

Social and Economic Democracy and Removal of Untouchability

Dr. Ajeet Jaiswal¹

¹ DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, PONDICHERRY UNIVERSITY,

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Abstract

Ambedkar viewed democracy as an instrument of bringing about change peacefully. Democracy does not merely mean rule by the majority or government by the representatives of the people. This is a formalistic and limited notion of democracy. Like many other national leaders Ambedkar had complete faith in democracy. Ambedkar made ceaseless efforts for the removal of untouchability and the material progress of untouchables. From 1924 onwards, he led the movement of untouchables till the end of his life. He firmly believed that the progress of the nation could not be realized without first removing untouchability. Ambedkar held the view that the removal of untouchability was linked to the abolition of the caste system and that it could be only by discarding the religious notions from the basis of the caste system. Therefore, in the course of his analysis of the caste system, he examined the Hindu religious philosophy and criticized it. He did this boldly, often facing strong resentment from the orthodox Hindus. This paper attempts to investigate Ambedkar's thought on democracy and removal of untouchability. For this the researcher discuss about social and economic democracy, factors necessary for the successful operation of democracy, removal of untouchability, self-respect among untouchables and some of the important factors like education, economic progress, political strength, conversion

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1 INTRODUCTION

himrao Ramji Ambedkar (Born on 14 April 1891 in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh 14 April 1891 -Died on 6 December 1956), popularly also known as Babasaheb, was an Indian jurist, political leader, philosopher, thinker, anthropologist, historian, orator, prolific writer, economist, scholar, editor, a revolutionary and one of the founding fathers of independent India. He was also the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of Indian Constitution. Ambedkar was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, in 1990.

Like many other national leaders Ambedkar had complete faith in democracy. Dictatorship may be able to produce results quickly; it may be effective in maintaining discipline but cannot be one's choice as a permanent form of government. Democracy is superior because it enhances liberty. People have control over the rulers. Among the different forms of democratic government, Ambedkar's choice fell on the parliamentary form. In this case also he was in agreement with many other national leaders.

Ambedkar viewed democracy as an instrument of bringing about change peacefully. Democracy does not merely mean rule by the majority or government by the representatives of the people. This is a formalistic and limited notion of democracy. We would understand the meaning of democracy in a better fashion if we view it as a way of realizing drastic changes in the social and economic spheres of society.

2 II. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

Ambedkar's idea of democracy is much more than just a scheme of government. He emphasises the need for bringing about an all-round democracy. A scheme of government does not exist in vacuum; it operates within the society. Its usefulness depends upon its relationship with the other spheres of society. Elections, parties and parliaments are, after all, formal institutions of democracy. They cannot be effective in an undemocratic atmosphere.

Political democracy means the principle of 'one man one vote' which indicates political equality. But if oppression and injustice exist, the spirit of political democracy would be missing. Democratic government, therefore, should be an extension of a democratic society. In the Indian society, for instance, so long as caste barriers and caste-based inequalities exist, real democracy cannot operate. In this sense, democracy means a spirit of fraternity and equality and not merely a political arrangement. Success of democracy in India can be ensured only by establishing a truly democratic society. Along with the social foundations of democracy, Ambedkar takes into consideration the economic aspects also. It is true that he was greatly influenced by liberal thought. Still, he appreciated the limitations of liberalism.

Parliamentary democracy, in which he had great faith, was also critically examined by him. He argued that parliamentary democracy was based on liberalism. It ignored economic inequalities and never concentrated upon the problems of the downtrodden. Besides, the general tendency of the western type of parliamentary democracies has been to ignore the issues of social and economic equality. In other words, parliamentary democracy emphasised only liberty whereas true democracy implies both liberty and equality. This analysis becomes very important in the Indian context. Indian society was demanding freedom from the British. But Ambedkar was afraid that freedom of the nation would not ensure real freedom for all the people. Social and economic inequalities have dehumanized the Indian society. Establishing democracy in such a society would be nothing short of a revolution. This would be a revolution in the social structure and attitudes of the people. In the place of hereditary inequality, the principles of brotherhood and equality must be established. Therefore, Ambedkar supported the idea of all-round democracy.

3 III.

4 FACTORS NECESSARY FOR THE SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF DEMOCRACY

We have already seen that Ambedkar favoured the parliamentary form of government. For the successful functioning of this form of government, it is necessary that certain other conditions must be fulfilled. To begin with, political parties are necessary for the effective working of parliamentary democracy. This will ensure existence of the opposition which is very important.

Parliamentary government is known as responsible government mainly because the executive is constantly watched and controlled by the opposition. Respect and official status for the opposition means absence of absolute power for the executive. The other condition is a neutral and non-political civil service. A neutral civil service means that administrators would be permanent -not dependent on the fortunes of the political parties -and that they would not take sides with political parties. This will be possible only when appointments of civil servants are not made on the basis of political consideration. Success of democracy depends on many ethical and moral factors also. A country may have a constitution. But it is only a set of rules. These rules become meaningful only when people in the country develop conventions and traditions consistent with the constitution. People and politicians must follow certain norms in public life. Similarly, there must also exist a sense of morality and conscientiousness in the society. Law and legal remedies can never replace a voluntary sense of responsibility. No amount of law can enforce morality. Norms of honest and responsible behaviour must develop in the society. Democracy can be successful only when every citizen feels duty bound to fight injustice even if that injustice does not put him into any difficulty personally. This will happen when equality and brotherhood exist in the society.

To make democracy successful in India, Ambedkar suggested a few other precautions also. Democracy means rule of the majority. But this should not result into tyranny of the majority. Majority must always respect the views of the minority. In India there is a possibility that the minority community will always be a political minority also. Therefore, it is very essential that the minority must feel free, safe and secure. Otherwise, it will be very easy to convert democracy into a permanent rule against the minority. Caste system could thus become the most difficult obstacle in the successful functioning of democracy. The castes which are supposed to be of low status will never get their proper share in power. Caste will create barriers in the development of healthy democratic traditions. This means that unless we achieve the task of establishing democracy in the social field, mere political democracy cannot survive.

IV.

5 REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

How can untouchability be removed? Untouchability is the indication of slavery of the entire Hindu society. If the untouchables find themselves chained by the caste Hindus, the caste Hindus themselves live under the slavery of religious scriptures. Therefore, emancipation of the untouchables automatically involved emancipation of the

Hindu society as a whole. Ambedkar warns that nothing worthwhile can be created on the basis of caste. We can build neither a nation nor morality on this basis. Therefore, a casteless society must be created.

Intercaste marriages can effectively destroy the caste but the difficulty is that people will not be prepared to marry outside their caste so long as casteism dominates their thinking. Ambedkar describes such methods as inter-caste dining or marriage as 'forced feeding'. What is required is a more drastic change: liberating people from the clutches of religious scriptures and traditions. Every Hindu is a slave of the Vedas and Shastras. He must be told that these scriptures perpetrate wrong and therefore, need to be discarded.

Abolition of castes is dependent upon destroying the glory of these scriptures. Till the scriptures dominate the Hindus, they will not be free to act according to their conscience. In place of the unjust principle of hereditary hierarchy. We must establish the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. These should be the foundations of any religion.

6 V. SELF-RESPECT AMONG UNTOUCHABLES

However, Ambedkar knew that all this involved a total change in Hinduism which would take a very long time. Therefore, along with this suggestion for basic change, he also insisted on many other ways for the uplift of the untouchables. Under the influence of tradition the untouchables had completely surrendered to the domination of the upper castes. They had lost all spirit to fight and assert themselves. The myth of inherent pollution also considerably influenced the minds of untouchables. Therefore, it was necessary to arouse their self-respect. Untouchables should realize that they are the equals of caste Hindus. They must throw away their bondage.

7 VI.

8 EDUCATION

Ambedkar believed that education would greatly contribute to the improvement of the untouchables. He always exhorted his followers to reach excellence in the field of knowledge. Knowledge is a liberating force. Education makes man enlightened, makes him aware of this self-respect and also helps him to lead a better life materially. One of the causes of the degradation of the untouchables was that they were denied the right to education. Ambedkar criticized the British policy on education for not adequately encouraging education among the lower castes. He felt that even under the British rule education continued mainly to be an upper caste monopoly. Therefore, he mobilized the lower castes and the untouchables and funded various centers of learning. While a labour member in the executive council of the Governorgeneral, he was instrumental in extending scholarships for education abroad to the untouchable students. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to undergo both liberal education and technical education. He was particularly opposed to education under religious auspices. He warned that only secular education could instill the values of liberty and equality among the students.

9 VII.

10 ECONOMIC PROGRESS

Another very important remedy which Ambedkar upheld was that the untouchables should free themselves of the village community and its economic bondage. In the traditional set up, the untouchables were bound to specific occupations. They were dependent upon the caste Hindus for their sustenance. Even for meager returns they had to submit themselves to the domination of caste Hindus. Ambedkar was aware of the economic dimension of their servitude. Therefore, he always insisted that the untouchables should stop doing their traditional work. Instead, they should acquire new skills and start new professions. Education would enable them to get employment. There was no point in remaining dependent upon the village economy. With growing industrialization, there were greater opportunities in the cities. Untouchables should quit villages, if necessary and find new jobs or engage themselves in new professions. Once their dependence on caste Hindus is over, they can easily throw away the psychological burden of being untouchables. In a realistic evaluation of the villages, Ambedkar graphically describes them as 'a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrowmindedness and communalism'.

Therefore, the earlier the untouchables become free of village-bondage, the better. Even if the untouchables had to live in the villages, they should stop doing their traditional work and seek new means of livelihood. This would ensure their economic emancipation to a considerable extent.

The mainstay of Ambedkar's argument was that the oppressed classes must generate self-respect among themselves. The best policy for their uplift was the policy of self-help. Only by working hard and casting off mental servitude, they can attain an equal status with the remaining Hindu society. He did not believe in social reform on the basis of humanitarianism, sympathy, philanthropy etc.

Equal status and just treatment was a matter of right and not pity. The downtrodden should assert and win their rights through conflict. There was no short cut to the attainment of rights.

11 VIII.

12 POLITICAL STRENGTH

As a step in this direction, Ambedkar attaches much importance to political participation of the oppressed classes. He repeatedly emphasized that in the context of colonialism, it had become imperative that the untouchables gain political rights by organizing themselves politically. He claimed that by attaining political power, untouchables would be able to protect safeguards and a sizeable share in power, so that they can force certain policies on the legislature. This was so because during the last phase of British rule, negotiations had already begun for the settlement of the question of transfer of power. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to assert their political rights and get an adequate share in power. Therefore, he formed political organizations of untouchables.

13 IX.

14 CONVERSION

Throughout his life Ambedkar made efforts to reform the philosophical basis of Hinduism. But he was convinced that Hinduism will not modify its disposition towards the untouchables. So, he searched for an alternative to Hinduism. After careful consideration, he adopted Buddhism and asked his followers to do the same. His conversion to Buddhism meant reassertion of his faith in a religion based on humanism. Ambedkar argued that Buddhism was the least obscurantist religion. It appreciated the spirit of equality and liberty. Removal of injustice and exploitation was the goal of Buddhism. By adopting Buddhism, the untouchables would be able to carve out a new identity for themselves. Since Hinduism gave them nothing but sufferings, by renouncing Hinduism, the untouchables would be renouncing the stigma of untouchability and bondage attached to them. To live a new material life, a new spiritual basis consistent with the liberal spirit was essential. Buddhism would provide this basis.

Therefore, at the social level, education; at the material level, new means of livelihood; at the political level, political organization and at the spiritual level, selfassertion and conversion constituted Ambedkar's overall programme of the removal of untouchability.

Finally, what is the relevance of Ambedkar's thought? In his lifetime Ambedkar was constantly responding to contemporary issues. Therefore, his propagation of separate electorates or reservations, his views on linguistic states, etc. have a specific context. It would be wrong merely to take up the same programmes which Ambedkar had to take up in those circumstances and try to delineate the essence of his political ideology. We have seen that Ambedkar steadfastly held the image of society free from injustice and exploitation. Therefore, he repeatedly announced that an ideal society will be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. What are the forces operating against these three principles? Casteism and communalism on the one hand and economic exploitation on the other continue to provide strength to the prevalent inequality in the Indian society. Ambedkar fought for a society free from caste-domination and class-exploitation. So long as these two machines of exploitation -caste and class -are in existence, Ambedkar's thought would be relevant as an inspiration in the fight against them. ¹

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