

# Many meanings of Democracy

BY: [YASHOWARDHAN TIWARI](#) JUNE 21, 2021

June 25th marks the anniversary of the beginning of Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime. It was during the wee hours of 26th June that post-Independence Bharat witnessed the beginning of its most brutal regime. Every year on these dates, dozens of articles and op-eds are published across newspapers and blogs, marking the horrors of the Emergency, as a prelude to the anatomy of totalitarian systems.

It has turned into an annual ritual to also remember the sacrifices of thousands of political grassroots workers who bravely opposed the imposition. However, in light of the challenge thrown by the Emergency to the democratic nature of the polity itself, it's strange that it is a bit rare to find people gossiping about democracy.

Anniversary of the Emergency should also be observed as a festival of freedom and democracy, a celebration to come together as a nation to engage in dialogues about the many meanings of democracy, to strengthen Bharat as the world's most colorful democracy. That would be a tribute true to the spirit of the people who performed the vital role as critics and opponents of the Emergency and as saviors of our democracy.

Kindled with this spirit, I would like to recount here a beautiful exchange of letters that I came across in an essay published in Ramchandra Guha's book *Democrats and Dissenters*. These letters were exchanged between Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), written in 1957 around the period of general elections, debating the nature of a parliamentary democracy. Rich in thought and content, the letters point out to the perpetual problem of managing such democracies and a debate on the content of such institutions.

JP, who had played a heroic role in the Quit India movement during the freedom struggle, and had later on decided to dedicate his entire life to social work under the influence of Acharya Vinoba Bhave, had always taken a keen interest in the political scenario of the nation in spite of not being associated formally with any political party. When the general elections were around the corner, JP wrote to Nehru asking him to act in the capacity of a prime minister as a "national leader rather than a party leader", so as to "encourage the growth of an opposition" and thus "soundly lay the foundations of parliamentary democracy" in Bharat.

JP stated that:

"According to parliamentary democracy theory it is not necessary for the opposition to be better than the ruling party. Equally bad parties in opposition are a check on one another and keep the democratic machine on the track... [A]s a Socialist my sympathies are all with the British Labour Party, but I concede that when Labour is in power the Conservatives perform a valuable democratic function without which the Labour government might become a menace to the people.

So, I realize that if my advice had been followed by the opposition parties (JP had advised them to come together as a united front against Congress rather than engaging in three-cornered contests in the constituencies), it would have led to some undesirable parties gaining somewhat in strength.

I was prepared, however, to take that risk on the ground (a) that between the two evils of absoluteness of power and a little increase of strength of certain undesirable parties, the former was the greater evil and (b) that there would be five years after the election in which a sound opposition party could be created."

JP, himself being a social worker of very high national stature and working with a platoon of Sarvodaya workers, argued formidably for their role in shaping the democracy as critics of the government in power, stating that they would "betray their ideals if they did not boldly play a corrective role, offering friendly, constructive, non-partisan advice and criticism and, if need be, even opposition in the form of

non-cooperation and the like. Nor can eschewing of party politics mean indifference to the manner and outcome of elections. True, those who have eschewed party politics are not expected to take any partisan stand, but they may, with complete consistency, raise general political and ideological issues for the guidance of the electorate, the parties and the candidates.”

JP’s thoughts on the functioning of parliamentary democracies indicate a rigorous analysis of ways of deepening the democratic ethos. He does not restrict them to parliamentary or party politics and advocates for a significant role to be played by non-partisan individuals of high standing and social workers, in line with his Gandhian roots.

Jawaharlal Nehru, on other hand, takes a rather curious stand on the issue. Responding to the request for his playing the role of a national leader and arguing about its nature, he questions:

“If it is meant that he should collect a number of important people from different parties and form a government, surely this can only be done if there is some dominant common purpose. Without such a purpose, no government can function... There must be some common outlook and unity of purpose in dealing with these problems. Otherwise, there would be no movement at all and just an internal tug of war.”

On the meaning of ‘parliamentary democracy’, Nehru observes:

“It means that every opportunity should be given for an opposition to function, to express its views by word or writing, to contest elections in fair conditions, and to try to convert the people to its views. The moment an opposition is given some kind of a protected position, it becomes rather a bogus opposition and cannot even carry weight with the people. I am not aware of any pattern of parliamentary democracy in which it has ever been suggested that the opposition should be encouraged, except in the ways I have mentioned above.”

As it turns out, Nehru, who is regarded as a quintessential democrat, comes out as a pragmatist seeking to constrict the scope of such democracies to party politics and ideological programs. JP, on the other hand, seems to be more enthused with the Gandhian ethos than the political heir of Gandhi himself.

My reason for reproducing these letters is that these debates in themselves are fascinating. They also give us a glimpse into the narratives argued in the backdrop, that shaped our democracy. One rarely finds such beautiful dialogic exchanges between our leaders now, something which Guha laments as well. This debate is also significant as it was JP who later led the movement against Indira’s regime. It’s indeed surprising and worth investigating as to how could a Bharat, starred with such gems of critics as JP, who were stuffed profusely with a democratic spirit, give rise to an Indira!

This forty-sixth anniversary of the Emergency, let’s discuss democracy!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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