



Treatment of Democracy in G.B. Show's The Apple Cart

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Throughout his life George Bernard Shaw has wrote written copiously almost on everything under the Sun. He has written more than fifty plays, which picture the socio-political, economic, religious, moral life of the world around him. He rather depicts the spirit of his times through his dramatic works. It is his good luck to be born as modernist. He is in no sense an escapist but a man and a writer who bravely faces the multiple, vexing problems of his day and endeavours to suggest a remedy for all the human ills that inflict mankind. He is pragmatic thinker and a writer who always upholds the cult of human liberty, equality and fraternity. His writings, particularly his great dramas, have opened up new windows to let in fresh, invigorating air on the humdrum human situation and its stage. His satirical onslaughts do not spare the social, political, religious, moral evils of the day.

Shaw is not only a socialist, but a social democrat. He suggests: "the state is to be identified with the whole people by complete democracy."¹He presents an in-depth analysis of democracy i.e., what is democracy? Its use in modern day world, its drawbacks, or problems, difference between monarchy and democracy. He suggests that democracy is to be reformed if it is to survive and shows the hollowness of early twentieth century in Great Britain. Democracy is derived from the Greek word 'demos' and 'Kratos', the former means the people and the latter means the power. Democracy thus means power of the people. Shaw refers to Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy: "It is a government of the people, for the people, by the people."² Shaw agrees that Democracy is a govt. of the people. A human community cannot exist without a government. Government is necessary for the welfare of the people and maintaining law and order. It is also true that Democracy, like other government, is for the people because



they all want to be governed. In this regard, Shaw agrees with Dean Inge who says, “Democracy is a form of society which means equal consideration for all” (p.10). But, according to Shaw, it is physically impossible that Democracy should be the government by the people. It can never be reality. It can only be a government by the consent of the governed. Everyone has no knowledge of government affairs. “ All the monarchs, all the tyrants, all the dictators, all the die-hard Tories are agreed that we must be governed” (p.10). It implies that everybody cannot govern, “Government by the people is not and never can be a reality: it is only a cry by which demagogues humbug us into voting for them” (p.10). Shaw says that every citizen cannot be a ruler just as every boy cannot be an engine driver or a sea-robber or a dramatist. There cannot be a nation of prime ministers just as there cannot be an army of Field Marshals.

Shaw wants a govt. of experts; clear hearted, people serving, and unselfish and intelligent man. He suggests that men in power should not exploit his position because he has got a chance to serve the people and he should not cheat the public, who have raised him to such a high position. He wants that the authority should also be answerable to someone. Shaw in TheApple Cart treats the same balance of power between the parliamentary cabinet and constitutional monarch. The conflict is not really between royalty and democracy. It is in fact between democracy and monarchy on the one hand and plutocracy”. Democracy and monarchy on the other. Plutocracy having destroyed the royal power under democratic pressure, has bought and swallowed democracy. The rich industrialists first reduced the king to a cipher by arguing that days of absolute monarchy are over. After destroying the King’s power, they have now destroyed the power of the parliament by the force of their money. “ Money talks; money prints; money broadcasts; money reigns; and king and labour leaders have to register its decrees and even by a staggering paradox, to finance its enterprises and guarantee its profits” (p.4). Shaw tells here about the power wielded by rich industrialists under modern democracy. He says that the rich people control all instruments of propaganda and power like the press, the platform and the radio. Thus it is the industrialists who are the real rulers of the country. The King as well as Labour Leaders have simply to carry out the dictates of the capitalists. They are helpless in their struggle against the rich industrialists. Money is the strongest weapon which can be used for offence as well as defence and, moreover, everything is saleable to money, Shaw comments:



Democracy is no longer bought; it is bilked. Shaw criticises, this pseudo-democracy. The ‘so-called democrats’ are the demagogues who are merely money grabbers. So, the corruption is in its high swing and Shaw wants everyone to fight against it.

In the Preface to TheAppleCart Shaw suggests that modern democracy is expected to solve the economic problem of how to produce and distribute our subsistence, and the political problem of how to select our rulers and prevent them from abusing their authority in their own interests or those of their class, or religion. Here Shaw says that capitalist system is under the influence of Breakages, and capitalists get their own profit. They do not produce things of which millions of us stand in desperate want. Economic democracy means no economic disparity and everyone should enjoy equal opportunities in the society. There would be no unemployment and should have economic security. This is possible only when there is no exploitation and the solution for the political problem is votes for everybody. “Politics, once the centre of attraction for ability, public spirit and ambition has now become the refuge of a few fanciers of public speaking and party intrigue”(p.64). king Magnus points out how political work in modern democracies has become dirty. He also points out that the best men do not come forward to take part in the political affairs. Now only those people join politics who are expert in making public speeches and indulging in party intrigues. Such people have no practical ability and no proper education. They are comparatively inferior people. All other ways of progress are closed to them. So, they join politics. Thus people of poor abilities choose politics as their career. Very few able persons join politics and because they hate corruption and false pretences of cunning people, who join politics simply to make money. Besides, Democracy has a very slow machinery. It takes thirty years to do thirty minutes work. It mismanages even simple problems. In these circumstances, a revolution is needed in the working of the modern democracy. If democracy in not reformed, it will give rise to dictators who run through thirty years work in thirty minutes by unconstitutional methods.

Boanerges, a new cabinet minister, comes to the King in his office in the Royal Palace to give him ‘a piece of mind’ about the recent political crisis brewing up in the country. King’s private secretaries are chatting while doing work. Boanerges tells Sampronius about his appointment with the king and complains about unnecessary delay in his meeting and remarks.



They say that ; “Politeness is the punctuality of kings” (p.32).. Sampronius replies intelligently, but in a very humble way “punctuality is the politeness of kings and Magnus is a model in the respect)p.32). Here Shaw wants to show discipline and good manners of the King, “Without good manners human society is intolerable and impossible” (p.123).. Boanerges is shown as a rude person who represents the ministers of cabinet. Magnus who is never short of words asks Boanerges to be frank and flatters him. Boanerges says, “This country has got to be governed, not by you but by your ministers. You are only constitutional monarch” (p.34).. Boanerges says that King has no more responsibilities in democratic government. He is only a showpiece. Boanerges continues and calls the King an ‘ India rubber stamp’. But Magnus rejects his adjective by telling him that none can approach either a king or a minister to pick him up from the table and use him like a stamp. He says that Kings are more clever, than popularly elected ministers. Magnus outwits Boanerges by saying that a king might not have infinite wisdom, knowledge, and power, but he has as much as his ministers, Shaw here satirises democracy because ministers have no formal training and they are merely puppets in the hands of civil servants. In the past, people believed in divine right theory. They consider the King to be the representative of God on earth. This theory could have an element of truth because every person has some divine spark in his soul. He is a living soul. He has life, brains and power. He flatters Boanerges that he is the best choice for the post of President in a Republic government, because “Presidents now are chosen by the people, who always want a strong man to protect them against the rich”(p.38). But Magnus himself never wants to be a President, because there is ‘terrible precariousness’ in this position and no security. He admits that even when Monarchy lasts, “I am very secure, I escape the dreadful and demoralizing drudgery of electioneering. I have no voters to please. Ministers come and ministers go. I go on forever” (p.38). Magnus says that Royalty has its own advantage. He says that as the constitutional monarch, he is more secure than a President. He has not to contest an election. He is saved from the botheration of taking part in an election campaign. He need not humour the voters. Here Shaw satirises the faulty system of electioneering in contemporary democracy in England. He remarks, “our general elections have become public auctions at which the contending parties bid against one another for our votes by each promising a larger share than the other of the plunder of the minority” (p.11). Voters have



only a limited choice. The electorates are not capable of doing anything by their votes except to pave the way to their own destruction. The elections have not been a means to select the best qualified rulers for the public. They have become so absurd.

There are only a few fortunate reasonably honest and public spirited who are represented in the Parliament. Amanda says that she won the election not by arguing with the people about his speech, but she simply mimics the high falutin- passages made by her contender in his speech and then inviting people to sing choruses with her. “And that’s how England is governed by yours truly, Sir,” she declares triumphantly.

A deputation of six cabinet ministers arrives at the Royal Palace. They are Proteus, the Prime Minister, Pliny, Chancellor of Exchequer, Nicobar, Foreign Secretary; Crassus, Colonial Secretary and Balbus, Home Secretary; Boanerges also join them. Before the King comes and receives them, the Ministers give differing opinions about the King. Thereupon Proteus advises them not to quarrel among themselves. They must hold together. He warns them that the king is very clever. He informs the cabinet that the king is carrying on propaganda against the cabinet in the press. For example, he had said the previous day that his royal veto was the only defence of the people against corrupt legislation. Boanerges suggests that the king is right. According to Boanerges, Democracy is not practicable. What they need is a strong man? Such a remark on the part of a minister annoys Proteus. He even threatens to resign. But the other members of his cabinet coax him not to do so. Pliny, the chancellor of Exchequer, advises his friend not to quarrel. He asks Proteus to read the ultimatum which the cabinet intends to present to the king. Proteus takes out a paper from his pocket. He says that he will ask the king to sign it. In case, the king refuses to do, the cabinet will resign. Boanerges asks Proteus to read the ultimatum. Just then the King, accompanied by Amanda, Postmistress General and Lysistrata, Power Mistress General, enters. Proteus protests that the two lady members of the cabinet should have a private conference with the King. Lysistrata defies Proteus. She even taunts the Prime Minister. Proteus seems to lose his temper. But, Boanerges reminds his colleagues to be dignified. He protests: “ I say, Let us be dignified, I say, let us respect ourselves and respect the throne” (pp.45-46). Amidst this trifling Proteus says to the King: “ Your Majesty’s reference to the Royal Veto in a speech yesterday has brought matters to a head” (p.47). The King defends himself by saying that



he is only referring to his powers. Proteus insists that the king must sign the ultimatum. The ultimatum has three conditions.

- 1) The King should make no more speeches.
- 2) He should not instigate the Press against the cabinet.
- 3) He must not refer to his Royal Veto again.

The King justifies his Royal Veto. He tells the cabinet that he stands for intellectual honesty, conscience and virtue. He is not a slave to the press or voting mob. He can exercise independence of mind. The ministers, however, are constantly afraid of the Press and the Electorate. The Press and the voters are in the pockets of the rich people. King has no fear of election and of offending the press. Thus, he can do what the ministers dare not do. The king can protect the cabinet against the tyranny of the rich and clever people by exercising his power of Veto. He advises the cabinet not to reduce the king to puppet by depriving him of his royal veto. None all want that king must sign it. The king asks the cabinet to give him time to consider his decision.

We find in the opening of IInd act, the king telling the Queen that he will receive the cabinet there in the open. Pamphilius announces the arrival of the American ambassador, Mr. Vanhattan. The King receives him and the latter informs the king that he has brought a very good news for him. He announces that the debt that England owes to America, has been cancelled and America has decided to merge with the British Empire. Then cabinet arrives. The king wants the cabinet to advise him regarding the American ambassador's proposal. But, Proteus insists that they should take the ultimatum first. The whole cabinet agrees with him on this issue. The King requests the cabinet not to insist upon his signing the ultimatum. But, the ministers do not agree with him. Magnus tells his ministers that if he is forced to sign the ultimatum, he will abdicate the throne. Lysistrata requests the King not to take this rash step. Nicobar declares that the King cannot upset the Apple Cart like that. Boanerges suggests that England should abolish monarchy and make Magnus the President of the English Republic (because he is a strong man). The King says that he wishes to abdicate, to save and not to destroy monarchy. When he abdicates, he will be succeeded by his son Robert, Prince of Wales. The cabinet rejoices in the King's decision. But the King has a clever plan. He says that he will dissolve the parliament. He points out that



before he abdicates, he will give up all titles and dignities and becomes a common man. He will then seek election to the parliament as a candidate from the Royal Borough of Windsor. When he is elected he will form a party and succeed Proteus as the Prime Minister of the country. The King's plan comes as a big shock and surprise for the Ministers. Their apple cart has been upset. Proteus takes it into pieces. The crisis is over. He says that the king will not abdicate. He points out that there will be no ultimatum and that they will go on as before. Proteus leaves the meeting saying that he will never forgive the king for stealing the ace of trumps from their hands and playing it so cleverly.

Shaw has created the King as a man of genius and his ministers are comparatively fools. It, therefore, surprises and angers many of his fellow socialists to find that in TheAppleCart Shaw is apparently on the side of King Magnus and against the democratic cabinet in their struggle to keep the King under control. "It surprise them still more by its exposure of the foibles and follies of Labour Cabinet ministers and its apparent advocacy of the Monarchical system."³ Shaw is also bamed for betraying the democratic beliefs which his has held for so many years, but he declares in the preface that he had in fact carried the democratic idea to its logical extreme by making the King Magnus threaten to abdicate his throne and put himself forward as a commoner at the next general election and he would have become a more conscientious prime minister than his rival, Proteus. The critics who attack him for being a royalist, a supporter of King and not a supporter of the people, are exhibiting their own failure to understand the principles upon which Show has based his life's works. Shaw's intention is to raise the general level of democracy; he "would have his mobs all Caesars instead of Toms, Dicks and Harrys. The mistaken notion that he is preaching 'a final ethical superman' galls him. His Superman is simply the complete voter."⁴



BIBLIOGRAPHY

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3. John Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life Work and Friends (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1956), p.517.
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