

Democrats and Dissenters: A Critique of Post-independent Intellectual Discourse

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Abstract

This article reviews a recent book titled 'Democrats and Dissenters' by Ramchandra Guha (Allen Lane, 352 pages, Rs. 699, 2016). It is a collection of incisive essays on politics, society, ideologies and intellectuals. The book is based on anecdotal information, author's travel experiences and his superb analytical skill as well as profound wisdom. It represents liberal voice of contemporary India and provides hope for those who have conviction of dissent.

Keywords: Democracy, Liberalism, Dissenting voices, India

'Democrats and Dissenters' (2016) is a set of sixteen essays exploring author's research interest on the dynamic growth of Indian Republic after independence. The author has used his core research strengths in history, comparative sociology and politics to analyse issues that influenced Indian society and politics. The book is rich in content and has a lucid narrative. The first part of the book on 'Politics and Society' has eight essays dealing with a range of topics covering political parties, leaders, neighbouring countries and tribal affairs. The second part is more intriguing and engaging as it discusses the life and contributions of seven great academicians. Though an unbiased historian, author has not repressed his personal and political convictions and judgments throughout the book.

The first chapter explores the reasons for gradual decline in the strength and presence of Indian National Congress in the Indian political domain. Author has used a historian's perspective to identify the constructive role played by Congress in building a democratic and united India, amidst presence of factionist elements and challenges. Two decades preceding and succeeding Indian Independence (1920-1960) was particularly challenging for Indian political, social, and economic system. Author has credited the leadership of Congress Party during this time period for becoming the torchbearer of democracy in India while raising bars of socialism and holding on to principles of secularism. Along with Gandhi, there is also reference to role of regional leaders like Kumaraswamy Kamaraj in nation building process. As the essay progresses, the author is deeply critical about the dynastic politics in the party

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and blatantly expresses his deepest disappointment in party's present state of affairs and leadership.

The second chapter identified eight key issues, which he considers as the greatest threats to the freedom of expressions in India. This chapter carries lot of relevance following the recent debate about freedom of expression and revoking the archaic sedition laws in India. Author points out the retention of colonial law as one of the major threats to the freedom of expression. He also points out the inability of judicial system particularly, the lower courts in segregating and rejecting the politically motivated cases. The rise of identity politics in India, corruption and functioning of law enforcement agencies, narrow-minded behaviour of Indian politicians is also a case in point where even renowned artists had suffered. Author has painstakingly narrated the failure of fourth estate and the commercial dependence of media houses on industrial houses and deliberated on how the government has handicapped their performance and affected journalistic ethics. Biased ideological orientation of intellectuals (writers/film makers/editors/artists) is also a potential threat highlighted by the author. The third chapter is constructed through quoting a series of written communication between Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayanan, which has so far not been discussed widely in the public domain. The two parliamentarians indulged in an extensive and politically productive debate on the merits of parliamentary system of democracy. J.P. Narayanan argued the dire need for a focused and well-functioning opposition party in the parliament. While Nehru in course of the communication had conceded that the parliamentary system of democracy has its faults and its success depends much on the human beings who runs it. The author has crafted the chapter to highlight the relevance of intense intellectual and politically charged debates on policy matters, which is lacking among today's politician.

The three essays that followed discuss about India's neighboring nations China, Pakistan and Srilanka by comparing the common threads of plural faith and multilingualism. Author displays his gutsy traits while drawing comparisons between Tamil Elam issues in Srilanka and Kashmir debacle in India. Where talks of human right issues in Kashmir is considered non-patriotic, the author is assertive on how Indian government has let down the Kashmiri population since independence and how the respective governments have treated them as less than 'complete citizens'. A common thread of gender equality issues in three countries reflected in the book also make interesting reading. The fourth chapter offers a comparative focus on China and India. According to the author, China is less pluralistic and less accommodative of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversities compared to India. The essay on Pakistan too relies heavily on personal experiences of visiting Pakistan on three different occasions. Author has made interesting observations of finding pan selling Keralite, Sikhs and Gujaratis who were settled in Pakistan. Author has attributed cold war politics as one of the reasons for long-standing negative effect on Pakistan democracy. Unlike Pakistan, India chose the non-alignment movement, which ensured that the army battalions were confined to its cantonments only. Author observes Srilanka as a progressively democratic country in the next chapter where the nation had its share of grave intolerance perpetuated against the linguistic minority, which led to three-decades of bloodshed that wrecked the state.

In the succeeding chapter author observes another critical issue on Indian democracy, the lack of political representation of Tribals. Tribals in general have been broken up groups in states unable to reinforce themselves as an interest group. The essay derives on direct comparison between Dalits and Tribals which in itself is a contentious argument. But he is right on his view that Dalits have more power during elections as compared to Tribals. The last chapter of the first section, navigates through eight different years of independent India. Author chooses events that has changed or affected Indian political psyche deeply. The chapter reviews many saddening and turning points in Indian history. Independent India's first struggle started with partition and author finds 1948 as a strong contender for worst year category in Indian history. The other picks made by the author include the years in which all major wars were fought by India including the 1962 (Ind-China) and 1966 (Indo-Pak) war. The internal unrest in northeast, Adivasi protests in Bastar, Starvation and food riots in West Bengal, and devaluation of Indian rupee, make the year 1966 stand out in the lot. The year '1975', could easily be marked as the darkest year of Indian democracy due to Emergency episode. Author shortlists the year '1984' as a contender, as it was marked by Blue star Operations in Golden Temple, assassination of Mrs Gandhi, attack on the Sikh community and the Bhopal gas tragedy. Other two picks made by the author are when the secular tradition of Indian democracy was shattered [the demolition of Babri Masjid (1992) and the Gujarat riots (2002)]. 2008 is discussed by the author as it witnessed a terror strike(Mumbai), and internal disturbances (Kashmir, Orissa, Telengana, Northeast), natural calamities as well as experienced repercussions of Global Financial Crisis. Despite an interesting narration, author chose not to pick any particular year as the worst one.

In the second section on '*Ideologies and Intellectuals*', author has painstakingly portrayed the body of work of seven renowned scholars. Author begins by paying tribute to illustrious Eric Hobsbawm whose contribution include employing multidisciplinary and wide range of non-traditional sources to address the research problem. Author has been emphatic about the fact that the traditional Marxist approach of the great historian has made him ignore the shady and violent incidents of communism. He was also sceptical about emerging areas like environmental history. The essay also points out that the historian rather had an optimistic view on pro-immigration policies in Europe, which was eventually shattered as we could conclude from the current context of migration turmoil faced by Europe.

The following essay dwells on the works of the Benedict Anderson, who had immersed his academic life studying about Indonesia. Author also curiously highlights a personal interaction where an intriguing question of whether India could have survived as a democracy without partition was pointed out. He also highlights the scholar's admirable ability to transcend the thematic polarities of structure and agency, interests and ideas, economy and culture. The illustrious scholar is best known for his best seller-*Imagined Communities*, but author has discussed about his other major scholarly works in detail also. *Imagined Communities* compares the concept of nationalism of nineteenth and twentieth century through case studies. In the current context of Indian nationalism debates, Anderson's celebrated work on nationalism would evoke huge interest. Author points out that while the great scholar appreciated the fact that nationalism could evoke hope and self-sacrificing love, it should also encourage self-criticism and self-correction. These viewpoints could stand the tests of time.

The essay titled 'The Life and Death of a Gandhian Buddhist' introduces to the life and work of Buddhist Scholar and Academician Dharmanand Kosambi whose journey has hardly been discussed in public realm. Prof Kosambi was a true follower of Gandhi and chose to leave academic career in USA to join the freedom movement. It also reflects interesting aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's efforts towards pooling funds to send a scholar to Ceylon to study Buddhism and Pali language, amidst the furore surrounding the freedom struggle movement.

The fourth and fifth essays in this series are on life and work of renowned sociologist Andre Betlie and economist Amartya Sen respectively. Betlie who has done ethnographic study of a village in south India (Tanjore) for his doctoral work, has been a pioneer in developing a social theory for India and hold the view that 'merit' or 'need' cannot be an attribute of a group but an individual. While sociologists supports the idea of giving concessions and protection to a group for a limited time. He was also pessimistic about the idea of protective discrimination to a group for an unlimited time. This principle was applied in the context of reservations in India. The essay on Amartya Sen primarily is a revised critical review of Sen's book-*Argumentative Indian*, which was earlier, published on Economic and Political Weekly. Author is appreciative of Sen's effort to elucidate incidents in history to construct the idea of harmonious society. But he is equally critical about Sen's interpretation of historic anecdote to link past with the present.

The essay on Dharma Venkataraman, is a memoir by the author to his mentor and who was a pioneer in the field of socio-historical research. Dharma, who endorsed rigorous research methods primary data held the view that "past cannot be used to justify or condemn policies of the present". This specific narrative was used by the author to criticize Amartya Sen's approach in the previous chapter, which also reflects the tremendous influence of the mentor on author's methodological beliefs. Author also highlights the instances when she has taken controversial viewpoint on sensitive issues. Amongst the most interesting one is her 'behind the scene' efforts to publish an advertisement in Times of India(30 Jan 1993) bringing together a series of signatories condemning the Babri masjid and riots.

The essay on U. R. Krishnamoorthy brings together all facets of an English language teacher who donned many hats. He was a firebrand intellect who had taken compelling positions against Congress party during Emergency, Babri masjid and lately he was a visible critic of Narendra Modi (2014). The concluding chapter, 'Where are the conservative intellectual in India', author carefully analysis the prominence of liberal and socialist intellectuals in Indian political and academic space and laments about the lack of conservative intellectuals particularly when right wing political party is in power in India.

The book is indeed a brilliant analysis on the political and sociological history of modern India and must read not only for academic researchers but also for those keen observers of Indian polity.