Dissent and Democracy

Mains: *GS – IV – Ethics*

Why in News?

Recent student protests in Delhi have revived debates on democratic dissent, accountability, constitutional reform and this issue invokes "Rousseau's Social Contract Theory".

What is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory?

> *The theory argues that individuals voluntarily* ***surrender certain freedoms*** *to create an organised society governed by common rules.*

- **Core Principles of the Social Contract**
  - **Freedom & Law** – Freedom is not absolute; it exists within the framework of laws that shape society.
  - **Legitimacy of Institution** – Institutions gain legitimacy through the collective consent of citizens.
  - Democracy endures when citizens respect institutions and seek reforms through constitutional processes.
  - **Rights & Responsibility** – Citizens have both rights and responsibilities.
  - Liberty without responsibility may cause disorder, while responsible participation reinforces democracy.

How educational institutions act as microcosms of democracy?

- **Schools and universities** – They function as democratic institutions in which students learn the principles and practices of governance.
- They teach students to:
  - Respect established rules and procedures,
  - Actively participate in discussions,
  - Resolve conflicts through peaceful means,
  - Develop an understanding of accountability,
  - Appreciate a diversity of perspectives.
- Consequently, educational institutions serve as microcosms of the social contract by preparing students to become responsible citizens.

What is the importance of democratic dissent?

- **Dissent** – It is the **expression of disagreement or opposition** to an opinion, decision, policy, law, or authority.
- It constitutes a fundamental aspect of democracy, as it allows governments and institutions to recognise shortcomings and enhance governance.

- The Constructive Role of Dissent
  - Dissent serves to protect democratic freedoms.
  - It holds institutions accountable for their actions.
  - Dissent encourages the implementation of policy reforms.
  - It promotes active public participation in democratic processes.
  - Dissent provides a platform for marginalised groups to express their concerns.
- **For Instance,** the Indian freedom movement was founded on democratic resistance, exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi's leadership through nonviolent methods.
- Therefore, dissent should not be regarded as anti-democratic. Instead, when exercised

responsibly, it serves to strengthen democratic institutions.

What are the counterproductive effects of democratic dissent?

- **Challenges** – Serious concerns emerge when democratic disagreement escalates into persistent confrontation or violence.
- Excessive disruption may lead to the following consequences:
  - The erosion of public trust in institutions,
  - Increased political polarisation,
  - The disruption of academic activities,
  - The weakening of governance,
  - And a shift in focus from constructive reforms to ongoing conflicts.
- Rather than focusing on educational improvements, debates are increasingly dominated by ideological conflicts and physical confrontations.
- Therefore, while questioning institutions is a legitimate aspect of democracy, entirely delegitimising them can undermine democratic stability.

What are the roles of teachers and educational institutions?

- **Promoting Constitutional Values**
  - Justice
  - Liberty
  - Equality
  - Fraternity
- **Encouraging Critical Thinking –** Students should be taught to critically evaluate policies based on factual information and evidence, rather than relying on emotion or misinformation.
- **Developing Civic Responsibility –** Educational programs should enable students to understand the following:
  - Constitutional rights,
  - Civic duties,
  - Institutional processes,
  - Peaceful conflict resolution.
- **Building Institutional Trust –** Teachers should emphasise that, although institutions may be imperfect, they are capable of improvement through democratic participation.

What are the significance of institutional accountability?

- **Mandates of public institutions** – Public institutions must also maintain the following characteristics:
  - Transparency,
  - Responsiveness,
  - Accountability,
  - Participation,
  - A citizen-centric approach.
- Students are entitled to accessible grievance mechanisms and equitable administrative procedures.

- Institutional accountability enhances public confidence and diminishes the likelihood of confrontational political engagement.
- Respect for institutions does not necessitate uncritical acceptance of all decisions.

What are democratic mechanisms for institutional reform?

- **Significant democratic instruments** – The constitutional framework of India establishes multiple peaceful mechanisms for addressing public grievances.
  - Right to Information (RTI)
  - Public grievance portals
  - Student unions
  - Academic councils
  - Judicial remedies
  - Public consultations
  - Social audits
  - Digital governance platforms
- Utilising these institutional mechanisms contributes to the strengthening of democratic processes.

What are the challenges before Indian democracy?

- **Political Polarization –** Public debates are increasingly characterised by ideological divisions rather than a focus on pragmatic solutions.
- **Declining Institutional Trust –** Ongoing confrontations erode public confidence in governmental and civic institutions.
- **Misinformation –** Social media platforms frequently amplify misinformation, thereby hindering the possibility of informed public discourse.
- **Youth Alienation –** A lack of effective institutional response may lead students to lose confidence in democratic processes.
- **Weak Civic Education –** A significant proportion of young citizens remain unaware of constitutional mechanisms available for pursuing reforms.

What could be done?

- **Strengthen Civic Education –** Educational curricula should prioritise the teaching of constitutional values, democratic participation, and civic responsibility.
- **Improve Institutional Responsiveness –** Governments and universities must establish transparent and efficient systems for grievance redressal.
- **Promote Dialogue –** Regular and structured interactions among students, faculty, and administrators can mitigate misunderstandings and foster mutual understanding.
- **Encourage Peaceful Participation –** Student activism should prioritise evidence-based advocacy, nonviolent protest, and constructive engagement with policy processes.
- **Build Institutional Trust –** Institutions must remain receptive to constructive criticism while upholding principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability.
- **Foster Constitutional Morality –** Dr B.R. Ambedkar emphasised that democracy endures only when citizens uphold constitutional methods rather than resorting to extra-constitutional means.

Reference

The Indian Express | Democracy Needs Dissent