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Ambedkar's Conception of Nation and Democracy

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Introduction

This chapter discusses Ambedkar's plan for nation-building, how his viewpoint differs from conventional thinkers, and how his idea of a nation is more inclusive and centred on social solidarity. Furthermore, the chapter describes the significance of democracy and its nuances. Why Ambedkar saw the state as a catalyst and democracy as the essential foundation for nation-building? In particular, it focuses on Ambedkar's concept of economic democracy and its significance for developing a nation since it fosters freedom, equality, and brotherhood.

Defining Nation

A nation is a large group of people who live in a specific country or region linked by similar ancestry, history, culture, or language. Although having a rich and diverse culture and languages, India sought to be a nation. On these lines, many Indian leaders, including Vinayak Damodar Sawarkar, Sri Aurobindo, Tilak, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.K. Gandhi, Golwalkar, and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, explored the concept of Rashtra. Although the two are distinct, the Bhartiya notion of Rashtra can be compared to the western idea of a Nation. The main distinction is that Rashtra is more ethical-spiritual, while the nation is more cultural (Singh, 2016). Savarkar confined it to Pitrabhumi (Fatherland) and Punyabhumi (Holyland). The Gandhian theorisation of the nation is based on ascriptive identity. His philosophy focuses on "social (Varnashrama Dharma), economic (trusteeship), and political (Ramrajya)" (Aloysius, 1997, 228) in which Shudra, Ati-shudra can acquire education, not for employment or career advancement but to serve the governing class. More or less, the majority of nationalistic thinkers believed that India was a nation.

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Contrary to mainstream nationalist leaders, Ambedkar, with a very pragmatic approach, did not accept that India was a nation. As early as the 1940s to the drafting of the Constitution, Ambedkar dealt with this issue. In the constituent assembly on 26 November 1949, Ambedkar critiqued nationalist leaders and argued, "I recall a time when politically astute Indians despised the phrase "The people of India", "The Indian nation" was their preferred term. I believe we cherish a tremendous delusion by assuming that we are a nation" (Ambedkar, 1994, 1217).

Ambedkar questions how a nation can consist of individuals separated into thousands of castes. When caste itself is anti-national and produces apathy, he said India is not a nation but a nation in the making. Along these strings, Ambedkar built his thought on the nation over the remarks of Earnest Renen. Quoting Renan, Ambedkar argued;

> "The nation, like the individual, is the result of efforts, sacrifices, and commitment... A heroic past and great men's greatness can be sources of national pride. To have a common glory in the past and a common will in the present: to have done great things together and to want to do so again are crucial for making people" (Ambedkar, 1990, 35).

After defining what a nation is, Ambedkar gave a broader scheme for nation-building. He elaborately describes the necessary elements to become a nation.

1. The first step is to acknowledge that India was never a nation.
2. The second step in the process is to forget the past.
3. Thirdly, all those who have been enslaved should be given their legitimate rights.
4. Lastly, eliminating the governing elite's privileges and destroying their monopoly on political power (Kumar, 2007).

This chapter will elaborate on the third (All enslaved people should be granted their legitimate rights) and fourth aspects (Eliminating the ruling elite's advantages and dismantling their political monopoly) of Ambedkar's idea of nation-building. In the third aspect of nation-building, Ambedkar specifically emphasised on social solidarity. Ambedkar argued that we could not make a nation without giving due rights to untouchables. He argued that untouchables were never treated as bonafide citizens; they were treated as aliens in this country.

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As an untouchable, this notion of alienation is reflected in the entire life course of Ambedkar. In his discourse with Gandhi, he said that 'I have no homeland' and later on, in his autobiography 'Waiting for a Visa, the sense of alienation continues. In his case, Ambedkar asked for a visa through a separate electorate, though he was unsuccessful.

The fourth aspect of nation-building is destroying the monopoly of elites over political power. At the time of the struggle for independence, Ambedkar noted that simply gaining independence from the British would not be sufficient to construct a nation; instead, we must eliminate Brahminical imperialism. As G. Aloysius rightly pointed out, we had 'Upper caste Brahminic Nationalism' in India (Aloysius, 1997, 2). As a result, we built a nation in procedure and principle but not in spirit, which continues in the 21st century. Recent protests, movements and atrocities over Dalits and incidents like 'Una' and 'Hathras' posed a moral question on our foundation of collective belonging on which nation is situated. In the nation's broader imagination, various untouchables still await their belonging as a national. "The visa for which Ambedkar remained forever in waiting is in a sense same as that had been denied to Rohit Vemula, to Dr Payal Tadvi" (Rathore & Nandy, 2019, XV).

Essentiality of Democracy for Nation-building in India

An Ideal society for Ambedkar as a nation is a democracy founded on the trio of liberty, equality and fraternity, which he drew from Buddha. Nationalism, for him, meant abolishing Brahmanic imperialism and establishing a society of egalitarianism. In this process of nation-building, democracy plays a crucial role too. Democracy not only cherishes the values of diversity but ensures liberty, equality, fraternity and freedom to its citizens. In India's democratic underpinnings, Ambedkar argued that parliamentary democracy is not a new concept in India. However, we had various shreds of evidence of thriving democracy in the past. One of them is Mahaparinibbana's Suktas, the Buddhist Sangha's secret ballot election. It was nothing but the practice of parliamentary democracy. These Sanghas were founded on democratic values.

Ambedkar drives the traces of parliamentary democracy from the Buddhist Sangha. Nevertheless, why did he emphasise parliamentary democracy so much? Its answer lies in his thought of inclusiveness and social solidarity. In evaluating the development of Dalits, Ambedkar

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once asked two primary questions to Dalits. "First, do we have economic power? Secondly, Do we have social abilities? Answering these questions, he replied that we do not have both, and the remaining power is political power" (Ambedkar, 1979, 251). Political power is the only power to maintain continuity in the progress of untouchables. He saw the emancipation of Dalits through a democratic revolution, in which parliamentary democracy was crucial.

Secondly, Ambedkar favoured parliamentary democracy because of India's socio-economic stratification, as parliamentary democracy ensures more legislature's responsibility toward its people. He highlighted its merits; adopting Parliamentary democracy means discarding traditional rule, which is essential to dismantling the monopoly of Brahmins. In Parliamentary democracy, people's representatives make any law, practice and regulation and implement it in public (Ambedkar, 2003, 425). Additionally, there will be episodic accountability of representatives for their membership renewal. Ambedkar lists two other essentials: opposition and free and fair election. Ambedkar said that the opposition had such relevance that Britain and Canada paid a salary to the opposition leader.

On the other hand, free and fair elections are required because the transfer of power becomes civic rather than barbarian, as was in the past when the game of the throne after the king's death was a routine play. In a free and fair election, we must critically analyse the positions of big corporates. Their donations to political parties increase their say in policy formulation. Last but not least, impartial bureaucracy is equally essential to ensure free and fair elections (Ibid, 423). Lastly, according to him, parliamentary democracy would allow the minority classes to peacefully transform the caste-class society into a socialist order. Parliamentary democracy for Ambedkar was nothing more than a transitional stage on the road to socialism (Ratnam, 2021, 65). For the inclusion of Dalits and the oppressed sections of society, Ambedkar emphasised state socialism. State socialism is the mean for percolating egalitarianism in democracy. Through his Fabianist approach, Ambedkar wanted to establish state socialism to ensure inclusiveness and an egalitarian society.

Ambedkar favours civic republicanism over authoritarianism. He underlined the importance of ensuring and protecting minorities' rights. Though everyone is unequal, be it men, women, or transgender

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people, equality is undoubtedly a created concept, but equality is fundamental to democracy and a democratic guiding principle. The keystone of democracy is that people are treated based on their merits rather than their ancestor's entitlements. Although Ambedkar was aware of liberal equality, he was convinced it would not achieve substantive equality. Because everyone has a varied social location and access to resources and opportunities, initial equality is impossible. Though every society is heterogeneous based on stratifications and differences, Ambedkar prudently distinguished between differences and disadvantages attached to different social groups. In Indian society, the downtrodden had faced penalties due to caste, and its apportions based on ascribed identity. Ambedkar assured that assaulting the ideology of inequality, values, ethics and practices of the abhorrent caste system is a prerequisite for reinforcing democracy in India (Ramaiah, 2017, 29).

Ambedkar underlined the social divide of the Hindu social order and disagreed with Marx's proletariat dictatorship. Ambedkar defines democracy as "a form and a method of government, whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of people are brought about without bloodshed" (Ambedkar, 1979, 475). He said that democracy is more than just a political system; It is a way of shared living and experience. It is primarily respect and reverence for one's fellow man (Ibid, 57). Having a deep understanding of India's social structure, Ambedkar was sure that the Marxist proletariat revolution would not help abolish the deep-seated graded inequalities of Hindu society. In order to eradicate inequality and establish democracy, he argued that political democracy alone could not be expected to go very far if glaring economic and social disparities remained. Ambedkar's vision of democracy encompassed 'political, social, and economic democracy.

According to Ambedkar, the underpinnings of democracy can be embedded in social relationships and associated with the lives of the people who make up society (Jadhav, 2015, 180). Democracy, in other words, is a social endosmosis process. Like-mindedness, fraternity, and a sense of collectiveness are prerequisites for it. Nevertheless, it is challenging to create a sense of fellow-hood in the Indian social structure, which is highly diverse and undemocratic. During the adoption of the Constitution in the constituent assembly,

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he reiterated this principle. None of his contemporaries gives such tenable arguments for avowed democracy.

Ambedkar stresses the trinity of social, economic, and political democracy. He envisioned a more extensive definition of democracy beyond the commonly held political liberty and equality notions. Ambedkar believed that describing democracy solely through political power was insufficient; therefore, he deconstructed the term in the concept of political, social, and economic democracy. On political democracy, he stands against majoritarianism's rule and demands for 'one person, one vote'. He raised the question that although in our political life, we recognise the idea of 'one man, one vote, and one vote, one value', in the social and economic realm, we continue to disregard the concept of one individual, one value. How much longer will we be living a life full of contradictions? How long will we deny equality to our fellow men in social and economic dynamism? If we continue to do it for a long time, we jeopardise our political system. Ambedkar understands the essential nuance of democracy. That is why along with political democracy, he equally emphasises economic and social democracy. In economic democracy, he wants to establish a welfare state with fair distribution and control over resources and production to end the majority's hegemony. (Ramaiah, 2017, 25-26)

Unlike his contemporaries, Ambedkar wrote extensively about the need for democracy. He contended that Parliamentary democracy advanced by expanding political rights to unify social and economic opportunities. Ambedkar warns people that the democracy plant is not blooming everywhere. Several democracies, including Egypt and Syria, have vanished, and the Constitution has been repealed. Therefore, these precautions are required to consider time for a healthy and prosperous democracy. He gave some preconditions for the success of democracy in any society

> First - *There must be no glaring inequality in society:* There must not be a division of haves and have-nots. Deep social cleavage in society is the reason for the breakdown of society. Until there is division among communities based on caste and class, democracy will be perilous. Second - *The presence of opposition:* Representatives of the people have episodic accountability and scrutinise every five years. However, there must be some immediate authority to check the work of the

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Government; here comes the role of opposition for a thriving democracy. Third - *Equality in law and administration:* The administration must maintain impartiality, objectivity, and transparency. It is necessary to make a robust system rather than a spoiled system. We must respect the difference between political office and civil office. Fourth - *Observance of constitutional morality:* Constitution provides a skeleton; the flesh of that skeleton can be found in constitutional morality. Fifth- In the name of democracy, there must not be a tyranny of the majority over minorities. It will lead to revolution and root out democracy entirely if it happens. Following it, democracy necessitates the existence of moral order in society. For democracy to succeed, the essence of ethics and ethical principles must be present. Lastly, democracy necessitates 'public conscience', defined as a conscience that becomes disturbed in response to any wrongdoing, regardless of who is the victim (Ambedkar, 1979, 475-486).

After broadly describing the prerequisites of democracy, Ambedkar gave examples of countries like Italy, Germany, and Russia, where democracy collapsed. On the other hand, democracy succeeded in England and the USA (Ambedkar, 2002, 62). Ambedkar underlines that in the former countries, due to a lack of social and economic democracy, political democracy did not succeed. In the case of the latter countries, social and economic democracy was strong, and thus, democracy succeeded there. The second reason that Ambedkar gave was the game of two classes, i.e., the rulers and the ruled. This concept can also be viewed by understanding Edward Said's abstraction of "Orientalism" (Said, 1994, 20). He defines it via two terms, i.e., the occidents (the one who rules) and the orients(the one who is ruled upon). Orientalism is a corporate institution for dealing with the orient. Occidents think of the orients as incapable of ruling and therefore define their democracy by their own rules and regulations. It leads to a lack of social and economic democracy in eastern countries. Unfortunately, these types of hierarchisation defect the opportunity to rule by the orients or the ruled classes, finally heading towards the failure of democracy.

Democracy has been extinguished in the Indian subcontinent. Good democratic conduct requires dialogue and deliberation, which

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requires common sense logical norms that rationality can only provide. Nevertheless, the strengthening of Brahmanical imperialism breeds caste and theocracy. In the shadow of Brahminical imperialism, Indian society became unscientific and irrational. According to Ambedkar, democracy is both a means and an end. Equality, liberty, and fraternity are all synonymous with democracy. For Ambedkar, socialism is another name for economic democracy (Teltumbde, 2021, 81). Ambedkar wanted the future Constitution to be a complex code for the country's economic structure. He emphasised the significance of specifying the shape and form of a society's economic system. For the protection of social and economic democracy, he emphasised the crucial role of the state.

The Necessity of Economic Democracy

Ambedkar's conceptual understanding of democracy is based on the axiological approach. He believed that the roots of democracy are based on social solidarity, democratic participation and social endosmosis, where individuals have freedom and dignity. Ambedkar advocated various policies to bolster social and economic democracy throughout his life. He was a firm believer in welfarist human progress. Unfortunately, after his death, the idea of democracy was reduced to just political by scholars. As a young nation of seventy-five years, democracy in India neither flourished nor periled (Drèze, 2018, 118). Ambedkar's vision of socio-economic democracy was blackout after independence, and it was evident that after establishing a democratic system, India entered into a life of contradiction. The social structure of India perpetuates graded inequality, and the Constitution, on the other hand, paved the way for liberty, fraternity, and equality. Ambedkar suggested ensuring social and economic democracy for the success of political democracy as a way out of this contradiction.

For Ambedkar, economic democracy ensures equal access to financial resources for all citizens and controls and regulates primary means of production and livelihood by a state's politically organised community (Ramaiah, 2017, 25). Ambedkar was clear that concentrating resources in the hands of a few would only lead to inequality. It will crack the bedrock of economic democracy and, ultimately, demolish the foundation of democracy. Ambedkar outlines some conditions that must be met for economic democracy to be

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realised, such as the annihilation of caste and untouchability. The caste system is an exploitative institution that perpetuates inequity socially and economically; it is worse than slavery; it produces an unfree society and leads to financial exploitation. "While explaining the economic ramifications of caste and untouchability, Ambedkar asserts that the orthodox castes/classes utilised their economic power as a weapon against the untouchables in the form of a "social boycott" (Ibid, 54). Caste and untouchability, he believes, give caste Hindus an economic advantage. Therefore people cannot choose professions based on their abilities and achievements. It only breeds exploitation and inefficiency. Brahminism's official doctrine of predestination is based on inequality since it avoids revolution and is grounded in graded inequality.

After highlighting the contradiction of ideologies and hurdles of economic democracy, in establishing democracy, Ambedkar very thoughtfully distanced himself from the extra-constitutional means of bloodshed, proletariate revolution and satyagraha to fight against Brahmanic imperialism. Specifically, Ambedkar said the Marxist revolution is not a torchbearer in the Indian context. Because the "Hindu social system is undemocratic by design" and based on graded inequality, which prohibits revolution, it is meant to be anti-democratic. The classification of society into varnas, castes, and outcasts is based on ordinances rather than theories. Cumulatively, they are all obstacles erected in the face of democracy. (Ibid, 56) Commenting on the Marxist class struggle, he argues that men will not join in a revolution for equal property unless they know they will be treated equally after the course is achieved; there will be no discrimination based on caste and creed (Ibid, 69). Hence, Ambedkar suggested state socialism as a means of eradicating glaring disparities. He elaborately gave his socialistic democracy blueprint in *"State and Minorities: What are their Rights and how to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India"*.

Ambedkar's close association with the Fabianist approach helped him to structure state socialism in the 1940s. His concept of state socialism was integral to his vision of a democratic road to annihilating caste. Ambedkar argued that society's economic shape and structure are equally vital as social and political. Critics claim that the legislature, rather than the Constitution, can establish state

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socialism. In response to those critics, Ambedkar categorically mentioned that leaving the idea of implementing state socialism to the legislature will assist in shaping the economic structure of society through state socialism because parliamentary democracy is the rule of the majority's policy. One Government may work toward pro-socialism, and the next may do vice-versa. Ambedkar argues that it is more challenging in India to establish state socialism as socialist and political-minded Hindus only wanted political reforms, not economic ones. He exemplifies the urgency of socialism in independent India to fill these gaps with rapid Industrialisation. Private enterprises can not do it, and if they did, it would produce those inequalities of wealth that private capitalism has grown in Europe, which should be a warning to Indians (Ibid, 71).

Through socialistic revolution, Ambedkar's wish is as follows:

> "The state would own and control key industries. State or a state-owned corporation would manage primary industries. Insurance would be a monopoly for the Government. Every adult citizen would be covered by life insurance. Agriculture would be organised as a state cooperative industry, with proprietors receiving compensation. The cooperatives would be organised regardless of the members' caste. And Nationalisation of land" (Rodrigues, 2007, 149).

Ambedkar spoke about his idea of state socialism even in the proposal of objective resolution. In which he argued;

> "I should have expected some provision whereby it would have been possible for the state to make economic, social and political justice a reality and I should have, from that point of view, expected the resolution to state in most explicit terms that so that there may be social and economic justice in the country, that there would be nationalisation of industry and nationalisation of land, I do not understand how it could be possible for any future Government which beliefs in doing justice socially, economically and politically unless its economy is socialistic" (Ambedkar, 1994, 9).

In his opinion, adopting state socialism is a higher form of democracy. Economic democracy under state socialism transforms private property into public property. Though Ambedkar favoured

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the idea of socialism, as a pragmatist, he did not want to mention it explicitly in the Constitution. He gave the upper hand to liberty. As a result, Ambedkar vehemently rejected it when K. T. Shah suggested an amendment in 1946 to designate India a "Secular, Federal, Socialist" republic. He replied that rather than tingling people about how they should live, it would be considerably better to leave the decision to the people (Teltumbde, 2021, 91). It reflected that the main focus of Ambedkar was to establish state socialism, avoid dictatorship, and retain parliamentary democracy (Ratnam, 2021, 73). In this vein, Ambedkar incorporated economic democracy in the directive principle of state policy and took a liberal stand of not imposing a socialistic dictatorship. As he asserted;

> "Therefore, he says, it is no use saying that the directive principles have no value. In my judgment, the directive principles have a great deal, for they show that our ideal is economic democracy. Directive principles are merely another name for an instrument of instructions, which implicitly contains the doctrine of implied power to make a law. Directive principles are nothing but obligations imposed by the Constitution upon the Government of the day. These are the obligations of the state. These principles should be made the basis of all executive and legislative action that they may be taken hereafter in the country's governance" (ibid).

According to Ambedkar, a socialistic economy is when the state resolves to nationalise industry and land to achieve economic, social, and political justice. He claims that the fragmentation of holdings exacerbated population pressure on land and was a direct cause of agriculturist poverty. That is why it is critical to protect an agricultural renter. An industrial worker's benefits must likewise be extended to agricultural labourers. The agrarian democracy must be designed for enhanced agricultural productivity, mechanised agriculture, large farms, cooperatives, and community farms. Because salaries under the caste-based Vetti Begar/Koti system (explained briefly in the next chapter) are at the mercy of upper-caste landlords, minimum wage principles must be implemented for agricultural labour (Ibid, 70). Ambedkar emphasises the superiority of state socialism over the Brahminical-capitalist state in all aspects of social life, including the economic, political, and moral domains, and the Brahminical-

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capitalist state as a counterpoised and primarily antagonistic agent in the historical process. Ambedkar's views prophesied the emergence of a casteless and classless society. A democratically elected government and a self-managed, solidaristic democratic economy will replace the caste-based coercive state-society machinery.

Similarly, in 1943, Ambedkar astonishingly criticised parliamentary democracy for neglecting economic inequality. Nevertheless, later on, he still favours it due to its nature of responsibility toward people compared to the presidential system of Government. His lenience toward state socialism is reflected in his later writings of *'States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and how to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India'*. Unlike in the days when he wrote '*Annihilation of Caste',* he realised that political equality would be superficial and fragile unless economic equality was not guaranteed. (Teltumbde, 2019) However, economic democracy can be fulfilled with the imperative of equality, dignity and respect in interpersonal relationships. Hence, due access to resources for all sections of the society without exclusion and marginalisation will contribute to the strengthening of democracy.

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Conclusion

Contrasting to his contemporaries, Ambedkar took on the problem of the oppressed section to mainstream thought and his action in building a nation. His intellectual rigour shaped democratic socialism in India. He not only redefined democracy but very wisely his fight for solidarity in society as he saw the rise and fall of democracies in various countries. Ambedkar does not wish to delude himself or his countrymen with false pride in ancient glories. He pointed out the flaws in social institutions and proposed solutions in the form of economic democracy, such as the nationalisation of industries and land, and ultimately through his concept of state socialism.

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