

Dr Ambedkar's Philosophy on Democracy and his Dissent: An Analytical Study of Ambedkar's Socio-Political Ideas

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Abstract

Dr. Ambedkar was one of the greatest builders of modern India. His contribution to the evolution of socio-political and constitutional thought has been quite remarkable. He has been regarded as 'Father of the Indian Constitution'. He was a nationalist, democrat and above all a humanist. Throughout his life, he fought for the rights of oppressed sections of the society. He had a vision of an egalitarian society based on the notion of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. His dream of an egalitarian society remained unfulfilled even today in the twenty first century. Indian society is still being crippled by caste system, inequality, religious prejudices and social injustice which in turn obstructing the path of Indian Democracy. This paper attempts to present Dr. Ambedkar's view on Democracy and dissent expressed by him regarding some of the aspects of Indian Democracy. The objective of this paper is to analyze views of Dr Ambedkar on Indian Democracy in the context of contemporary scenario. This paper also seeks to explore an answer to the question that how far India succeeded in achieving democracy visualized by Ambedkar.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Inequality, Caste System, Constitutional morality, Minorities

Introduction

Dr. Ambedkar was born at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh on 14 April 1891. He was an untouchable by caste. By dint of his hard work, he received higher education from London and United States. Since his childhood, Dr. Ambedkar suffered discrimination, humiliation and social segregation from the members of the upper sections of the society. He had faced lot of hardships and inhuman treatment which had a deep imprint on his mind. On account of all these hardships, he made up his mind to fight against injustice and inequality. He worked for the uplift of the oppressed sections and tried to improve their political, economic and social condition. Dr Ambedkar was a man with mission. His aim was to achieve reconstruction of Indian society and polity. He worked incessantly to fulfil his goal since colonial period. He wanted to achieve his goals within democratic limits and was not interested in launching any bloody revolution. He had a vision to establish true democracy in India. Dr. Ambedkar had a firm belief in democracy but he gave primary importance to social democracy. Dr. Ambedkar expressed his thoughts and perception on democracy through his writings and speeches. This paper aims to evaluate concept of democracy envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar. The objective of this paper is to evaluate contribution of Dr. Ambedkar to political and social thought in the context of its relevance in present scenario.

Dr. Ambedkar' perception on Democracy

It is imperative to discuss meaning of democracy before examining Ambedkar's perception. However, the word democracy is derived from Greek word demos means 'rule of the people'. The fundamental idea of this form of government comes from the ancient Greece. Various scholars and philosophers have interpreted it differently. The most famous definition of democracy was of Abraham Lincoln-“A Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” But I would focus on Ambedkar's ideas of democracy.

According to Ambedkar definition of democracy, “A form and a method of Government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed.”¹ 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 that there is democracy. That is the real test. It is perhaps the severest test.”² According to him, democracy was not a form of government but a form of social organisation.³ He says, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen.⁴ According to Ambedkar democracy is the way of life. He remarks that there is nothing eternal: ‘that everything is changing, that change is the law of life for individuals as well as for society.’⁵ He firmly believed that for the success of democracy ideal society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity is required. Ambedkar believed that politics is nothing, if not realistic. He says that the political structure rests on the social structure; indeed, the social structure may modify the political structure in its working, may nullify it, and may even make a mockery of it.⁶ Ambedkar wanted to remove inequality from Indian society. Our Indian society is based on Varna- Caste system which according to Ambedkar was the biggest hurdle on the path of democracy. For a successful functioning of democracy, it is important to remove inequalities from our social structure. Ambedkar's main goal was to establish social democracy besides political democracy. He was very clear in his mind that it is extremely difficult to achieve political progress without reconstruction of Indian society. He regarded that the roots of the democracy were to be found in social relationship, in terms of associated life between the people who formed the society.⁷ According to Ambedkar, “the purpose of the modern democracy is not so much to put a curb on an autocratic King but to bring about the welfare of the people.”⁸

India attained independence in 1947. We succeeded in achieving political democracy which means political equality that is “one man one vote”. According to Ambedkar political democracy rests on four premises: (1) the individual is an end in itself; (2) the individual has certain inalienable rights which must be guaranteed to him by the Constitution; (3) the individual shall not be required to relinquish any of his constitutional rights as a condition precedent to the receipt of a privilege; (4) the state shall not delegate powers to private persons to govern others.⁹ Ambedkar had given special significance to political rights of an individual. He wanted political rights for an individual in order to save them from the oppression of the state. He wants that state should provide guarantee of political rights to all its citizens.

But socio-economic inequality is the biggest handicap for our democratic set up. Ambedkar has identified certain conditions necessary for an effective functioning of democracy. One of the first conditions is that there must be no glaring inequalities in the society. There must not be an oppressed class. There must not be a suppressed

class. There must not be a class which has got all the privileges and a class which has got all the burdens to carry. Such a thing, such a division, such an organization of a society has within itself the germs of a bloody revolution, and perhaps it would be impossible for the democracy to cure them. The second condition according to Ambedkar which is required for working of democracy is the existence of opposition. For him it is important to have an opposition as it means that the government is always on the anvil. The Government must justify every act that it does to those of the people who do not belong to its party. Third condition precedent for the success of democracy and that is equality in law and administration. He emphasised here not on equality before law but rather equality of treatment in administration. He wanted to remove chaos and injustice from administration for its effective functioning. There shall not be any interference from the Government in administration. Dr. Ambedkar says that the fourth condition for the successful working of democracy is the observance of constitutional morality. In the name of democracy there must be no tyranny of the majority over the minority. The minority must always feel safe that although the majority is carrying on the Government, the minority is not being hurt. Another condition which is precedent for democracy according to Ambedkar is 'public conscience'. Public conscience means conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer; it means that everybody whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved.¹⁰ Ambedkar firmly believed that public conscience is important for the purpose of getting rid of injustice. Dr Ambedkar said that all these conditions are very much required for democracy to flourish. He reminded people time and again that democracy is not a plant which grows everywhere. It requires suitable environment of ideal society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Ambedkar suggested certain devices essential to maintain democracy: (1) constitutional methods: (2) not to lay liberties at the feet of great man: (3) make a political democracy a social democracy.¹¹ Thus in order to preserve democracy it is essential to adopt these methods.

Dr. Ambedkar's dissent with some aspects of Indian democracy

Dr. Ambedkar had expressed dissent regarding some of the aspects of Indian democracy. Dr Ambedkar raised his voice against unequal social structure prevalent in Indian society. He had provided a strong criticism of unequal social hierarchical order of Indian society. According to him, Indian society does not consist of individuals. It consists of an innumerable collection of castes. The existence of Caste System is a standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy. Indian social structure is based on "Graded inequality". Castes are not equal in status. It is an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt. This feature of the caste system has most pernicious consequences. It destroys willing and helpful co-operation.¹² In Ambedkar's opinion, anti-social spirit of caste makes common activity and associated living impossible, as various castes have an innate tendency to develop their own interests and do injustice to others. Caste distinctions based on birth or on occupation provide a breeding ground for mutual distrust and animosity. Caste has killed Public spirit and destroyed the sense of public charity.¹³

According to Ambedkar, Indian society is so imbedded in the Caste System that everything is organized on the basis of caste. Enter Indian society and you can see Caste in its glaring form. An Indian cannot eat or marry with an Indian simply because he or she does not belong to his or her Caste. An Indian cannot touch an Indian because he or she does not belong to his or her Caste.¹⁴ In his conception of democracy there should not be any class structure in society, because “in a class structure there is on the one hand tyranny, vanity, pride, arrogance, greed, selfishness, and on the other hand insecurity, poverty, degradation, loss of liberty, self-reliance, independence, dignity and self-respect.”¹⁵ He remarked: “A democratic society must assure a life of leisure and culture to each one of its citizens.”¹⁶ Ambedkar was against any form of discrimination. He firmly believed that each and every section of the society should have equal rights politically and equal share socially and economically. He regarded that the democratic principles of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness were essentials in human life. He gave prime importance to human rights.¹⁷

Ambedkar in his final address to the Constituent Assembly stated, “The important thing we must do is not to be content with mere political democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. Social democracy means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These three principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of these is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty. 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. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one value. In our social and economic, 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? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up”¹⁸

According to Ambedkar, Social unity and equality in society are the two most essential prerequisite for the success of democracy in India, without it democracy would perish. It is very important to have social and economic democracy because society could be more oppressive than government. “Most people do not realise that society can practice tyranny and oppression against an individual in a far greater degree than a government can. The means and scope that are open to society for oppression are more extensive than those that are open to government; also they are far more effective.”¹⁹ Ambedkar wanted to abolish Caste system but he could not do so. Indian society has still been suffering from rigid caste system. Indian society has many biases and prejudices attached to caste system. We have not yet been able to eradicate discrimination, inequality, caste and regions based prejudices from our

society. Concept of inter-caste marriages is still not opened up. In many regions in India oppressed sections of the society suffered from untouchability and caste prejudices. They suffered social exclusion, discrimination and oppression from members of other castes. They have not yet been given due respect and basic rights in the society. People have more loyalty towards their community. People in our society have still been following caste norms and social segregation in a rigid manner and Indian society is being paralysed by it.

There have been millions of people in India who believed in these caste and religious norms, community and regional biases in the democratic process also. While voting they choose their candidates on the basis of caste, religion, region and community. Dr .Ambedkar has raised this issue in 1956 when he delivered his speech on Voice of America. “How does an Indian Vote in an election? He votes for a candidate who belongs to his own caste and no other”.²⁰In the context of contemporary scenario, Caste system has been posing greatest challenge to our democracy. It has its consequences in religious, cultural, social and political sphere. Caste politics and prejudices have been ruining our democratic set up. Caste has been a dominant factor in political, socio-cultural scenario of our country. We have not been able to overcome these obstructions in our democracy.

There is no doubt about the fact that in the present context the phenomenon of untouchability has been minimized up to certain extent but it is still prevalent in different parts of the country. Though it has been abolished by the Constitution and declared illegal by the article 17 of the constitution but Untouchability has not yet become the thing of the past. Historically, political rights and equal social status had been denied to untouchables or so-called Dalits. In the present context, their situation has not been improved much. In both rural and urban areas, they continue to live in poverty and were deprived of equal social, economic and political rights. Millions of oppressed sections of the society have been suffering from atrocities, humiliation, discrimination and social ostracism.

Dr. Ambedkar had given special place to existence of Opposition. Ambedkar had another dissent regarding functioning of opposition in Indian democracy. He considered it as a condition precedent for a democracy and he raised this issue that in Indian democracy opposition did not get its due place. He argued that unfortunately, in our country all our newspapers, for one reason or other, have given far more publicity to the Government than to the opposition, I believe it is the revenue from advertisements, because you cannot get any revenue from the government and you find columns after columns of speeches reeled out by members of the ruling party in the daily newspapers, and the speeches made by the opposition are probably put somewhere on the last page in the last column.²¹ He further says that in England not only is the Opposition recognised, but the leader of Opposition is paid with a salary by the Government in order to run the opposition. In the same way, you will find that in Canada, the leader of the Opposition gets a salary in the way as a Prime Minister does, because in both these countries democracy feels that there must be someone to show whether the Government is going wrong. And this must be done incessantly and perpetually and that is why they do not mind spending money on the leader of the Opposition.²² According to Dr. Ambedkar in a democratic set up there shall be a two party system- one in power and another in opposition. In the present scenario, it is essential to make opposition stronger in Indian democracy. Opposition should be strong enough to provide an effective criticism of the Government.

Ambedkar had dissent with inequality in administration. He was in favour of equal treatment in administration. He raised objections to inequality in administration. He wanted that Party in power should not influence and interfere in the administration. He argues if there will be discrimination in the administration then it would result into chaos and injustice. According to Ambedkar ‘What happens when a man goes to a particular officer or to the Minister with an application for licence in trading in a particular commodity. I do not know, it is quite possible again that probably the Minister may first look at his hat. What sort of a coloured hat he is wearing? If he is wearing a hat which appeals to him and it assures him that he is a Party man and another man goes with another sort of dress or belonging to another Party; and in making his decision the licence is given to the first and refused to the second, although both of them on merits are equally qualified to have that licence, then obviously this is a discrimination in administration and there is no equity.’²³

He further says that, ‘The sort of a thing which used to happen in the United States which is called a “Spoil System”, that is to say, when one Party came in office, it removed all the employees that were employed by their predecessors including even the clerks and the peons and they filled their vacancies by those gentlemen who helped the new Party to go in power. The United States as a matter of fact, had no administration worth speaking of for a number of years. Subsequently, they themselves realized that this was not helpful to democracy. They abolished this “Spoil System”. In England, in order that administration should remain pure, impartial, away from politics and policy, they have made a distinction between what is called political offices and civil offices. The civil service is permanent. It serves all the parties, whichever is in office and carries out the administration without any kind of interference from the minister. Ambedkar said that this is very fundamental and I am afraid we had already departed from that and may completely abnegate and abolish the thing we have had so far during colonial period.’²⁴ He said that such a thing at any rate in this country to do would be quite impossible. For any officer to say something which is contrary to the wishes of the Minister is, to my mind, utterly impossible.

Ambedkar was against discrimination and interference in administration. It is one of the important conditions for the successful functioning of democracy. In the contemporary scenario Indian democracy has failed to a larger extent in maintaining equity in administration. Political leaders have been using their power in most of the Government offices. Political manipulation and power game is being used as a strategy in our democracy. Whenever new government comes, it tries to bring those officers to important posts that would help the new government in power to function easily and as per their agenda. They try to replace those officers who had been appointed by their predecessors. In all the Government offices this power politics and political manipulation has been a common practice. The party in power tries to keep power in its own hands. The party whosoever comes into power interferes in the decision-making beyond democratic provisions. It is one of the biggest challenges to our democracy.

Ambedkar had dissent regarding oppression of minority by majority. “There shall not be tyranny of majority over minority. The minority must always feel safe and secured. There shall not be any fear amongst minority on account of rule of majority. According to Ambedkar what happens is that these minorities develop contempt for Parliamentary people, and develop a revolutionary spirit something unconstitutional. It is therefore necessary that when democracy is working, the majority on which it is based must not act in a tyrannical manner”.²⁵ He further says

that for smooth functioning of democracy moral order is required in society. It is imperative to have constitutional morality. It has been mentioned in our constitution that there shall not be any discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, creed, sex, religion etc. In fact article one and two of United Nation declaration on 10 December, 1948, states “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that human rights protected in U.N.D.R belong to everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind such as colour, race, religion, language, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status”. There has been violation of these obligations in our country. Millions of oppressed sections of the society or so-called minorities have been suffering from discrimination, degradation and violence. Our democratic system failed to provide protection of human rights at large. So how can India claim to a big democracy where minorities being the citizens are not enjoying liberty and equality?

Dr. Ambedkar in his speech delivered at Poona district Law Library Pune on 22 December 1952, “Democracy requires public conscience. Because there is no ‘public conscience’, myself and my India is the only world within which I am bound. If this sort of things happens, the minority which is suffering from injustice gets no help from others for the purpose of getting rid of this injustice. It again develops a revolutionary mentality which puts democracy in danger.²⁶It is significant to raise voice against injustice. Though in the present context ‘public conscience’ has developed up to certain extent as many people have started raising their voice against injustice but millions of Indians are still being suffered from injustice and violence.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to critically examine the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar on Democracy in the context of contemporary scenario. This study has also been an attempt to provide an understanding of dissent articulated by him regarding some of the aspects of Indian democracy. Dr. Ambedkar was the undisputed leader of the oppressed sections of the society. Dr. Ambedkar’s major contribution to political thought was making social democracy an essential prerequisite for successful functioning of political democracy. He emphasised on the importance of social democracy which means attaining equality at social level. India attained independence and politically became a democratic state but Dr. Ambedkar gave more importance to society than to state. Dr. Ambedkar had a firm belief that liberty, equality and fraternity are indispensable for full blossom of the personality of every person-socially, intellectually and politically. According to him democracy should offer every individual social equality, economic justice and political liberty. It is clear that Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy revolves around the concept of justice and social equality. He declared it time and again that unless social democracy is achieved, survival of political democracy would be in danger.

Dr. Ambedkar had dissent regarding lack of equality in Indian society. However, in the contemporary scenario Indian society has not yet been able to fulfil Dr. Ambedkar’s dream of equality. Indian society has not been able to achieve goals set by Dr. Ambedkar. The Indian society has still been caste ridden and suffering from social exclusion, untouchability, regionalism, and community prejudices which have been posing hindrance to our democracy. Dr. Ambedkar had expressed dissent with some of the aspects of political democracy. Dr. Ambedkar said that it is essential to have an opposition in order to keep a watch over executive. We have an opposition but for an efficient working of democracy, we need to make it stronger. He had

dissent with the practice of inequality in administration. In the present context, Indian democracy has not been able to achieve equality and non-interference in the administration. Party politics and political manipulation are paralysing our administration and in turn hampering the growth of our democracy. Last but not the least; Dr. Ambedkar was a messiah of oppressed sections. He had dissent regarding deprived and segregated status of oppressed sections. During colonial period he fought for their rights. He was against tyranny of majority over minorities. In present scenario, millions of Dalits have been facing social exclusion and inhuman treatment. On the basis of Census report 2011, I have attempted to present the status of crime against Dalits. The year 2011 has witnessed an increase in crime against the Schedule Cates as 33,594 cases were reported in the year 2010 have increased to 33,719 cases in the year 2011. They have been continued to be deprived of education, basic human rights, and opportunities in various fields.

Dr. Ambedkar said that “we must strive to maintain the basis of democratic civilization. If democracy lives, we are sure to reap the fruits of it. If democracy dies, it will be our doom.”²⁷ To conclude I can say that there have been many challenges before our democracy which we have to overcome. Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of an egalitarian society, social justice and true democracy has not yet been fulfilled completely. For the growth of our democracy, it is necessary to achieve goals visualized by Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy on Democracy encompassed the interest of all the sections of the society. It is crucial to remove all the limitations which have been hampering the growth of democracy envisioned by Dr. Ambedkar.

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