
UNIT 18 FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- the basic meaning and vision of democracy;
- Ambedkar's views on democracy; and
- the future of democracy.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will emphasis the meaning and vision of democracy and also reflect Ambedkar's views on democracy and the future of democracy. Ambedkar did not see democracy as a mere mechanical tool for forming an elected government through political competition of self-interested individuals aspiring for political office. For him it was an expression of fraternity in which representative and represented are bound by love, affection, empathy and share equal dignity. Democracy is both an end and a means in a sense that it is a vision of good society based on ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity and above all dignity; it is also an institutional arrangement to achieve those ideals.

Ambedkar upheld the fundamental western idea of democracy i.e. government of the people, by the people and for the people, but gave it a more substantive meaning. He believed that democracy was a way of life. He said, "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."

18.2 VISION OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy as a form of government or as a mode of associated living does not bear the same meaning across time and space. The ancient Greeks had Athenian democracy. The Athenian democracy was different from our modern democracy in a sense that it allowed over fifty percent of its population to be slaves, who had no place in the government at all. The rest of the people who were free in Athens enjoyed all civil and political rights.

Secondly, democracy even in the same country has not always been the same. Democracy in England before and after the revolution of 1688 was different; democracy in France after the French revolution of 1789 did not remain the same. Similarly democracy in India before 1947 was not the same as we have it today. Democracy not only undergoes changes in form, it also undergoes change in purpose. The purpose of modern democracy is not so much to put a curb on an autocratic king but to bring about the welfare of the people.

Although democracy has changed a lot, at its core lies a government by discussion. Drawing inspiration from Buddhism, Ambedkar argues that the tradition of governing people by discussion is not new to India. Although it is unknown to us at present, India was far more advanced in ancient times. He cites example of the *Suktas* of *Mahaparinirbhana* in which it is stated that while Budhha was dying in Kushinara (Kushinagar), a message was sent to the Mallas who were sitting in session that time and discussing important affairs of governance. When they received the message about Budhha, they decided that they would not close the session, but carry on with their work and will go to Kushinara after finishing of the business of parliament. They were devoted to parliamentary institutions.

The Budhhist Sanghas also had a rule about parliamentary procedure, i.e. no discussion without motion. They also followed the system of secret ballot, so much in vogue now. Budhhist Sanghas had ballot papers, which they called *Salapatraka Grahakas*. Unfortunately all this past heritage that was good has been lost.

This ancient Budhhist understanding of democracy also gets its reflection in the modern parliamentary governments. In *The English Constitution* (1867), the British essayist Walter Bagehot sums up the essence of parliamentary government in one sentence. He says parliamentary government means government by discussion, not by fisticuffs. Ambedkar's vision of democracy also draws inspiration from Abraham Lincoln, who in his famous Gettysburg speech, defined democracy as "a government of the people, by the people and for the people." This definition of Lincoln assumes the underlined unity and fraternity of the people and any division of the people on the basis of hierarchy or mutual repulsion will ruin democracy.

If democracy is to succeed in India, it needs to redefine itself in terms of its purposes. Ambedkar defined democracy "as a form and method of government whereby revolutionary change 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 it can be said that there is democracy in India.

What are the conditions which must exist in order that the democratic form of government may continue to work without any kind of hindrance? Ambedkar enumerates seven conditions for the successful working of democracy in India.

- 1) No glaring inequality in the society. Neither should be there be an oppressed class that carries all the burden nor an oppressive class that has all the privileges. A glaringly unequal and oppressive society has within itself the germ of bloody revolution and perhaps it would be impossible for democracy to cure it.

- 2) An effective opposition. Democracy means that at some stage somewhere there must be a veto on authority. The government should be subject to veto at the hands people every five years and there must be people in parliament to challenge the government immediately in the house itself.
- 3) Equality in law and administration. The administration must be discrimination-free and must treat everyone equally. The government must not interfere in administration as its task is to formulate policy.
- 4) Constitutional morality must be observed. The Constitution is a mere skeleton of the polity whereas constitutional morality is the flesh and blood of polity. The Constitution is a set of rules of the game; people must be ready to obey it.
- 5) The moral order of the society must be functioning. The moral order of the society is often taken as granted in a democracy. If there is no moral order, democracy will go to pieces.
- 6) In the name of democracy, there must be no tyranny of majority over minority.
- 7) Public conscience must exist. Public conscience means the conscience that becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer and it means that everybody, whether he or she suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join in to set right, a wrong.

Along with aforesaid seven conditions precedent for the successful working of democracy in India, Ambedkar talks about two pillars on which parliamentary democracy rests; these are the fulcrum on which the mechanism works. These are:

- an opposition
- free and fair elections.

There are always two sides to a question of polity; it is necessary that the people should know both the sides. If one side is represented by the government then the other is raised by the opposition, hence a functional opposition is required in a successful parliamentary democracy. An effective opposition is the key to a free political life of a democracy.

Free and fair elections are necessary for the transfer of power from one section of community to the other in a peaceful manner and without bloodshed. Ambedkar warns us not to lose sight of the fact that big businesses, corporate houses and black money are playing a big role in the political life of this country. If moneyed people try to influence the election by contributing to the election funds of any political party, they will naturally try to extract concession for themselves either by modifying present legislation or by influencing the party in power to legislate in such a manner as would be beneficial to their interests.

In *Mahabharatha*, when somebody asked Bhishma as to why he was supporting the *Kauravs* if he found the *Pandavas* to be in the right, Bhishma replied, “I must be loyal to the salt: if I eat the food of *Kauravas*, I must take their side even if they might be in the wrong.” Thus ensuring free and fair elections and keeping use of money power out of electioneering is the biggest challenge for a successful future of Indian democracy.

18.3 CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

B R Ambedkar in his famous parting speech to the constituent assembly 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... 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.

Economic equality is imperative for the success of the western model of parliamentary democracy. Political scientists such as Alexis de Tocqueville argue that democracy in America (the US) and Europe is a success because the majority of the population in these countries is middle class. India adopted the model of western democracy even though its middle class was virtually absent and a considerable part of its population consisted of poor, illiterate and starving people. The stark economic inequality bears the seed of revolution in its womb, if not rectified, sooner than later, it shall blow up the institution of democracy in India.

Democratic politics demands a democratic society at its base, the undemocratic social structure based on hierarchy and mutual hatred is a danger to the successful working of democracy in India. In India, society does not recognize individuals, as is the case of modern liberal democracies; rather it recognizes innumerable castes that are exclusive to each other, have no common experience to share and have no bonds of sympathy.

Caste is a system of graded inequality. This means castes are not equal in their status; they stand one above another. This system breeds jealousy and destroys willing and helpful co-operation. It is an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt. Castes are bound to occupations thus, stunting the growth of individuals. The existence of caste system is a standing denial of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy. Then the question is how to put an end to the caste system? Ambedkar suggests the following for the destruction of the caste system:

- education for the lower castes
- inter-dinning
- inter-caste marriage
- sharing of political power.

The birth of egalitarian social order is a pre-condition to a substantive democratic politics.

The gains of democratic politics are often of no use in highly religious and superstitious societies. For Ambedkar, primacy of religion over politics posed a great challenge to democracy in India. Taking a case of Roman society, Ambedkar illustrates that the power of religion over man often make him blind to his material needs and political power.

In Roman society there were two classes of citizens, patricians (upper class) and plebians (lower class). Plebians fought hard to obtain a share in political power, and had secured the appointment of a plebian consul elected by a separate

electorate constituted by an assembly of plebians in the supreme executive under the Roman Republic. In the ordinary course of things the plebians should have got a strong plebian consul in view of the fact that his election was to be by a separate electorate of plebians but this did not happen. The reason for this was the domination of religion over the minds of the Roman people. It was an accepted creed of the Roman people that no official could enter upon the duties of his office unless the Oracle of Delphi declared that he was acceptable to the Goddess. The priests who were in charge of the temple of the goddess of Delphi were all patricians. Whenever therefore the plebians elected a consul who was known to be a strong party man opposed to the patricians, the oracle invariably declared that he was not acceptable to the Goddess.

What is worthy of note is that the plebians permitted themselves to be thus cheated because they too, like the patricians, held firmly the belief that the approval of the Goddess was a condition precedent to an official taking charge of his duties, and that election by the people was not enough. If the plebians had contended that election was enough and that the approval by the Goddess was not necessary, they would have derived the full benefit from the political right which they had obtained.

If parliamentary democracy fails in our country for the reasons mentioned by Ambedkar, if the people in power do not realize that the masses will not tolerate unbearable social inequality, economic inequality and hereditary political authority, the only result will be rebellion, anarchy and communism.

18.4 FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

The future of democracy in India depends a great deal on:

- reconciling ethnic pluralism with elaborate institutional arrangement of minority rights
- ensuring that people on social and economic margins, find representation at every level in institutions and processes of democratic politics.

It is an imperative for Indian polity to put an end to segregation and injustice. “I, me, myself and my India is the only world within which I am bound.” If people start to think like this, the minority which is suffering from injustice gets no help from others for the purpose of getting rid of injustice. This can develop a revolutionary mentality which puts democracy in danger.

However, there are also counter-trends, in the form of growth of democratic space and democratic spirit. There has been a rise in various kinds of social movements which have expanded individual rights and community rights. The quality of Indian democracy has also improved. There is now a better representation of women in politics especially at grassroot level. The most powerful and promising trend is the growing participation of the underprivileged, especially Dalits and Backward Classes. They have understood the meaning of political power as a master key which opens the gate to all opportunities. Therefore, they are participating in large numbers, not only as mute participants by way of voting, but with the spirit and enthusiasm to change the democratic landscape of the country. This new trend in Dalit Bahujan politics has been termed as the “Second Democratic Upsurge” by political scientists. It seems that the future of Indian democracy is in their able and safe hands unless economic democracy fails them miserably.

In its most general sense, Ambedkar pinned his hope for economic democracy mainly on state action:

- central planning
- collectivization of agriculture
- state ownership of key industries, public health and education.

The study of the changing nature of the Indian state suggests that after a brief euphoria of socialism and withdrawal of state during LPG (Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization), the Indian state is reinventing itself and having greater clarity about the scope of expanding economic democracy through means other than state socialism, such as the following:

- worker management
- producer co-operatives
- non-profit organisation
- participatory planning
- community control over environmental resources
- a renewed focus on providing universal basic services like primary education and health care.

Indian democracy is still relatively young – seven decades are not a long time to make the transition from a society around the privileges of a small minority to one governed “by the people for the people”. To meet the demand of social transformation by state action, the state in India has made several protective legislations for various marginalized groups i.e. Dalits, tribals, women and minorities. Although effective implementation of laws is a challenge before the Indian democracy, it has definitely started an unfinished journey on the invaluable advice of B. R. Ambedkar that,

Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity which are not to be treated as separate items in 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. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity.

18.5 LET US SUM UP

In short, Ambedkar’s conception of democracy is that of a revolutionary democracy which aims at bringing social transformation and human progress. It dispels conservative elements, superstition and hierarchy in society, and attempts to establish an egalitarian social order, so that every citizen of this country gets an environment in which fullest development of his personality becomes a reality.

The aim of democracy is to end gender inequality, caste discrimination, safeguard minority rights, safeguard tribal rights and minimize the inequality of income, status and opportunity, and to uphold the principle of one person one value and one vote. It is a form of government working on the principles of equality, liberty

and fraternity, which is capable of bringing revolutionary change in the economic and social life of people without bloodshed.

18.6 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) According to B. R. Ambedkar, what are the necessary conditions for a successful democracy in India?
- 2) Examine B R Ambedkar's definition of democracy. How does it differ from a dogmatic definition of democracy?
- 3) Discuss the role of opposition in the successful working of democracy in India.
- 4) What is the future of Indian democracy considering the challenges it is facing today.
- 5) What do you understand by social democracy? Is parliamentary democracy in India a social democracy?

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