

## **Debates for a healthy Democracy**

Abraham Lincoln in his historic Gettysburg Address said, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” while referring to democracy as the rule of the people rather than a rule over the people. To Mahatma Gandhi’s understanding of democracy, I something that gives the weak the same chance as the strong. According to Aristotle “In a democracy, the poor will have more power than the rich because the will of the majority is supreme”. So, what exactly is Democracy? To put it simply Democracy in its core is a method of governance of the society by people. As the times have progressed it is impossible for people to exert unlimited sovereignty and partake directly in politics. That is where representative democracy, or in Sartori’s terms ‘governed democracy’ comes into play. With the emergence of representative democracy, the individuals become “passive citizens of democracy” rather “than its real actors”<sup>1</sup>. This results in a weakened democracy which makes debates and public discussion a lot more vital for better functioning of democracy.

Public debate is a series of forums where public opinions, interests, and expectations are expressed on an issue that concerns the whole or part of the society.<sup>2</sup> Engaging citizens in the discussions and the decision is essential to establish an environment normalising tolerance while exchanging information, opinions, arguments, and counter-arguments and ensuring a behavioural shift as a community towards tolerance and a safer political climate. The debates aid efficient intercommunication and communication among the masses. It would not be realistic to think it is possible to reach a common decision or consensus as the composition of the public will vary depending on the subject of the discussion and people with varied identities and demands will come up. This will further extend the scope of visibility within the nation. According to Habermas, sovereignty “gains validity through public debate which reveals issues that bear significance for the whole society, interprets them and contributes to the solution of problems”. One of the other comments made on the value of public debate besides being a tool for getting

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<sup>1</sup> Reyhan Suney. *The Importance of Public Debate in Democratic Regimes*, 8 Europ. Sci. J., 35, May 9, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Id. At 36

information is that it is at the same time a tool for enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> When individuals with different identities and experiences are put together there is a bond to exchange bold ideas. Thus, creating a healthy constructive tension and ease inclusivity in all the sections of society.

One of the distinguishing features of constitutional democracies is the openness of the administration. Debates only help to increase transparency as the administration is not able to monopolise the information away from society. Holding public debates further brings light to the administrative failures and integral problems and allows them to be discussed in open and be heard by society. Another one of the admirable features of democratic administration is accountability. Accountability is the foundation of democratic legitimacy where the administration and administrator can be held accountable to people. Public debates help in increasing accountability as the problems are tuned into agendas of these debates. The administration will have to explain why it has made such a regulation or why it has refused other alternatives<sup>4</sup>. These public debates will also keep in check the risk of abuse of power to a minimum as an administration which is constantly supervised and questioned will serve as a barrier in the way of the tendencies of decision-makers to act in an elitist manner or independently of the society.<sup>5</sup> Not only this these debates, in turn, empower the citizens to own up to their own decisions and actions and further providing citizens with a full understanding of the implications of their course of action and their alternative solutions proposed.

Public debates conducted in a free environment are an effective learning method as to what are the public's general demands and expectations are. This process of leaning will then prove to be helpful in policymaking and effective governance of the society.

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<sup>3</sup> Id. At. 38

<sup>4</sup> Id. At 41

<sup>5</sup> Id. At. 42