is a more harmonious family.

We dissent at home, with our friends and with our colleagues in the places we work. It is through these ways of dissenting that we establish a relationship with them. Our relations with our friends are based as much on how we learn to live with our disagreements as on other things. The relationship between spouses is filled with many moments of disagreement. If our friends and family consist only of those who agree with us all the time, then we will not have any friends and family. Learning to live with others, the first requisite for a social existence, is about learning how to live with them when they disagree with us.

Dissent is so ingrained in us that we don't even need others to disagree. We constantly disagree with ourselves. We argue with our own selves all the time as if each one of us is an individual made up of many selves. When we think, we are often dissenting with our own selves. When we stifle dissent within our own minds, we stop thinking. Many of our meaningful acts also occur from this dissenting conversation of our many selves.

Dissent is thus a condition of existence and the real problem is not dissent but silent assent. When we agree collectively, we are silently assenting, agreeing with what is being said and done. This is really not the existential characteristic of a human being but only that of a 'bonded mind'. However, some might say that assent is the way societies come together, and it is needed for a stable society. But this is plain wrong. Just as a baby attains its sense of self through dissent, so too does a society get its own identity by learning to dissent. In other words, we will have a stronger identity of what our society and nation are through forms of dissent.

Moreover, every process of forming the social needs dissent. A group made up of people who agree to everything all the time is not really a society but an oligarchy. It becomes a society only through disagreements and dissent. Dissent, paradoxically, is the glue which makes a decent society possible.

A mature society is one which has the capacity to manage dissent since members of a society will always disagree with each other on something or the other. Democratic societies are the best of the available models in managing dissent with the least harmful effect on the dissenter. This is the true work of democracy; elections and voting are the means to achieve this. The essence of democracy is to be found in the method it uses to deal with dissent, which is through discussion and debate, along with particular ethical norms.

A democratic society manages dissent by trying to make individual practices of dissent into social practices. Academics and research are two important activities where dissent is at the core. No society has survived without making changes to what was present earlier. New knowledge and new ways of understanding the world, for good or bad, has always been part of every society.

How is new knowledge, new understanding, created? Many new ideas arise by going against earlier established norms and truths. Science, in its broadest meaning, is not possible without dissent since it is by finding flaws with the views of others that new science is created. No two philosophers agree on one point, and no two social scientists are in perfect harmony with each

other's thoughts. Artists are constantly breaking boundaries set by their friends and peers. Buddha and Mahavira were dissenters first and philosophers next. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are filled with stories of dissent and responsible ways of dealing with it.

Thus, when academics dissent, it is part of their job expectation to do so! Dissent is not just about criticism, it is also about showing new perspectives. The scientific community does not imprison scientists for dissenting although we are increasingly finding today that social scientists and artists are being targeted in the name of dissent. This has grown to such an extent that when faculty members dissent about unlawful hiring practices, they face harassment and suspension.

It is not that dissent is necessary only for democracy — it is necessary for the survival of the human race. Any society which eradicates dissent has only succeeded in eradicating itself. We cannot afford to forget the examples of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. A sustainable, harmonious society can only be formed from practices which deal with dissent respectfully and ethically.

The importance of dissent is not just that it is good for democracy. There is also a fundamental ethical principle involved in dissent. Any society which muzzles dissent is acting unethically. Let me give two ethical principles associated with dissent. First, its relation to non-violence, a principle which is so integral to the unique Indian practices of dissent from ancient times to Gandhi and Ambedkar. Second, dissent is an ethical means of protecting those who are worse off than others. Dissent is not mere complaint which all of us, however privileged we are, indulge in. Social dissent is a necessary voice for all those who are oppressed and are marginalised for various reasons. This is the only thing they have in a world which has denied them the basic dignity of a social life.

The ethical principle is that the worse off in a society have greater right to dissent and protest even when the more privileged may not agree or sympathise with that dissent. This is the truly ethical principle that can sustain a mature society. Thus, when we hear the voices of dissent from the oppressed and the marginalised, it is ethically incumbent upon those who are better off than them to give them greater space and greater freedom to dissent. Any of us, particularly the more well-off population, who support any government which wants to use its power to stop dissent of those who are suffering from injustice of various kinds are being used as partners in this unethical action. We act immorally when we sit in the comfort of our homes and abuse those who fight for the rights of the poor and oppressed. When we condemn them in the name of the nation, we are performing an unethical act of further condemning those who are already condemned.

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