
UNIT 17 SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Structure

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- Ambedkar's understanding of democracy in general and his conception of social democracy in particular;
- Basic features of Ambedkar's conception of social democracy in terms of equality, rights, freedom and justice;
- Just and righteous social order as the key to the success of democracy against caste system and Hindu social order; and
- Ambedkar's state socialism as an alternative to capitalism and socialism.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Social democracy has emerged as a significant concept in the twentieth century. Conceived as an alternative to both liberalism and Marxism, it came into existence with the recognition of the limits of both capitalism and socialism. It is associated with the welfare state, and the values of equality and solidarity. It builds upon commitment to shared values and social responsibilities. It emphasizes ethical living with a communitarian slant. Social democracy is primarily based on the idea that the state should ensure security and equality for all and must play a role in reordering society accordingly. Social democracy believes in gradual and incremental change. It considers that socialism may be established through lawful means rather than by force.

Social democracy as a practical concept offers an account of the complex interplay among ideas of legitimacy, efficiency and stability. It aims to enhance the functionality and stability of democratic states. It seeks to explain the functional deficiencies of libertarian democracy. It allows active participation of people in institutions of democracy. It makes institutions accountable to people. It attempts to actualize rights. Social democracy insists that democracy and associated rights

must be extended to social and economic spheres as well. Social security, justice and participation play important roles in improving the quality of democracy in a given society.

Social democracy is about practically realizing the value of democracy at societal level. This belief became prominent in the west with the failure of liberalism and socialism in realizing their ideals in society. The idea of democracy gained ascendancy in the aftermath of the Second World War and took various forms, such as political democracy, economic democracy and social democracy.

Social democracy co-exists with values like equality, community living and justice. The contours of social democracy vary on the basis of how one conceives and relates these values and ideals. In India, Ambedkar came with ideas aimed to abolish the highly discriminatory and inhuman caste system. One can decipher some variant of social democracy as an ideal from his writings and practice. The key values of his variant of social democracy are equality, society as an ethically constituted community and state socialism.

Ambedkar, as an important political philosopher, has creatively enriched the tradition of social democracy. Against the liberal versions of democracy, he provides a new meaning to democracy in general and social democracy in particular. He adopts social democracy as a principle in building the Indian nation state. He understood that political equality is not sufficient for the working of democracy. Social and economic equality are essential conditions for effective functioning of political democracy. Social freedom plays a vital role in expanding the horizons of social equality and democracy. Universal human rights and fundamental rights can be realized in the true sense only by ensuring a righteous social life. He finds the source of these rights in normative social life rather than in legal imposition. However, he recognizes the importance of legal provisions in safeguarding weak and vulnerable social minorities from the wrath of the powerful. He upholds the role of the state as interventionist, in minimizing the existing inequalities and ensuring the freedom of its citizens. State has to be egalitarian and aim at promoting the welfare of the people. In this direction Ambedkar deviates from the typical discourse and argues for state socialism as a political framework and social justice as a principle of social democracy rather than being carried away with either liberalism or socialism.

17.2 AMBEDKAR'S CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Ambedkar not only conceptualized democracy suited to Indian conditions but also fought for realization of the ideals of democracy. He addressed the question of social dynamics arising out of the functioning of a democratic government in an undemocratic society. He articulated the concerns of people who were deprived of basic civil rights.

To understand his conception of democracy, we have to look into his writings, speeches, struggles and his involvement in nation-building (through his participation at various levels in the British Indian government and Independent India). In his efforts, we may find his quest for real democracy.

Social equality, freedom, associated living, just social order and moral governance are recurring themes in his writings and his struggles for liberation of the

oppressed. Ambedkar defines democracy distinctly, addressing historical, political and social specificities of India and puts it in a philosophical way. He views democracy as a desired moral principle of governance and suggests mechanisms to enrich it for the common good. In other words, Ambedkar aspires to nurture the culture of democracy in all spheres of life. For him it is not just an ideal but also a social necessity to build a good society.

Democracy is based on the doctrine of one man one value. The fundamental principle of modern democratic states is the recognition of the value of the individual. It is based on the belief that each individual has but one life, and full opportunity should be accorded to each to attain his maximum development in that life. Neither of these propositions can be said to be part of the accepted philosophy of aristocracy of India.¹

According to Ambedkar, a democracy is quite different from a republic as well as from a parliamentary government. The roots of democracy lie not in the form of government, parliament or otherwise. Before adopting parliamentary democracy in India, Ambedkar had critically evaluated the functioning of parliamentary democracy in the West. He identified that wrong ideologies and wrong organisations were responsible for the failure of democracy in the western countries that had adopted democracy as a form of government. The rulers were always drawn from the ruling class and the class that was ruled never becomes the ruling class. So democracy did not fulfill the hopes it held out to the common man of ensuring to him liberty, property and pursuit of happiness.

Socialism is an alternative to parliamentary democracy and many countries had adopted this form of government. However, Ambedkar was critical of this form of government and identified it with dictatorship. Ambedkar upholds parliamentary democracy over socialism by giving a new meaning to democracy. He extended the spirit of democracy from political to include both social and economic domains. His conception of state socialism internalized the principle of socialism and carried it through the democratic form of government. He favoured state socialism without dictatorship and with parliamentary democracy. He prescribes state socialism through the law of constitution. His vision of democracy is to strike a balance between equality and liberty so that associated living in a pluralistic society is ensured.

Ambedkar explains that parliamentary democracy rests on four premises:

- a) The individual is an end in himself.
- b) The individual has certain inalienable rights, which must be guaranteed to him by the Constitution.
- c) The individual shall not be required to relinquish any of his constitutional rights as a condition precedent to the receipt of privilege.
- d) The state shall not delegate powers to private persons to govern others.²

Ambedkar's notion of parliamentary democracy is not confined to political domain only but deals with social and economic issues too. He laid down the following preconditions for the successful working of modern democracy:

- 1) There must be no glaring inequalities in the society. There must not be an oppressed and suppressed class. There must not be a class which gets all privileges and a class which gets all the burdens to carry.

- 2) The opposition must be strong and effective.
- 3) Law and administration must be equal for all.
- 4) Constitutional morality must be observed.³

For Ambedkar, democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in social relationships, in terms of associated life between the people who form a society.⁴ He has this to say about society:

The qualities which accompany this unity are praiseworthy community of purpose and desire for welfare, loyalty to public ends and mutuality of sympathy and co- operation. The existence of the caste system is standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy.⁵

The caste system depicts the evils which cut at the very roots of democracy.

According to him,

Democracy is that form and method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of people are brought about without bloodshed.⁶

He criticizes the dominant tendency that views politics and ethics as two different and unrelated realms. He suggests that politics cannot be conceived separately from ethics. He emphasizes democracy as a moral social order rather than mere political governance. His view of democracy connects both social and political aspects as a part of common moral sphere. Ambedkar argues that democracy requires a moral order in society. In this direction, he further enriched his earlier definition. According to him,

Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards our fellow men.⁷

Democracy is spoken of as free government. Free government means that in vast aspects of social life people are left free to carry on their life without interference of law, or if law has to be made, then the law-maker expects that society be founded on morality to make the law a success. Ambedkar observed that only Laski categorically proposes moral order as the basis of democracy.⁸ Ambedkar further adds that democracy requires 'public conscience'. Public conscience means conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer, and it means that everybody, whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved.⁹

For Ambedkar, democracy is not merely a form of government. It is essentially a form of society. A democratic form of government pre-supposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there were no social democracy.¹⁰ Ambedkar believed that political and economic revolutions have no meaning unless a social revolution takes place. He cites examples from history that show that political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolutions. In other words, he argued for ethically constituted society for effective functioning of democracy. In the Indian context, he argued for the abolition of the caste system and viewed it as anti-social in spirit for its divisive, discriminatory, hierarchical and

exploitative character. He further identified that these features of the caste system are regulated by the Hindu social order. To realize social democracy, one requires an attitude of respect and equality towards one's fellow human beings. The social organisation must be free from rigid social barriers. Democracy is incompatible and inconsistent with isolation and exclusiveness.¹¹

Ambedkar observed that in Hindu society, there are privileges for few and disabilities for the vast majority. Hindu society offers no rights which the moral sense of man could recognize. Ambedkar upheld social democracy as viewed by M.G. Ranade. Ambedkar believed that Ranade struggled to craft rights and aimed to create a social democracy, without which there could be no sure and stable politics. He further endorses Ranade's position that you cannot be liberal by halves. You cannot be both liberal in politics and conservative in religion. The heart and head must go together.¹²

17.3 EQUALITY AS A PRIME VALUE OF DEMOCRACY

Ambedkar's conception of social democracy is based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. The idea of equality is a fundamental value of democratic life. In Ambedkar's view liberty and fraternity are derived from equality. He holds that where equality is denied, everything else may be taken to be denied. In other words, equality pre-supposes democracy. According to Ambedkar:

Democracy is another name of equality. Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made even a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realize the significance of equality and did not even endeavour to strike a balance between liberty and equality, with the result that liberty swallowed equality and has made democracy a name and farce.¹³

Ambedkar accenuates the necessary connection between equality, liberty and fraternity as a key principle of democracy and mandates a balance between them for the success of democracy.

Political thinkers recognized that formal equality of citizenship is not enough for a meaningful life. Democracy requires an equality of democratic agency. Democracy is ideal for human beings because it is the only form of society which at once depends upon and provides for the organisation of free communication. It demands equality, because it is only as equals that men can communicate. Equality as a moral ideal is necessary for realization of democracy in any sphere of life especially in a society where inequalities are internalized.

In political theory, the idea of equality is addressed in a limited sense, being mostly confined to political equality and silent about economic equality. Ambedkar extends the idea of equality to social and economic realms. He argues for equality in a caste-ridden society based on graded inequality. He calls for equality of untouchable communities in terms of dignity and self-respect. His notions of the individual, the community and the religion are strikingly different from those of others, in that he imbues them with reason, justice and ultimately morality.

Ambedkar observed that to realize democracy as an ideal, Indian society has to overcome its social order which is built on the principle of inequality. He pointed out that the Hindu social order is reared on the following three principles:

- Graded inequality.
- Fixation of occupations of each class and its continuance by heredity.
- Fixation of people within their respective classes.

This scheme of graded inequality is designed and preserved to maintain social inequality. The Hindu social order leaves no choice to the individual. It fixes his occupation. It fixes his status. All that remains for the individual to do is to conform himself to these regulations. Ambedkar observed that the principle of graded inequality has been carried into the economic field.

‘From each according to his ability; to each according to his need’ is not the principle of Hindu social order. The principle of the Hindu social order is: From each according to his need. To each according to his nobility. Every side of social life is protected against the danger of equality.¹⁴

Ambedkar viewed Hindu social order as based primarily on class or varna and not on individual worth; there is no room for individual merit and no consideration of individual justice. He further holds the position that inequality is the official doctrine of Brahmanism and lower classes have been suppressed remorselessly by Brahmins. Ambedkar says: Hinduism is inimical to equality, antagonistic to liberty and opposed to fraternity.¹⁵

In the words of Ambedkar,

Justice has always evoked ideas of equality, of proportion of compensation. Equity signifies equality. Rules and regulations, right and righteousness are concerned with equality in value. If all men are equal, then all men are of the same essence, and the common essence entitles them of the same fundamental rights and equal liberty... in short justice is another name of liberty, equality and fraternity.¹⁶

Ambedkar maintains that society has to discover aptitudes and capacities of individuals and train them progressively for social use. He emphasizes that there are indefinite pluralities of capacities in an individual which may characterize his persona. A society to be democratic should pave the way to use all these capacities of the individual. Social conditions necessary for flourishing of democracy are :

- Social equality,
- Economic security and
- Access to knowledge.

Ambedkar believes that the more equal the social rights of citizens are, the more able they are in utilizing their freedom.

17.4 SAFEGUARDING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Ambedkar's conception of rights is rooted in the idea of equality that goes against an unjust social order and oppression ascribed in the name of religion. He foresees

the connection between rights, social order and economic structure. He believes that the rights promised must be accessible to all citizens in everyday life. He envisages fundamental rights for all the citizens in a liberal democratic framework. At the same time, he emphasizes safeguarding the rights of the weak and the vulnerable against the majoritarian and dominant social groups. On the one hand he upholds the rights of the citizens in relation to state, on the other he upholds moral conscience against law. He mediates between the rights of the individual and those of the groups, the state and the society, in egalitarian and ethical terms.

The object of enacting fundamental rights is to protect the liberty of the individual from invasion by other individuals. The connection between individual liberty and the shape and form of the economic structure of society may not be apparent to everyone. Ambedkar considers that the untouchable cannot be economically independent so long as he lives in a ghetto as a dependent part of the Hindu village. He further points out that the majoritarian *Hindu religion as a code of life gives Hindus many privileges and heaps upon the untouchable many indignities which are incompatible with the dignity and sanctity of human life.*¹⁷

In the Hindu social order, dalits are often discriminated against in everyday life, both in private and public. Ambedkar argues that discrimination is a menace that must be guarded against if the fundamental rights are to be real rights. In a country like India where it is possible for discrimination to be practiced on a vast scale and in a relentless manner, fundamental rights can have no meaning.¹⁸

Unequal treatment has been the inescapable fate of the untouchables in India. In this backdrop, Ambedkar puts emphasis on recognition of differences. His argument for special provisions for dalits in legislature, education and opportunities is very much in the spirit of liberalism but adapted to the specific context of the Indian nation. He articulated dalit rights in the name of rights for untouchables, depressed classes, scheduled castes and tribes in a given historical context. Along with fundamental rights applicable to all citizens, he proposed benefit of various provisions for the protection of minorities and in addition special safeguards for scheduled castes (dalits).

Ambedkar considers dalit rights as minority rights against the majoritarian Hindu society. He differentiates between social and religious minorities. Dalits are viewed as social minority and Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others are viewed as religious minorities. He pleaded for special provisions and protection of religious minorities because of the economic and educational backwardness of these communities rather than on the grounds of religion. He viewed dalit rights as group-specific rights for dignity, self-respect and development in all fields of life, for realization of a fuller human being.

He further maintains that state, instead of being neutral, has to play an interventionist role to protect the rights of dalits. *The depressed classes must be made free citizens entitled to all the rights of citizenship in common with other citizens of the state.* He also felt the need to extend the rights to many other minority communities that are suffering from similar treatment at the hands of the majority community. It is therefore necessary to have such a provision to ensure that all citizens shall have equal benefit of laws, rules and regulations.¹⁹

Ambedkar believed that,

*rights are real if they are accompanied by remedies. It is no use giving rights if the aggrieved person has no legal remedy to which he can resort when his rights are invaded. Consequently when the constitution guarantees rights it also becomes necessary to make provision to prevent the legislature and the executive from overriding them.*²⁰

Ambedkar was of the opinion that fundamental rights have no meaning unless until state protects the weak and the marginalized.

However, Ambedkar found the source of rights in the moral conscience of society rather than in law. He maintains:

*As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society. If social conscience is such that it is prepared to recognize the rights which law chooses to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no law, no parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word.*²¹

17.5 STATE SOCIALISM AS A FEATURE OF WELFARE STATE

Unfortunately, democracy could give effect only to the doctrine of one man, one value so far as the political structure is concerned. It has left the economic structure intact and allowed market forces to mould it. It was equally essential to prescribe the shape and form of the economic structure of society, if democracy was to live up to its principle of one man, one value. Ambedkar made an attempt to define by the law or constitutional framework both the economic structure as well as the political structure of society. Ambedkar pointed out that in the West, parliamentary democracy took no notice of economic inequalities and didn't care to examine the result of freedom of contract on the parties to the contract, in spite of the fact that they were unequal in their bargaining power.

Ambedkar considered state socialism, which treats everybody equally, ensures fundamental rights and safeguards the weak and vulnerable groups, as another important dimension of social democracy. State socialism is a regulative principle of the nation's economy. The state has to plan the economic life of people on lines that would lead to the highest point of productivity without closing every avenue to private enterprise, and also provide for equitable distribution of wealth. The plan proposes state ownership in agriculture with a collectivized method of cultivation and a modified form of socialism in the field of industry; it places squarely on the shoulders of the state, the obligation to supply the capital necessary for agriculture as well as for industry.

Ambedkar considers state socialism essential for economy and for India's rapid industrialization. Private enterprise cannot do it, and if it did it would produce those inequalities of wealth which private capitalism has produced in Europe and which should be a warning to Indians.²² Ambedkar maintains that state socialism has to be established by the law of the constitution and thus makes it unalterable by any act of legislature or executive. Ambedkar attempts to establish state socialism without abrogating parliamentary democracy and without leaving its establishment to the will of a parliamentary democracy.

According to the classical liberal position, liberty remains where the state refrains from intervention. Ambedkar differs with this and poses a question that, to whom and for whom is this liberty? Obviously this liberty is the liberty of landlords to increase rents, of capitalists to increase hours of work and reduce rates of wages. In other words, what is called liberty from the control of the state is another name for the dictatorship of the private employer.

Economic dependence has other consequences also besides the condition of poverty and degradation which proceeds from it. The Hindu has a code of life, which is part of his religion. The code of life gives him many privileges and heaps upon the untouchable many indignities that are incompatible with dignity and sanctity of human life. For the development of an individual, economic opportunities have to be provided and the state has to play a role in this regard.

Ambedkar's state socialism is a way out of capitalism and Brahmanism. He firmly believed that freedom of the individual is possible only under parliamentary democracy and not under dictatorship of any kind.

17.6 STRUGGLES FOR DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

For Ambedkar, society means associated living. Associated living is another name for democracy. It means showing respect and concern for fellow beings. Society should nurture the feeling of belongingness by exhibiting solidarity. Society means communication among individuals and groups of people rather than living in isolation. He looks for society as a community that is based on strong foundations of morality. Ambedkar saw Hindu society as being antithetical to these ideals. Ambedkar believed that the Hindu social ideal as prescribed by Hindu religion has acted as a most demoralizing and degrading influence on Hindu society.

It consists of an innumerable collection of castes which are exclusive in their life and have no common experience to share and have no bond of sympathy. The existence of the caste system is a standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy.²³

Ambedkar further argued for the prosperity of the full capacity of an individual.

There is in a man an indefinite pluralities of capacities and activities which may characterize an individual. A society to be democratic should open a way to use all the capacities of the individual. Stratification is stunting of the growth of the individual and deliberate stunting is a deliberate denial of democracy.²⁴

Ambedkar reiterates his vision of social democracy through his writings and struggles. The election manifesto of the Schedule Castes Federation illustrates his position on social democracy:

The party will treat all Indians not only as being equal before the law but being entitled to equality and will accordingly foster equality where it does not exist and uphold where it is denied.

It will regard every Indian as an end in himself with a right to his own development in his own way and the State as only a means to that end.

It will uphold the right of every Indian to equality of opportunity subject to the provision that those who have had none in the past shall have priority over those who had.

It will keep the State ever aware of its obligation to make every Indian free from want and free from fear.

It will insist on the maintenance of liberty, equality and fraternity and will strive for redemption from oppression and exploitation of man by man, of class by class and of nation by nation.

It will stand for parliamentary system of government as being the best form of government both in the interest of public and the interest of the individual.²⁵

17.7 LET US SUM UP

Ambedkar is an important political philosopher, who contributed to the tradition of social democracy. In principle, he argued for one man, one value and equality before law in a hierarchical society. Ambedkar's conception of democracy represents a liberalism of a different kind, encompassing elements of socialism. Equality, in both theory and practice is an essential component of his conception of democracy. He wanted to broaden the scope of equality from political domain to include social and economic domains as well. His conception of democracy has both instrumental and intrinsic values. He moves beyond liberalism by arguing that the essence of democracy lies in associative, communicative and righteous social life. He brings in a communitarian view of democracy that is based on strong foundations of morality.

Ambedkar is critical about Hindu community, which does not recognize the individual worth and capabilities. He attacks Hinduism for its non-recognition of human personality and its deliberate debasement. He observed that the philosophy of Hinduism from the viewpoint of justice reveals that it is inimical to equality, antagonistic to liberty and opposed to fraternity. He proposes a moral community based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. He believes that individuals make sense of their identity in a moral community and proposes reflexive individualism.

Ambedkar argues that social and economic democracies are the tissues and fiber of a political democracy. He maintains that the tougher the tissue and fiber, the greater the strength of the body. Moreover, the strength of Ambedkar's vision of social democracy lies in balancing equality, liberty and fraternity in both idealistic and realistic terms.

For Ambedkar, the roots of democracy lie not in the form of government but in social relations. He maintains that the preconditions for the success of democracy are that there must not be glaring inequalities in society and there must be statutory provisions to mitigate the sufferings and safeguard the interests of the oppressed. Ambedkar considers the disadvantaged should be the constitutive basis of the state. He demands special considerations for certain groups based on disadvantage, disability, subordination, oppression and injustice.

He developed a complex set of criteria to determine the state of disadvantage and attempted to specify its various gradations. He argues for a need for a system of safeguards for the disadvantaged in general and untouchables in particular. Ambedkar observed that the rights guaranteed by the state are not enough to protect the rights of Dalits; social and moral conscience to protect laws are also required. He puts more emphasis on the moral society and its customs than on the written legal law in governing people. He considers that social

morality is required for effective functioning of a democratic form of government.

17.8 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) What are the basic features of Ambedkar's social democracy?
- 2) How do you see the principle of equality being central to the flourishing of democracy?
- 3) Discuss Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu social order and in what way is it an impediment to democracy?
- 4) What is the role of the state in bringing about economic equality and protecting the rights of its citizens?
- 5) Write a short note on Ambedkar's conception of state socialism.
- 6) What do you understand about Ambedkar's emphasis on moral conscience over written legal law in governing the people?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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End Notes

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⁴ Jadhav, Narendra, ed. Ambedkar Speaks, Vol.1. New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2013, p.297

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