

Dr. Ambedkar and the Future of Indian Democracy

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The future of Indian democracy depends a great deal on a revival of Dr. Ambedkar's visionary conception of democracy. This vision also needs to be enlarged and updated in the light of recent experience.

Revolutionary Democracy

Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy was closely related to his ideal of a "good society". He did not leave room for any ambiguity regarding the nature of this ideal. On many occasions, he stated that he envisaged a good society as one based on "liberty, equality and fraternity". Democracy, as he saw it, was both the end and the means of this ideal. It was the end because he ultimately considered democracy as coterminous with the realisation of liberty, equality and fraternity. At the same time, democracy was also the means through which this ideal was to be attained.

Dr. Ambedkar's notion of "democratic government" went back to the fundamental idea of "government of the people, by the people and for the people". But "democracy" meant much more to him than democratic government. It was a way of life: "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 fellowmen."

Another crucial feature of Dr. Ambedkar's conception of democracy is that it was geared to social transformation and human progress. Conservative notions of democracy, such as the idea that it is mainly a device to prevent bad people from seizing power, did not satisfy him. In one of the most inspiring 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".

For this to happen, it was essential to link political democracy with economic and social democracy. Indeed, Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy was inseparable from his commitment to socialism. Sometimes he referred to this combined ideal as "social democracy", in a much wider sense than that in which the term is understood today. The neglect of economic democracy was, in his view, one of the chief causes of "the failure of democracy in Western Europe". As he put it: "The second wrong ideology that has vitiated parliamentary democracy is the failure to realize that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social or economic democracy... 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." In this and other respects, his analysis of the fate of democracy in Western Europe largely applies to the Indian situation today.

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Rationality and Liberation

Dr. Ambedkar's passion for democracy was closely related to his commitment to rationality and the scientific outlook. At an obvious level, rationality is necessary for democratic government since public debate (an essential aspect of democratic practice) is impossible in the absence of a shared adherence to common sense, logical argument and critical enquiry. Rational thinking is even more relevant if we adopt Dr. Ambedkar's broad view of democracy as a state of "liberty, equality and fraternity". Indeed, rationality is conducive if not indispensable to the realisation of these ideals. A person who is not free 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 a scientific outlook are essential.

There is also a close affinity between rationality and equality. For one thing, propaganda and manipulation are common tools of subjugation. The caste system, for instance, has been propped over the centuries by an elaborate edifice of unscientific dogmas. The scientific outlook is essential to liberate and protect oneself from ideological manipulation. For another, the scientific spirit has a strong anti-authoritarian dimension. Authority rests on the notion that one person's view or wish counts more than another's. In scientific argument, this is not the case. What counts is the coherence of the argument and the quality of the evidence. In that sense, the scientific outlook is a protection against the arbitrary exercise of power.

There is a view that reason and science are "western" notions, alien to the people of India, who have their own "modes of knowledge". This view is bound to astonish anyone who has cared to read the Buddha's teachings. Many centuries before Descartes, Buddha urged his followers to use their reason and not to believe anything without proof. In "Buddha or Karl Marx", one of his last speeches, Dr. Ambedkar includes the following in his summary of the essential teachings of the Buddha: "Everyone has a right to learn. Learning is as necessary for man to live as food is... Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination."

This is not to deny that there are other modes of knowledge than rational argument and scientific discourse. That is the case not only in India but all over the world. For instance, no amount of rational argument can convey what a jasmine flower smells like. Direct experience is indispensable. Similarly, if you hold the hand of an Iraqi child who has been wounded by American bombs, you will learn something about the nature of this war that no amount of scientific information on "collateral damage" can convey. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Dr. Ambedkar gives a fine account of the distinction between *vidya* (knowledge) and *prajna* (insight). In the step from *vidya* to *prajna*, non-scientific modes of learning often play an important role. But this does not detract from the overarching importance of rationality in individual enlightenment and social living.

One reason for bringing this up is that recent threats to Indian democracy often involve a concerted attack on rationality and the scientific spirit. I am thinking particularly of the Hindutva movement. As various scholars have noted, this movement can be interpreted as a sort of "revolt of the higher castes": an attempt to reassert the traditional authority of the upper castes, threatened as it is by the expansion of political democracy in independent India. This reassertion of Brahminical authority in the garb of "Hindu unity" involves a suppression of rational thinking and critical enquiry. That is the real significance of the seemingly

“irrational” statements and actions we are witnessing day after day from political leaders of the saffron variety: the call for teaching astrology in universities, the substitution of myths for history, the search for Lord Ram’s “authentic” birthplace, the handover of research institutions to certified obscurantists, among other recent examples. I doubt that Mr. Murli Manohar Joshi really cares for the inclusion of astrology in the university curriculum, but what he has good reason to care for is the nurturing of a spirit of submission to Brahminical obscurantism. Resisting this and other attacks on rationality is an important requirement of the defence of democracy in India today.

Morality and Social Order

One of the most interesting features of Dr. Ambedkar’s political philosophy is his stress on the ethical dimension of democracy, or what he called “morality”. One aspect of this is the importance of “constitutional morality”, that is, of abiding by the spirit of the constitution and not just its legal provisions. Going beyond this, Dr. Ambedkar felt that “morality”, in the sense of social ethics, was indispensable for the realisation of liberty and equality. In the absence of morality, there were only two alternatives: anarchy or the police.

Dr. Ambedkar’s emphasis on morality was well integrated with his commitment to rationality and the scientific spirit. In particular, he considered that morality was always subject to rational scrutiny. Further, his notion of morality was quite close to what might be called “social rationality”.¹

A useful illustration of the importance of social rationality is the role of trust in social life. As I see it, there are three broad types of trust, and at the risk of simplifying, we can say that they are associated with irrationality, individual rationality, and social rationality, respectively. The first type is blind trust. Leaving an examination room after asking the students to “kindly abstain from cheating” would be blind trust. The example is perhaps a little far-fetched, but real-life examples of blind trust are not difficult to produce. Rasputin exploited it, with the consequences that we know.

The second type may be called calculated trust. This is the kind of trust that game theorists talk about: someone (say X) “trusts” someone else (say Y) to do something because X speculates that Y knows that it is in his or her own interest to do it. For instance, in India drivers trust other drivers to drive on the left because everyone knows that anyone who drives on the right is likely to have a crash. Like blind trust, this kind of “trust” is pervasive in the real world, but it does not take us very far.²

The third type of trust is a sort of considered *habit of thought*, somewhere in between blind trust and calculated trust. It can be seen as an inclination *not* to “calculate” like a game theorist in certain situations. Instead, we “trust” the other person to do a certain thing because of a general perception of the fact that without this kind of trust social life would be impossible. For instance, the habit of punctuality can be seen as involving this kind of trust. It is an example of “social rationality”. This kind of trust can be of great importance for the flourishing of social life and democratic politics, and the same applies to social rationality in general.

¹ On the latter, see particularly Anatol Rapoport (1960, 1995) and Amartya Sen (1985).

² In the novel *The Alchemist*, when one of the characters discovers that his companion keeps a loaded gun in her handbag and asks why she does that, she replies – “it helps me to trust people”.

Dr. Ambedkar's emphasis on morality was closely linked to this recognition of the importance of social rationality. The main difference is that morality has a strong ethical component, which social rationality may or may not have. To continue with the example of punctuality, we could decide to be punctual based on a habit of social rationality, or we could be punctual because we feel that making other people wait is unethical. For Dr. Ambedkar, the ethical dimension is paramount.

In fact, one of Dr. Ambedkar's many criticisms of caste system was that it undermines social rationality and morality. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he thundered: "The effects 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." He ultimately identified morality with "fraternity" - "a sentiment which leads an individual to identify himself with the good of others".

Dr. Ambedkar's attraction to Buddhism has to be seen in the light of his twin commitment to morality and reason. Not only did he regard Buddha's "Dhamma" as compatible with (indeed committed to) reason, he also saw it as an expression of the ideal of "liberty, equality and fraternity". At one point he even stated that this ideal of his derived directly "from the teachings of my master, the Buddha". Towards the end of his life, he even seems to have nurtured the hope that the Dhamma would become a universal code of social ethics.

In retrospect, Dr. Ambedkar's vision of the Dhamma as a universal code of ethics was perhaps a little naïve. Personally, I doubt that there will ever be a universal code of ethics. Diversity, including the diversity of ethical codes, is an intrinsic and welcome feature of social living. I would even suggest that Dr. Ambedkar's devotion to the Buddha's teachings occasionally jarred with his commitment to critical enquiry and independence of mind. Having said this, his 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 (as in the "median voter" model and other theories that pass for "political economy" today), it will never succeed in bringing about liberty, equality and fraternity. In particular, it will never do justice to minority interests.

To illustrate the point, consider the problem of urban destitution in India – the plight of wandering beggars, street children, leprosy patients, the homeless, and others. These people constitute a small minority and they have no political power whatsoever (most of them do not even vote). Nor are they likely to have any in the foreseeable future. This is the main reason why the problem remains almost entirely unaddressed. If this problem is to come within the ambit of democratic politics (and there are signs that this is beginning to happen), it can only be on the basis of ethical concern. This illustration pertains to a relatively confined aspect of India's social problems, but the potential reach of ethical concerns in democratic politics is very wide. If social ethics acquire a central role in democratic politics, a new world may come into view.

Democracy and Socialism

As mentioned earlier, Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy encompassed "political, social and economic democracy". As he saw it, political democracy alone could not be

expected to go very far, if glaring economic and social inequalities remained. A well-known expression of this concern is his parting speech to the Constituent Assembly: “On the 26th 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... How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril.”

Dr. Ambedkar’s diagnosis raised the question of how the “contradiction” was to be removed. Since he had distanced himself in the same speech from extra-constitutional methods (including not only violence but also “satyagraha”), the answer presumably lied in democratic practice. However, Dr. Ambedkar himself warned that the whole process of democratic practice in an unequal society was vulnerable to being derailed by vested interests. There is a hint of a chicken-and-egg problem here: what comes first, democracy or socialism?

At one stage, it seems that Ambedkar envisaged that socialism would come first, and set the stage for democracy. His hope, at that time, was that “state socialism” would be enshrined in the Indian constitution. A socialist constitution, as he saw it, was the key to reconciling democracy and socialism. Without constitutional protection for socialist principles such as state ownership of land and key industries, socialism in a democratic society was likely to be derailed by vested interests. Dr. Ambedkar’s blueprint for a socialist constitution was presented in *States and Minorities*, an early memorandum submitted to the Constituent Assembly.

In retrospect, this memorandum looks a little simplistic in some important respects. For instance, one would hesitate to advocate “collective farming” with the same confidence today, in the light of recent evidence. However, this does not detract from the importance of the larger idea of a socialist constitution, helping to reconcile socialism with democracy. And some aspects of Ambedkar’s blueprint have not lost their relevance.

Whatever its merits, Dr. Ambedkar’s proposal for a socialist constitution was something of a political non-starter. It had little chance of being accepted by the Constituent Assembly, where privileged interests were well represented. However, Dr. Ambedkar did not abandon the idea of constitutional safeguards for socialist ideals and economic democracy. Ultimately, these were embodied in the “Directive Principles” of the Indian constitution, which deal with a wide range of economic and social rights. The Directive Principles are indeed far-reaching, if one takes them seriously:

“In my judgment, the directive principles have a great value, for they lay down that our ideal is economic democracy... [Our] object in framing this Constitution is really twofold: (1) to lay down the form of political democracy, and (2) to lay down that our ideal is economic democracy and also to prescribe that every Government... shall strive to bring about economic democracy.”

As it turned out, however, the Directive Principles were not taken seriously in independent India. They were not enforceable in a court of law, and nor did electoral politics succeed in holding the state accountable to their realisation, as Dr. Ambedkar had envisaged. We are left with a half-baked democracy, where reasonably sound democratic institutions coexist with social conditions that threaten to make parliamentary democracy “a name and a

farce”. Contrary to Dr. Ambedkar’s expectations, democracy in independent India has neither flourished nor perished. Instead, it has limped along, burdened by the “contradiction” he had identified, which is still with us today.

The Future of Indian Democracy

Where does this leave us, as far the future of Indian democracy is concerned? On the face of it, there is little reason for optimism. Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of democracy and socialism has failed to materialise. Political democracy has survived, but economic democracy remains a distant goal, and therefore, democracy remains incomplete and lopsided. In fact, even political democracy is not in very good health. Further, Indian democracy is confronting new challenges, including the Hindutva movement, growing economic inequality, the rise of militarism, and the brazen misuse of power by political parties (including those purporting to represent the underprivileged).

Having said this, there are also counter-trends, in the form of a growth of democratic space and democratic spirit. A startling variety of social movements have flourished in India, and creative initiatives keep expanding the boundaries of political democracy year after year. Many new tools of democratic practice have emerged, unforeseen by Dr. Ambedkar: the right to information, the panchayati raj amendments, modern communication technology, transnational cooperation, to name a few. The quality of Indian democracy is also gradually enhanced by a better representation of women in politics, wider opportunities for people’s involvement in local governance, and the spread of education among disadvantaged sections of the society. The most powerful and promising trend is the growing participation of the underprivileged in democratic processes. This, I believe, is the wave of the future.

As discussed earlier, Dr. Ambedkar had a visionary conception of democracy, which needs to be “rediscovered” today. But going beyond that, we must also enlarge this vision in the light of recent developments. While Dr. Ambedkar was far ahead of his time in stressing the link between political and economic democracy, perhaps he failed to anticipate the full possibilities of political democracy itself. He thought that in the absence of economic democracy, ordinary people would be powerless. Also, he thought of political democracy mainly in terms of electoral and parliamentary processes. In both respects, his assessment was highly relevant at that time. Today, however, we are constantly discovering new forms of democratic practice, in which people are often able to participate even if economic democracy is nowhere near being realised.

This ability to participate arises from the fact that economic privilege is not the only basis of advantage in democratic politics. Money power certainly helps, but this advantage is not always decisive. Much depends also on organisational activism, the weight of numbers, the strength of arguments, the force of public opinion, the use of communication skills, and other sources of bargaining power. Aside from bargaining power, social ethics can also come into play in a democracy where there is room for what Dr. Ambedkar called “morality”.

None of this detracts from the importance of striving for economic democracy. But the fact that this goal has proved more elusive than Dr. Ambedkar anticipated should not prevent us from pursuing other “revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people”. The abolition of caste inequalities, for instance, is a perfectly reasonable goal of democratic practice today. So are gender equality, peace in Kashmir, the eradication of

corruption, universal education, world disarmament, and the end of hunger, among other revolutionary changes that we might aspire to.

It is also worth noting that economic democracy itself may not be as distant as we think. Indeed, it is an interesting paradox of contemporary politics that even as economic power has become more concentrated, it also looks more fragile. That is one lesson from the recent collapse of Enron, the defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the WTO debacle, and the growing sheepishness of the Bretton Woods institutions. What looks “politically infeasible” at one point of time often turns out to be within reach much sooner than expected.

In practical terms, the best course of action may be to revive the Directive Principles of the Constitution, and to reassert that these principles are “fundamental in the governance of the country” (Article 37). Indeed, in spite of much official hostility to these principles today, there are unprecedented opportunities for asserting the economic and social rights discussed in the constitution - the right to education, the right to information, the right to food, the right to work, and the right to equality, among others. Dr. Ambedkar’s advice to “educate, organise and agitate” is more relevant than ever.

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