**Freedom of dissent**

BY A . G. N O O R A N I 2021-02-20

THE fundamental right to dissent from the state`s views or from conventional wisdom is now being systematically denied by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India. The signs were obvious no sooner had he assumed power in May 2014. The slogan `Congress mukt Bharat`, (an India freed totally from the Congress party)indicated a plan on the government`s part to wipe out the opposition.

Matters took a turn for the worse when a yogi was imposed on Uttar Pradesh as its chief minister. Ban on cow slaughter was followed by a campaign against inter-faith marriages in the name of `love jihad`. The most menacing of all the devices for the suppression of dissent is prosecution for sedition. This charge was widely abused in the days of the British rule in India to crush the movement for freedom. It has been abolished in the country of its birth, Britain. However, it is being used systematically by the votaries of Hindutva in India. On Feb 13, a 22-year-old climate activist, Disha Ravi was arrested in Bangalore. The home minister in the north Indian state of Haryana, one Anil Vij, declared on Feb 15, `Those who have antinational thoughts in the mind must be completely eradicated (nasht kar dena chahipe)`. The young activist was arrested by the Delhi Police Special Cell for her links to the f armers` protest `tool kit` tweeted by the famous global climate activist Greta Thunberg.

As it is, the Sangh Parivar is obsessed with `foreign conspiracies`. Recent protests and tweets provided it with a convenient excuse.

Significantly, Prime Minister Modi never ceased electioneering even after his electoral victories. His technique is not to debate with his political opponents. It is to vilify them and denounce them as persons lacking in patriotism. This is the standard technique employed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). But it is also a recognised symbol of fascism. From the electoral defeat of political opponents, the tactic descends to their elimination.

Democracy is based on the freedom of speech. In other words, an acceptance of diversity of opinion and of dissent. Every state rests on a national consensus, the agreed fundamentals or, if you prefer, the precepts of the national ideology. Every democratic government rests on the consent of the governed. A grave crisis arises when the government that is in majority in parliament joins both in other words, it identifies the views or the ideology of the majority for the time being as the national consensus itself.

This transient majority claims to repre-sent the entire nation. From this point, there is but one short step to claiming that it alone represents the nation and to denying the opposition`s legitimacy, in fact, its very right to exist.

Many fail to recognise this danger. If the Hindus alone constituted the nation, it is obvious that the minorities would not politically have any right whatsoever to have a say in the nation`s governance. `Culturally` (read: religiously) they must be converted to the Hindu faith. This is `ghar wapisi` (return to the fold).

The late Atal Behari Vajpayee was a member of the RSS. `The Sangh is my soul,` he had proclaimed. But, to the Sangh`s discomfiture, he had also proclaimed his admiration of Jawaharlal Nehru. In total contrast, Narendra Modi hates Nehru. Modi has been an RSS pracharak (activist) all his life; from the years when he was still in his teens.

In power, whether in Gujarat as its chief minister or as India`s prime minister he haslost no time in revealing his autocratic streak, his Hindutva mentality and his megalomania. He has not held a single press conference in the nearly seven years since he became prime minister.

The cabinet system no longerexists. No minister speaks on the government`s policies without praising Modi. A personality cult is promoted on fascist lines. The majority of the electronic media supports him blindly.

In this atmosphere, the right to dissent has to fight an unequal contest. Indian democracy has to battle for its life. The tragedy is that the opposition parties refuse to unite. They revel in discord.

All this applies no less to dissent on foreign policy. Indeed, it is even more necessary perhaps because dissent in foreign policy arouses patriotic fervour and devotion which never help if calm appraisal is required. Patriotic zeal overwhelms and the slogan `my country right or wrong` prevails. Thus emotion prevails precisely at the moment when calm reasoning is required. There is another factor.

Governments in power use the foreign stage to mobilise public opinion at home with the result that a calm approach in foreign policy suffers. The writer is an author and lawyer based in Mumbai.