

# The struggle for democracy

*What is truth but to live for an idea. It is a question for discovering a truth, which is truth for me, of finding the idea for which I am willing to live and die.*

—Kierkegaard



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## Feuilleton

Since time immemorial, people have been pondering over the meaning of life. Is my life worth living? Have I been wasting my time so far? And, how many thoughts and emotions are stirred by the state of the world and the predicament that our beloved country is confronted with?

The questioning and anxiety are more acute, when we approach the defining moment in our history. The existentialists sum up this state in the word "angst" which is almost equivalent to the word anguish.

We all find our own answers. Periods like these often entail a crisis, when we ask ourselves what we are living for, what we have suffered for and whether it has been worth the effort. No wonder, many Pakistanis are making a determined effort to determine the *raison d'être* of their nationhood. They are asking the question: Are we Pakistanis first or Muslims first? We turn to our Quaid's speech of August 11, 1947. Have we understood its historic importance and do we believe in it sincerely?

In questioning ourselves about the purpose of our existence and that of our country, we are influenced in our doubts and certainties by a whole range of objective and subjective factors. What class we belong to, what interests do we stand for, what political views colour our society, what cultural values do we espouse, what social needs do we have and what opportunities are open to us.

Our personal quest is defined by our experience, the demands that we make on life, our philosophical and religious convictions and our sincerity regarding these beliefs.

While young people search for principles to live by, the old people like me, celebrating the 80th birthday on August 11, ponder and evaluate. When we talk about the meaning of human life, we are referring to the relationship between the life of an individual and the aims perceived by society.

Democracy i.e. genuine democracy encompassing political, economic and cultural dimensions offers every one a chance to pursue worthy aims in life and enough sense of purpose and commitment to achieve them. Of course, there is nothing automatic about this. It makes great demands on each individual. Descartes said: I think, therefore I am. Camus declared: I rebel, therefore I am. It was Jean Paul Sartre who maintained: I stand committed, therefore I am.

Democracy is not handed to anyone on a platter. The way to democracy is

strewn with blood, sweat, tears and toil. How do we get to the meaning of life? It is determined by the development of an individual's self-awareness, his ability to define correctly the substance of his life and his own role within the community and above all his growth as a democratic personality.

This is not something that a person can suddenly decide. It often involves a protracted and contradictory process. It is particularly true in our country where democracy never had a fair deal.

When someone sets out to determine the meaning of his life, he embarks upon a practical and intellectual confrontation with his social environment, measuring his skills, interests, preferences and expectations against the objectively given social conditions and the claims that democracy makes on him. In doing so, he defines himself and his place in the life of the community.

Man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but also creates it. People like to leave a sign or two for posterity to show that they have done something worthwhile. Every one enters history in his own distinctive way.

True enough, thinking yourself as a participant in the making of history is a good start to define your role in society. An act which helps to solve the fundamental problems of our society i.e. alleviation of grinding poverty, eradication of illiteracy, creating a healthy, hygienic environment; which assists in the consolidation of democracy and in the weakening of reactionary, fundamentalist forces, will at the same time enhance the dignity of the individual and confirm the equality of all human beings.

It will bring to him optimism and joy connected with self-fulfilment. It is no use cursing darkness all the time, it is much better to light a candle. Probably it will induce others to light their candles. If thousands join, darkness will fade away.

A meaningful life does not have to be spectacular. It is a simple, ordinary life dedicated to the emancipation of mankind. It is a life of struggle against the forces of intolerance, dogmatism, fanaticism and opportunism, which will not let democracy blossom. In the idea of the struggle is the realisation that it is not simply understanding the world but of changing it and changing oneself in the process.

As Iqbal puts it:

Do not dally on the shore  
Where life's melody dies a gentle death.

Leap into the sea, fight against the waves,

For immortality lies in struggle.

Even though democracy is the most admired form of political system, it is the most difficult to maintain.

Alone among all forms of government, democracy rests on a minimum of coercion and a maximum of consent. Many of the problems that democracy has experienced in Pakistan spring from the tensions that are inherent in its nature.

First is the tension between conflict and consensus. Democracy is a system of institutionalised competition for power. Without competition, conflict and dissent, there is no democracy. But any society that sanctions political dissent runs the risk of the conflict becoming too intense so as to endanger civil peace and political stability. Hence, the paradox: democracy requires conflict but not too much. Conflict must be tempered with consensus. *Ijma* i.e. consensus is an Islamic concept. We have forgotten the importance of *Ijma*, which has repeatedly brought us to the verge of chaos and anarchy.

Second is the tension that sets representativeness against governability. Democracy abhors concentration of power. So, democracy subjects leaders to a mechanism of popular representation and accountability. This requires a party system that can produce a government stable and coherent enough to represent and respond to competing interests without being captured or paralysed by them. Representativeness requires that parties speak for these conflicting interests. Governability demands that parties have sufficient patriotic sense to rise above them.

The third contradiction inherent in democracy is between consent and effectiveness. Democracy means rule with the consent of the governed. To be stable, the people must deem democracy legitimate; they must view it as the most appropriate form of government for their society. Because democracy rests on the consent of the governed, it enjoys popular legitimacy. This legitimacy requires a profound moral commitment which develops over a long period.

Democracy requires consent. Consent requires legitimacy. Legitimacy requires effective performance. Democracy needs to be strengthened by live, dynamic and kicking institutions. Without stable institutions, democracy remains exposed to authoritarianism.

Democracy can flourish only in a civil society — a society which is law-based and law-governed, a society in which tolerance is the dominant virtue, a society in which the individuals organise themselves and are vigilant about their rights, and constantly active to solve their problems.