
UNIT 16 PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Structure

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16.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- the meaning of parliamentary democracy;
- the contribution of B. R. Ambedkar to parliamentary democracy;
- the challenges and prospects of parliamentary democracy; and
- the contribution of parliament to democracy.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss the meaning of parliamentary democracy and Ambedkar's contribution of parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary democracy is a democratic form of government in which the party (or a coalition of parties) with the greatest representation in parliament (legislature) forms the government, its leader becoming prime minister. Executive functions are exercised by members of parliament appointed by the prime minister to the cabinet. The parties in the minority serve as opposition to the majority and have the duty to challenge it regularly. The prime minister may be removed from power whenever he or she loses the confidence of a majority of the ruling party or of parliament. Parliamentary democracy originated in Britain and was adopted in several of its former colonies.¹

Broadly, parliamentary democracy functions are according to certain postulates, the most important being responsibility of the executive to the legislature; and through the legislature ultimately to the electorate and the country. Another postulate is a peaceful transfer of governmental authority from one party to another either as the result of an adverse vote in parliament or after a general election. It presupposes a party government founded on collective responsibility. This is how the British Parliament has evolved. Parliamentary institutions elsewhere have copied this pattern with modifications and deviations; and India is no exception. Parliamentary democracy here bears about it the marks of its parentage.²

In a parliamentary democracy, the government must maintain the confidence of parliament at all times. Therefore, government formation and legislative decision making are necessarily intertwined, and a bargaining perspective is a natural

approach to coalition formation and policy choice. Moreover, as both government formation and legislations depend on representation in parliament, voters, to the extent that they respond to incentives related to policy outcomes, must base their voting decision on expected coalition formation outcomes. This is true especially in proportional representation systems, the modal electoral institution in parliamentary democracies. The incentives present in a parliamentary system also affect the continuity of governments and policy. In equilibrium, governments generally do not persist from one inter-election period to the next and neither do their policies. Government transition and policy change thus should be expected in parliamentary systems, independently of whether there are shocks to the system.³

16.2 MEANING OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

India is the largest democracy in the world. Scholars have defined democracy in different ways. Dicey defines democracy as “that form of government in which the governing body is a comparatively large fraction of the entire nation. Bryce accepts the definition of Herodotus and says that democracy denotes that form of government in which the ruling power of the state is largely vested in the members of the community as a whole.”⁴ Bryce adds “This means in communities which act by voting, that rule belongs to the majority, as no other method has been bound for determining peacefully and legally what is to be declared the will of the community which is not unanimous.”⁵ Bagehot defines democracy as “government by discussion,” Lincoln as “the government of the people, by the people and for the people.”⁶ But Ambedkar was not satisfied with the definitions of democracy given by Walter, Bagehot or Abraham Lincoln.

He viewed Grothe’s notions about freedom, self-government and democracy as fallacious and misleading. Ambedkar writes:

For, words such as society, nation and country are just amorphous if not ambiguous terms. There is no gain saying that ‘nation’ through one word means many classes. Philosophically, it may be possible to consider a nation as a unit but sociologically, it cannot but be regarded as consisting of many classes and the freedom of the nation, if it is to be reality, must vouchsafe the freedom of the different classes comprised in it, particularly of those who are treated as the servile classes.⁷

According to Ambedkar, democracy means, “a form and method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed. If democracy can enable those who are running it to bring about fundamental changes in the social and economic life of the people and the people accept those changes without resorting to bloodshed, then, I say, that there is democracy. That is the real test. It is perhaps the severest test.”⁸

He desired to remove the contradiction created by economic and social inequalities. He wanted to establish the principle of one man, one vote and one value not only in political life of India but also in social and economic life; in other words, he wanted political democracy to be accompanied by social democracy. He was conscious of the social and economic inequalities which corrode the national consciousness of the Indian people. He said, “we must make our political democracy a social democracy as well, political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy.”⁹

Democracy means that political power is ultimately in the hands of the whole adult population and that no smaller group has the right to rule. "Democracy only takes on a more useful meaning when qualified by one or the other word with which it is associated, for example, liberal democracy, representative democracy, participatory democracy or direct democracy."¹⁰ Although all free societies are democratic, democracies can fail to protect individual freedom. Countries are considered democratic to the extent that they have fair and frequent elections in which nearly all adults have the right to vote, citizens have the right to form and join organizations and to express themselves. Democracy must ascertain the constitutional structure that best suits the needs of a particular country. Alternative forms of constitutional democracy include parliamentary versus presidential forms of government, plurality versus proportional representation system and federal versus unitary systems.

16.3 AMBEDKAR'S VIEW ON PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

According to Ambedkar, "Parliamentary democracy is unknown to us at present. But India, at one time had parliamentary institutions. India was far more advanced in ancient times. If you go throughout the Suktas of Mahaprinibbana, you will find ample evidence in support of my point. In these Suktas it is stated that while Bhagwan Buddha was dying at Kusinara (Kusinagara) a message to the effect was sent to the Mallas who were sitting in session at that time. They decided that they should not close the session but would carry on with their work and would go to Kusinara after finishing of the business of Parliament."¹¹

Ambedkar was a fervent believer in democracy. He took a rationalistic and comprehensive view of democracy. He was, by philosophical persuasion, a liberal democrat. While pursuing the cause of justice for the Untouchables, he was in fact enunciating the democratic principle as the bedrock of justice.

His vision of a democratic society was one in which there will be neither an oppressor class nor a suppressed class; equality before law and in administration and functioning of moral order in society. He wrote elsewhere that a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity should be the only alternative to a caste society. It should be full of channels for conveying a change, taking place in one part to other parts. It should be mobile. There must be 'social endosmosis'. This is fraternity which is only another name for democracy. He writes:

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 fellowmen.¹²

He was aware of the fact that equality is a fiction and is "glaringly fallacious, "but believed that we cannot escape it. We can get the most out of people by "making them (everyone) equal as far as possible at the very start of the race."¹³ It is quite clear from this that he was taking a purely 'secular' approach to the problem of democracy, and he believed in democracy that was complete and real. He firmly believed that political democracy could not succeed without social and economic democracy. According to him, social and economic democracy is the tissue and the fibre of political democracy. He did not make a secret of his utter dissatisfaction and dismay at the inadequacy of the democratic

edifice created in the Constitution of India, of which he himself was the chief architect.¹⁴ In his address to the Constituent Assembly, he said:

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 recognising 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 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 moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.¹⁵

So, he attached high importance to establishing the principle of 'one man one value' along with the principle of 'one man one vote and, one vote one value', that alone can make democracy complete and real. This is the soul of democracy. In other words, political power, economic strength and social position should be shared equally by all sections of society in a democracy. He pleaded for a share for the Dalits in the political power of the country so that they could influence decision making and participate in the policy- making process in their favour. "His idea of democracy is thus, tinged with social realism, human experience and reason, pragmatic and humanistic outlook on life."¹⁶ He accepted the theory of state socialism instead of communism or capitalism for achieving economic equality and prosperity.

To Ambedkar, three main things were inherent in parliamentary system of government. These were¹⁷:

- 1) Parliamentary government means negation of hereditary rule. No person can claim to be a hereditary ruler. Whoever wants to rule must be elected by the people from time to time. He must obtain the approval of the people. Hereditary rule has no sanction in Parliamentary System of Government.
- 2) Any law, any measure, applicable to the public life of the people must be based on the advice of the people chosen by the people. No single individual can presume the authority that he knows everything, that he can make the laws and carry the Government. The laws are to be made by the representatives of the people in Parliament. They are the people who can advise the men in whose name the law is proclaimed. That is the difference between the monarchical system of government and the democratic system of government. In monarchy the affairs of the people are carried on in the name of the monarch and under the authority of a monarch. In democracy the affairs of the public are carried on in the name of the head of the state, but the laws and the executive measures are the authority on which the government is carried on. The head of the state is the titular head; he is merely a symbol. He is a concentrated 'Murti'. He can be worshipped but he is not allowed to carry out the government of the country. The government of the country is carried out, though in his name, by the elected representatives of the people.
- 3) Parliamentary system of the government means that at a stated period those who want to advise the head of the state must have the confidence of the people in themselves renewed.

According to him, “this is also not enough. Parliamentary system of government is much more than government by discussion. There are two pillars on which the parliamentary system of government rests. These are the fulcrums on which the mechanism works. Those two pillars are (1) an opposition, and (2) free and fair elections.”¹⁸

About his preference of parliamentary system of government, Ambedkar wrote:

During the discussion in the Constituent Assembly, there was a variety of opinion as regards the nature of the Constitution that we should have. Some preferred British system; some the American system, there were others who did not want either of these two types of government. But after a long discussion a large majority of members came to a conclusion that the system of the parliamentary government as it is in Britain is best suited to our country. There are some sections of people who do not like the parliamentary government. Communists want the Russian type of government. The socialists are also against the present Constitution of India, they are agitating against it, they have declared that if they come to power they will modify it. Personally speaking, I am very attached to the parliamentary system of government.¹⁹

According to Ambedkar, there are some limitations leading to failure of parliamentary democracy in a country.

In a parliamentary democracy, the Executive may be held up by the Legislature which may refuse to pass the laws which the Executive wants and if it is not held up by the Legislature it may be held by the judiciary which may declare the laws as illegal. Parliamentary democracy gives no free hand to dictatorship and that is why it became a discredited institution in countries like Italy, Spain and Germany which readily welcomed dictatorships.²⁰

Ambedkar analysed the reasons for the failure of some parliamentary democracies. He noted that even in countries pledged to democracy there may be a great deal of discontent and dissatisfaction against parliamentary democracy. “The discontent against parliamentary democracy is due to the realization that it has failed to assure to the masses the right to liberty, property or the pursuit of happiness.”²¹

The cause of this failure, he said, may be found in either wrong ideology or wrong organisation or both.

One such erroneous ideology is the idea of freedom of contract and its ignorance of the economic inequalities of the parties in the contract. Another wrong ideology that has vitiated the institution of parliamentary democracy is the failure to realize and feel that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy.

About bad organisation, he says the following:

All political societies get divided into two classes, the Rulers and the Ruled. This is an evil. If the evil stopped here it would not matter much. But the unfortunate part of it is that the division becomes so stereotyped and stratified that Rulers are always drawn from the ruling class and the class that is ruled never becomes the ruling class. This happens because generally people do not care to see that they govern themselves, they are content to establish a government and leave it to govern them.²²

Ambedkar warned the harbingers of democracy that if parliamentary democracy fails in this land, the result will be rebellion, anarchy and communism. He says:

I want you to take note of these eventful certainties and if you wish that parliamentary democracy prevails in this country, if you are satisfied that we will be assured of our liberty of thought, speech and action, if we should preserve our independence, if we cherish the inherent right of individual liberty, then it is your duty as student, as intelligent community of our country, to strive your utmost to cherish this parliamentary system of government in its true spirit and to work for it.²³

16.4 LET US SUM UP

In context of the preceding discussion it is now possible to set out the key characteristics of a parliamentary democracy. Parliaments differ from one another in terms of social and economic context. There are federal and unitary states. There are presidential and parliamentary systems. There are single and dual-chamber parliaments. Above all there are enormous differences between countries, not only in their size, but also in their levels of economic development, and in the resources that are consequently available to parliaments for carrying out their work. Ambedkar firmly believed that without social and economic democracy political democracy could not succeed. According to him, social and economic democracy is the tissue and the fibre of political democracy.

16.5 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) If parliaments are to survive as an effective instrument of mankind, they must adapt themselves to the great social and political forces and problems of our time. Critically discuss giving suitable examples.
- 2) Discuss the challenges and prospects of parliamentary democracy.
- 3) Discuss in detail giving suitable examples of parliamentary contribution to democracy.
- 4) Analyse the political philosophy of Bhim Rao Ambedkar in context of parliamentary democracy.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Endnotes

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- ⁵ *Ibid.* P. 327.
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- ⁷ G. S. Lokhande. 1982. pp. 22-23.
- ⁸ Bhagwan Das. *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*. Jullunder, Punjab: Buddhist Publishing Home. 1963. pp. 49-50.
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- ¹¹ Prem Kumar Chumber and TakshilaChumber (2012). *Future of Parliamentary Democracy*; This speech was delivered by Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar at D.A.V. College, Jalandhar on 28th of October, 1951. *Ambedkar Times*. (2012) VOL-4 ISSUE-6. (See: [http://ambedkartimes.com/Ambedkar%20Times%20\(August%2015,%202012\).pdf](http://ambedkartimes.com/Ambedkar%20Times%20(August%2015,%202012).pdf) (Accessed on 11-01-2017))
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- ¹⁴ *Constituent Assembly Debate (CAD)*, Vol. XI, p. 979.
- ¹⁶ Rajasekhariah, A. M., and Hemalata Jayaraj. 1991. pp. 357-375.
- ¹⁷ Bharathi, K. S. (1998). *The Political Thought of Ambedkar (Encyclopaedia of Eminent Thinkers)*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi 110059, pp 78-79
- ¹⁸ Bhagwan Das. 1963. pp. 52-53.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 49-50.
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- ²¹ Bhagwan Das. 1963. p. 31.
- ²² *Ibid.* p. 31.
- ²³ K. S. Bharathi. 1990. p. 141.