

Prem Kumar Chumber, Editor-In-Chief: Ambedkar Times & Desh Doaba

B.R. Ambedkar views on Social Democracy



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Social democracy occupies centre stage in the philosophy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. It constitutes the core of his struggle against the historic social malady of graded inequality in

India. This is distinwhat guished him from the rest of the mainstream Indian freedom and thinkers

fighters who were struggling primarily for the liberation of the country (political freedom) from the yoke of British Empire. Dr. Ambedkar expanded the meaning of political freedom by incorporating in its fold the less talked about issue of freedom from internal colonialism - caste based social exclusion. He assigned special importance to the principles of social democracy by championing the cause of the socially excluded sections of the In-

dian society. He wanted to strengthen the emerging sphere of political democracy in India by substantiating it with the institutionalisation of the less talked about phenomenon of social democracy. Dr. Ambedkar defines social democracy as:

[A] way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles ... 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.

Frozen in the centuries old stratified structure of the Hindu social order, the principles of equality and fraternity are yet to find a clear expression and a significant space in the political democracy of independent India. Social life in India is still governed by the principle of birth-based graded inequality that tends to elevate some (upper castes) and degrades many (lower castes). Even after more than sixty-four years of India's independence and wide spread anti-untouchability laws, the so-called outcastes continue to be subjected to repulsion and all sorts of humiliations. They have continuously been deprived of education, human rights, social status, and equal opportunities in the field of art, culture, science and technology.

The roots of democracy are to be searched in the domain of social life. On the completion of the Draft Constitution (25 November 1949), Dr. Ambedkar sounded a grave warning in his famous address in 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. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, 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 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. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible or else those who suffer

from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so labouriously built up.

Keeping in view the prophetic warning of Dr. Ambedkar, independent India opted for a mixed economy model of development and introduced the system of reservation for the downtrodden in government jobs, education institutions and legislature. The preamble of the constitution clearly spells out the objectives of securing "to all its citizens JUS-TICE, social, economic and political" as well as "EQUALITY of status and of opportunity".

The social Democratic vision of Dr. Ambedkar got further reflected in the Resolution of the Government of India for the creation of the Planning Commission in March 1950. The Resolution clearly defined the scope of the work of the Planning Commission in the following terms: The Constitution of India has guaranteed certain Fundamental Rights to the citizens of India and enunciated certain Directive Principles of State Policy, in particular, that the State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing (Contd.. to page 4)

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Research Scholar

Rajeev Bhargava, one of the most noted names in the world of Political Science, postulated in one of his works that India is not yet a multinational federation but is rather a linguistically federal nation state. The facts support this argument of his rather well. India as a social union is composed of many different communitarian societies. India is a multi ethnic entity in the deepest possible sense of the term with about twenty two recognized languages, thousands of dialects, and multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups. The mere existence of such a deeply divided society is unthinkable to the common mind. Yet India has survived as a democracy for more than six decades. In multi ethnic societies, minorities often lead an insecure existence, especially in those nations where the proportion of population professing one religion surpasses others by a huge margin. Same holds true for India. The minorities, especially religious minorities, have at many occasions, explicitly expressed their fear regarding the biased and prejudiced policies of the state and have also displayed secessionist desires. Minorities within India argue that the idea of Hinduism implicit in the very identity of India or Bharat gets reflected time and again in either its outright rejection of the existence of other religious groups claiming for an equal status or insidious attempts at co-opting various religious denominations within the fold of dominant culture .

In such as scenario, it becomes very important on the part of the state to, time and again; reinforce its commit-

ment to protecting and safeguarding both, culture and rights of the minorities. Various gestures towards that end need to be made. Indian state, right from its inception in 1947, has extended an olive branch to the minority religious commu-

nities, many of whom were rather apprehensive about the Mansimar Kaur intentions of the state post independence. The issue was widely taken up during Con-

stituent Assembly Debates. The bloodshed at the time of independence and partition clearly brought home the point that the religion is a rather volatile category and has the capacity of inflicting much pain and destruction. Thus, the constitution of India itself was the first confidence building measure by the state towards minority religious communities of India.

While formulating the constitution of the country, the makers made an attempt to legalize the protective stance it tended to take towards the culture and rights of the minorities. Different provisions were included in constitution which performed this task rather well. For instance, article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of the religion one professes or the culture one practices. Within the domain of education and property too, the secular credentials of the state were portrayed amply well. Notwithstanding this, the very document of constitution became a major irritant between the state and many religious communities. Many scholars believe the constitution to promote assimilation rather than co existence. Article 25 of the constitution clearly states that Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism are not separate religious denominations but are a part of the wider Hindu community. This particular provision of the constitu-

tion neutralizes whatever secular commitments it might have made elsewhere in the constitution, at least for these three com-Dept. of Political Science munities whose independent Panjab University, Chandigarh existence has altogether been absolved in one stroke.

> At a different but not unrelated level, the Supreme Court of India, too, plays the role of building the confidence of the minorities. Various landmark judgements have been passed at different points in time by the apex adjudicatory body to inculcate the confidence amongst the minorities. A watershed judgement in this regard was that of Jehovah's witnesses . The case revolved around two schoolchildren in the state of Kerela, who were expelled from their school since they did not join in the singing of National Anthem and this action of theirs was seen as disrespecting the national anthem and thus violating the first fundamental duty enshrined in the constitution. The children were the followers of the faith of Jehovah's witnesses which prohibits them from singing or even joining the singing apart from one which is in praise of god. The expulsion of the children was over turned by the court on the ground that no religious minority, howsoever small can be compelled to perform any activity which is against their faith, even if it violates the moral code of conduct enshrined in

the constitution.

At last, it is at the rhetorical level where the constant effort to inculcate a feeling of confidence is made. The leaders through their statements and speeches make an effort to establish their pro-minority stance. The headline of today's edition of a reputed daily reads, 'BJP not anti-minority, says Gadkari' can be clearly interpreted as an effort by the party concerned to gain confidence and later, votes of the minority communities of the country. One can always argue that statements such as these are just political gimmicks intended towards garnering more and more votes ahead of the election season. There is, however, no denying of the fact that statements such as these do go a long way in creating a feeling of confidence amongst minorities. In a country inhabiting cultural pluralism at such a vast scale, it thereby becomes imperative to revisit its commitment to the secular ideals, especially at the time when religion as a social category is a cause of many a discords and disagreements around the world. India need not look any further; South Asia itself can be seen as a territory riveted with intense religion based conflict. In such a scenario, the state structure need to make a voluntary and conscious effort towards rekindling the loyalties of the minorities towards the state which many a times seems to have been eroded owing to lack of confidence in the state apparatus and structures. These measures are necessary for India to become a multinational federation in the real sense of the term.

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and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life, and shall direct its policy towards securing, among other things –

(a) that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood;

(b) that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good; and

(c) that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment (The First Five Year Plan: 1).

Thus an all-inclusive vision of development and an egalitarian social order underlined the basic spirit of the constitution as well as the ambitious Five Year Planning projects of the Planning Commission of India. To translate the ideals of the founding fathers, a number of special provisions are incorporated in the constitution and the Resolution for the creation of the Planning Commission. State affirmative action is the most prominent among them. It aimed at overcoming historic castebased social exclusion and oppression. Along with reservations in education, employment and legislature, rural development programme, public distribution system, public health programmes, cooperatives, the Right to Education Act, midday meals programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Food Security Act, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana are a few more significant state initiatives taken over the last six decades since independence to help emerge social democracy in India. Yet another important measure towards the formation of social democracy has been a series of attempts, under the Directive Principles of state policy, to democratize and decentralize governance and the devolution of authority from the centre to the grass-roots (panchayati raj institutions). Thus the constitution of India, as aptly argued by Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, is "a unique social charter the boldest statement ever

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of social democracy". Whether these varied measures have been able to facilitate the growth of social democracy in India or not, is a matter of contention. Nevertheless, the incorporation of such measures in the constitution is a vindication enough that the founding fathers of Independent India wanted to deepen the roots of liberal democracy while placing it on firm foundation of social democracy.

Dr. Ambedkar's vision of social democracy assumes added importance in the wake of neo-liberal reforms in India, particularly since 1991. The neo-liberal market-economy with singular focus on economic growth and profit, suffocates the delicate nurturing milieu of social democracy in India. Given its exclusive agenda of economic growth and profit, and insensitivities towards the rabid discriminatory social structures, will it be feasible for economic liberalization to plough through the arid land of caste hierarchies and rampant social exclusion - the main enemies of social democracy? Or would the neo-liberal free-market economy further deepen inequalities, caste hierarchies and social exclusion by tightening casterope around the neck of the incipient institutions of social democracy? Would it not delay, if not preclude, the often talked about trickle-down impact of the economic liberalization on the lives of the multitudes of the Indian poor with majority of them historically relegated to the periphery?

There is a general impression that the adoption of the neo-liberal marketeconomy model by India in 1991 dilutes the social welfare concerns of the Indian state. It is in this context that the institution of social democracy has come under dark clouds of the free market economy model. Neo-liberal market-economy is primarily based on delicensing, removal of import quotas, cutting down tariff levels, liberalization of the inflow of foreign capital, capital goods, imported inputs, capital markets, industrial liberalization, removal of MRTP constraints, opening of yet newer areas hitherto reserved for the public sector, tax concessions, voluntary retirement scheme, hidden closing of non-viable units, widespread use of contracted/casual labour, sub-contacting work to the small scale sector, taming labour etc. Before Indian economy could actually open its gates to the surging tides of world marketeconomy, the study of economic liberalisation had already deepened its roots in the domain of social sciences in the country. However, in terms of content and scope, neo-liberalism is yet to enter mainstream political sociology with vast body of pertinent literature remains confined to the discipline of economics. It rarely focuses on the intricate but often neglected relationship between caste and economy as well as contradictions between the emerging structures of neo-liberal marketeconomy and the incipient institutions of social democracy. In other words, economic liberalisation, caste, social democracy and intersections among them constitute the core challenges that India face today.

Among the core challenges that contemporary India face, the issue of economic liberalisation seems to be the latest, while caste certainly remains the oldest. Caste, at the same time, also enjoys the dubious distinction of being the most perennial and complex phenomenon. As an exclusionary social phenomenon, it has eclipsed the Indian (read Hindu) society for ages and continues to affect its economy and polity even today so much so that it proves to be a stumbling block in the way of substantive democratisation from within. During the long spell of Muslim rule and the subsequent British Raj, the scourge of caste has expanded beyond imagination. In the postcolonial India, it assumed a new potent identity against its traditional hierarchised stance. The constitution-based state affirmative action has further aided the institutionalisation of caste as identity. Social democracy figures somewhere in between these two above mentioned challenges. It, however, remains peripheral to the critical thinking of the builders of modern India. Although a sharp division between the moderates and the extremists within the Indian freedom struggle brought into focus social of the colonial India, the political, however, took precedence over the social in independent India. Ultimately, the form of democracy that India has come to acquire is a parliamentary democracy that in fact was implanted on Indian soil during the British rule. It did not evolve from within under natural conditions. Thus, despite the widespread belief about its ancient roots, it is considered to be of recent origin. But once it was transplanted, efforts were being made for its survival. It is in this context that social democracy becomes prerequisite for the survival of the parliamentary democracy in India.

My key argument is that the entry of neo-liberal market-economy in India in 1990s has further compounded the ongoing tug-of-war between tradition and modernity to the disadvantage of the latter by entrenching, albeit indirectly, the oppressive caste structures in the country. In the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity, the institution of social democracy stands with modernity and openly confronts the forces of neo-liberal marketeconomy, which quite interestingly seem to toe the line of the primordial and ascriptive institution of caste. Free market discriminates against the poor. Majority of the India's Poor belong to lower castes. Thus, the free markets discriminate against the Dalits. Taking side with the lower caste victims of the 'economics of market', which are mercilessly excluded from the business domain, social democracy compensates them in ensuring a respectable space in the 'politics of democracy'. In other words, social democracy aims at overcoming the primordial and ascriptive hurdles in the way of arduous but steady march of liberal democracy in India.

Social democracy is thus aims at building an indigenous base for the restoration of an egalitarian social order and internalisation of democratic values of equality, freedom and fraternity. It aims at imbibing the spirit of constitutionalism among its people. It underscores annihilation of caste and caste-based social exclusion. There is a general impression that given the presence of caste in the social structure in the country and the typical communal character of its electoral constituencies, the former has been able to acquire a leading role in the arithmetic of electoral number game in post-colonial India, thus blocking the way of social democracy.

It is in this context that the induction of neo-liberal economic reforms in India further complicates the existing contradictions between caste and democracy. Neo-liberal economic reforms were adopted to bridle the ever-increasing menace of fiscal crisis and to help India get rid of its chronic poverty. The problem of chronic poverty in India, however, seems to be not merely an economic issue. It has equally been rooted rather more deeply in the asymmetrical social structures of its Brahminical social order, which finds its natural ally in the fast expanding operations of new-liberal market economy in the country. It is against this backdrop that the project of economic liberalisation seems to block the way of nascent institution of social democracy in India. (91-97791-42308)

DALIT DISCRIMINATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA ANDIN THE UK Inequality and Poverty Programme, Department of Anthropology, LSE Asia Research Centre, LSE And The Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK (FABOUK) Dalit Discrimination in Contemporary India and in the UK Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) 123 Birth Anniversary Commemoration, 8 May 2014, 10-12 pm

123 Birth Anniversary Commemoration, 8 May 2014. 10-12pm Seligman Library, Department of Anthropology, 6 Floor, Old Building, LSE 10.00-10.05: Introduction to the Life and Work of Dr. Ambedkar.

Arun Kumar: General Secretary, The Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisation, UK. 10.05 – 10.25: Dalits Tamils and Categorical Relations in Kerala.

Jayaseelan Raj: Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Inequality Poverty Research Programme, Anthropology, LSE. 10.25-10.40 – Discussion, 10.40-11.00: Dalit Women in Andhra Pradesh.

Clarinda Still: Department Lecturer, Modern Indian Studies, Oxford and Inequality and Poverty Research Programme, LSE.

11.00-11.15 – Discussion, 11.15-11.35: Caste-Based Discrimination in the UK.

Santosh Dass: President, The Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Orgainsiation, UK Vice Chairman Anti-Caste. , Discrimination Alliance.11.35-12.00 – Discussion

Chair: Alpa <u>Shah.</u>

Associate Professor (Reader), Department of Anthropology, LSE. Director of Inequality and Poverty Research Programme, LSE.



Time: 6:00 PM, Venue: Sutter County Veteran's Memorial Community Hall

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