

Contemporary Politics and Democracy in India

19th January, 2017 at the India International Centre, New Delhi

The discussion was moderated by Dr Sudhirendra Sharma, consultant and environmentalist who congratulated Sanjay Kumar, secretary of Deshkal society for their efforts toward promoting public discourse by organising a series of monthly discussions. Dr Sharma spoke of the symposiums held in ancient Greece which catalysed the rise of several important ideas of democracy and justice which influence us even today. Reflective conversations held amidst a group of people stimulate an exchange of ideas thereby making room for new questions to emerge which leads the discussion in newer exciting directions.

Dr Harish Khare, Editor-in-Chief of The Tribune initiated the discussion on contemporary politics and democracy in India. He raised concerns regarding the rise of right wing nationalism and the brutal suppression of voices of dissent, an alarming development in recent times that threatens the very foundations of democracy in India. The liberal intelligensia is rapidly losing ground, not just in terms of their presence within parliament but also in terms of their popularity amidst the common people. Dr Khare raised the question which became the focal point of the ensuing discussion-Why have liberal progressive voices lost footing in today's society? What are the factors responsible for the current polarisation in political debates?

One of the panellists, Dr Maninendra Thakur, Associate Professor, CPR, JNU moved the discussion forward by pointing out the appeal of populist rhetoric in assuaging the anxieties of an increasingly frustrated middle class. He cited his first hand experiences witnessing the current police crackdown on student protestors at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Peaceful protestors at the university are unduly harassed and any negative coverage of the government handling of the case in the media is actively suppressed. There is no longer much space for expression of critical individual opinion regarding government actions; the very notion of freedom of expression is in danger.

Dr. Thakur mentioned that in the past few years the number of public lynchings in India has gone up tremendously which indicates an increased sense of frustration and anxiety amongst the general populace of the country. This dissatisfaction has

manifested as lack of faith in the institutions of governance and has led to significant degree of public disengagement from politics. Moreover, in today's society, there exists a pronounced inclination towards individual interest and self-aggrandisement and a marked disinterest in social issues which has led in turn to a culture of silence on public matters.

Dr. Khare interjected that one of the factors responsible for decline in public engagement by individuals could be the rise of social media technology. Such technologies, promoted in part by vested corporate and government interests create a false sense of connectivity and empowerment in people. Instead of engaging with their community in person and thereby connection with each other at a human level, people retreat to the echo chamber of their social media platforms. Further, as another participant in the discussion pointed out, popular media promotes tropes such as the muslim gangster, the libertine progressive, etc. which enhance the rise of conservatism and create an environment of jingoistic nationalism.

The younger generation, entranced by technology lacks not only the will but also the capabilities for public engagement. One of the participants in the discussion pointed out that schools and universities are designed in ways that hinder conversations, an example being the lack of benches in the IIT Delhi campus where students could have come together and exchanged their view on the social issues of the day.

The politics of anxiety foments polarisation of ideas and forges a sense of animosity amongst different religious and social groups which is cleverly utilised by political parties capitalising on identity politics to win elections.

Despite the issues plaguing democracy and politics in India today, the discussion ended on an optimistic note. It is evident that, however subdued at the moment, a sense of civic solidarity still exists as evinced by the ongoing movement for Dalit rights, the popularity of the Anna Hazare movement, the student protests going on at JNU, the rise of women's rights and tribal rights movements. However, the need of the hour is for these voices to come together in protest against the populist polemical rhetoric and jargons systematically promoted by political parties. We need to demand a viable alternative to the current mode of repressive governance. No society will put up with repression and unjust policies for a long time, sooner or later, the tide will turn, hopefully towards a more inclusive political and social order.

At the end of the discussion, Sanjay Kumar, secretary of Deshkal Society thanked the participants for their enthusiastic participation in the discussion.