

Henrik Ibsen's Approach To Democratic Values : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Henrik Ibsen is admired as the father of natural realism as he gave the plays on new ideas. He made experiments in the field of drama and wrote his tragedies in simple prose on the life of common people. His tragedies left a deep impression upon his contemporaries and successors such as G.B. Shaw, Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller, J.M. Synge, John Drinkwater etc. Many critics place him in the category of Abraham Lincoln as he was a staunch advocate of democracy. However, he never made any effort to hide the weaknesses of this system that he loved most. In An Enemy of The People he boldly supported the minority against the stupid majority. In The Pillars of Society he exposed the evils of capitalism through Bernick. Of course he was an advocate of ethical values such as mercy, generosity, righteousness, humanism, fortitude, patience, tolerance etc. and wanted that equal rights should be given to all for progress. Hence he is aptly placed in the category of Socialists.

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Introduction

After the popularity of *A Doll's House* Henrik Ibsen wrote the tragedy *An Enemy of The People* and asserted that the minority may be correct and majority may be often wrong. In every democratic country all the decisions are taken with the help of majority. But Ibsen says that the voice of a simple person like Dr. Stockmann can't be suppressed simply because the majority of people have been manipulated by the clever politicians. Ibsen wants to improve the existing water supply system so that clear and pure water may be supplied to the citizens of town Bath. Dr. Stockmann is worried about the growing number of patients and feels that the dirty water may be the root cause of the trouble. And his doubt has been confirmed by the scientists. For a short time he feels delighted and then writes an article on the defective Water Supply System of Bath city. This article creates the conflict between Dr. Stockmann and his brother Mayor Peter and then between the worthy physician and the editor of *People's Messenger*. Hovstad and Aslaksen promise him that the article will be printed positively as the newspaper is committed to public welfare. But both of them forget the bitter fact that the newspaper is owned by the capitalist and the editors can't publish anything against the interest of the industrialists. Then both the editors beat about the bush and Dr. Stockmann understands the real situation. Yet he does not bow down an inch and wants to get his judgment followed by the authorities of Bath's Water Supply System. He is pretty sure that the bacteria called Infusoria is found in the municipal water and it is really very dangerous to mankind as a whole.

As a practical man Peter is not prepared to pay attention towards the danger caused by dirty water. He knows that the dirty water of tanneries is dropped into the city's water system. But his problem is that the new Water Supply System will cost more than two thousand dollars and the expenses will be a burden upon the citizens because they will have to be taxed again for this project. The main problem is that the installation of new project will take at least two years and water supply to the people will be stopped for such a long time. Peter is fed up with the original ideas of his Dr. Stockmann who writes an article for the press as and when he has to say something new. Here Ibsen advocates liberty of expression as press is the fourth pillar of democracy.

When Ibsen was writing this play J.S. Mill and James Mill asserted the importance of freedom of expression in a democratic country. J.S. Mill wrote *Six Theories of Justice, On Liberty And Utilitarianism* and *Subjection of Women* to advocate that men and women ought to be free in the real sense. James Mill wrote *The History of British India, Political Economy* and *Political Writings* on the

contemporary political issues that proved a burden for the colonial British government. In theory the authorities admired the details of the concept of liberty but in practice they put many restrictions upon the citizens.

Nucleus :

In *An Enemy of The People* the conflict is introduced in the first Act as Peter comes to know about the article of Dr. Stockmann on Water Supply System to be printed that day. He advises his brother to keep silent on issue of present Water Supply System as it is difficult problem to solve. Quite a few years ago Dr. Stockmann was unemployed and hence led a miserable life. If he takes the risk of his career, he will find himself reduced to nothing. But Dr. Stockmann does not care for the warning of his younger brother and contacts other people to discuss this issue. But he fails to realize the influence of Peter on the voters. His daughter, a school teacher, is dismissed from job. Then Peter tries his level best to make propoganda against Dr. Stockmann and finally the meeting is called to discuss the affair. But the arguments of Dr. Stockmann are ignored by the listeners and members of the board.

Here Ibsen concentrates upon the working of democratic system in which the votes of the majority matter and the voice of minority is always suppressed. Dr. Stockmann feels insulted as a few people call him 'an enemy of the people'. Ibsen boldly asserts that the common people fail to understand the complexities of administration. They are mostly busy in earning and spending money and hence fail to understand the basic truth $\frac{3}{4}$ Who is right and who is wrong? Heroic person Dr. Stockmann is requested by his wife not to interfere in the administration of Peter as the latter is very vindictive. Nobody is going to support him against Peter. After all he has his duty towards wife and children too. Irony of situation is that nobody is prepared to lend him the hall for his meeting. Captain Horster dares to support him as he is the captain of a ship. Dr. Stockmann plans to sail out of Bath on the ship of Captain Horster as he finds that the people have no faith in him. But he feels shocked as Captain Horster is dismissed.

Now Dr. Stockmann decides to live in Bath itself and struggle for his bread. Peter is taken aback as the courage of Dr. Stockmann does not diminish in odd situation. Nobody supported Christ when he gave the definition of truth and was crucified.

With this tragedy Ibsen forces the audience to think on various questions such as $\frac{3}{4}$ What is the duty of the administration towards common people? Is the majority voice always right? Is Dr. Stockmann not free to express his views on public interest? How long the voice of the right person be suppressed? Why does

Peter manipulate the situation against Dr. Stockmann? Are people really free to speak their ideas? Why does Peter keep everything ready for the dismissal of Dr. Stockmann? How long will the virtuous people suffer if they wish to protect the public interest?

Ibsen analyzed the answer of a few important questions such as $\frac{3}{4}$ Why are the capitalists not checked and punished when they commit crimes? Why do the bureaucrats function freely? Why are the politicians successful in their selfish plans? He was shocked to see that the birds of same feather flock together and there was perfect understanding among the capitalists, bureaucrats, the politicians and the press reporters. They supported each other in times of crisis.

With *An Enemy of The People* and *The Pillars of Society* Ibsen clarifies the reality that the poor persons remain to be consumers and can never become producers. The poor people have to pay the taxes as imposed by the government. They rarely contest the election as they can't afford for election expenses. On the contrary the capitalists take benefit of shares and bank loans and make rapid progress. Due to harmony among bureaucrats, politicians, capitalists and press reporters, many evils remain hidden and common people remain helpless victims of unemployment, poverty, natural disasters, heavy taxation, etc. Yet Ibsen proves and asserts that truth, non-violence, self-restraint, self-illumination, integrity, honesty, social service, generosity, righteousness, right conduct etc. are the real friends of mankind and the pillars of society.

It was said towards the end of 19th century that the sun of British Empire never sets' and British government controlled more than 25% countries of the world. Each capitalist wanted his influence in these colonies as the British Colonialism was at its climax in the times of Ibsen and as a political critic he could study the working of British Imperialism because a lot of small nations were attacked and won by the British forces. They won the countries to have raw materials from there and then sell their finished goods in these markets of Asia and Africa mainly. For this a lot of companies wanted to establish their network of transport facilities $\frac{3}{4}$ road transport, railway transport and water transport. Quite a few British companies sold the shares of their companies in these colonies to gather funds for the new products. For smooth running of international and national trade, the shrewd merchants established the banks in Britain, India and other colonial countries. Due to one economic survey it became clear that 15 percent customers come to bank to withdraw their deposits and hence a lot of public money can be utilized by the capitalist for his personal business. It was commonly observed that the capitalists made manipulations in the

accounts of each industry so that they may have expansion of one industry into two $\frac{3}{4}$ three allied industries. The money from shares and bank-loans plus their profits made it easy to expand their factories.

In 1840 Karl Marx gave his theory of class struggle in *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Capital* and asked the labourers to unite in their own interest. Let them form their union to face the capitalists and revolt against masters when the need arises. With revolt they will lose their chains as they have nothing else to lose. Yet the British labourers did not bother for the problems of Indian labourers due to their selfish gains. As they were not educated, they failed to understand Marxian concepts of four stages of evolution, class-war, theory of surplus money, thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, theory of dialectical materialism, the fifth and final stage of dictatorship of the proletariat and the seeds of the disaster of capitalism lie in its birth etc. So, the labourers failed to assert their rights if at all they dare to form unions because the union leaders connived with the capitalists secretly for personal gains. As a result they had no say in the eco-political system of Britain and were exploited for years.

In *The Pillars of Society* Ibsen discusses the secret ways of Bernick as he wanted to establish railway transport system between Great Britain and India. Due to their wisdom the British Ministers gave the liberty to capitalists to spread their own transport facilities. When American traders talked of new railway transport system in Norway, Bernick opposed it as he was at the top of shipping transport system. Work was in progress round the clock in his ship yard and he owned two big ships called The Indian Girl and Palm Tree Ship.

The dark sides of capitalism have been clearly analyzed here by Ibsen. In the beginning of the play Bernick is issuing instruction to his foreman Aune to keep the ships ready to sail. He can't tolerate that the ships are standing useless in the yard. But Aune tells him that the bottom of the ship is all rotten and the ships need a lot of repairs costing a big sum. But Bernick warns him to pay attention to his duty and ignore the problem of repair. Let the ships sail in public interest and the risks can be tolerated by the passengers concerned. Aune fails to understand the brutal and inhumanitarian attitude of the master.

Actually a lot of political thinkers gave their interpretation of socialism and it became a saying that 'socialism is like a hat that has lost its shape as it has been used too much'. But Ibsen accepted the socialist theory that equal chances should be given to all for education and progress. He failed to relish the theory of Anarchists like M.A. Bukunin (1876) and P.J. Proudhon (1865) that state is an evil. Proudhon defined $\frac{3}{4}$ What is property? and $\frac{3}{4}$ How does it prove harmful for society as a

whole. The followers of *Individualism*, asserted that that government is best which 'governs the least'. So, Ibsen was the product of great political and economic awakening and yet he supported the rights of the masses as opposed to those of classes.

Conclusion

In *The Pillars of Society* Aune the foreman tells the reality of an unemployed labourer as the latter is useless and worthless as an unemployed person. His family members don't welcome him when he reaches home without his daily wages and puts his tools on the ground. The basic question before his wife and children is $\frac{3}{4}$ Who will give them bread that evening and tomorrow? How long to borrow things from the provision store? Who will help them when somebody is ill? How long the labourer will remain out of job? What is the possibility of getting another job? His own face is faded as he has nobody to share his grief with. After observing the real miseries of such labourers Ibsen thought of a welfare state which may support the old people, the sick people, the miserable children and of course the unemployed labourers in moments of crisis. Due to sickness and hunger many young labourers died almost every week. As mentioned by MC Farlene, the sailors quite often didn't return home as they became victims of the tides and the tempest. Since Bernick has installed new machines in the shipyard, many labourers have become jobless. But the other labourers could not easily work on new machines. So, Ibsen describes the panic as caused by new tools of production though the demands were increasing in the markets of Asia, Africa, Europe etc. These new machines created a vacuum in society and nobody could force the capitalists to mend their ways.

Once again capitalist Bernick took keen interest in spreading the railway network for rapid transport of raw materials and the finished goods. He manipulated the members of Commercial Association and got the resolution passed in his favour. His supporters Mr. Rummel and Rorlund boldly called it the success of his generosity and integrity though it was the victory of money and fraud. By now many sycophants flattered him as he possessed a lot of money. Economists like G.B. Shaw aptly argued that it is money that controls the various socio-political forces. Secretly Bernick had been buying the land wasteland, waterfalls etc. so that he may succeed in his new business. Ironically the American traders were blamed for the rising prices of the concerned land. Even Johan is indirectly blamed for the defects of administration. There was a time when Bernick wanted to forget his beloved Lona so that he may easily marry Betty. His family was on the brink of financial crisis and hence he married Betty for improving his financial condition. His plan succeeded as Johan left

for U.S.A. with Lona and this couple was blamed for the financial problems of the family. India and Britain had large trade relations these days though Indian merchants dealt with other traders of the world for the sale of various goods. Dina makes the remarks :

A beautiful thing is something that is great $\frac{3}{4}$ and far
 $\frac{3}{4}$ off. (PS 13)

This tragedy confirms the fact that like Karl Marx, Ibsen had perfect understanding of the dishonest means of capitalists like Bernick and as a result the poor were getting poorer and the rich richer. The capitalists had all facilities to establish new factories because there was least interference of the government in their way. They had bought a lot of land for the establishment of new units. With the money of shares and bank-loans they found it easy to produce more goods. Fortunately, for them there was birth of a new civilization in the whole Europe and people became highly conscious of their standard of living. Naturally they aspired for new furniture, carpets and other decoration pieces to appear civilized before their friends and relations. Due to the prosperity of the nation, the upper middle class people behave as bourgeoisie and then they were imitating the manners of the upper classes. French dances, dresses, whigs etc. became popular again and a lot of cosmetics were used by men and women to appear smart and pretty. These people often borrowed money when they had no money to fulfil their new needs. Many people arranged parties though they could not afford them. With his tragedies Ibsen made people think seriously of the causes of their tensions and stresses $\frac{3}{4}$ How far is society responsible for their problems? Or, are they responsible for their own mental stress?

However, people take out the procession to reach the destined point and all the illuminations create bright light in his honour. At this stage Rummel and Rorlund make speeches in honour of Bernick. His generosity as master is admired. But Bernick asks his friends not to speak very high of him as he too has committed many mistakes. He wishes to be forgiven by the people for all his faults. He boldly accepts that righteousness, fortitude, integrity, non-violence etc. are the pillars of society. Then he goes one step further and declares that the labourers and the women are real pillars of society.

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