

ARE WE FIT FOR DEMOCRACY ?

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Is It Relevant ?

Put this way, no country really is, including ours. With our massive population, tremendous distances, illiteracy and the communication gap, the absence of a non-conformist conscience, the absence of grass-roots vigilance and activity and chronic indiscipline in every walk of life - it would really be surprising if we should be fit for democracy.

But then, who is ? Fitness for Democracy is essentially relative. We may not be as fit for it as the people around the Atlantic or in Japan, Australia and New Zealand. On the other hand, we probably are more fit for it than those in Africa.

So what ? Is it suggested that, in the absence of such fitness, we settle for an authoritarian if not a totalitarian regime ? Is it suggested that we fall prey to the false dichotomy of "Bread Vs. Freedom" which the Marxists are only too ready to sell us ?

Would it really help if we did ? The answer, judging by experience, is in the negative. Such an attitude of defeatism would only lead to permanent stagnation and the permanent stunting of our people.

Fitness for Democracy can only be developed by the practice of freedom, even though it may take a little time as it did in Britain from the days of Magna Carta onwards. It is in fact, a continuing process where a people progress towards the ideal conditions of democracy through trial and error.

The last word on the subject was said by Wilson Churchill, both a great

democrats and a strong leader : "Of all the known systems of government, democracy is undoubtedly the worst - except all the others".

If we are to develop fitness for Democracy, there are two basic preconditions. The first is the development of voluntary grass-roots activity. We suffer from too much politics and too little citizenship, and this imbalance has to be rectified. As a British statesman once said : "We must educate our masters".

The second precondition is that we do not ask too much of the democratic system and that we do not burden this tender plant with all the junk that we have acquired as a result of what is called socialism but is in practice state capitalism and bureaucratic statism. That was the path along which India was led by Jawaharlal Nehru and, unless we undertake a 'U Turn' and get away from it, there is little hope. Democracy and State Socialism cannot co-exist for very long.

We have to push back the frontiers of government if our young democracy has to survive. In other words, we must revert to the liberal idea of limited government.

Gandhiji, who knew our people, understood this very well and that is why he repeatedly said : "That government is best which governs the least".

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