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Editorial

AMBEDKAR'S VISION OF DEMOCRACY

On the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, it is important that the citizens of India reflect on the vision of one of the greatest founding father of the nation as articulated in his many speeches and writings. One of the monumental legacy left behind by Dr. Ambedkar is the Constitution of India, which has stood the test of time in a diverse and pluralistic society like India and ensured that India remained a vibrant democracy in the midst of South Asian countries struggling to maintain and sustain their democracies. Dr. Ambedkar was one of the greatest political scientist India has ever produced whose discourse on democracy shaped the institutions of democracy in India.

Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy was not limited to the western conceptualization of being "of the people, for the people and by the people". According to him, democracy was not merely a form of government, but it was a form of social organization. Besides, democracy could not be limited to political democracy where every citizen has an equal right to vote in an election. He envisioned democracy as way of life where there is not only political democracy, but also economic democracy and social democracy. This implies that in a democratic society, there should not be huge social and economic inequality or one class of people privileged over the other. He was aware that in a democracy, those who enjoy majority support will win elections and govern the country. However, he was concerned that there should be adequate safeguards and protection for religious and linguistic minorities so that democracy is not reduced to tyranny of the majority over minorities.

The ideal of a "good society" was closely related to Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy. A "good society" is based on a moral order having the values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity, which reflects public conscience. These values are well articulated in the Preamble of the Constitution. In his view, democracy is not merely a form of government, but a form of associated living of different diverse communities living in harmony with attitudes of respect and reverence towards all fellowmen. In a caste-ridden society like India, such a society is a utopian idea. However, Dr. Ambedkar conceptualised democracy as a means to bring about social transformation along with human progress. According to him, democracy is "a form and method of Government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed."

Dr. Ambedkar's vision had an ethical dimension of democracy called "morality". According to him, "constitutional morality" is not merely going by the legal provisions but abiding by the spirit of the Constitution. He was of the opinion that "morality", meaning social ethics, was indispensable for the realisation of a society based on justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. His emphasis on morality was based on his commitment to rationality and the scientific spirit as he considered morality always subject to rational scrutiny, which may be called "social rationality".

Dr. Ambedkar's vision of democracy encompassed "political, social and economic democracy". According to him, political democracy could not be sustained if glaring social and economic inequalities remained. In his parting speech to the Constituent Assembly, he said, "On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter 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 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." These words of Dr. Ambedkar should resonate in the corridors of power in India even today.

The articles of this issue of Social Action tries to capture the different aspects of the Dr. Ambedkar's idea of democracy articulated in the many speeches, books and articles he has written on political theory and practice. In the article titled "Ambedkar's Quest for Social and Economic Democracy", Pradyumna Bag discusses Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on the importance of economic and social democracy in sustaining political democracy. He agrees with Dr. Ambedkar's view that citizens will not be able to enjoy the fruits of democracy if the unjust socio-economic structures in society continue to persist. Ratnesh Katulkar presents Dr. Ambedkar's view on caste, a hegemonic social institution that is deeply entrenched in the social reality of South Asia, in his article "Understanding Ambedkar's view on Caste in the context of Justice and National Unity". Using various texts from Hindu scriptures and the writings of Dr. Ambedkar, he shows that Dr. Ambedkar considered the caste system contrary to the values he cherished. He argued for the "annihilation of caste" and embraced Buddhism. However, Ambedkar's Buddhism was different from traditional Buddhism as it was action-oriented and based on principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. The article titled "Ambedkar's Vision and Social Justice Provisions in the Constitution: Text and Context" by Pankaj Deep is an analysis of social justice as an integral part of Dr. Ambedkar's vision of a modern democracy. Pankaj highlights the importance of social justice

in the discourse on democracy in a country where a large proportion of the population belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities and other backward communities live in poverty and destitution in spite of several progressive legislations and affirmative action measures. He concludes that Dr. Ambedkar's view, that democracy will be hollow if there is no social justice to disadvantaged sections of society, is reflected in the Preamble of the Constitution, the fundamental rights enshrined in it and the Directive Principles of State Policy. These provisions in the Constitution provides the tools for the promotion of social justice in governance, but due to lack of political will for implementation of these provisions in the right spirit, India continues to have millions of people living in hunger and poverty. In her article "Margin of Village: Ambedkar on Reconstruction of Rural Society", Jayashree Ambewadikar points out that Dr. Ambedkar made the individual as the basis of the Constitution as he was against village panchayats as a unit because untouchables were always excluded in village decision-making, which was dominated by higher castes. According to her, Dr. Ambedkar considered education as the only means to reconstruct a new rural society.

In addition to these four thematic articles, there are three articles that deal with Indian democracy and society. Dr. Meera's article on "Nationalism and Hinduism: Religious Nationalism and Dalit Society" presents the views of prominent Hindu social reformers in the context of their attitudes to nationalism and the caste system prevalent in Hindu society. The article "Institutionalised Cultural Pollution in India: The Merging of Social and Organizational Cultures" by James Dabhi deals with the perpetuation and institutionalisation of social discrimination in organisation cultures. The research article by Moamenla Amer titled "Explaining Differential Levels of Political Awareness among Youth in Nagaland" reveals that there is a positive correlation between political awareness and participation in the electoral process in Nagaland.

The contribution of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to the discourse on democracy and society is immense. Undoubtedly, his major contribution has been the Constitution of India, which largely reflects the values he cherished and his vision of democracy that encompasses political, economic and social dimensions. Citizens of India need to fulfil this vision of Dr. Ambedkar in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and exclusion and make the country a vibrant democracy.

Denzil Fernandes