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**DILEMMA OF DEMOCRACY IN AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE BY  
HENRIC IBSEN**



**Dr. Dhanajya Raibole,**

*Head Department of English,  
Kala Varishta Mahavidyalaya, Sawangi, Aurangabad MS, India  
Email ID : [ghananjayraibole1981@gmail.com](mailto:ghananjayraibole1981@gmail.com)*

**ABSTRACT**

*Freedom of expression is founding principle of democracy in any region or country, more the exercise of this principle the stronger the organization. However, political parties today are equipped with manipulating the majority opinions and edging the democratic institutions towards arbitrariness. An Enemy of the People by Henric Ibsen is one such a play that comments on the eroding principle of freedom of expression among common people. In order to rule over common masses, the political class is manipulating*

*their opinions through media, and thus dragging us to chaotic situations. The common man is facing moral dilemma as what to abide with: whether to go with political party interest or think of common good. This research paper attempts to uncover and comment on this phenomenon in democracy by referring to the play by Herick Ibsen.*

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**KEYWORDS**

*freedom of expression, majoritarianism, moral dilemma of common masses in democracy*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Introduction

*An Enemy of the People* (1882), is Henrik Ibsen's a play depicts real and similar events where in the Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist appears to be Ibsen himself. The protagonist – physician uncovers social disease and corruption, diseased water and social corruption, is vilified and yet persists in his mission to expose lies and corruption just as Ibsen continued to write probing dramas. On the same level, “Dr. Meissner was the Medical Officer at a health spa at Teplitz in Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic, in the 1830s. When cholera broke out there, he issued a public warning and the guests, of course, all left. Rather than drawing praise, his action aroused the wrath of the townspeople.”<sup>1</sup> As in *An Enemy of the People*, they threw stones at his house. Meissner left the town. “In 1880, a chemist in Norway's capitol, Oslo, then called Christiania, challenged the sanitary conditions of a steam kitchen, causing a public uproar and a meeting like the one in the fourth act of *An Enemy of the People*.”<sup>2</sup>

*An Enemy of the People* comments on the problems of corruption and pollution. In addition it raises questions role of individual in society, democracy deteriorating into a mobocracy; and priority of self-interest over moral ideals in terms of public issues. This paper attempts to uncover the dilemma confronted by individuals in democratic society

### **Democracy Dilemma: Form over Substance**

Substance of democracy, i.e. demand for freedom of expression, liberty and equality can only overthrow the one-party regime. Thomas Jefferson, father of liberty in USA, thought of liberty in terms of freedom of the mind. "I have sworn," he said, "upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of men." His English contemporary, Edmund Burke thought of liberty in the same terms. But Burke saw that in the end true liberty must be self-

government: "a controlling power upon will and appetite placed within. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of in- temperate minds cannot be free." Lord Halifax quoted T. H. Green's saying that "that man is free who is conscious of himself as the author of the law which he obeys."<sup>3</sup> Jefferson, Burke, and Halifax were among the first in their generations to recognize this ideal state wherein free men, autonomous personalities, are bound together in a society by a deep sense of moral obligation, can never be achieved finally and for all time. Liberty to express and acceptance of one's opinion in public interest entails the substance of democracy. Unlike the substance, the form of democracy, as pointed by scholars like Lord Bryce in *Modern Democracies* (1921) entails "a government in which the will of the majority of qualified citizens rules, taking the qualified citizens to represent the great bulk of the inhabitants, say, roughly at least three fourths." Evidently, majority public decisions are held higher than the substance. For instance, elections and majority rule takes precedence over individual opinion despite proclaimed through scientific procedures. The nature of the processes of democracy that is "government by discussion," based on compromise-hardly touch the substance. The root of the matter is the autonomous personality, a condition in which mind and conscience are sufficiently in control of the instinctual drives for the personality to act in accordance with conscience, reason, and reality.<sup>4</sup>

### **Democratic Substance: Freedom of Expression**

Dr. Thomas Stockmann and his family are excited about the opening of the new Baths, a health spa facility. As a medical officer for the Baths he has concerns over the use of Baths. After receiving the letter from the university laboratory it is revealed that the Baths are contaminated with bacteria that will make people sick. The discovery makes everyone happy in family especially Hovstad, Billing, and the doctor's family, particularly his wife Katherine and his daughter Petra. However, not all are happy in the town upon the discovery. Dr. Thomas

Stockmann's father-in-law Morten Kiil suggests the whole thing is a trick. Hovstad warns the mayor may try to delay the necessary fixes. The mayor absolutely rejects his conclusions saying, "You have no right to express ... an opinion which might ... conflict with your superiors." (Enemy of People, 56) Despite hazardous contents in river water, Dr. Thomas Stockmann is asked stop talking about his findings, or else he may lose his job at the Baths. The newspaper office, Hovstad and Billing presume benefits out the discovery but they are wholeheartedly ready to support the Dr. Thomas Stockmann. The mayor arrives and announces the townspeople that they will have to pay to fix the Baths themselves and it will take at least two years, depriving the townspeople of the economic benefits of the Baths. Immediately, Hovstad, Billing, and Aslaksen change sides, supporting the mayor and rejecting Dr. Stockmann entirely. The doctor insists he wants the public to know about his findings, but Aslaksen won't print it, and no one in town will rent the doctor a space to hold a town meeting.

A manipulated meeting is arranged in the home of Captain Horster to limit Dr. Stockmann's ability to speak. Aslaksen refuses to let Dr. Stockmann speak about the Baths, and he interrupts or contradicts Dr. Stockmann when he is allowed to talk. Aslaksen argues "If a man has something ... worth hanging on to, there's a limit to what he can believe. (Enemy of People, 83) On this account the doctor gets increasingly angrier until he denounces the "stupidity" of the "common people" who cannot think for themselves. For the "working classes are nothing but the raw material, from which a people will be fashioned." *An Enemy of the People*, 82) Dr. Stockmann repudiates "working classes," or the common people. This indicates that Ibsen had been frustrated by the way his works had been rejected by "common" audiences, and he preferred a more intellectual audience, which had a better chance of appreciating his ideas. All our spiritual springs are poisoned ... our society rests on the plague-infected soil of lies. Dr. Stockmann calls himself a

"freethinker" and is declared "An Enemy of the People" and chased out of the meeting. He is worried about the condition of common persons' role in democracy. Firmly, he claims "surely ... it can't be right that ... the stupid shall have dominion over the clever!" (*An Enemy of the People*, 78) "The majority has the power ... unfortunately ...; but it doesn't make them right."(*An Enemy of the People*, 79)

As consequences Dr. Thomas Stockmann's family faces troubles. A mob throws rocks on his house. Their landlord kicks them out. Dr. Stockmann loses his job, as does the Stockmanns' daughter, Petra. Dr. Stockmann rejects all of them. He tells his family that he refuses to move because he has "a deep-rooted tendency to go your own way ... that's almost as undesirable."(*An Enemy of the People*, 8) He wants to stay and fight for his town against bureaucracy and ignorance. And thus he becomes, "a man who wants to destroy a whole society must be an enemy to everyone." (*An Enemy of the People*, 42) Although the crowd has been hostile to Dr. Stockmann, Hovstad is the first one to term him "an enemy." This may be an effort on Hovstad's part to ingratiate himself with the mayor, or it could be Hovstad's demonstration to Petra of what happens when she rejects him.

### **Democracy, Parity and Majoritarianism**

Dr. Stockmann comes out of trap of democracy by strongly holding his ideals. Despite being thrown away from house, from job he never deters to object and stand lonely against majority in the society. Unfortunately taking this stance needs intellectual upbringing. Here the role of school, colleges and higher education institutions is to nurture substances i.e. liberty, equality, freedom of expression, harmonious role of editors in print media and electronic media. Lack in discharging the role lead to majoritarianism state of democracy.

The political parties have grown more cautious in terms manipulating public opinion at large. A political party brings together people with the same political ideas. By taking part in an election, parties hope to get as many of their members

as possible into a representative body, like parliament or a municipal council. At the same time they try to hold as many posts as possible in the government, or in the municipal or provincial executive. Political parties have various functions. One is promoting the interests of their voters. They also draw up party programmes. Citizens can join political parties, enabling them to help shape the party programme.

However, “when a society expects people to behave properly, political parties are much more cautious about pursuing their own interests but if the public expects a party to manipulate election laws they probably will because they’re not disappointing anyone.” Sarah John, *Democracy v Self Interest?*

The result is majoritarianism which soon leads to external enemies to internal enemies. It entails institutional arbitrariness to individual mediocrity and suppression which has impact on economy. For instance, India is facing economic crisis currently. Apart from global slowdown and the COVID-19 crisis is essentially due to the current majoritarian ethos in the economy. It has led to excessive Centralisation, an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. It also has led to finally the inability of the current regime to envisage policies that are inclusive. “For instance, the economy today requires liquidity and purchasing power with the common people, but policy makers have steadfastly rejected this option, why? It is often interpreted as a necessity born out of neoliberal proclivities. While that may not be false, it is essentially because the majoritarian ethos disempowers the majority as a necessary part of disciplining society.”<sup>7</sup> So, whether to support government policies or not despite voting for the same government is the dilemma confronted by people in India. The common man is left with “no right to express ... an opinion which might ... conflict with your superiors.”<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Dr. Stockmann becomes more strong despite loss of home, job only because of his belief in democratic principles of freedom of expression. However, for a common worker or common man, surviving in democracy today means be mediocre, keep silence on public issues such as deforestation, environmental pollution eroding clean air, water and soil. Those who try to break the silence, they are threatened or deliberately neglected from national memory. In this situation to come out from majoritarian span, therefore, moral dilemma is disturbing the common man today. If at all the intellectuals try to spread awareness about the state of affairs among masses in the society, the media – print and electronic media diffuse their thinking and thus manipulate their opinions at the time of elections.

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