

AMBEDKAR'S CONTRIBUTIONS AND VISION TOWARDS DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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Abstract - There cannot be any discussion on Democracy in India without the study of the role and contributions of Ambedkar towards it. Equality and Liberty are two basic pillars of any Democratic System. Only with liberties a Democratic System cannot be inclusive. This was the basis of the understanding of Ambedkar. There has been a dearth of studies on the contributions of Ambedkar towards democracy in India. This paper attempts to analyse the role of the ideas and of the struggle of Dr. Ambedkar to make Democracy in India inclusive. The continuance of the caste system in India is a negation of social equality as well as of Democracy in India. Unless it is 'annihilated' Democracy cannot be successful and inclusive. The democratic space needs to be accommodative to the Dalits; otherwise they cannot be called as its stake-holders. So Ambedkar struggled throughout his life for the emancipation of Dalits so that they can contribute equally and meaningfully in the democratic process. He was a believer in the Parliamentary form of Democracy. He was convinced that Democracy has the potential in bringing radical socio-economic changes in the life of the marginalized peacefully. He had creative contributions in making Indian Constitution as one of the most Democratic ones in the world. But political democracy only cannot guarantee democracy. Without socio-economic democracy, the victims of inequalities will destroy the political structure created out of the constitution. He warned. His words have become more relevant than his times because of the monstrous inequalities created by the Neo-liberal paradigm of development.

Key Words- Democracy, Inclusive, Neo-liberalism, Caste, Dalit

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era, it is crucial for us to derive insights from Ambedkar's ideas and struggles more than at any other point in our history. This is vital for the enhancement and deepening of democracy in India and the revitalization of an already weakened democratic system. The significance of Ambedkar has grown, surpassing even his impact during his lifetime, underscoring the eminence of his ideas. He has evolved into an iconic figure in contemporary society, transcending caste and regional confines, exerting a more influential presence in various parts of India today.

Ambedkar, now evoked by individuals spanning the political spectrum, from left to right, liberals to conservatives, has become a potent force. However, the peril lies in attempts, including those by his ideological adversaries, to seize his legacy. Such endeavors pose a threat to Ambedkar's ideas, which were primarily forged through his unwavering struggle for the radical transformation and democratization of society. Portraying Ambedkar merely as a hero without delving into the ideas he ardently championed throughout his life is not only a moral but also an ideological disservice to his legacy.

The resonance of Ambedkar's ideas and his struggle has multiplied in today's contemporary times due to their relevance. Therefore, preserving Ambedkar and his ideas and preventing their exploitation by those who exploit them for political gain presents one of the greatest challenges for those who genuinely believe in him. The mission of Ambedkarites for the annihilation of caste remains unfinished, and achieving the coexistence of liberty, equality, and fraternity still seems distant. Ambedkar's vision of democracy as a means of effecting revolutionary changes peacefully holds significance in the Indian context. The question of democracy for whom finds its answers in Ambedkar's ideas and struggles, as his lifelong dedication aimed to make democracy inclusive in India.

1.1. Defining Democracy

Ambedkar viewed democracy as a dynamic system, subject to changes in both structure and objectives. His definition emphasized it as "a form and method of government, whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed" (Ambedkar: 2003:473). Ambedkar outlined several crucial conditions for democratic success.

Firstly, he stressed the necessity of eliminating "glaring inequalities." The presence of oppressive and suppressed classes can undermine democracy, as historical examples have shown that inequality can lead to the downfall of democratic systems. The second condition highlighted the importance of opposition for democratic success. Ambedkar saw democracy as a check on hereditary and autocratic rule, with a vigilant opposition crucial for holding rulers accountable in their exercise of power on a daily basis.

Another critical condition for a thriving democracy, according to Ambedkar, is equality in law and administration. Equal treatment in administration is crucial, as any deviation could jeopardize democracy and perpetuate discrimination. Constitutional morality, described as the flesh of the constitutional skeleton, constituted the fourth condition in Ambedkar's framework for democratic success. He highlighted the need to avoid misusing power to intimidate the opposition and advocated for the practice of constitutional morality to prevent harm to democracy.

Moreover, Ambedkar opposed the dominance of the majority over the minority in a democracy, emphasizing the importance of minorities feeling secure for democracy to thrive. He also identified additional conditions essential for the effective operation of democracy, including the presence of moral order in society and a strong public conscience. Without moral order, democracy faces the risk of collapse. Ambedkar defined public conscience as a moral compass that reacts to every injustice, irrespective of the victim, indicating that everyone should be willing to participate in rectifying injustices (Ambedkar: 2003:480).

1.2. Ambedkar's Views on Democracy

Ambedkar played a crucial and innovative role in shaping democracy in India. His approach was profoundly radical, seeking to create a place within the democratic system for the most marginalized, particularly the Dalits, in political, economic, and social aspects. Ambedkar's dual role as both a theorist and an activist, engaged in a persistent battle against Untouchability, gave him a unique historical and ideological position.

His examination of the caste system, approached from a sociological and anthropological perspective, preceded his crusade against inequality. Ambedkar underscored that equality and liberty are the fundamental pillars of any democratic society. Confronting pervasive caste-based disparities, he contended that democracy could not thrive solely on constitutional guarantees of liberty and equality. Ambedkar perceived democracy as transcending mere political structures, encompassing social governance and promoting harmonious coexistence among individuals.

For Ambedkar, democracy entailed more than just a political framework; it necessitated a culture of respect and solidarity in social interactions. He argued that political democracy could only flourish in a society where economic and social domains were infused with principles of fraternity and brotherhood. Ambedkar not only advocated for democracy but also practiced its principles. In the context of the oppressive caste system, he staunchly believed that democracy held no meaning for its victims, particularly the untouchables.

While other nationalist leaders prioritized the nation's independence, Ambedkar diverged by placing the caste question at the heart of his quest for justice. Despite limited scholarly attention to Ambedkar's democracy struggle during the Nationalist movement, he astutely analyzed India's social landscape and proposed remedies for democratic advancement. He did not compartmentalize social, political, and economic equality; instead, he deemed them indispensable for democratic prosperity.

Ambedkar's emphasis on the economic dimensions of democracy is often understated. In his reflections on India's forthcoming constitution in 1946, he underscored the necessity of provisions to actualize economic, social, and political justice. He advocated for the nationalization of industry and land, viewing it as imperative for achieving social and economic equity. Despite compromises prompted by lack of support in the constituent assembly, Ambedkar envisioned India as a capitalist nation with nominal adherence to socialist principles.

He acknowledged the radical nature of advocating for the nationalization of land and industry but deemed it crucial for ensuring the dignified existence of the impoverished untouchables and their access to socio-political and economic justice. For Ambedkar, social and economic equalities were prerequisites for attaining political equality in India. Poverty and hierarchical structures, including the caste system, would undermine democracy since political mechanisms were influenced by social realities. This conviction propelled him to assert that social and economic reforms must progress alongside political democratization.

1.3. Limits of Democracy

Ambedkar astutely analyzed the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy, which remain pertinent today. He argued that discontent with parliamentary democracy stems from its failure to guarantee the masses their rights to liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. He attributed this failure to both flawed ideology and flawed organization. Ambedkar identified the sanctification of the freedom of contract as a central issue, which, upheld in the name of liberty, disregarded economic inequalities and allowed the strong to exploit the weak. He emphasized that political democracy cannot thrive without social and economic democracy, as they are integral components of its foundation. Ambedkar critiqued parliamentary democracy for prioritizing liberty over equality, resulting in a proliferation of inequities. He characterized parliamentary democracy as a government of a hereditary ruling class over hereditary subjects, dominated by economic elites who wield political power. Ambedkar advocated for a reversal in the balance of power to democratize the political structure, particularly relevant in an era marked by pronounced inequalities under neoliberalism.

Ambedkar also indirectly addressed the alienation of labor, urging them to engage with radical texts like the Social Contract, Communist Manifesto, and Conditions of Labor for emancipation. Despite ideological alignment, communists and Ambedkar failed to form a united front due to various factors.

Ambedkar voiced concerns about the depoliticization of the working class and emphasized the necessity of capturing political power for meaningful change. He advocated for the organization of a Labor Party, advising laborers to distance themselves from communal or capitalist political parties. Ambedkar's progressive perspective remains relevant, highlighting the importance of labor's active participation in the political process for true democracy.

II. FREEDOM

He approached his efforts to improve the condition of the Dalit community with a philosophical mindset. Personally, he believed that there was no task in India more honorable than uplifting the scheduled castes. His perspective on freedom was both radical and inclusive. He highlighted the difference between the freedom used by the powerful to oppress the weak and the freedom of the weak to have the opportunity for full development. He expressed concern that if social freedom and mentality remained unchanged, and if the freedom granted by the Britishers was used to suppress the oppressed, there was little reason to fight for such freedom. Conversely, he argued that the cause he championed went beyond the specific class in focus.

In his view, the understanding of freedom surpassed national freedom and its limitations. Ambedkar's concept of freedom remains pertinent today, challenging the misunderstandings of those who believed that all citizens, including the Dalits, would automatically enjoy equal freedoms after the country gained independence. He was convinced that global salvation required the economic and social organization of the world and other societies to be based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar: 2003:256).

2.1 Hindu Villages and Democratic Space

Ambedkar delved into the spatial dynamics of Hindu villages, accurately observing the inequitable distribution of village space between caste Hindus and untouchables. He questioned why untouchables had been subjugated by Hindus for millennia, attributing it to the peculiar organization of Hindu villages. Typically, untouchable settlements were significantly smaller than the Hindu villages they were attached to and economically deprived, relying on the Hindu village for sustenance. Ambedkar argued that as long as this village system persisted, untouchables would remain socially and economically dependent, unable to break free from their inferior status. He advocated for separate settlements for untouchables, highlighting the need to dismantle the oppressive caste structure ingrained in the political and economic fabric of Hindu villages for the establishment of a truly democratic society. Ambedkar's

insights, rooted in sociology and economics, shed light on the origins of untouchables' inferiority complex and the hegemony of Hindu culture over Dalits, issues still relevant today as caste problems persist in rural areas. Despite reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), power dynamics in rural settings are often controlled by upper-caste Hindus, rendering democracy more symbolic than substantive. The unresolved land issue, crucial for empowering the predominantly Dalit landless population, has faded from neoliberal development discourses. Addressing land ownership, a remnant of feudalism, is imperative for dismantling feudal vestiges and fostering a truly inclusive democratic society—a message from Ambedkar that remains pertinent even after seven decades of India's status as the world's largest democracy, underscoring our failure to rectify this democratic deficit.

2.2 On Women

Regarding women and gender equality, Ambedkar held progressive views. He encouraged women from oppressed classes to actively participate in the struggle for emancipation. He advised against early marriage and large families, advocating for each married woman to assert her equality with her husband and refuse to be subjugated. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of increasing women's presence in conferences, meetings, and other activities, demonstrating his commitment to gendering the democratic space.

2.3 On Nazism

Ambedkar vehemently opposed Fascism and Nazism, denouncing them as barbaric, racial ideologies antithetical to democracy. He viewed the conflict as a battle between democracy and dictatorship, emphasizing the dire threat posed by Nazi racial arrogance. Ambedkar called upon all Indians to unite against Nazism, recognizing its danger not only to democracy worldwide but also to India's future, particularly due to its racial basis, which resonated with India's caste structure. He stressed the imperative of safeguarding democracy and its principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, underscoring that the survival of democracy was intertwined with the fate of humanity.

2.4 On Representation of Dalits

He redefined the notion of representation in India and actively campaigned for its democratization, particularly concerning Dalit representation. According to Ambedkar, no class should have the authority to govern another, especially the higher classes in India, which he argued behaved as an exclusive class with its own biases, detached from the aspirations of the masses. He believed that a candidate seeking to represent others should align with the aims, purposes, and motives of those they aspire to represent (Ambedkar: 1982:332).

Ambedkar strongly criticized the upper castes' social attitude in India toward the lower castes, pointing out their disdain and detachment. He argued that individuals considered touchable could not adequately represent untouchables, underscoring the significance of social divisions in Indian politics. Ambedkar's initial significant involvement in democracy entailed advocating for separate electorates for Dalits. He raised this issue before the Southborough Committee in 1919, contending that the existence and acceptance of untouchability by upper-caste Hindus made the representation of untouchables by touchables undemocratic.

Ambedkar viewed untouchables as socialized to endure their low status without complaint, drawing a parallel to slaves. He highlighted that untouchables were not even recognized as citizens, being denied fundamental rights such as personal liberty, security, and equality before the law. To address the interests of untouchables, Ambedkar asserted that only they could effectively represent themselves (Ambedkar: 1979:261).

According to Ambedkar, inclusive democracy in India required the representation of Dalits. He argued that religion alone should not determine minority status; rather, the real criterion should be social discrimination. Ambedkar proposed safeguards against communal majorities, introducing the concept of relative majority. He aimed to curb the dominance of communal majorities and advocated for relative majority to prevent the larger minority within minorities from becoming hegemonic. Ambedkar prioritized the more backward minorities among the minorities to achieve balanced representation and moderate the dominance of the majority.

Ambedkar's vision was both visionary and practical in ensuring democratic representation for all, although he had to compromise his positions due to the balance of forces during that period. He recognized that the most marginalized in Indian society, the untouchables, held the potential to powerfully democratize the political system. According to him, looking to the lower classes was essential for progress, and the reservation of seats for backward Hindu communities was crucial for national service, enriching parliamentary government (Ambedkar: 1982:345).

III. DEMOCRACY BEYOND STATE

Ambedkar consistently viewed democracy as extending beyond politics, believing that dismantling the unfair caste system required more than just state intervention. He believed society needed to embrace democratic values in everyday life, considering the elimination of caste a crucial step toward achieving a truly democratic society. While supporting parliamentary democracy to foster unity, he also acknowledged India's deep divisions, remaining hopeful about the constitution's power to bring about significant social and political change.

Ambedkar's perspective did not differentiate between political, economic, and social democracy. He lauded the directive principles advocating economic democracy, despite his unrealized vision of a socialist state with land and industry under national control. His adoption of Buddhism was more of a social protest against the rigid Hindu caste system, seeking a more equal identity.

As a firm believer in democracy, Ambedkar valued diverse opinions and believed in the strength of democracy lying in its ability to accommodate different views. He strongly criticized the caste system, viewing it as incompatible with democracy and deeply entrenched in Indian life. He challenged the idea that education alone could dissolve the caste system, arguing that educating those committed to preserving it might reinforce its existence. He stressed the importance of educating those wanting to dismantle the caste system, cautioning against solely enriching the wealthy or educating caste system supporters, as it would worsen societal divisions rather than alleviate poverty or strengthen democracy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Throughout his life, Ambedkar passionately advocated for democracy, dedicating himself to securing justice and fundamental rights for the most marginalized and oppressed groups in Indian society. His contributions to India's democratic ideals were unique and profound, portraying him as a visionary leader with practical strategies in his fight. Despite his unwavering commitment to his principles, Ambedkar was willing to compromise in the broader interest of democracy and the people.

Enduring numerous humiliations, Ambedkar used these experiences to refine his approach to caste issues, which was more radical and inclusive compared to contemporaries like Gandhi. In today's context, his relevance has increased as democratic spaces face challenges amid neo-liberal assaults, gaining recognition across various political ideologies.

However, Dalit political organizations in the country are currently fragmented. Ambedkar emphasized the need for a unified national political organization of Dalits during his significant address on July 18, 1942, at the All India Depressed Class Conference in Nagpur. He cautioned that democracy could not solely rely on the constitution; instead, the marginalized and deprived must actively strive for their rights and an inclusive democracy.

Ambedkar's ideas and struggles remain pertinent amidst wider democratic deficiencies within institutions and processes. His theory and struggle for democracy align without contradiction. He advocated for reservation in both public and private sectors, although compromises limited its implementation to the public sector.

Amidst the current neo-liberal assault, the public sector, where reservation exists, faces diminishment. Those opposing reservation should consider this new development. Dalit forces aligning with neo-liberal capitalist ideologies need to reconsider, linking the anti-neo-liberal struggle with the fight for social justice. Unity between Dalits and workers is crucial for a robust movement toward democratic and social justice.

In the face of neo-liberal capitalism encroaching on hard-won democratic spaces, mounting a united challenge becomes imperative. Issues surrounding caste, land, employment, and resource accessibility remain pivotal for inclusive and democratic development. Ambedkar's legacy lies in his genuine effort to create a better world, not only for Dalits but also as a crucial step toward human equality, democratization, and societal liberation from stagnation and degradation.

Reviving Ambedkar for the current struggle is essential, moving beyond regarding him as a static figure. He emphasized that without the annihilation of caste, there can be no revolution in India, and conversely, without a revolution, caste cannot be eradicated. The most affected by the neo-liberal onslaught are the marginalized, forming the cornerstone of any democratic resistance against it. A democratic society should allow individuals to utilize their capabilities fully, and any form of stratification deliberately denies democracy (Ambedkar: 2003:521).

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