

Ambedkar's Vision for India: A Critical Take on Nation and Democracy

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To the downtrodden sections of the Indian society, the iconic statue of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is much more than a mere idol. It symbolizes a ray of hope as it epitomizes the tireless strive of the oppressed for their long-denied dues. It is noteworthy that the statue holds a book. That book is not his revolutionary *Annihilation of Caste*, but a copy of the Indian constitution, in the conceptualization of which he had played a crucial role. But his contribution as the architect of a democratic nation is often overshadowed by his image as the emancipator of the Dalits. "On Building of Nation and Its Democracy," a collection of texts sheds light upon this facet of the stalwart social reformer that otherwise receives relatively less attention. A compilation of various letters, press statements and other writings of the reformist, it is included in the second part of the seventeenth volume of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* edited by Hari Narake, M. L. Kasare, N. G. Kamble, and Ashok Godghate. The first edition of the book was published by the Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra in 2003. The book was reprinted in 2014 by Dr. Ambedkar Foundation. In the following sections of this essay I will explore the collection "One Building of Nation and Its Democracy" by way of arguing that Ambedkar's advocacy for the Dalits was a part of the greater vision he had for making India an independent nation and a true democracy.

In Greek "Demos" means "people" and "kratia" means "to rule." By this etymological analysis, Aristotle defined democracy as the system in which people possess the supreme power. Abraham Lincoln viewed it as Government by the people, for the people, and of the people. But according to Anthony Arblaster, "democracy is a concept before it is a fact because it is a concept it has no single, precise and agreed meaning" (3). So essentially, the structure of democracy should vary considering regional needs. Realizing this, Ambedkar

had understood that it was unwise to completely emulate western democracy in India because it was based on the principles of equality and fraternity which were almost unimaginable in the caste-ridden Hindu society. The Indian society during his time was numerically, economically and culturally dominated by one particular class and the introduction of joint electorates would have resulted in a Government ruled by a class, for a class, and of a class. The solution provided by Ambedkar in “Joint vs. Separate Electorates Dr. Ambedkar via Media” is “to separate the two questions that are covered in the Communal Award, namely the question of seats and the question of electorates” (“On Building” 290). The separate electorate for every community would bring about fair representation of even the most neglected lot in the parliament. However, the decision of whether separate electorates should be introduced or not, in a certain province, was vested by Ambedkar upon the minorities of that province. He states, “If the minority wants separate electorates the majority should have nothing to say against it; equally if the minority wants joint electorates, the majority should be bound to accept their decision” (“On Building” 291). This made possible the co-existence of joint electorates at some provinces and separate electorates at others. According to him, “the proposal has the merit of establishing a middle stage between the extreme Congress and Hindu Mahasabha stand on joint electorates throughout and the extreme Muslim demand of separate electorates throughout” (“On Building” 292).

Babasaheb’s affiliation for parliamentary democracy, in which voice of no citizen remains suppressed, is also reflected in “We Shall Wage Relentless War to Introduce Adult Franchise.” Therein he points out the hypocrisy of the Congress which though used to boast of toiling for democracy, did not take the initiative for the introduction of adult franchises in the Bombay municipality. That is, however, not the only instance when the hypocrisy of the Congress and Gandhi is demonstrated by Ambedkar. In “Indians’ Destiny is Bound up with the Victory of Democracy,” Ambedkar explains logically how rejecting the Cripps Mission, which conceded Independence and constituent assembly but only failed to transfer defense, was a blunder done by the Congress in desperation to earn back its lost prestige. (Cripps Mission, formed by the British Government in 1942 and headed by Sir Stafford Cripps, was aimed at convincing the Indians to fully extend their support to the British in World War II. – Ed. Note.) But one of the reasons for which, according to him, asking for Indian control of

defense was futile is quite disturbing as it stated, “there is no Indian politician so far as I know, competent to run the technical and military side of the Defence department” (“On Building” 329).

Interestingly, the Cripps Mission was a British assay to secure India's cooperation in World War II. In “Great Britain must be Supported,” Ambedkar opines that India should render support to Great Britain in the war. He not only criticizes the sense of unwillingness and hesitancy in participation that India was showing but also condemns Britain for herself being the reason for the same. According to Ambedkar, by overlooking Hitler's aggression towards “smaller” countries, Britain had actually demoralized the reason to join the war on their side. Moreover, the negligible to no “locus standi” given to India in the empire's foreign affairs had made Indians even more disinterested. Per contra, he adds that reciprocating India's assistance, Britain also must have had recognized the duties it owed to the Indians. They must have had aided India in harnessing her unparalleled human resource so that she could have defended not only herself but also the whole empire in necessity. The means of bringing this immense manpower to use was, according to Ambedkar, the introduction of compulsory military training for a certain age group irrespective of class or creed. The other task of the British was to disambiguate the exact status of India within the empire. In “India and the British Commonwealth,” rather than getting carried away by nationalistic fanaticism, Ambedkar stayed pragmatic while considering which one was a better option for India – national status or dominion status. His clear preference was the dominion status because according to him not severing all ties with the British might have had helped India in obtaining arms and ammunitions much needed at that time for building up India's defence. But he was also aware of the drawbacks embedded in the commonwealth framework which conflicts with India's constitution.

Though Babasaheb supported British proposals when he felt those were beneficial for India, he did not hesitate to outright scrap the ones he understood to be conflicting with Indian interest. The text “Mobilise against Federation Turning Point in History of Nation” concerns Ambedkar's opinion regarding the Federal Plan present in the Government of India Act, 1935. It appears from the text that he was substantially unimpressed by the aforementioned plan owing to the “imperfections” and “inherent defects” in it that his party,

i.e., Independent Labour Party, had identified. These shortcomings included the uneven distribution of financial burden between provinces and British India, excess representation given to states, indirect election to the federal assembly and special obligations of the Governor General. He argued that even though the said problems could be sorted out, the unsolvable problem will remain the impedance in acquiring full control over the army and finances. Ambedkar's take on the issue becomes clear from the statement, "The Federal part of the new constitution must be shunned as a deadly poison" ("On Building" 304).

Though Ambedkar opposed the Federal Plan proposed by the British, in some of the subsequent texts he has provided ideas for the creation of new states which would be very relevant in the federal polity of post-Independence India. In "One Official Language for Centre and Provinces," he writes in favour of the creation of linguistic provinces because as maintained by him, that could bring homogeneity in a state. He argues, "The reason why in a heterogeneous society democracy cannot succeed is because power, instead of being used impartially is used to the detriment of another" ("On Building" 360). Be that as it may, he disapproved of making Bombay a city state despite being a multilingual urban agglomerate because he perceived Maharashtra and Bombay to be integral to one another. But in "Ambedkar's Recipe for Maharashtra" he proposed the division of the Maharashtra state on linguistic basis. Nonetheless, he did not want the formation of a very large province even if the entire population had linguistic homogeneity. For this reason in "Strongly Object Creation of Monolithic Monstrous States," he proffered division of Uttarpradesh and Bihar. These states, he felt, could put at stake, interests of not only the centre but also their own minority communities. Nevertheless, though Ambedkar pressed for the formation of states on the basis of language, he wanted the official language of the centre to be that of the states as well. Hindi according to him was the most suitable for being the official language of India "because of the fact it could expand" ("On Building" 385). This he wrote in "Retain English at any Cost" where he also expressed his view that English should be retained as the medium of instructions in Indian educational institutes as it was the "richest of all languages" ("On Building" 385). Ambedkar recommended a common official language in the centre and the states because he thought it would be detrimental to further fragmentation of the country. But when it came to the ordeal from which these qualms had appeared, i.e., the issue of the

partition, Ambedkar's stand appears to have been neither inclined toward Congress which was strongly opposed to the partition, nor towards Muslim League which was incessantly insisting for the same. In "We can be a Nation Only through Social Amalgamation" he had put his view as follows, "I do not agree with Mr. Gandhi and the Congress when they say that India is a nation. I do not agree either with the foreign relations committee of the Muslim League when they say that Hindus and Muslims could not be welded together into a nation" ("On Building" 318). In "How to End Indian Political Impasse" he tried to mediate between the two sides by giving the agency directly to the people to decide whether division was required or not. The true significance of this proposal laid in the sense that for the first time someone was paying heed to the opinions about the partition of those whose lives were about to be most affected by it. He wrote in "Wisdom and Statesmanship will Dawn to Prevent India from being Divided into Two Parts" that what the Muslims and minorities wanted right from the beginning was their rightful share in the Government and had that safeguard not been denied by Congress, demand for the partition might had never arisen. In "Unless these Points were Cleared No Lead on Partition Issue," he raised some very serious questions concerning protection of minorities in both the countries about to be formed after the partition. But he seemed not at all content with activities of the Boundary Commission set up to fix the national boundary after the partition. This he expressed in "If Boundary Drawn is not Natural it will Put the Safety and Security of the People of India in Great Jeopardy," where he gave further pragmatic suggestions for forming the boundary.

Notwithstanding everything said so far, Ambedkar as a nation builder has still more laurels to his name. The text "First Proposal on Central Irrigation and Waterways Advisory Board" bears testimony to Ambedkar's earnest efforts as a member of the central cabinet during 1942-46, to establish the Central Irrigation and Waterways Advisory Board which would set the road map of India's post-independence irrigation development. This dedication he had for framing India's irrigation policy is further manifested in the texts "Control and Utilize the Mahanadi to the Best Advantage" and "Flood-control Use of Atomic Power." Apart from irrigation he also had a deep understanding of the foreign policy of the nascent republic as evident in "U.S.A. Inclined towards Pakistan" where he freely expresses his concerns about America's public opinion being more favourable for Pakistan than India.

In “No Use about Independent Foreign Policy without Striking Power,” he unequivocally blames Nehru for “dragging India headlong to ruin” (“On Building” 383). The text “One Man’s Traffic in Public Affairs” makes prominent his uncompromising attitude criticizing flaws of the Nehruvian regime. But ironically a few of his own convictions scattered across “On Building of Nation and its Democracy”, according to me, are prone to criticism.

Owing to the trauma of the partition, when most of the country’s thinkers were having the opinion that creation of states on the lines of language would cause obliteration of national integrity, Ambedkar pushed for the creation of linguistic states which today bear testimony to India’s unity in diversity. But Ambedkar who led India on her march towards becoming a true multilingual country, himself opposed the march when he wrote that linguistic states should use Hindi as their official language just like the centre. The reason for this gets reflected in his text “Thoughts on Linguistic States”, first published in 1955, where he argued that the way to prevent the country from becoming “the medieval India consisting of a variety of states indulging in rivalry and warfare” was to deter a state from using its mother tongue as official language (145). This necessitates pondering whether Ambedkar unwittingly had sown seeds of the suppression of diversity and glorification of a certain language carried on by some political forces today.

Another view of Ambedkar, I do not agree with, is his idea of introducing compulsory military training for the entire population of the country belonging to a certain age group. India, being home to the world’s largest youth population, training so many people simultaneously throughout the country will incur a staggering expenditure. If that amount is rather spent on upgradation of artillery and technology and advanced training of existing soldiers, better results can be obtained. Apart from that it is fundamentally against the spirit of democracy to make someone undergo military training without his will.

Despite these apparent/ minor contradictions, the texts included in “On Building of Nation and Its Democracy” bear testimony to the fact that Ambedkar had an earnest will to reshape India as a nation for which upliftment of the lower castes was indispensable. He and the Congress had different ideas of nationalism. That is why, when Gandhi scrapped the Cripps Mission and called for an intense movement, Ambedkar protested against his decision. Additionally, Ambedkar was not a staunch adversary of the partition and even

though India had got national status, he insisted upon reverting back to dominion status. These facts might give a reader the impression of Ambedkar being peripheral in the “national movement.” Arun Shourie, in his *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which Have Been Erased* has accused Ambedkar of not participating in the freedom struggle as he was unable to rise beyond caste considerations. But what Shourie’s arguments lack is the understanding that so long as a large section of the society remains plunged in deprivation and atrocities, Independence in the truest sense of the term will remain unachieved. During a time when the desire for political independence had gained precedence over the need for social reforms, Ambedkar could firmly demand the annihilation of the caste system because unless all the classes get rid of their shackles, the nation would not be able to fight unitedly against its colonisers.

Ambedkar’s proposition for separate electorates was bashed by the “Janata” as, “To elevate the minority, only because it is a minority, to a pinnacle of power and prestige superior to that held by the majority, is the way to cut at the root of the very fundamental principle of democratic government” (“On Building” 293). What the report failed to realise was that giving agency to the distressed classes was not an attempt to reverse the class hierarchy but adhering to democracy’s pledge which is to give every section of the society share in the Government. Owing to strong opposition from several individuals including Gandhi the provision for separate electorates could not be incorporated into the constitution and for ensuring representation of the lower castes, the concept of reserved constituencies was introduced. The problem with this system is that though all candidates contesting from a certain reserved constituency are “lower caste” by origin, the voters belong to all classes from that region, the bulk being the upper castes. As a result, quite often the candidate more engaged with the Dalit cause gets defeated, impeding proper upholding of the minority issues in the assembly. The greatest instance of this is the defeat of Ambedkar himself at the two elections he fought. It is undeniable that even seven decades after Independence only a minuscule of the minorities of India has been alleviated. Moreover, increasing Cases of molestation of Dalit women and sad incidents like that of Rohit Vemula are proofs that the representation policy adopted so far has failed to address the social injustices the minorities are subjected to. In such a distressful time, one is compelled to rethink, that if the

representation system proposed by Ambedkar had been accepted could not the condition of minorities in India have been better today?

The idea of Nation has been conceptualized in various ways. Benedict Anderson, for instance, has theorised Nation as an “imagined community,” a socially constructed group, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of it. Gandhi on the other hand had derived from Indian mythology, the concept of “Ram Rajya,” a nation driven by morality. “On Building of Nation and Its Democracy” provides a fascinating insight into Ambedkar’s idea of an ideal nation and his efforts in building the same, and this collection immensely contributes to our understanding of Nation and Nationalism. The collection particularly demonstrates that Ambedkar, who was greatly influenced by Buddhism, a religion that manifests democratic principles in its organisational structure, held necessary the participation of all classes in the Government. I had started this essay by taking up the general tendency of looking at Ambedkar only as a proponent of Dalit liberation. But the analysis of Ambedkar’s collection, I hope, corroborates my argument that being the redeemer of the depressed classes is in no way Ambedkar’s sole identity but only a part of his lifelong strive as a true nation-builder.

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