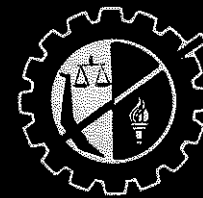


**PEOPLE'S VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY IS
THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY**

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by

Bayaprakash Narayan

THROUGHOUT the world human society stands today at the crossroads. But more than other peoples of the world, the peoples of Asia have been faced with this choice between the roads that cross. We the people of India, as the Preamble to our Constitution says, have chosen the democratic way of life and have given to ourselves a democratic constitution. But as the experience of several Asian Nations and even other nations shows, it is not enough to have a democratic Constitution; it is not enough to have a Parliament and other legislatures, as we have in our country the Vidhan Sabhas, nor is it even enough to have parties. We have seen how from Cairo to Djakarta political systems based on some sort of a constitution, some sort of a party system, some sort of a Parliament or Assembly have been brushed aside by dictators or military leaders who happen to appear on the scene. And, therefore, some of us in this country feel that the grassroots of democracy are as much if not much more important than the formal institutions of democracy such as Constitutions, legislatures, parties.

I find that the party system in our country is a very unreal system. It does not seem to represent all the sections of opinion in the country. It seems to be a race today for everyone to declare themselves as socialists. The Congress is a Socialist Party: it calls itself a socialist party or at least believes in the "socialistic pattern of society." The P.S.P. is a socialist party. The Communists also say that they

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

EUGENE BLACK
President, World Bank

want to build up a socialist society in India. I read somewhere the Bharatiya Jana Sangh saying that it believes in Bharatiya Socialism. The D.M.K (Dravida Munnetra Kazagam) also made a statement saying that it believed in Constitutional Socialism. I do not know if the others believe in other kinds of socialism. However, you see this race between the parties to be socialist or radical.

I am sure that as in every society, there must be elements, there must be forces which do not want change or do not want change which is rash, hasty, without proper deliberation, without proper examination, experimentation and so on.

These elements and forces of our society have no political expression as a result of which our political development tended to be rather unbalanced. And, therefore, even though I am not a conservative—I stand for change, non-violent change—even though I am not interested in any parties or the party system, I welcome the move for a new party.

Let me now examine what I call the grassroot problems of democracy. Anyone who thinks of democracy today in our country, particularly amongst the educated classes, thinks of parties, thinks of the Opposition and thinks of the balance between the parties. As long as the party system lasts, such balance is essential for the successful working of democracy. There is no doubt that the opposition in the country is rather weak and if a development takes place, that strengthens the opposition, it is the strengthening of democracy to that extent. Within that sphere, it is perfectly valid to hold that view. At the same time, it does not seem to me that that should be enough for the health and safety of our democracy. As a matter of fact, I feel that the party system is not the best system of democracy.

As democracy has evolved in the past two centuries, there has been no other kind of democracy that has been proved to be better than the Parliamentary party system of democracy. But that of course does not mean that what has so far happened is the last word and there is nothing further to be done. We know, for instance, in our country, that inspite of the fact that we have a constitution and political parties, the party system happens to work in such a way that even the minimum definition of democracy is not implemented, the minimum definition being that democracy is the rule of the majority. In many States of our country, parties are in power which received only minority votes at the general election. Outside Kerala, there is a feeling that Kerala has gone Red which is far from the truth. In the last general election, the Communist Party in Kerala received barely 35% of the votes and many people who voted for them did not really vote for Communism; they voted for anti-something; they were dissatisfied with something or the other and they voted like that. There is no doubt that if the opposition were to come together, there will be no possibility of the Communist Government in Kerala. But it is not only in Kerala that the Government represents a minority opinion. The Congress Party happens to be in power in many States where it really represents the minority opinion. That is not true working of democracy. And usually it so happens that the parties function more or less on the basis of a few individuals who are powerful and who are popular. For instance, in the Congress Party ultimately it ends up in the leadership of one individual. Thus democracy gradually distils down to the rule of one individual because that individual happens to be a very strong personality, a popular figure. All these are problems which need to be gone into by those who are interested in democracy today.

We had Gandhiji as our leader for the national revolution.

Gandhiji talked of "Swaraj" and of the Government of the people. He used to say that that Government is the best which governs the least. Today the trend is in the opposite direction. Whether it is the Communist State, or the Democratic Socialist State, or the Welfare State, or the Liberal State there are more controls and the State has taken over more and more functions. So the trend is towards government governing more and not governing less.

I for one believe in a democracy in which the Government governs the least. How can we have a Government like that? Only if the people are able to manage their affairs themselves. The citizens must realise their responsibility. There must be ability amongst the people to come together in the cities, in towns, in villages, in districts and in states, in order to solve their problems by themselves without the help of authorities that are "above" them. It is in this regard that our country is very weak and, therefore, our democracy at the grassroots is very weak. There is all over the country, more so in rural than urban areas, a state of inertia. The people are not active, they are not doing things which they should and could do and, therefore, there is over-dependence on the State.

Take a village. They will construct a building for a school but after having done that their whole initiative will come to a stop and then they will want somebody in the district board, or the Government to take it over and run it. They are not able to run that whereas educational institutions should all be run by the people. The parents who want their children to be educated should come together and establish schools and then go ahead with the colleges and with the universities if it is possible to do so. But all this is not happening today.

We in the *Sarvodaya* movement emphasise the initiative of the people—the *Lolcnshakti* as against the *Rajashakti*

(the power of the state). We emphasise the politics of the people, *Lokneeti*, as against *Rajaneeti*, the politics of the Government. Vinobaji being a Sanskrit scholar and a linguist has coined this beautiful word, *Lokneeti*. In the old city states the people used to come together in the market place and discuss and legislate there. That was a people's democracy in the true sense of the word, not in the sense of the so-called people's democracies of the communist countries. In that respect, we are very backward.

In this context, the responsibility of the citizen is not only to cast his vote intelligently and understandingly—and not to be duped by casteism or communalism or money, etc. You do not discharge your responsibility only when you have sent a representative whom you really want to be in the Assembly or in the Lok Sabha. There is the more important aspect of democracy, and that is, how much the people are able to manage their affairs themselves. Their civic affairs, educational affairs, medical affairs, industrial affairs, commercial affairs, all these and many more must be managed by themselves. Prof. Harold Lasky was once asked in a group discussion as to how he would test the value of a democracy. He replied that he would judge the value of a democracy by the amount of voluntary activity in that democracy. More voluntary activity there is, the more real democracy and true democracy it is. And more the people depend on the State, or the Government, the more there is denial or restriction of democracy. This aspect of democracy is what Vinobaji has been placing before the country.

Gandhiji was the undisputed leader of the country. He fought a remarkable battle for freedom and he won a remarkable victory. But we know that after that victory Gandhiji did not take power in his own hands, which was a very extraordinary thing for a leader to do. After every

successful revolution, the leader takes power into his hands. Washington became the first U.S. President, Lenin became the first Prime Minister of Soviet Russia. But Gandhiji neither became the first President nor the first Prime Minister of free India. Why? Because he was thinking of the grassroots of democracy, of going to the people and showing them how to run their affairs themselves.

The political parties that we have today, the way they are functioning, are making the people more helpless. And they are making it more difficult for democracy to rise from the roots. They are all interested in building the ceiling and the roof but not the foundation. Representatives of all political parties, when they go to the people, say: "Give us the vote, support us and we will do the rest." Really that is misleading the people. But it is so, because otherwise it is impossible to catch the votes. It is impossible for any Government to deliver the goods unless the people are doing things themselves. The Opposition parties will go to the people and say: "Well, we sympathise very much with your sufferings and with your problems. But it is you who are to blame for all this. You gave your votes to the wrong people. This time you have to give your votes to the right people. Give it to us and we will do the rest. We will provide the schools, the roads, the hospitals, food and employment and houses and so on." But nobody encourages democracy at the grassroots by stimulating people to voluntary activity.

Gandhiji wanted to build a new democratic India from below. And, therefore, he talked of the *Gram Rajya* and the *Nagara Rajya*. Before *Swaraj*, there was more voluntary activity. After *Swaraj* there has been a decline in voluntary activity because the people say that it is now their government, *Swaraj*, and the Government should, therefore, do everything. In that way, you will have the end of

democracy. You may have the forms of democracy, you may have elections and parties, but for all practical purposes you might have a totalitarian State. It may change hands. But the Government will do everything and people will be an inert mass. This should not happen.

Ultimately, whatever problem you take up, whether it is a problem of education, or industry, or commerce or science, you reach the rockbottom of ethics. On what kind of ethical values is the whole system raised? What are the values which the individuals in society profess and believe and try to implement in their lives? Vinoba's Sarvodaya movement tackles this basic problem. And that is what Gandhiji also tried to do. He pictured an ideal India in which there would be *sarvodaya*, the welfare of all. The basis of society would be love, mutual co-operation. It will be a co-operative society rather than a competitive society riven with all kinds of conflicts. But he said that this good society cannot be made up of bad men. There must be good men first. And it is not institutions, not laws, not political systems, not constitutions, which create good people. For that you require a widespread process of education understood in the widest sense of the word. Education does not mean academic education; but the improving of the human beings through service, love, examples, preaching, reasoning and argument.

Unless every citizen or most of the citizens in the country realise the responsibilities of democracy and have the capacity to look after themselves, our democracy will remain always in danger. The final guarantee of democracy is the people themselves. Today we cannot say that the people themselves are conscious enough to be able to safeguard their democracy because they do not have the capacity of private initiative. I hesitate to term it private enterprise as that word has come to acquire, I do not know why, a bad meaning. Private enterprise does not only mean the

Capitalist system. It can be the individual's enterprise. I personally feel that the more scope there is for every individual to express himself in every manner possible to his own good and to the good of society, the more freedom and scope there is for individual enterprise, the stronger democracy is. But in order that that such a democracy may be powerful and strong, the individual's outlook must be, to go back to that basic problem, an ethical outlook. If every individual had the freedom to do what he liked but what he always did was selfish, such kind of individual enterprise would be bound to lead society to chaos, or to a kind of dictatorship. Therefore, I am rather happy that Rajaji's new Swatantra Party has in its declaration of principles made a reference to Gandhiji's idea of "trusteeship." That means everyone should function as if he were a trustee for his brothers. Everyone who is working—be he a lawyer, a doctor, a merchant, an industrialist, a labourer, or a peasant—should be working not only for himself but as a trustee for the good of fellow human beings. This is not possible merely by political resolutions and party conferences or legislation. It must be done first through example. It does not mean that everyone can become a Gandhi, or a Vinoba, and renounce everything. But to the extent to which it is given to us to have the moral strength and the courage, our attitude should be not selfish or self-centered. All of us should be looking to our fellow human beings and doing whatever is possible for us. Then only private enterprise comes into its own. Then it has a social conscience and it lasts. That becomes the foundation of democracy. Otherwise, it might be dangerous because other people might get the opportunity to crush private enterprise in the name of the collective good and the collective good might really become a kind of a collective oppression as we find in the Communist countries.

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"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives."

— A. D. SHROFF

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