



VISION VS REALITY: ARE WE LIVING IN DR. AMBEDKAR'S INDIA?

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ABSTRACT

Dr Ambedkar was a stalwart in the scholarly world. An eminent jurist, economist, philosopher and social reformer, his role as the Father of the Indian Constitution is well-known. However, less emphasised are his various visions that helped in nation-building and continue to have a notable impact in the contemporary Indian socio-economic-political arena. While drafting the constitution, he meticulously laid down a framework to create a fair society enshrined in the ideals of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity.' He propagated concepts like equal pay for work, maternity benefits, and Universal Adult Franchise. The path of India towards an egalitarian and casteless society was moulded by his perspectives. Our Constitution is a testament to that. According to him, The Constitution could play the role of a universal moral compass for India, a country society is divided on the basis of caste, religion, language, and other factors. This Constitutional morality would therefore lead to coordination between antithetical interests of different people along with administrative cooperation. Ambedkar's ideas and legacy echo through the welfare programmes of the Government today. The Mudra Scheme for availing loans, Stand-up India for aiding entrepreneurship in the SC and ST community, and the Ayushman Bharat scheme, display the government's unwavering commitment to fulfilling the dreams of Ambedkar. But these schemes and policies are mere drops of Amrit mixed with Vish in the cosmic ocean of the country we call India. Ambedkar is not just a scholar limited to the pages of a political science textbook anymore, he transcends beyond his contribution to the Constitution. Through this essay, using theoretical and practical considerations, we will explore where Ambedkar's vision has failed, and how India is not the country the father of its constitution had once envisioned.

KEYWORDS : Ambedkar, India, Politics, Constitution**History**

Indian democracy, historically, has been proof of how the nation's institutions survived even the most tumultuous times. Our pre-existing ethos of tolerance and empathy was the fundamental reason to accomplish this. The construction of effective political institutions and protection of human fundamental rights of citizens provided us with leverage to exercise more soft power in world politics as compared to our neighbours.

Gandhi famously remarked "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible." This core of inclusivity and tolerance strengthens our foundations.

However, all these ideas seem to be gradually withering away. Nehru, Gandhi and Ambedkar have not just been rendered irrelevant, but are relentlessly denigrated. The political elite is making concerted efforts to erase and rewrite history. The concept of democracy, it seems, will slowly languish for millions of Indians who are penniless, vulnerable, marginalised, and historically oppressed.

Futuristic Hopes

The state, Dr Ambedkar hoped, would be the catalyst that transformed both feudality and culture in Indian society. He hoped that political equity would guarantee socio-economic justice, especially considering gender, caste, and class. Various elements of the constitution, including Article 25 which authorised the state to reform religion to protect equality, and the temple entry legislation which provided Dalits access to temples, were created to fulfil these purposes. The democratic state used its powers to usher in an era of equality, albeit painfully slowly. Women gaining access to Shani Signapur temple and Haji Ali Dargah, the Supreme Court striking down triple talaq (a Shariah practice), the Mandal Commission report enabling affirmative action for backward classes, and land reforms that liberated farmers from oppressive landlords are prime examples of our nation's development towards Ambedkar's dreams.

However optimistic, Dr. Ambedkar had his premonitions, mentioning in the Constituent Assembly - "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic." Despite all our advancements, the capitalist class has had more than their share of the pie, with the top 10% consolidating 57% of the national income, in 2021. Another of Ambedkar's fears was "However good a constitution may be, it may turn out to be bad if those who are called to work it, happen to be bad." He postulated that the people and political parties that inherited the constitution must choose to abide by it, or any amendment would be irrelevant.

Nationalism: 'The Dead Faith of the Living'

During the 1930s. Ambedkar tried to spell out nationalism to his recently formed Indian Labour Party as follows:

"It is a feeling of 'consciousness of kind', which, on one hand, binds together those who have it, so strongly that it overrides all differences arising out of economic conflicts or social gradations, and, on the other, severs them from those who are not of their kind. It is a longing not to belong to any other group. This is the essence of what is called a nationality and national feeling."

There is a lot to mull over about this dual-faceted feeling and whether his visions are of any significance today or if his presence is used to propagate political fortunes. Ambedkar warned about the dangers of the fetishisation of nationalism - which he inherently opposed. Nationalism was just a means to an end for him, not an end in itself.

In 'The Partition of India', Babasaheb Ambedkar cautions "Indians today are governed by two ideologies. Their political ideal set in the preamble of the Constitution affirms a life of liberty, justice, equality and fraternity, whereas their social ideal embedded in their religion denies it to them." Clearly, today when the political ideal in the constitution buckles under the strain of the nation's demons, this prophecy is more relevant than ever.

Rise of the Right

As the socio economic polity of the nation suffered from twinges of the Emergency in the 1970s, there was a widespread belief in the need for a change in political functioning. The right-wing group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) began leading a dissident movement during this tumult, which in due course led to the genesis of Hindutva politics in India. The RSS re-emerged as a strong force once again, coming back from its long ban after Godse assassinated Gandhi.

The Bharatiya Jan Sangh initially did not gather much support, but the advent of the 1980s and formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party took Indian politics into a whole new arena. The crack in faith in the Congress Administration had long been palpable and many including non-congress parties, communist parties, free liberal and even Gandhians looked at merging with the right-wing force as an escape.

Democracy

Today, Populism, Polarisation and Personalities are the Dark Triad descending upon the horizon of India's democracy, which is usually meant to be characterised by elements such as rule of law, republican governance, and peaceful co-existence.

Rabble rousing demagoguery by herculean personalities who manipulate elections by playing upon the cultural and religious sensitivities of citizens has seriously weakened India's democratic

spirit. Hyper-nationalism and jingoistic chauvinism have become frequent themes in political debates, speeches, and rallies - all for voter base pandering.

Our body politic seems to be diseased by a dangerous 'alternative syndrome' – "if not him then who?" Elected representatives today, as opposed to those in the past, are increasingly becoming irrelevant as a result of the 'Presidentialisation' of politics, with increasing dependence on a single leader surrounded by a cult of personality.

Social scientists, ever since the 1960s, have agreed that Indian democracy is highly improbable, due to its convoluted and diverse socio-cultural nature. However, India defied this statistically valid hypothesis until very recently (excluding 1975-77). The state of the country is now validating this hypothesis, with the Indian democracy's health waning. The Democracy Report published by Sweden's V-Dem Institute warns that "India is on the verge of losing its status as a democracy due to the severe shrinking of space for the media, civil society, and the opposition." The motives of elected politicians have led to democratic backsliding in India, as opposed to traditional genesis like generals and soldiers.

'The Rise and Fall', by Professor Varshney, contends that "India's democratic exceptionalism is now withering away," reasoning that "a democracy which speaks with one voice, which elevates citizen duties over citizen rights, which privileges obedience over freedom, which uses fear to instil ideological uniformity and which weakens checks on executive power, is a contradiction in terms". For democratic theorists, these are all signs of creeping authoritarianism, not of democratic deepening.

This criticism of Indian democracy is not unfounded. Clearly, a world where peaceful protesters are charged with sedition, where citizenship is granted through religious exclusionary principles, freedom of the press is curbed, ideological non-conformity (even by students) is met with violence, lynch mobs are celebrated, comedians and opposition members are jailed, and judicial servility is cultivated, cannot be democratic. A world where the youth is discouraged from entering politics, where sedition is applied to valid criticism of the government, where bouncers are 'allegedly' ordered to beat up women on the floor of the Indian Parliament, and gubernatorial activism is rife, is clearly a cause for extreme concern.

Political, legal, physical, and financial attacks are commonplace against those that oppose the ruling regime. At the start of the Prime Minister's first term, the global opinion of Indian democracy included respect. However, two terms of the government seemed to have changed global perceptions for the worse. Explicitly internal problems seem to have self-evident external dimensions as well.

Apart from violence, all such criticism is met with "This is what the people want", "We were elected by the people", and "This is what the people voted for". A ballot conducted once in 5 years is used to validate legislation from Kashmir to citizenship amendment, preventive detention to farm reforms. This fundamental confusion must be addressed.

Elections are necessary, but not sufficient. Elections alone cannot be equated with democracy. The judgement of a democratic index depends partly on elections but focuses much more on the contributions of the elected government to the country. We now explore these themes in five different practical considerations that plague India even today:

The Criminalisation of Politics

Indian elections over the past two cycles have been watershed moments, the country will never fully recover from the changes brought about during these two terms. The mindset of politics has fundamentally worsened, with parties pandering to any voter bank ready to field them. Defections have become commonplace, and party manifestos don't seem to have any relevance to both the election and the plan of action of the ruling party.

Religious polarisation, mob lynching, intolerance and suppression of dissent have desecrated politics to such an extent that writers believe this election is fought over the soul of India. The General Election, a celebration of the largest democracy in the world, is riddled with the largest number of moral code violations, bribery allegations, and

criminal MP's. As media houses and institutions align themselves with the ruling party, transparency and accountability of the elections are now in jeopardy, as politics is criminalised behind the garb of a Hindutva nationalistic feeling.

Economic Factors

Unchecked neoliberalism has proven detrimental to the country. There's much to fix, with the richest 1% owning more than four times the total wealth held by the bottom 70% of the population. Historical inequalities are once again being replicated when the citizens' right to health, education, environment and infrastructure are mediated through the market instead of the state reducing inequities through substantial investments.

An Indian food delivery start-up, Swiggy, is eyeing an IPO debut at US\$1 billion, India ranks 94 among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index. Malnutrition is prevalent - one-third of children are stunted, one fifth are wasted and half are anaemic. Lavish corporate hospitals host upper classes and promote medical tourism in the subcontinent, but most of the population is denied a minimum standard of quality healthcare. The Lancet ranks India 145 out of 195 countries in terms of health-care access and quality – behind countries like Yemen, Sudan and North Korea.

Agricultural Reforms

Ambedkar was the first legislator in India to introduce a Bill for abolishing the serfdom of agricultural tenants. He envisioned that industry and agriculture would progress hand in hand and this would ultimately lead to the increase in profitability from agriculture as the country modernised. According to him a land-holding becomes economical only when it is able to make profits even after providing for all the expenses incurred which includes the supplied capital and labour. Therefore, a productive holding renders itself uneconomic if more people depend on it. Today, the high dependence on farmland renders small land-holders unable to make capital investments or arrange for labour, forcing them to sell the small pieces of land they own. The state of agriculture in the country is dismal with the law of inheritance leading to further fragmentation of land. Farmer suicides are rife and there is a large population of landless labourers who work for meagre wages.

The recent Farmers Bill was a slight attempt to align with Ambedkar's ideologies on the issue and could have been amended and worked on to become a spectacular reform. But, like most issues that plague the country it was politicised to an extent that the government and the protesters held their ground and no further discourse was possible.

Caste System

As the ideology of 'purity vs. impurity' is rekindled in the political space, violence against Dalits has taken a new turn. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) displays distressing statistics of a crime being committed against the Dalits in every 15 minutes, and that of an average number of six Dalit women being raped each day, the majority of which do not see the light of justice...

It is safe to say that the current situation of caste in India would make Ambedkar turn in his grave. 25% of Indians and 52% of Brahmins admitted to practising some form of untouchability. 35% of Jains, 30% of Hindus, 23% of Sikhs, and 18% of Muslims admitted to being 'caste conscious'. Ambedkar had envisioned that reservations in politics would end 10 years after independence, but we are far from such equality today. Retrieved from the National Council of Applied Economic Research's survey, this data shows troubling rifts in society.

Right-wing politics in India rides too on the back of Brahmanical conservatism, manifesting in the collective social psyche of the nation as relations are moulded depending on caste and communal prejudices. Dalits being excluded from the structures of society makes them vulnerable to humiliation of the caste Hindus. In the India we live in today, these individuals persist to connote deep-rooted prejudices to 'religiosity'. With Savarna Hindus are ardently unwilling to let go of their 'Caste Pride', the liberalisation of indefensible social attitudes and the acclivity of the Dalits in the societal hierarchy.

While 2500 crores are spent on statues, religion and caste still play major roles in diminishing equality for Indians today. The puppetization of elected Dalit representatives by political parties, and the lack of healthcare and education for Dalits, truly represent an India that deviated far away from Ambedkar's dreams.

Women and Gender Equality

Ambedkar made breakthroughs in the advancement of gender equality, laying down the foundation of the Hindu Code Bill (conferring onto women the right to adopt and inherit), reducing working hours to a maximum of 48 per week, and introducing overtime, paid leave, and minimum wage for all, including women. He established 'equal pay for equal work' irrespective of sex and maternity benefits, and believed that women were victims of a rigid hierarchal socio-cultural system that artificially defines gender relations as perpetuated by Manusmriti and Hinduism. He believed the Manusmriti directly fed Hindu beliefs, blaming it for Indian patriarchy and the denial of freedom, self-respect, education, property, and divorce, to women.

Intersectionality of Dalit women also clearly portrays how sufferings of the Dalit women happen at a deeper level than their male counterparts due to two oppressive facets of their identity; each oppression is dependent on and shapes the other. At the bottom rung of India's social hierarchy of caste, class, and gender, they are largely uneducated and the gender wage gap between them and Dalit men is huge. They bear the brunt of the social ostracisation due to the prevalent casteism and intra-caste assaults only make this worse. They are often sold into brothels under the Devadasi System. Dalit men also frequently release their frustration of socio-economic strain and their bruised 'masculinity' through the acts of 'controlling' their women.

Ambedkar's advocacy for universal adult franchise ensured that women had the right to vote immediately after Independence, but we have a long way to go before achieving the utopian idea of gender equality. The gender gap in the country is ever-widening with only 62.5% closed till 2020, largely due to women's inadequate representation in politics and leadership roles, decrease in women's labour force participation rate, poor healthcare, lagging female-to-male literacy ratio, and large income inequality.

CONCLUSION

The country is fraught with conflicts and obstructions in various spheres as enumerated above. Ambedkar was a man of great ideas and principles. Therefore, his spirit needs to be reignited and conjured from within, so that the nation can rise against these challenges. A mass realisation must occur about the fact that merely being a "democracy" does not mean all our goals as a country are fulfilled. There are miles to go before we truly achieve the India he envisioned...

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