

The Philosophy of Dissent

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO H.D. THOREAU

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1. DISSENT

The Rebel is an essay on man in revolt, and on the nature of revolution, in which, Albert Camus enunciates that the urge to revolt is one of the essential dimensions of human nature, in man's timeless Promethean struggle against the conditions of his existence. Further, he writes that the *Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is.*¹

Man is the nucleus of society. A society that has a strong urge to go ahead will not subscribe to the aspect of an unchanging character. Human life cannot remain stagnant and lend itself to self-destruction. Life moves on forward surmounting all the obstacles with the irrepressible desire to explore new realms that are aided by the faculty of reason and conscience. Man, since his cave life, has passed through so many vicissitudes, reached nuclear age and attained supreme power and status. The transformation in the life of man has become possible only because he refuses to remain static, and there is in him the innate desire to be dynamic in search of change all the time. The change is sustained by the latent instinct of man. Hence, he refuses to be stay put. This is the basic force that propels the society to a revolutionary change. When we probe the history of humanity and its respective civilizations this becomes obvious.

Man, himself being the nucleus of society, all his thoughts and deeds, are amalgamated with it. But the most vital of all this is his *opposition to the status-quo*². This is not unique to our age, but this yearning for change happens to be the inherent nature of humanity-past, present and future. Griffin and Smith say that

*A 'dissenter' sees what he believes to be flaws in the existing order of things and seeks to remedy them-even if only be attempting to bring them to the attention of the upholders of tradition.*³

The expression of dissent is not confined to any particular aspect that governs the life of a human being. It would subsume the political, social, economic and religious spheres of life. History presents us with many instances of dissent expressed in the form of violent uprisings. When individuals felt that injustice had been done to them and that their rights had been encroached upon; they organised themselves and took to arms. This was the familiar mode of dissent in the past. The manifestation of dissent has taken different forms depending on the context of contemporary conditions. It varies from civilisation to civilisation. When might was upheld to be an unquestionable right, any dissent was considered an affront to the authority, and such an attitude on the part of the individuals was discouraged by crushing it mercilessly.

Every individual in society has a part to play in its progress. He is endowed with conscience and reasoning, to fulfil his duty towards the society. His conscience pricks him and his ideas or actions are affected, and this may come into conflict with the age old conventions and traditions accepted and practised by the society. This disagreement of the individual may not be congenial to the society in which he lives as his view on the relevant matters varies from the point of view of the society. In an authoritarian setup, this attitude is detested, and the incumbents are penalised. The individual resents such treatment and looks for an opportune time, to vent his feelings. This is the initial stage of dissent. Camus refers to Schuler and writes:

Resentment is very well defined by Schuler as an auto-intoxication – the evil secretion, in a sealed vessel, of prolonged impotence. Rebellion, on the other hand, removes the seal and allows the whole being to come into play. It liberates stagnant waters and turns them into a raging torrent... Rebellion, though apparently negative since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of the man which must always be defended.⁴

The consequences of dissent are many, and its forms are also numerous. Protest, resistance, petitioning or peaceful demonstration