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Revisiting Ambedkar's Democracy

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Abstract

Ambedkar's idea of democracy has great significance in the prevailing socio-political ambience. He emphasized on many untouched and unexplored aspects of Indian society and polity unlike his contemporaries. He was immensely committed to democratic method for the resolution of socio-political disagreements and dichotomies. Equality, eviction from discrimination, abolition of untouchability and the inhuman practices were the most significant issues agitating in his mind which reflected in the Constitution of India. Therefore the foundation of the constitution is premised on the principles of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. He wanted social democracy prior to political democracy and he urged to make 'political democracy' a 'social democracy'. He believed that political democracy could not be lasted unless there lied at the base of it social or economic democracy. Ambedkar's idea of democracy is based on social justice. He also emphasised on the constitutional morality as one of the many tools for the proper functioning of democracy. This paper analyses Ambedkar's ideas on democracy of his dream for India, and also identifies the preconditions for the successful working of democracy.

Introduction

The foundation of the Indian Constitution is premised on the principles of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. These principles are included in the 'Preamble' of the constitution, 'an essentially Ambedkarite Preamble' which Ambedkar authored 'almost- single-handedly' (Rathore (2020)). The preamble intends of removing social, political and economic inequalities. The constitutional vision discards discrimination on the basis of caste, class, gender and others. Shepherd (2020) argued that through the drafting of the Constitution and his politics, Ambedkar had played a crucial role in undermining the possibility of varna dharma dictatorship to be established immediately after the British left India. The 'Social Justice' is the basic aim of the Indian constitution. In fact, Ambedkar's vision of social justice not only encourages Dalits assertion, but also it is motivational for the marginalised sections of various societies around the world. Ambedkar's comprehensive movement for a 'justified social order' was based on equality. On Ambedkar's idea of social justice, Ilaiah (2012) called Ambedkar a prophet of the people whom he created soul and politics for. The liberty, equality and fraternity are held as the key components of social justice. Justice, therefore, is simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity, and further he also said, 'The system of rank and gradation is simply another way of enunciating the principle of inequality (Ambedkar 2008, p.25). Ambedkar, 'being a compassionate rebel, therefore, found Buddhism closer to his understanding of social justice' (Raja, 2016). Given his wider egalitarian perception, Ambedkar has been widely regarded as one of the most radical egalitarians of the twentieth century (Rathore, 2020, p.60). He was immensely committed to democratic method for the resolution of socio-political disagreements and dichotomies. For him, democracy was 'a political association of equal and free citizens engaged in the process of defining itself in the indefinite future,

and he was committed to designing democratic institutions for post-colonial India as a politician, lawyer and, of course, as the chairperson of the Drafting Committee' (Ibid, p.8). Ambedkar is held as one of the 'greatest political scientists India has ever produced whose discourse on democracy shaped the institutions of democracy in India' (Fernandes, 2017).

'The future of democracy depends a great deal on the revival of Ambedkar's visionary conception of democracy' (Dreze, 2018, p.170). Ambedkar firmly believed that democracy could not be equated with any form of government. In fact, the roots of democracy lied not in the form of government, parliamentary or any other, but they are to be 'searched in the social relationship, in terms of the associated life between the people who form the society' (Mungekar, 2017, pp.306-7). In other words, for Ambedkar, 'democracy was not just a form of government, but also a way of life...and his vision of democracy was closely related to his ideal of a good society' (Dreze, 2018, pp.170-71). He said that 'democracy keeps on changing its form, and also always undergoes changes in purposes. The purpose of modern democracy is not so much to put curb on an autocratic king but to bring about the welfare of the people'(Mungekar, 2017, p.288). Ambedkar described democracy as 'a form of and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed' (Ambedkar 1994, p.vii). This means that he said, 'If democracy can enable those who are running it to bring about fundamental changes in the social and economic life of the people and the people accept those changes without resorting to bloodshed, then I say there is democracy'(Mungekar, 2018, p.289). He believed that there was a need to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, and suggested the need to hold fast 'the constitutional methods of achieving social and economic objectives by abandoning the bloody method of revolution, abandoning the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and satyagraha' (Guha, 2012, p.321). Here, except method of revolution, he even nullifies the Gandhian methods for preserving democracy. He held these methods as the 'Grammar of Anarchy' and urged to abandon as soon as possible. Further, he justifies the unconstitutional methods only when the constitutional methods collapse in accomplishing the desired objectives (Ibid, pp.321-322).

Social Democracy

After Independence, in 1948, Ambedkar had stated that political democracy has been achieved by the freedom struggle against the British and it has been taken over from the British, but social democracy remained to be unaccomplished task. He wanted social democracy prior to political democracy and he urged to make 'political democracy' a 'social democracy'. He believed that political democracy could not be lasted unless there lied at the base of it social or economic democracy (Ambedkar 2003, p.1215-16). Equality, eviction from discrimination, abolition of untouchability and the inhuman practices were the most significant issues which were agitating in Ambedkar's mind. He believed, 'Political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy. Social and economic democracies are the tissues and fibre of political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fibre, the greater the strength of the body' (Ambedkar 1991, p.107-08)). Ambedkar held 'social democracy' as a way of life, which 'recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles...are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity, and the divorce of one from another will defeat the very purpose of democracy' (Ambedkar 2003, p.1216). For him, 'Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, equality and liberty could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them,' Dreze (2018, p.171) held these as 'prophetic words'. Given the caste based discrimination against the lower castes, Ambedkar said that equality remains absolutely absent in Indian society; 'on the social plane, the Indian society is based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. And on the economic plane, the Indian society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty' (Guha, 2012, p.323). However, the scenario has not been changed much even after the seventy five years of independence. He had stated that 'on the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions'...'We will have equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life.' In politics we will be recognizing the principle of 'one man one vote and one vote one value.' And in social and economic life by reason of social and economic structure, continue to "deny the principle of one man one value' (Guha, 2012, p.323). He expressed the concern that if this contradiction continues, the political democracy will be in peril. Ambedkar (2003, p. 127) calls it contradiction by criticizing political democracy, because, "the right which is guaranteed by law

but is opposed by the society is of no use at all'. The contradictions needed to be removed so that to maintain the political democracy, otherwise, 'those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy' (Ambedkar 1994, p.1216). However, on Ambedkar's prescient of blowing up of the institutions, it has rightly argued that 'The subaltern social castes and classes in India have neither become "revolutionary" enough to "blow up" anything, nor gained dignity as citizens to build a fraternity' (Gudavarthy, 2021). This shows that the poor Dalit/marginalised classes could not stand up to blow the oppressive rulers and the political institutions despite the rulers' 'despotic governance' against them. In fact, these rulers strategically and cunningly devised 'a coercive mechanism' to keep various marginalised sections disunited and scared of the monstrous system. These aggrieved people also failed to produce the efficient leader for their concerns in the contemporary crisis out of the fear of system's despotism. The downtrodden feel fortunate enough to be alive in the despotic realm. Moreover, the politicians also play 'Dalit Cards' by dividing them. In fact, in the democracies like ours, the aggrieved people earlier could democratically protest against the unconstitutional and coercive working of the democratic government, democratic processes and the political institutions. However, with the time and regime change, the people are coercively debarred from showing their democratic anguish for their rights and needs of livelihood.

Fraternity as the Root of Democracy

In view of preserving the noble democratic structure, Ambedkar believed in the principle of fraternity. In his celebrated work, *Annihilation of Caste* (1939), he stated that for fraternity in society;

There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association...there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men (Ambedkar, 1979, p.31).

Fraternity remains 'the common brotherhood of all Indians-if Indians being one people. This principle gives unity and solidarity to social life. However, it was difficult to achieve.' The principle of fraternity was based on the nation. So, as Guha writes, Ambedkar raised the question that; How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? 'The castes are anti-national. In the first place, because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste' and 'for fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint' (Guha, 2012, p.324). The present day nature of Indian democracy certainly recalls Ambedkar's predictions which made in Constituent Assembly and making him more relevant comparatively to his contemporary doyens of democracy in India. Ambedkar believed that nationalism was not just shouting slogans, but in comprehensive way, it was the empowering of people and reclaiming of their dignity. Believing and practicing the principles of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity remain the true and perfect nationalism, that leading further to strengthening of democracy. He believes, 'Without fraternity, liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in Democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty, it is because at the basis of both there is fraternity. Fraternity is therefore the root of Democracy' (Ambedkar, 1987, p.283). Ambedkar held democracy as another name for equality (Rodrigues, 2002, p.62). However, India has lost, as it seems, the base of fraternity. The politics of religion and caste have marginalized the strength of fraternity. Therefore, given the less probability of formation of absolute fraternity and democracy, Bhattacharjee (2018, pp.63-64) writes that '(Gopal) Guru may also like to add the idea of a new fraternity, a fraternity of the not-yet nation, of the not-yet democracy to come.'

Corporate Power, Religion and Democracy

Ambedkar had rightly warned that if the power of democracy falls, directly/indirectly, in the hands of businessman/Capitalist or a priest/religious man, it would not be people's democracy anymore. Both the forms would surely marginalize the fundamental principles of egalitarian and secular democracy respectively. The

capitalists' governance will premise on the profit. Ambedkar aptly prophesied that; 'If moneyed people try to influence the elections by contributing to the election fund of any political party, what will be the result? If the party which they have supported financially comes in power, they will naturally try to extract concessions for themselves either by modifying the present legislation or by influencing the party in power to legislate in such manner as would be beneficial to their interests' (Mungekar, 2017, p.305). In other words, if the aim is profit, then it will discourage the welfare of the poor and marginalized people. The practice of de-nationalization/privatisation of public property would be prioritised. However, the nexus between political parties in power and corporate world has become the prominent political culture. Therefore, such system appears standing behind the rich; A government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. And consequently, the labours/working class has to suffer from very pathetic situation. In this context, Ambedkar said, 'A democracy which enslaves the working class...is no democracy but a mockery of democracy' (Ambedkar 2014, p.217).

Moreover, the Priest or religious man's governance will premise on religion and spirituality. The religiously prone ruler would render preference to religion over the welfare and rights of the citizens, because he would focus on the development of religious institutions and also would engage the people in religious practices that eventually would make the people to forget about their rights and the means of livelihood. In fact, for Ambedkar, religion was for man, and not man for religion. However, the religious supremacy believes and preaches 'man for religion.' The religiously-prone regimes compel man to tolerate hunger and humiliation, but not to tolerate assault on his religion or practices. Arguably, the religion has overpowered the mind of man. Therefore, Ambedkar's argument becomes more relevant when he says, 'Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act.' Therefore, Ambedkar said that democracy requires strong 'public conscience' to understand what is wrong and what is right? However, it is absolutely missing. Ambedkar believed, 'A people and their religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be necessary good for the well-being of the people' (Ambedkar 1979)

Constitutional Morality

For Ambedkar, 'Constitution which contains legal provisions is only skeleton. The flesh of skeleton is to be found in what we call constitutional morality' (Kshirsagar 1992, p.59). According to Dreze (2018, p.173);

Ambedkar's passion for democracy was closely related to his commitment to rationality and the scientific outlook...Rational thinking is even more relevant if we adopt Ambedkar's broad view of democracy as a state of liberty, equality and solidarity. Indeed rationality is conducive if not indispensable to the realization of these ideals. A person who is deprived of liberty can afford to be irrational, since he or she is not in command in any case. But if we are to take control of our lives, rationality and scientific outlook are essential...There is also a close affinity between rationality and equality.

Ambedkar believed that constitutional morality is also essential for the success of democracy. In the sense of social ethics, morality was 'indispensable for the realisation of liberty and equality, and in the absence of morality, there were only two alternatives: anarchy or the police' (Dreze, 2018). As quoted by Dreze, Ambedkar argued; 'The edifice of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste [...] Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound' (Dreze, 2018, p.175). As Dreze opined, 'Ambedkar's recognition of social ethics as an essential ingredient of democracy has not lost its relevance. If democracy is just political competition between self-interested individuals...it will never succeed in bringing about liberty, equality and fraternity. In particular, it will never do justice to minority interests' (Dreze, 2018, p.175). But, in contemporary modern India, none amongst the politicians, intellectuals, jurists, journalists and others abide by the constitutional morality. Therefore, 'For successful working of democracy, the observance of constitutional morality is precondition...Democracy does

require the functioning of moral order in society. If there is no moral order, democracy will go to pieces as it is going now probably in our own country' (Mungekar, 2017, pp.298-299). According to Ambedkar, constitutional morality is 'not a natural sentiment. It had to be cultivated. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic' (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1989, VII, p.38) Ambedkar believed that in the absence of constitutional morality, there would be misuse of constitution despite its carefully written. It may be used arbitrarily and whimsically by the rulers. Without imbuing of Constitutional morality in the legislators, executives, judicials, administrators, intellectuals etc, the constitution would be a toy in the hands of these people. In fact, the constitutional morality puts greater obligation and responsibility on the part of rulers and authorities to behave constitutionally and conduct their functions according to the rules of Constitution and not to have behaviour similar to feudal overlords. Therefore, Ambedkar's statement becomes more relevant that; "...however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot."

Preconditions for the Successful Working of Democracy

Ambedkar, in Constituent Assembly, had raised the doubt on the future of democracy and the democratic institutions in India that; "What would happen to her democratic Constitution? Will she be able to maintain it or will she lose it again?" (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989: XI, p.978). Therefore, Ambedkar suggested preconditions for the successful working of democracy that; there should be absence of glaring inequality in the society as the 'deep cleavages between class and class that are going to be one of the greatest hindrances in the success of democracy', equality of treatment in law and administration, the observance of constitutional morality, absence of tyranny of majority over minority, moral order in the society, and strong presence of public conscience i.e. the existence of strong opposition (He said democracy means that nobody has any perpetual authority to rule, but that rule is subject to sanction by the people and can be challenged in the House itself; The opposition is a condition precedent for democracy, opposition is the key to a free political life) (Omvedt, 2004). However, when strong opposition is missing, despotism in the name of democracy becomes absolute. Unfortunately, Ambedkar's idea of transforming political democracy into social and economic democracy could not be materialized, and the democratic project was reduced to just political democracy in India (Dreze, 2018).

On 'Personality Cult', Ambedkar's warnings, in context of India, became more practical today. He suggested the Indians not to blindly and uncritically follow a particular leader. Ambedkar quoted the liberal thinker, John Stuart Mill, who had said that 'the citizens of a democracy must never lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or ...trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions' (Guha, 2014). In fact, he believed that 'there has been nothing wrong in being grateful to great men who have rendered life-long services to the country, but there are limits to such gratefulness.' In case of 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,' and he further said, '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' (Guha, 2014). Therefore, looking at the Indian democracy, Ambedkar's warnings appear more relevant.

By and large, Ambedkar, the champion of egalitarian democracy, aimed at the comprehensive welfare, well-being, respect and dignity of all the citizens. For constructive democracy as imagined by Ambedkar, Parekh similarly opined that 'India needs to recommit itself to the ideals of equality, social justice, fraternity, human dignity and individual liberty that are so well set out in the preamble to our Constitution and form the core of our national identity' (Parekh, 2011, p.154). In a broader sense, 'Democracy is freedom from hunger, humiliation, and violence. Democracy is saying no to brazen arrogance. It's the rejection of caste and religious bigotry and every other form of human and non-human indignity' (Chowdhury and Keane, 2021, p.30). The argument that the 'poor societies are unlikely to remain democratic' makes a valid sense if the democratic problems remain unresolved (Rudolph and Hoeber, 2002).

Conclusion

Ambedkar judged the success of democracy on the basis of respecting fellow humans and the promotion of fraternity amongst the diverse social groups. Ambedkar's philosophy encourages the development of humanism. Given deliberately biased and discriminatory myriad socio-political practices based on caste, religion, region, culture, faith, income and social status, the constitutional vision of fraternity appears as chimera. Therefore, bridging the gap between political democracy and social democracy is the major challenge in consolidating India's democratic roots. Moreover, because of the lack of 'Dalit/marginalised Solidarity' and the leadership crisis in Dalit community, the caste discrimination and prejudices against them are easily deliberated by the elites of higher social/political castes. Amongst many contemporary concerns of Indian Democracy, therefore, the religious fanaticism, caste politics, political despotism, inequality and the massive poverty are rampage that mostly affect Dalits/minorities life. The myriad socio-political and economic problems seemingly emanate because of the perverted democratic practices leading to 'democratic-fascism'. The violation of democratic values and morality lead towards the death of democracy. By and large, by empowering the people, reclaiming of their dignity and believing and practicing the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, potentially "the just social order" can be established. Therefore, in the sombre socio-political ambience, Ambedkar's democratic philosophy matters a lot that provides greater impetus towards the formation of healthy socio-political democracy. He was against the socio-political system that favours one class fully privileged and another class under privileged to carry the eternal burden of first class. However, the toxic political culture has emerged as the formidable challenge.

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