

Revisiting Ambedkar's Vision of Democracy and Its Relevance for Contemporary India

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Abstract

India's contemporary aspirations of a Viksit Bharat by 2047 underpinned by 'sabka saath, sabka vikaas' are increasingly seen as resonating with the ideals of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It therefore becomes imperative to engage with Ambedkar's philosophy to not only draw connections but also to explore how his philosophy sought to radically reconstruct the conceptual and normative edifice of an 'inclusive society'. It was not only the values of 'liberty' and 'equality' that were seen as the building blocks of democracy but more importantly notion of 'fraternity' emerges as central to Ambedkar's democratic ideal. It is in this context that the paper seeks to revisit Ambedkar's vision of a more substantive democracy that goes beyond the political attributes to encompass both social and economic democracy. More importantly, Ambedkar inspired model of democracy is rooted in ethical principles drawn from a reinterpretation of Buddhism. The paper thus explores the nuances of Ambedkar's democratic vision and its relevance for contemporary India.

Keywords: *democracy, inclusion, liberty, equality, fraternity*

I - Introduction:

Realization of Ambedkar's revisionist understanding of democracy as a value-laden system of social life is crucial to the attainment

of the vision of Viksit Bharat. Like Dewey, Ambedkar saw democracy as more than a process of decision making, as 'a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience', in other words, as a habit or 'way of

life' that was based on mutual respect and revered difference. To that extent, it was not only the values of 'liberty' and 'equality' that were seen as the building blocks of democracy, but more importantly notion of 'fraternity' emerges as central to Ambedkar's democratic ideal. Foregrounding the 'social' underpinned by fraternity as central to the idea of democracy allowed Ambedkar to argue how inclusion required what he called as 'social endosmosis' in terms of free flow of ideas and experiences. To the extent that caste system hampered the exchange of ideas and experiences between communities, Ambedkar castigated caste system as anti-democratic. The paper thus seeks to problematize ideas of democracy and inclusion as envisioned by Ambedkar to emphasize the ethos of an 'inclusive society' that needs to be realized in a Viksit Bharat.

Aimed as a theoretical and interpretive contribution, the paper employs a methodological framework grounded in intellectual history and normative political theory. Accordingly, the paper relies on a close reading of Ambedkar's writings, conceptual analysis, and critical engagement with relevant secondary literature as its primary methods. The paper is structured along five sections. Section II

engages with Ambedkar's understanding of democracy embedded in Indian social reality drawing from both John Dewey and a reframing of Buddhism. Section III delves into Ambedkar's imagination of an ideal society as it flows from his notion of democracy. Section IV culls out implications of Ambedkar's ideas on democracy and inclusion for contemporary India and the challenges thereof. Finally, Section V concludes with a reiteration of Ambedkar's relevance in realization of the vision of Viksit Bharat.

II - Ethos of a Substantive Model of Democracy

Ambedkar understood democracy as 'a form and method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed' [1]. Quite clearly, for Ambedkar democracy was not just a form of government but a form of society. As Ambedkar stated, 'The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between the people who form a society' [1].

According to Patnaik, Ambedkar's understanding of democracy postulates three

critical interventions [2]. Firstly, it centres on differentiating between political and social democracy and considers social democracy as the pre-requisite for a robust political democracy. According to Ambedkar, there is a greater chance of success of political democracy if it is built on the foundations of social democracy. As he puts it, 'Social and economic democracy are the tissues and the fibre of a political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fibre, the greater the strength of the body' [3]. Secondly, for Ambedkar democracy as against appeasement symbolises a procedure for grievance redressal. Thirdly and finally, means or mechanisms of democracy must be seen as distinct from values or ends that democracy stands for. More precisely, the mechanisms of democracy should support political values of liberty, equality and fraternity. It is in this sense that increasing electoral participation in India, what scholars have pronounced as "deepening of democracy" was not so for Ambedkar. Rather to Ambedkar it signalled reducing democracy to electoral democracy.

In his last speech to the constituent assembly on 25th November 1949 on the occasion of the adoption of the Constitution, Ambedkar had alluded to the mismatch between political and

socio-economic aspects of democracy in India. As he stated

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 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 . . . How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? [4 p. 1216]

Skof views the statement as capturing the tensions that may linger in any political community [5]. Reflecting Dewey, it suggests that equality should not be reduced to a static political principle, but is something that has to be nurtured.

Ambedkar's dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy was primarily based on its failure to recognize the futility or redundancy of political democracy without social and economic democracy. To the extent that parliamentary democracy ignored economic inequalities and

did not recognize unequal bargaining power of the parties to the contract, its key principle of freedom of contract ended up sanctioning the strong to deceive the weak. The result has been that '...parliamentary democracy in standing out as a protagonist of liberty has continuously added to the economic wrongs of the poor, the downtrodden and the disinherited class' [3].

In Ambedkar we not only see a scathing critique of parliamentary democracy but an ethically grounded version of democracy. A pragmatist reading of Ambedkar's ideas of democracy allows one to discern 'an ethical criterion' for democracy in India [5]. Dewey's thought had a profound and long lasting impact on Ambedkar's ideas under whom he studied at Columbia University completing both his M.A. (1915) and his Ph.D. thesis (1916). Kadam is of the opinion that "unless we understand something of John Dewey, . . . it would be impossible to understand Dr. Ambedkar" [6]. Drawing from Dewey, Ambedkar saw democracy as 'a mode of associated living and conjoint communicated experience', democracy not just as a mode of governance but 'a way of life' in India.

Dewey had called for what he described as "creative democracy" which does not limit democracy to institutional forms and decision making procedures but signifies what Bernstein [7] has referred to as 'continual cultivation of democratic ethos'. As Dewey in his essay 'Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us' concludes, '...the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute' [8]. This understanding of democracy as a continuous effort or struggle to nurture right civic habits and dispositions among citizens clearly resonates with Ambedkar's ethical understanding of democracy as a way of life [9]. It is for these reasons that communication remains central to both Dewey's and Ambedkar's thought. In fact, Ambedkar in his vision of democracy did not restrict social endosmosis within the boundaries of the nation state but also envisioned transcultural and transnational exchange revealing Ambedkar as a cosmopolitan thinker [10].

What we see in Ambedkar is in fact a further expansion of Dewey's idea of creative democracy in so far as it is enriched with Buddhist spiritual and moral principles [11].

Ambedkar's vision of democracy combines pragmatic thought with Buddhist ethical-spiritual leanings. Ambedkar's own experience of discrimination and oppression shaped his psycho-critical abilities [12] allowing him to excavate within Buddhism ethos of collective emancipation [13]. According to Raut, Ambedkar embeds his theory of democracy in Buddha's *maitree* [14]. As stated by Ambedkar

...what sustains equality and liberty is fellow feeling. What the French Revolutionists called fraternity. The word fraternity is not an adequate expression. The proper term is what the Buddha called, *maitri*. 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. [15 p.283]

Ambedkar's work 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' which was published posthumously in 1957 elaborates Ambedkar's reframing of Buddhism. According to Verma, Ambedkar

preferred Buddhism over other religions as it contained within it a 'theory of social action' [16]. Ambedkar in fact saw Dhamma as very different from religion in that it is social, and not personal. Dhamma signified 'righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life' implying how 'society cannot do without dhamma'. Dhamma thus emerges as a 'moral code' for individual conduct as well as collective life and a constitutional principle in Ambedkar (as cited in Verma) [16].

Raut calls Ambedkar's vision of democracy as 'Dhammic or Spiritual democracy' in so far as it liberates the individual from the prejudices that may colour his attitude individually or as part of a community [14]. Buddha's inclusion of lower caste individuals and women in the sangha (association) represented significant efforts to dismantle social inequalities. To that extent Dhamma becomes 'a universal morality which protects the weak from the strong, which provides common models, standards, and rules and which safeguards the growth of the individual' (as cited in Verma) [16].

According to Meera Nanda, in recovering Buddhist heritage and bringing it in conversation with Dewey's pragmatic thought,

Ambedkar paved the way for an 'epistemological revolution' which is a pre-condition for the creation of democratic and secular habits-of-the-heart [17]. Scientific temper and respect for systematic inquiry central to Dewey was also embedded in Buddhism according to Ambedkar. Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhist emphasis on 'mindfulness' as reflecting Deweyan scientific temper which calls for subjecting everything to re-examination and reconsideration. It is this attitude of critical reflection that was seen as having the potential for liberation that led Ambedkar to publicly renounce Hinduism and embrace Buddhism in 1956.

It is in this sense that Nanda calls Ambedkar an exemplar of 'a prophet facing forward' who turned to India's Buddhist heritage and recovered scientific reason within it that allows us to question the worldview that we inherit [17]. In castigating the mystical and metaphysical aspects of Buddhism that emphasized otherworldliness, Ambedkar 'sought to secularize Buddhism'. In other words, Buddhism was unlike all other religions in so far as it postulated 'a rational ethic for life' [18]. It is for these reasons that Ambedkar saw Buddhism

as the foundation for 'an enlightened democracy' in India [19].

Having said that, Ambedkar also highlighted certain procedural elements for democracy to thrive. Absence of stark inequalities in society, existence of a strong opposition to challenge government, equality in both form (law) and substance (administration), constitutional morality, and a check on majoritarianism were seen by Ambedkar as necessary pre-conditions for a successful democracy. In addition, a moral order that inculcates respect for law in the people and a 'public conscience' that questions and counters any wrong in society were seen as crucial for democracy to be meaningful [20].

Ambedkar's vision of democracy thus combines procedural with substantive aspects drawing from Pragmatist school of thought and Buddhist moral and spiritual principles. Ambedkar's radical and revisionist understanding of democracy that questions entrenched structures of power thus reinforces his relevance as a 'global critical theorist' advocating an 'emancipatory idea of democracy' [11].

III - Ambedkar on 'Inclusive and Just Society'

A just society in Ambedkar's imagination is rooted in the principle of treating individual as an end in himself or herself by providing conditions for the flourishing of individual personality. Secondly the associated living in a just society has to be built on the foundations of liberty, equality and fraternity what Gokhale has called 'the trio of principles' [21].

Ambedkar time and again referred to Dewey's usage of the term 'social efficiency' to highlight how caste system was not only a 'social evil' but hampered modernization and progress. In so far as caste system obstructed viable opportunities for development of their full potential to certain sections of society, it amounted to wastage of human resources. For these reasons both Ambedkar and Dewey saw caste system as an economically inefficient system that ultimately hampered societal growth and progress by restricting occupational mobility. As Thorat puts it, 'Due to limited mobility of labour under social restriction, the caste system also leads to voluntary unemployment of the upper caste and involuntary unemployment of the lower caste' [22].

According to Ambedkar to the extent that caste system signified "graded inequality" marked by an 'ascending scale of hatred and descending

scale of contempt' it militates against willing and helpful cooperation thereby hampering the prospects of democracy in India [1]. Ambedkar's concept of "graded inequality" which he called as the 'soul' of the caste system is a notion of hierarchy that according to Rathore is 'internally complicated by replicating antagonism between castes, but also encouraging cooperation between them' [23]. As Rathore puts it. 'Under the stable and profoundly inegalitarian system of graded inequality, every caste has another community that it may freely and legally exploit, even as it suffers from exploitation' [23].

For Ambedkar safeguarding rights of minorities (which for him included not only religious minorities but also Dalits) was the essence of democracy. Accordingly, idea of political representation in Ambedkar was equally radical. Ambedkar postulated a model of 'relative majority' as against 'absolutist majority' as a mode of political representation for minorities. Under this model, a government could be formed by all minorities working together. If at all they are not able to form government, the model envisaged that the ruling party would still need their approval to enact any legislation or ordinance. In other words, Ambedkar was of the opinion that

'needs, not numbers, should govern the extent of representation' terming it as 'effective representation' [24].

On economic restructuring, Ambedkar envisaged a complementary relationship between agricultural and industrial sectors towards addressing the issue of unemployment and poverty in India. Development of infrastructure in the form of roads, irrigation and electricity was favoured as it would absorb surplus labour augmenting agricultural savings and promoting employment. Ambedkar was also one of the earliest advocates of mixed economy model and championed state socialism with significant industries under state control and privatization in specific spheres of the economy. The state was to provide funds for the expansion of agriculture and industry with insurance also nationalised. The importance that Ambedkar attributed to state socialism can be gauged from the fact that he advocated for it to be incorporated as part of the constitution to ensure that it is not subjected to change [24].

Scholars have fittingly argued for the need to go beyond the writings of Ambedkar and the need to tease out ideas reflected in his practices to better grasp his theory of democracy [2]. In doing so, Ambedkar's thought is positioned in

'*vita praxis*' tradition along with Gandhi, Nehru, Lohia, Jayaprakash, and A. K. Gopalan. In contrast to putting up new ideas in the public domain in dialogue with the people, scholars in this tradition are interested in mobilising people to transform social structures.

Ambedkar accordingly had acknowledged the contributions by Harijan Sevak Sangh (which was earlier called as the All India Untouchability League and was formed in 1932) for the untouchables through education, healthcare, water access and promotion of industrial schools and cooperative societies. Rather than providing sporadic assistance at individual level, Ambedkar was of the opinion that the Sangh should concentrate on restructuring the social conditions that perpetuated the marginalisation of the depressed classes [25].

In other words, Ambedkar symbolises what can be called as a 'transformative intellectual'. It is this spirit of praxis that is captured in his slogan of 'Educate, Agitate, and Organize'. Patnaik calls the 'implicit theory' reflected in his practices as 'theoretical surplus' that needs to be made explicit and sees Ambedkar as advocating a "middle ground theory of democracy" in contrast to socialists, communists, and liberals [2].

IV - Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

Ambedkar's vision of inclusion and democracy presents both challenges and opportunities for contemporary India and its vision for Viksit Bharat. Envisioned to be built on the three pillars of 'Demography, Democracy, and Diversity' [26], there is enduring relevance of Ambedkar for Viksit Bharat. To the extent that Ambedkar emphasized how 'Caste is not merely the division of labour. It is also a division of labourers' fraternity comes across as an important principle that has to guide the vision of Viksit Bharat. Ambedkar sensed three threats to Indian democracy that continue to plague Indian democracy. First, the increasing significance of caste loyalties negatively affecting social fraternity. Second, hero-worship and third, erosion of constitutional morality.

Given the continued salience of identity politics, deepening socio-economic inequalities, caste-based discrimination, and pressing issues of unemployment, agrarian distress, gender disparities and marginalization Ambedkar's line of thought remains an important reference point in policy debates and social movements. Policy debates around judicial independence, federalism, and civil society regulation must therefore be understood in light of Ambedkar's

belief that democracy requires robust institutions insulated from arbitrary power. Contemporary debates related to reservation policies, introduction of Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quotas, and demands for a Caste Census directly resonate with Ambedkar's thought. Similarly, debates on labour code reforms, gig worker protections, informal sector social security, land redistribution, and civil liberties continue to invoke Ambedkar's legacy and exemplify Ambedkar's continuing relevance as a living intellectual force. The pervasive effects of social media in perpetuating hate speech, misinformation and polarization have further reinforced the importance of cultivation of democratic dispositions as critical to harmonious development.

To the extent that Viksit Bharat signifies not just economic growth but a good quality of life for individuals and a society which is vibrant, culturally rich and harmonious [26], Ambedkar becomes relevant in this endeavour. More importantly, for the spirit of democracy to flourish and contribute to New India 'social endosmosis' is the conducive context to be nurtured. Ambedkar's approach to democracy thus seeks to bridge the gap between knowledge and action through the principle of 'praxis' by

calling for a fundamental revamping of society, fostering social coherence and interaction, political protection and representation of the marginalised and economic transformation on socialist lines. Importantly, novelty of Ambedkar's thought lies in proposing concrete policy proposals to translate this into reality.

V - In lieu of Conclusion

Ambedkar thus articulates a rich, value-laden conception of democracy when seen from the vantage point of his ideas on constitutionalism, his critique of caste, and his engagement with Dewey and Buddhism. Arguably, Ambedkar's vision sets a high normative standard for democracy to act as a transformative force. Prospects of Indian democracy resonating Ambedkarite spirit requires a fundamental change in the ethos of governance wherein the mentality of togetherness and its crucial role in translating vision of Viksit Bharat into a reality has to be grasped. The moral compass of Ambedkar's thought emphasizes commitment to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Realization of the same requires taking proactive steps to address structural inequalities faced by marginalised communities in order to

make the socio-economic system more inclusive and democracy a more substantive one. All of this according to Ambedkar can be made possible only by bringing fraternity (understood as an 'ethico-spiritual concept' similar to Buddhist *maitree*) to the centre stage. At the institutional level it suggests adherence to 'constitutional morality' and at the societal level it advocates the need for 'public conscience' [23].

More than alignment with the Ambedkarite vision, the challenge for contemporary India thus is to foster a deeper engagement with Ambedkar's thought to not only read him as a philosopher but as an activist through his practices. There is a dire need to go beyond symbolic appropriation of Ambedkar's ideas by structuring policies and discourses in ways that reflect true spirit of democracy as envisioned by Ambedkar. Democracy is to be seen both as an end and as a means. Restricting democracy to symbolise mechanisms of adult franchise, frequent elections without imbibing the foundational value of fraternity along with concrete steps in that direction will continue to produce a hollow version of democracy and not substantive one. To that extent India requires 'public conscience' than ever before.

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