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## AMBEDKAR'S CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY

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### Abstract

Democracy is regarded if not the best but a better option for humanity to create a socially and politically civilized society. The best option for the rule is not yet invented by political scientists. Hence democracy remains to be the only best option available before modern humans. Indeed, the same democracy produced great democrat like Abraham Lincoln as well as the worst kind of dictator like Hitler. Therefore, Ambedkar conceived a kind of democracy that could make India a vibrant, dynamic nation producing rule for the people with elements of social equality and equal opportunities under the largely state-controlled economy along with reasonable space for private players.

### Key Words

Ambedkar, Democracy, Equality, Fraternity, Liberty.

### Introduction

The literal meaning of democracy is 'rule by the people and not rule by the majority. If a person elected by majority votes, he/she has to represent all people of his constituency who voted and not voted him/her; and also who couldn't vote and who are not eligible to vote him/her. Once elected he/she is representative of all. In the words of James Madison is a 'representative democracy. Ambedkar wanted India to be a representative and parliamentary democracy. He didn't prefer the Presidential form of democracy though he was very much influenced by the ideals of American polity shaped by political visionaries like Abraham Lincoln and James Madison. The presidential form of government required a national-level political network to capture political power. Marginalised sections of the society can't have financial resources and political networking capacity throughout the country to capture power which only privileged sections could do.

Therefore, Ambedkar didn't want the presidential form of government. To make the Indian polity representative of all sections of society and to maintain diversity and plurality in the political representation, Ambedkar felt that parliamentary democracy was most suitable to India. He used to often refer to Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy that 'government of the people, by the people and for the people to define his idea of democracy. However, Ambedkar conception of democracy enriches the definition of democracy and gives new direction and purpose to Indian democracy.

### **From Graded Inequality to Guaranteed Equality**

India is a nation of graded inequality represented by thousands of castes. Every caste is a nation in itself only to find other Indians as its social alien. Ambedkar found the only solution to make India a stronger nation was to annihilate caste. In this context, Ambedkar's conception of democracy needs to be understood.

Ambedkar's conception of democracy consists of three dimensions- political democracy, social democracy and economic democracy. He envisaged democracy as a means and egalitarian society as an end. He visualized an effective state role to facilitate the transition of Indian society from 'graded inequality' to guaranteed equality. What is the connection between political, social and economic democracy? Ambedkar saw that without removing socio-economic inequalities political democracy would be the power of a few because hegemonic forces that are the privileged few could capture the electoral process.

Ambedkar analysed that in any period of the history of human society there existed two classes – the governing class and the servile class between whom there is a continuous struggle for power. "Democracy and self-government in India cannot be real unless freedom has become the assured possession of all."<sup>1</sup> Electoral process is one part of the democracy and it alone doesn't guarantee the success of democracy. The manipulators hegemonise the power structure through the electoral process as was done by Hitler in Germany. He became a Nazi dictator by using the means of the election machinery. Hence Ambedkar felt, "Adult suffrage and frequent elections are no bar against the governing class reaching places of power and authority".<sup>2</sup> Ambedkar through the constitutional safeguards visualized to reconcile social and economic democracy with political democracy. Ambedkar was an egalitarian liberalist. Egalitarian liberalism is the basis of Ambedkar thought. Equal liberties for Dalits is the objective of his thoughts.

### **Enlightened India (Prabuddha Bharat)**

French Revolution has changed the course of human history by producing path-breaking ideas- 'liberty, equality, fraternity. Ambedkar saw these three principles of a democratic society in the philosophy of the Buddha and envisaged India to become a nation of people who believe in liberty, equality, fraternity. His idea of democratized India is an enlightened India. He called it 'Prabuddha Bharat'. His enlightened India is based on the principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' rooted in Buddhism. The only means Ambedkar wanted to adopt for the realization of his enlightened India is democracy. But his conception of democracy is

different from mere political democracy. As it is said earlier his democracy is a combination of socio-economic and political democracy. How could democracy work to transform a society of inequality into an enlightened society? He relied mostly on government intervention to take initiatives for the empowerment of the masses. He viewed a democratically formed government as an effective and peaceful means to empower people socially and economically. He defined democracy as “a form and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed.”<sup>3</sup>

For Ambedkar democracy is a mode of ‘associated living’. For him, democracy is politically a form of government and socially it is a way of living. He was of the firm view that caste and democracy were incompatible. Hence, without the annihilation of caste, democracy in caste-ridden society is a beautiful makeup on a diseased body. Communism espouses the cause of equality at the cost of liberty. There is no place for individual freedom. Capitalism privileges liberty over equality and paves the way for the rich to become richer and the poor to become poorer. Ambedkar tries to balance liberty and equality through the fraternity. Associated living is another name of the fraternity.

Society needs harmony between the human desire for freedom and social concern. Without making a balance between the liberty of capitalist society and the equality of a socialist society, there can't be a truly civilized society or an enlightened society. If realization of enlightened society is the aim of the state the pertinent question is how to achieve the balance or harmony between the ideals of liberty and equality? Extremism in any form or any name leads to the destruction of society or individual. To maintain a middle path between capitalist's liberty and communist's equality, Ambedkar visualizes the role of fraternity and proposes that fraternity should be the basis of any nation or society to evolve into a civilized nation in the true sense.

Ambedkar explained the importance of social and economic democracy for the proper functioning of political democracy. He said, “...political democracy cannot succeed where is no social or economic democracy...Social and economic democracy are the tissues and the fibre of political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fibre, the greater the strength of the body.”<sup>4</sup>

He critiqued democracy for privileging liberty over equality and making political democracy a mockery. “Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realise the significance of equality and did not even endeavour to strike a balance between liberty and equality, with the result that liberty swallowed equality and has made democracy a name and a farce.”<sup>5</sup>

Fraternity is another of social democracy. Equality can be seen only when there is fraternity between communities. Ambedkar was firm about the necessity of social democracy for bringing fraternity into society. In his address to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, Ambedkar explained the intrinsic relation

between liberty, equality, fraternity: “[We must] not to be content with mere political democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of its social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life that recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. [Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative.] Without fraternity, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. [Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative.] Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them. We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is a complete absence of two things in Indian Society. One of these is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty.”<sup>6</sup>

Explaining the historical contradictions existing in the Indian society which are detrimental to the growth of socio-economic democracy, Ambedkar said, “On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics, we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. The second thing we are wanting in is recognition of the principle of fraternity. What does fraternity mean? Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians-if Indians being one people. It is the principle that gives unity and solidarity to social life. It is a difficult thing to achieve.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, the three principles of democracy liberty, equality, fraternity are prerequisites to establish the enlightened India that is Prabuddha Bharat.

## **Purpose of Democracy**

Ambedkar’s conception of democracy is a kind of social justice democracy as he felt that the purpose of democracy is to establish a society of social justice. For Ambedkar liberty, equality and fraternity together is justice. Without justice, democracy is a meaningless notion. The idea of justice is endorsed by many contemporary thinkers and leaders. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are".<sup>8</sup> The question is when would unaffected outrage against the injustice meted out to others? Civil society if pretends to be civic and doesn’t rise above its caste/racial considerations that defeat the very purpose of democracy. Martin Luther King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.<sup>9</sup> Kofi Annan felt, “We cannot build freedom on the foundations of injustice”.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of the views on justice expressed by post-Ambedkar thinkers and visionaries, it

could be said that Ambedkar was prophetic to align justice with democracy and without justice, democracy is an anarchy of the few who got elected representing the political majority. Another name of justice is the welfare state.

In the Ambedkar scheme of liberal democracy, democracy is more than the institutionalized power structure, it is a way of life. Democracy would be an elected autocracy when the democratically established power structure becomes an agency of casteists/racists to exercise unlimited power. In his last speech to the Constituent Assembly on the adoption of the Constitution, Ambedkar cautioned with hope on the survival of democracy in India. He said, "It is quite possible for this new-born democracy to retain its form but give place to dictatorship in fact. If there is a landslide, the danger of ... [India] becoming [under dictatorship] actuality is much greater. If we wish to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, what must we do? The first thing in my judgement we must do is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives. The second thing we must do is to observe the caution which John Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely, not 'to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with the power which enables him to subvert their institutions.' There is nothing wrong with being grateful to great men who have rendered life-long services to the country. But there are limits to gratefulness, As has been well said by the Irish Patriot Daniel O'Connell, no man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty. This caution is far more necessary in the case of India than in the case of any other country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship." <sup>11</sup>

### **State Socialism in Democracy**

Ambedkar's democracy includes socialism but with rights. He was opposed to the idea of socialism as it could lay the foundation for authoritarian rule. He preferred democracy but with a socialist agenda. In other words, he wanted democracy to work for people and not for a few privileged sections of society. He visualised the state as an agent for the empowerment of people. Ambedkar's state socialism as a kind of democratic socialism could be gauged from his views on objects of modern democracy: The individual is an end in himself; the individual has certain inalienable rights, which must be guaranteed to him by the constitution; the individual shall not be required to relinquish any of his constitutional rights as a condition precedent to the receipt of the privilege; the state shall not delegate powers to private persons to govern others.<sup>12</sup>

The pertinent question before him was how the state could achieve rights for an individual in a democracy where technically the majority decides the policy but practically a few privileged hegemonies power? Therefore, he visualised the democratisation of the Indian economy. His scheme of things to bring economic democracy in India includes the following: Ownership and running of the key industries by the state; the Insurance industry to be the monopoly of the state. The state makes it obligatory for every citizen to take an insurance policy commensurate with his income. This would, on the one hand, offer security to the individual, and on the other would give resources to the state for planning and undertaking economic development; Agriculture to be a state industry. The state to acquire ownership of all land so that there would be no landlord, no tenant and no agricultural labourer. The erstwhile landlords to be paid appropriate compensation; Farming to be collective. The land acquired by the state to be let out to the residents of the village without distinction of caste, gender or religion, in size of standard farms, the state to provide all the necessary inputs, and after making due payments to the state in lieu of the services rendered by it as well as the revenue, the remaining produce to be shared among the tenants as prescribed by the government.<sup>13</sup> However, Ambedkar recognised the role of private industries along with state monopoly on important industries to make India a nation of equal opportunities to all grow, wealthy with their capital and poor with government support. If the whole economy is left with private capital, Ambedkar felt there would be a rise in economic inequalities and India would be a poverty-stricken nation with a few rich people.

## Conclusion

Ambedkar's conception of democracy visualises India to adopt a parliamentary system of political democracy along with social democracy that visualises not merely liberty and also equality and fraternity based on the principles of economic democracy in the form of socialist agenda rooted in the rights of the people that is to adopt the mixed economy model giving space to state-owned industries as well as private capital. Therefore, Ambedkar defined political democracy as the rule for the people; social democracy as associated living; and economic democracy as state socialism with space for private capital.

Ambedkar believed that a democratic state has enormous potential to bring revolutionary changes to society. But at the same time, he subscribed to the view that only democratic struggles can bring social and economic empowerment to common people. In other words, Ambedkar was of the view that even a democratic state created through political process needs democratic struggles to build social and economic democracy in the society. Equality in the political process is not enough; equality in social and economic processes is a requirement for defining any country a fully democratic. Therefore, his view reflected in the Preamble of the Constitution of India in the following words, 'We the People of India' giving importance to the people of India for constituting politically and socially an entity called India.

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