**Entry Only** Artwork by Indian artist T. Venkanna, which recalls his visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland

# How Democracies Die

How do we make sense of this new equation between war, death and democracy?

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**DEMOCRACY** was invented in history to tame power, force and violence. It was a way of questioning the natural superiority of individuals or collectives based on race, faith, gender, or ethnicity. It was said: 'democracy denatures power'. Above all, democracy was imagined as an antonym of violence. This optimism was true even at the end of the 20th century after Fascism stood defeated. But at the turn of the 21st century, not only are democracies seemingly dying but they are also erupting into mass violence and death. Much of the violence is happening not against, but in the name of democracies. Today's mass violence is a way of actualising the 'general will' of the majority. The principle of majority has collapsed into majoritarianism, and democracies that came about to tame power look domesticated and helpless. Death and democracy have a new equivalence that has escaped conventional political explanations. Today, there is a renewed need to explain the political through the lens of death.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama prematurely declared the 'end of history', only to realise that it is increasingly turning out to be the end of (liberal) democracy. Historian and author Yuval Noah Harari had yet again prematurely declared the end of conventional war, only to perhaps realise he lives and works in a State that is spearheading global warfare. Conventional warfare has made democracies weak and vulnerable. What was invented to empower the weak today looks emaciated. Palestine is the Holocaust of the 21st century, but what makes it chilling is that it is carried out and justified in the name of the Holocaust of the 20th century. Victims have become aggressors. 'Historical injury' of the past is whipping up violent orgies of the future. How do we make sense of this new equation between war, death and democracy?

John Keane, who has been writing on democracy for decades, makes a pertinent point when he boldly states, "democracy is the friend of contingency"..."it promotes indeterminacy". He further says in his book *The Shortest History of Democracy*, "Democracy spreads doubts about talk of the essence of things, inflexible habits and supposedly immutable arrangements...it tears up certainties, transgresses boundaries and isn't easily tamed." Do the violent eruptions of our times have anything to do with this aborted attempt to institutionalise uncertainty and ritualise intensity of invention? If uncertainty is to be a way of life, is it being countered by the absolute certainty of death? What can be more intense than death?

Life negotiates and bargains with death, but death has always dictated the meaning in life. Psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl talks about meaning and ways of transcending death. Inevitability of death does not necessarily signify the death of meaning to life. Gandhi opposed war but served and nursed soldiers in the Boer war because he felt war is immoral, but preparedness for

death is the highest moral act. Gandhi had a premonition about his death. He expressed the desire to live for 125 years but after witnessing the violence of the Partition, he wished for his own death. It is a travesty that someone who spoke relentlessly for non-violence had to meet a violent death. In retrospect, one could say but for Gandhi`s death India may not have survived as a democracy. Indian exceptionalism wouldn't have existed. His death killed violence.

Michel Foucault argued for preparedness for death as the ultimate liberator from social bondage, constraints and power. Before death is the violence of power. All religions find moksha in death. Rebirth is considered to be a sin since human life is marked by suffering. Only way to escape suffering is to find meaning in death. Come to think of it, unforgettable moments of life are often about death—whether it is the image of a Tibetan monk calmly setting himself ablaze or a single protestor facing the tanks of the Chinese army during the Tiananmen Square protests. Why is death so engrossing?

Slavoj Zizek, as a compulsive contrarian, however, **ascribes the violent eruptions of Islamic terrorists and their preparedness to face death and to kill, like the Islamic State (ISIS), because they are secretly envious of non-believers and are not fundamentalist enough**. Death, here, is the 'final solution' to erase the conflict within one's own self. Death erases the irrefutable contradictoriness of life. It is the war against the contradictory pulls and demands of endless uncertainty. Democracies demand celebration of uncertainty and transgressive self-making; death is transgressive and resolves the burden of uncertainty. Death is the 21st-century answer to the 20th-century celebration of uncertainty.

Uncertainty could be an affable value with progressive hope and a utopian imagination of the future. There was a pervasive sense of directionality to collective goals and life. Progress and directionality got shot down as being coercive and the idea of the collective rejected for being constraining. What we landed up with is what sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman points to: freedom without goals. Generation X has freedom sans purpose. Without collective, there can be no sustainable meaning. Democracies provided a way of preserving collective with space for uncertainty and transgression.

Neoliberalism of the late 20th century induced uncertainty's doppelganger. It promised to expand on the promise of democracy's uncertainty by converting uncertainty into risk and explosion of 'animal spirits'. Gradually, neoliberalism`s uncertainty swallowed up democracy`s uncertainty. What was meant to be a transformative invention settled into a regressive insecurity. Insecurity became the new hallmark of uncertainty. Intensity of emotions was recast as intensity itself as an emotion. Collective in democracies was replaced by 'speed and scale'. We are now faced with speed as a value to live up to. Inability to cope with immortality of speed became an immoral act of the weak. Neoliberalism, as a gigantic creature to be feared, devalued the affable and somewhat fragile aesthetics of democracy. Over a period of time, democracy lost its way and neoliberalism its credibility. We are now in a barren field with no anchors. Is this the freedom we aspired for? Why is this freedom devouring life and making death the new anchor to structure meaning?

It is in this context that democracies became weaponised in the killing fields of neoliberal financial capitalism. We moved from exploitation to expropriation as new sites of profit making. Political manifestation of expropriation is what Achille Mbembe calls the shift from biopolitics to necropolitics. Mass killings and genocides are the modern machines running amok to cope with speed and neoliberal uncertainty. From debates around expanding citizenship and constitutional morality, we are now reconciling with disenfranchisement and the perennial threat of illegal immigrants and 'termites'. Neoliberalism's 'sky is the limit' is finding its afterlife in earthly exclusions. Inclusion and equality have become amorphous; exclusions are coming across as concrete and tangible, providing greater certainty of mobility.

Ironically, neoliberalism`s uncertainty has created a greater hunger for absolute certainty. Democracy's delicate balance between uncertainty and transformative inclusion was gunned down with a horrifying imagination of celebrating uncertainty and ruthlessly rooting for absolute certainty. We are now facing the afterlife of how democracies will look after death. We will claim '*sab ka saath*' as a faint reminder and a memory of a love lost but actively exercise retributive exclusions. We will exalt in the rhetoric of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, but weaponise every possible prejudice.

Violence seems to be the only emotion that speaks to us and genocide is the only experience we can relate to because we seem to think we understand it—whether we can express grief or not; resent it or not. We understand without grieving. Genocidal imageries have entered our everyday conversations and drawing rooms, signifying our warmongering drawing room nationalism. Death has become infinitely reassuring. Death is concrete and stands up to the innate desire for absolute certainty. Democracies that once flourished on uncertainty are today facing the renewed search for absolute certainty. The absolute certainty of the ancient past is now the distant cousin of death. Irrefutability of the past and its completeness converge with the finality and inevitability of death. Both strands together bully and terrorise the feeble fable of democracy's story of mounting uncertainty as a virtue to discover the unknown without losing trust in collective. Will democracy's enticing uncertainty ever make a comeback?

Uncertainty now has to be backed by a deeper sense of belonging that is finding an expression in cultural registers. From a legal and associational imagination in democracies, we need a new partnership between cultural belonging and uncertainty. Belonging might give us enough certainty without throttling democracy's need to transcend naturalism. Sense of belonging without a basal instinct for absolute certainty is the best antidote to war and violence. We need certainty that is not closed and self-righteous, and an uncertainty that doesn't double down into insecurity. Virtues of commitment and responsibility hidden in death need to be recovered to counter necropolitics and genocidal hysteria. To recalibrate these elements is by no means an easy task; it will require both an interpretative leap and a leap of faith. Will the dying memory and the residual effects of democracy serve us sufficiently and work in time? There is no absolute certainty, but the uncertainty of the past may conjure up a more reassuring future.

*(Views expressed are personal)*