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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Democracy, Dissent and the National Image Debate

THE HINDU

26 March 2026

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# Democracy, Dissent and the National Image Debate

The Hindu

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Is dissent against government policy compatible with patriotism, or does it undermine national interest — especially at international forums?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

The Indian Youth Congress staged a protest at the India AI Summit, drawing sharp political backlash with ruling party leaders framing the protest as “embarrassing India on the world stage.” The incident reignited the debate on the boundaries of democratic dissent.

## The Editorial Argument

The Hindu editorial argues that equating criticism of government policy with attacking the nation is a dangerous conflation that echoes Emergency-era rhetoric. The editorial defends dissent as a constitutional right under Article 19(1)(a) and a safety valve essential for democratic governance, warning that a mature democracy must distinguish between anti-state activity and policy criticism.

## Constitutional Basis of Dissent

PROVISION	PROTECTION
Article 19(1)(a)	Freedom of speech and expression
Article 19(1)(b)	Right to assemble peaceably and without arms
Article 19(1)(c)	Right to form associations or unions
Article 19(2)	Reasonable restrictions: sovereignty, integrity, security, public order, decency, morality, contempt of court, defamation, incitement

The Supreme Court has consistently upheld dissent as a fundamental democratic value:

- **Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras (1950):** Freedom of speech and expression includes the right to propagate ideas — even unpopular ones
- **Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015):** Struck down Section 66A of IT Act; held that mere discussion, advocacy, or dissent cannot be criminalised
- **Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar (1962):** Sedition (then Section 124A IPC) requires incitement to violence or public disorder — mere criticism of government is not sedition

## The “National Image” Argument

The editorial deconstructs the argument that protests at international events damage India’s image:

- 1 **Democratic credentials enhance, not diminish, national image:** India’s soft power derives from its democratic character — suppressing dissent at international forums undermines precisely what makes India respected globally
- 2 **International precedent:** Protests at G7/G20 summits, Davos, and COP conferences are routine in all democracies. The US, UK, France, and Germany regularly witness protests at major international events without claims of national embarrassment
- 3 **The Emergency parallel:** During the Emergency (1975-77), the government similarly argued that internal criticism weakened India internationally. History judged that suppression of dissent, not dissent itself, damaged India’s democratic reputation

## Shrinking Civic Space — Concerns

The editorial places the incident in a broader pattern:

INDICATOR	TREND
V-Dem Democracy Report 2025	India classified as “electoral autocracy” since 2018
Reporters Without Borders — Press Freedom Index	India ranked 159/180 (2025)
FCRA cancellations (2020-2025)	~17,000 NGO registrations cancelled/not renewed
Internet shutdowns	India leads globally: 100+ shutdowns in 2024
UAPA arrests without trial	~5,000+ persons in custody under UAPA; <3% conviction rate

## The Ethics Dimension

The editorial raises a GS-4 question: What is the ethical obligation of a citizen — to support the government unconditionally in the name of national unity, or to speak truth to power even when it is uncomfortable?

The Constitution answers clearly: Article 51A(h) lists developing scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of **inquiry and reform** as a Fundamental Duty. Reform requires criticism; inquiry requires questioning authority.

#### UPSC RELEVANCE

Article 19(1)(a), Romesh Thappar case, Shreya Singhal case, Kedar Nath Singh case, Article 51A(h)

*Right to dissent – constitutional basis, reasonable restrictions, sedition law, shrinking civic space*

*Ethics of dissent – citizen's duty to reform vs loyalty to state; democratic values in governance*

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### RIGHT TO DISSENT — CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS:

Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of speech and expression

Article 19(1)(b): Right to peaceful assembly

Article 19(2): Reasonable restrictions (8 grounds)

Article 51A(h): Fundamental Duty — develop spirit of inquiry and reform

### KEY CASES:

Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras (1950): Free speech includes unpopular ideas

Kedar Nath Singh v. Bihar (1962): Sedition needs incitement to violence

Shreya Singhal v. UOI (2015): Struck down Section 66A IT Act

S.G. Vombatkere v. UOI (2022): SC referred sedition law for reconsideration

### CIVIC SPACE INDICATORS:

V-Dem 2025: India classified as “electoral autocracy” since 2018

Press Freedom Index 2025: India ranked 159/180

Internet shutdowns: India leads globally (100+ in 2024)

BNS 2023: Section 152 (replacing Section 124A IPC) — sedition renamed “acts endangering sovereignty”

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Emergency (1975-77): Article 352 invoked; fundamental rights suspended

ADM Jabalpur v. Shivkant Shukla (1976): SC upheld suspension of habeas corpus (later overruled)

KS Puttaswamy v. UOI (2017): Privacy as fundamental right — includes freedom of thought and expression

UAPA: Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967; amended 2019; allows individual designation as terrorist

Sources: [The Hindu](#), [V-Dem Institute](#), [Reporters Without Borders](#)



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