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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Perspective on Democracy: Relevance in Contemporary Times

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is considered to be the chief architect of our 'grundnorm' i.e. the Constitution. He played a significant role in laying the foundation of democracy in India. He considered that democracy was not new to the Indian system but various ancient governing bodies adhered to democratic principles. His notion of democracy was not a westernised one, rather his reflections on the theory of democracy were firmly located in the Indian context. Equality and fraternity were considered to be at the heart of democracy. For him, democracy was a form of associated living. Democracy is not only limited to a government by the representative of the people but it has many more facets to it. It encompasses within its sphere social, economic as well as political democracy. Social democracy aims at removing the caste barriers created in our society. Caste system not only fractures national unity but also makes democracy impossible. Democracy is to be achieved not only in fact but in form also. The present paper aims to study the idea of democracy as propounded by Dr. Ambedkar. It aims to cover the various facets of democracy and to analyse whether we have secured the same notion of democracy to our people as envisaged by him.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He was not only a political leader and social reformer but also a scholar and thinker. He wrote various scholarly works and his ideas and notions have inspired generations and will continue to do so. He is known to be the greatest saviour of the suppressed community. His efforts in uplifting the oppressed section of the society have been innumerable. But his contributions towards our society are not

restricted to this aspect alone. He played an exceptional role in the framing of our *grundnorm*. He was a staunch supporter of democracy and his notion of democracy was not restricted only to political democracy but it was a holistic one. He considered that democracy was not new to the Indian system but various ancient governing bodies adhered to democratic principles. Democracy encompassed within its sphere social, economic as well as political democracy. He laid great emphasis on social democracy. To him a society characterized by

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inequality and social disparity could not sustain political democracy.

II. POPULAR MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

Though ‘democracy’ is a very popular term but the concept is one of a complex nature. The genesis of democracy in the world is a form of government in which a substantial proportion of citizenry directly or indirectly participates in ruling the state. The origin of the concept and practice can be traced to the ancient Greek city states in the fifth century BCE. The term ‘democracy’ itself is derived from the Greek words *demos* and *kratos* meaning ‘the people’ and ‘power or rule’ respectively. Thus, the meaning of the term comes out to be ‘the rule of the people’. It is a form of a government in which the people rule themselves either directly or indirectly or through their elected representatives. In a democracy, the sovereignty rests with the people in general. But this popular meaning of democracy is a restrictive one and imbibes within its sphere only the concept of political democracy. While democracy is a much broader phenomenon.

III. DR. AMBEDKAR’S PERSPECTIVE ON DEMOCRACY

The concept of democracy is not entirely new to the Indian polity. Dr. Ambedkar explained that democracy, especially parliamentary democracy is not unknown to India. He referred to the

parliamentary system of government prevailing in the Buddhist *Sanghas* where secret ballot system prevailed. There was no discussion without a motion being moved in the session. He opined that there was such intellectual freedom in ancient India as was nowhere else to be found.

The idea of democracy he put forth was much broader than the generally perceived idea of democracy which his contemporaries had. His notion of democracy was not limited to only political democracy but he also covered the social and economic dimensions within it. He forcefully argued that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy. This notion was also influenced by the societal conditions which were prevailing in our country at that time. The definition of democracy given by his predecessors or contemporaries could not satisfy him.

Another feature of Dr. Ambedkar’s conception of democracy is that it was aimed at achieving social transformation and human progress. Conservative notions of democracy did not satisfy him. In one of his most inspirational definitions of the term, 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”². To achieve this, it was essential to link political democracy with economic and social democracy. Indeed, Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of democracy was intertwined with the ideal of socialism.³ The neglect of economic

² Kshirsagar Ramchandra Kamaji, Political thought of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar 54 (Intellectual publishing house, New Delhi, 1992)

³ Jean Dreze, Dr. Ambedkar and the Future of Indian

Democracy, available at <http://econdse.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/JD-Ambedkar-and-future-of-democracy2005.pdf>, (last visited on Dec 24, 2021)

democracy was, in his view, one of the chief causes of “the failure of democracy in Western Europe”. As he put 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. Democracy is another name for equality. Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realize 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.”

He further added that democracy could not be equated either with Republic or Parliamentary Government. The roots of democracy lay not in the form of Government, parliamentary or otherwise. According to him, “Democracy is a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in terms of associated life between the people who form the society.”⁴

Dr. Ambedkar further said:

“Democracy is more than a political machine. It is even more than a social system. It is an attitude of mind or a philosophy of life. Equality and liberty are no doubt the deepest concern of democracy. But the equality and liberty are not sustained by the law of the state. It

is the fellow feeling that sustains the democracy. What the French Revolutionists called fraternity. The word fraternity is not an adequate expression. The proper term is what the Buddha called, Maitree. 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”.

His vision of democracy was not limited to the western notion. He enlarged his theory of democracy keeping in mind the Indian conditions. He laid emphasis on equality and fraternity in all spheres of life. Our society had the deep-rooted malaise of caste-based discrimination. This caste-based discrimination also bred economic discrimination because the oppressed communities were denied equal opportunities in terms of education and employment. Babasaheb abhorred such form of discrimination and vehemently fought against such practices. The caste-structure perpetuates an anti-social spirit in the minds of the privileged classes. The recognition of the class structure and income structure of society as sacrosanct was undemocratic and unrealistic. It hindered the formation of rational human relationships. Hence, he denounced the sanctity of the class structure of society as he considered that it poses a positive danger to democracy. He said that to preserve social democracy we should remove

⁴ D.R. Jatava, Political philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar

77 (National publishing House, New Delhi, 2001)

contradictions.⁵ Contradiction here means the inequality we have in social and economic life. As per him, castes are anti-national and antisocial because it creates jealousy and differences between castes which can further lead to the destruction of unity and solidarity of the country. He viewed these 'contradictions' as a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation and this is very much true. He laid much stress on the point that to maintain Indian independence and social democracy we must establish equality and fraternity in all spheres of life.

IV. ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL WORKING OF DEMOCRACY

Babasaheb explicitly stated the conditions which are very much necessary for the successful working of a democracy. They can be stated in brief as under⁶:

1. Equality- For the success of democracy the first and foremost essential element is equality. He states that there must not be glaring inequalities in the society. He was of the opinion that equality should prevail in the Indian society and there should be no discrimination under the pretext of caste, culture, religion and norms in the society. There should not be an 'oppressed class'. This concept of equality before the law and the equal protection of the laws finds a mention in Article 14 of our Constitution. The basic and fundamental conception of equality is respect for human personality.

The entire Indian society was divided in caste system which was based on negation of human values. He vehemently opposed the caste system and fought against the practice of untouchability. He explained the evil effects of caste system as follows, "Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible." Thus, according to him casteism was at the root of undemocratic system and it posed a hurdle in the success of democracy. He said that where equality is denied everything else may be taken to be denied.

2. Existence of an opposition- - The second important condition for the effective functioning of democracy is the existence of a strong opposition to the ruling majority. He laid emphasis on a strong opposition and not one which is meek and submissive. An opposition should have the ability of raising its voice against the unjustified policies of the ruling majority. He opined that there should be a political majority and a political minority rather than a communal majority and a communal minority. In a monarchical form of government, there was no veto power in the hands of people but in democracy there is veto power in hands of people. To avoid dictatorship, it is necessary in a democracy to have two party system, one the ruling and other, the opposition, to have a counter check on ruling party.

3. Equality in law and administration – In ancient India, people were treated according to their castes, even the profession which they could

⁵ Supra, note 3

⁶ Kshirsagar Ramchandra Kamaji, Political thought of

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar 56-61 (Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992)

carry on was also determined on the basis of the caste in which they took birth. There was no uniform civil code in law in Vedic culture. He vehemently opposed this caste system. There must be not only equality before law, but there must be equality of treatment in administration. The personnel in administration need to be most sincere and efficient. The officers in the higher echelons should not interfere whenever necessary action is taken by the administration against any culprit. The members of the ruling party should not interfere if any action is taken against any offender, even when the offender is related to a high functionary of the State. In other words, the personnel in administration should be permanent, incorrupt and efficient so that everybody can get true justice.

4. Constitutional morality – In Babasaheb's words, "A Constitution which contains legal provisions, is only skeleton. The flesh of the skeleton is to be found in what we call constitutional morality." Constitution is important for success of democracy but more important was constitutional morality in polity and society. Each and every rule of public life cannot be provided in the Constitution. The Constitution, however provide a mere skeleton or some basic principles and not every details. The details in the legal skeleton could be filled in by healthy principles or conventions which are always based on justice and which evolve in the course of history.

This concept of constitutional morality is oft cited in judgments of the Supreme Court and it as relevant today. We being a country governed by the rule of law, every law and every executive

action needs to conform with our 'supreme text', societal morality cannot guide the actions of the state. It is the constitutional morality which guides the State as well as the courts.

5. No tyranny of the majority – In a democracy, it is not expected from the majority to impose its tyranny over the minority. There will always be a majority and a minority but there should not be a tussle between them and this is a prerequisite for healthy functioning of democracy. The obligation is on the majority party that they should try to see that such an atmosphere which propagates an unconstitutional spirit should not develop in the Parliament and even outside the Parliament.

6. Moral order of the society – Democracy requires the existence of a moral order in the society. Politics should not be devoid of ethics. Moreover, ethics are important in every sphere of life as well as in every profession. If every person gets ethically right then it can lead to elimination of all forms of discrimination.

7. Public conscience - According to him public conscience means "conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer, and it means that everybody whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved." It is the obligation of the privileged to come to the aid of the underprivileged and help them wage a fight against the oppressive practices.

V. THE WAY FORWARD

Babasaheb's thoughts on democracy were ahead of his times and were adequately suited to the Indian conditions. In 1950, we adopted our

Constitution and pledged to constitute India into a sovereign, socialistic, secular and democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Whether we have been successful in achieving these ideals in letter and spirit would be a trying thing to answer but it can be said with certainty that there are still certain inherent evils plaguing the Indian polity. So, it can be safely said that the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar for the success of democracy are most significant and relevant to the Indian society in the present scenario.

He opposed the evils of the caste system and wanted its complete elimination from the Indian society. However, even today the deprived sections are not aware of their entitlements and are discriminated against in the society. The benefits meant for them either does not reach them or reach unto them when its too late. His expectation was that the administration should rise above the aspects of caste, creed, class and religion. The Constitution does guarantee various rights but many a times these are not respected and just remains on paper. Though, in present times there are conscientious citizens of our country who raise their voices against such oppression and discrimination and knock the doors of courts to seek redressal of these regressive activities.

The idea of 'associated living' is still missing from the Indian society. Many people give more importance to their own religion, caste and class and look down upon others. It is painful to see that even the educated youth of our society give more importance to caste and class considerations. The divisions in the society on

the basis of caste and religion has divided the society into parallel, self-contained communities that do not allow for conversation and negotiation necessary for a healthy democracy.

He stood firmly for a strong opposition but in today's times on various debatable issues we see that the opposition does not raise its voice and only those matters are raised or agitated which are seen as politically beneficial. It is very necessary for a healthy democracy that the policies of the ruling government are adequately debated and for this there needs to be a fearless, independent and a strong opposition.

Democracy pleads for the removal of a hereditary ruler or a monarch. Time has come that this notion is also adopted by political parties. There are many political parties where family lineage is given more importance than merit and only the family members remain at the helm of the affairs of these political parties. The political parties need to get rid of this hereditary system of ruling. It is high time that the political parties of our country adopt the concept of inter party democracy in letter and spirit.

Tyranny of majority is antithetical to democracy. This majority here can refer to various things; it can be the political party in majority, or the majority religion or the ideology of the majority of the people in the area. It is very essential for a healthy democracy that there is free flow of ideas and people voicing ideas opposing the majority should not be unnecessarily punished and prosecuted. The heinous acts of lynching which are being witnessed in recent times pose a serious threat to our democratic credentials.

VI. CONCLUSION

Today, the future of Indian democracy depends on the revival of Dr. Ambedkar's creative conception of democracy. This vision needs to be enlarged and updated in the light of recent situations. There is a need to take Babasaheb's intellectual legacy seriously. Though his vision of socialism and economic democracy is still a distant goal but our governments are working on this front. Our democracy has faced many challenges, the journey has not been smooth so far. But, we as a democratic nation have survived the worst of the situations. A variety of social movements flourish in our country and the representation of women in local bodies is gradually improving. We have made certain strides in enhancing the quality of our democracy. Even today there are various challenges, but till we are guided by the ideals and principles of our Founding Fathers, we as a nation can survive and our democracy can flourish like no other in the world. Proper implementation and observance of constitutional principles in true spirit can be the only solution to various challenges.

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