Democracy of Religion and Caste Bigotry: The Ambedkarian Intervention

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Abstract: Indian democracy has been experiencing major transformations. The political misadventures have majorly affected the democratic setup and its believers. Ethnic majoritarianism, polarization, and divisiveness became apparent. The religiously indulged politicians, so-called intellectuals, and biased media have been demeaning the pious principles of democracy and tearing down the social fabric of diverse India. The social/political decline, therefore, is ruining the spirit and substance of democratic politics. The frequent violation of democratic values leads to the fracturing of democracy that consequently nurtures democratic fascism. This setup adversely affects the life of Dalits/ marginalised because of missing 'Dalit/marginalised Solidarity' and the leadership crisis amongst them. Therefore, the religious and caste prejudices against them are easily deliberated by the social/political hegemons. Caste and religion have emerged as the main drivers of contemporary mass politics. This paper analyses the prejudicial democratic practices premising on religion and caste in contemporary Indian politics.

Keywords: Democracy, Caste, Religion, Ambedkar, Ethnic majoritarianism

The rulers are determined that their policy actions are legitimate and are always supported and accepted by the people in the majoritarian system of power politics. In the passion of unchallenged support, they discard any opposition to their policy actions, and if any protest heads up, coercive suppression takes place. Therefore, given various democratic mis-transformations in Indian politics, debates on the threats and existence of pure and morally viable democracy in India began taking place. Many contemporary scholars and intellectuals, India and beyond, have been pitching forward myriad prevailing concerns and threats to the liberal values/ideas that ingrained in India's democracy since its birth. Ambedkar had observed multiple challenges posing threats to democracy in the post-independence period. These challenges included 'the extreme economic inequality, creeping authoritarianism, big-ticket corruption, the rapid growth

of corporate power and the resurgence of Hindu majoritarianism,[1] and all these challenges are still vociferously flying in the political ambience. The political sphere offers no space to moralistic people, and the immoral and culprits have a prosperous and majestical political life, which has been the result of the political apathy of the learned and educated people. However, the reality is also that the learned and intellectuals also, unfortunately, fail to get birth in the political arena as political parties do not prefer them. Moreover, corporate funding to political parties has also vitiated Indian democracy. The political business flourished on a larger scale. Politics became a profitable family business for many rather than a means of social service for nation-building. The political dynasty/dynasties, though not new, has/have always been the reality of the Indian politics of the past, present, and may be the future. It has aptly argued that 'By buying off voters, the incumbent is engaging in undemocratic forms of mobilization to ensure victory,' and the fraudulent elections are the features of undemocratic regimes in which the results are engineered down for the victory.[2] Therefore, almost all the concerns that Ambedkar had observed are in practice that have deteriorated the image of Indian democracy. Given this, Chowdhury and Keane stated, '...that social decline is ruining the spirit and substance of democratic politics. Slowly but surely, Indian democracy is experiencing social death. The India Story has lost its credibility. India is not the world's largest democracy. India is the world's largest case of endangered democracy.'[3] Political analysts observed and felt the concerns that 'the Indian democracy is moving towards ethnic majoritarianism, polarization, and divisiveness... India's vibrant electoral democracy appears to be morphing into a no-holds-barred contest for power...Indian democracy seems less inclusive today than at any point in its history'.[4] Therefore, given the prevailing democratic misadventures in Indian politics, Varshney sees religion as one of the drivers of politics that has served as master narratives for mass politics in India, and 'The idea of the popular will is now drifting toward Hindu majoritarianism...' (and) he dares, 'If left unchecked, it will spell danger for the health of Indian democracy...'.[5] He also sees 'India's liberal freedoms are declining'.[6] Further, Jaffrelot sees 'India's transformation into an ethnic democracy.'[7] Moreover, Ganguly observes 'political liberalism in India under assault.'[8] On changing nature of Indian democracy, further he observes, 'The current right-of-center government...appears intent on transforming India's pluralistic, open, and secular state into an ethnic and illiberal democracy...As a consequence, India's future as a liberal democracy appears to be at some risk.' In such a situation when high voltage majoritarianism and religious contestations, and extreme disrespect for diversity become prominent, no leader/politician dares to apply moral authority to resolve the problem of uncontrolled fanaticism. The so-called religiously indulged intellectuals and biased media anchors have been demeaning the pious principles of democracy and tearing down the social fabric of diverse India. Free and diverse cultural life in India seems gradually fading. However, among others, 'religious and caste bigotry' became a

captivating practice in contemporary Indian politics. However, religion and caste-based discrimination are not new in India's social and political domain. Given myriad prejudices and discriminations, therefore, India's social fabric appears to be weakening dramatically. This article analyses the prolonged prejudiced practices based on religion and caste in the political domain that mostly affect the life of the marginalised sections in a multiculturally diverse society.

Politics of Religious Bigotry

Religion has the most significant place in the life of Indian people, and the virtue of self-restraint and sacrifice remains the best-known features of Hinduism. However, the perverted religious ideology has occupied a larger space in the political sphere. Because, as Nandy, a renowned Political Psychoanalyst, said, 'India has failed to develop a coherent idea of the place of religion in public life.'[9] India has been appearing to be overpowered and controlled by religious chauvinism. The orthodox religious people also have seized the significant political institutions that leading the country towards religious fanaticism and damaging the multicultural democracy. With this, the secular base and structure of Indian society have been inclined to collapse irrevocably. This has undermined the basic structure of the Indian Constitution as secularism is very close to the concept of democracy. Religiosity is being used as a means of instilling the socio-political order and unquestioned loyalty to the political policy actions in the name of nation-building or strengthening of the state. The political masters apply 'a religious style of language in invoking the need for sacrifice, redemption and spiritual virtue'[10] to cover–up and ignore the urgent needs of the people. When people speak about their rights and the needs of livelihood, the political players throw up the religious pound of flesh before them, which consequently, compels the people for 'profound psychological transformation'[11] in case of religious concerns. For the people, as it seems, religion is primary, and livelihood is secondary. In other words, the politico-religious political order scarily hypnotises society in such a way that the people appear ready to sacrifice their lives in the name of religion. Therefore, religiously transformed minds cease questioning social, political, and economic prejudices perpetrated by the policymakers who claim the support of the popular will for their actions. On political highjacking of religion, Nandy aptly writes, 'It was bound to open up a range of opportunities for political entrepreneurs ready to exploit religion for their purposes and to occupy the space vacated by serious politicians unwilling to touch religion.'[12]

The language of unity and fraternity amongst the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist people was deliberately made redundant. Though 'the chief leader of the country' speaks the language of inter-religious brotherhood, human rights, and welfare of all the sections, and also poses himself as a true caretaker of the downtrodden, however, the followers show unrestraint overt antipathy towards these people. In fact, given the divisive

religious politics, the fault line in the language of the Hindu-Muslim fraternity or the inter-religious fraternity seems discernible. India has lost, as it seems, the base of fraternity. The politics of religion and caste have marginalized the strength of fraternity. Therefore, given the less probability of the formation of absolute fraternity and democracy, Bhattacharjee writes that Guru 'may also like to add the idea of a new fraternity, a fraternity of the not-yet nation, of the not-yet democracy to come.'[13] Therefore, on the politics of religion, Mander writes, 'India...is fast being unmade, with hatred and bigotry becoming the new normal. Hate-mongering led powerfully and charismatically from the top – a kind of "command bigotry" – creates an enabling environment for people to freely and publicly articulate their bigotry and act out their hate.'[14]

Religiosity has dominantly compelled the majority of the masses to ignore the practices of exploitation, inequality, and caste-based divisions manipulated and nurtured by shrewd rulers who may be on the command of their ideological patrons. Religion is being weaponized in politics to methodically undermine the political, civil, and cultural rights of citizens.[15] The state-sponsored majority religion has marginalised the beliefs and practices of all other minority religions. In this context, Ambedkar had said, '...in the name of democracy there must be no tyranny of the majority over the minority'.[16] In contemporary politics, elections demonstrate the triumph of majority religion over the idea of social justice. Dalits and other backward classes are trapped and used to pull forward the anti-national/social 'religio-cultural agenda' engineered by the societal and political hegemons.

The religiously-prone regimes compel a man to tolerate hunger and humiliation, but not to tolerate assault on his religion or practices. Arguably, religion has overpowered the mind of man. Therefore, Ambedkar's argument becomes more relevant when he says, 'Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act.' Therefore, he also said that democracy requires strong 'public conscience' to understand what is wrong and what is right. However, it is missing. Ambedkar believed, 'A people and their religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be necessary good for the well-being of the people'.[17]

Politics of Caste Bigotry

Ambedkar said, 'Indian society is so embedded in the caste system that everything is organized based on caste. Enter Indian society and you can see caste in its glaring form'.[18] This social setup has not changed much even after the seventy-five years of independence. India's democracy since long has been inseparable from the politics of caste prejudices and the practice of inequality. The movements of anti-caste radicals have also dominated Indian politics. Therefore, as Ambedkar said, 'The existence of caste system is a standing denial of the existence of those (community of purpose and desire for welfare,

loyalty to public ends and mutuality of sympathy and cooperation) ideals of society and therefore of democracy'.[19] Given the dominance of the 'caste factor' in society/politics, India appears strengthened further as a 'democracy of caste prejudices'. The Indian democracy has created a puzzling situation where Dalits are 'equal by law unequal by castes'.[20] The caste chauvinist forces that discard humanity and distrust human equality have been vehemently active against the soul of the democratic constitution (a guardian of the Dalits/ marginalized rights) and also conspiring to establish a 'religious constitution' (theocracy) perhaps to legalise the caste hierarchy further and to consolidate one-religion domination by bulldozing the existing secular constitution and also to de-practice social justice. Ambedkar held that fraternity could be a fact only when there laid a nation and categorised caste as anti-national. The destructive forces in India are violating and murdering the great idea of humanity that was honestly propounded by Ambedkar and the other nation-builders. Ambedkar's philosophy is used rhetorically by all the political parties and leaders merely in 'decorating' their speeches to fetch Dalit votes. However, the scenario appears different in practice as no one works on Ambedkar's concerns about caste annihilation.

Ambedkar made optimum efforts towards the establishment of an egalitarian social order and freeing the Dalits/marginalized from the cruelty of social evils through the democratic constitution and by raising the confidence of Dalits to rise against the atrocities against them. However, despite the constitutional safeguards, the Dalits/marginalized are deliberately not allowed to escape from humiliation, violence, and discrimination in socio-political and economic spheres. The socio-political institutions are being rudely used in such a way that the sufferings of the marginalised are multiplying. Seemingly, Indian society at large failed to develop humanism towards the poor Dalits/marginalised. Besides, the worsening violence and heinous crimes against the poor and women, especially Dalits, are rampant. As quoted by Bhattacharjee, '[A] feminine body is disrespected, but a Dalit feminine body is almost hated,' because of 'the prejudice of the caste and untouchability.'[21] 'Humiliation is also a way to demonstrate what is in store for Dalits if they dare to make legal complaints against unauthorised shows of power by the upper castes'.[22] Further, '...in the case of Dalit woman, even her despised body is sexualized in the act of upper-caste vengeance. As the instrument of her daring and violation of the caste law, it is punished with sexual humiliation'.[23] Obviously, such humiliation occurs frequently because of the political support to the culprits from the power center and the higher castes, which further motivates the flourishing of democracy of caste humiliation. By and large, it is an unfortunate destiny of contemporary India that Dalit women face violence in myriad forms in Indian democracy; victims of inhuman treatment, brutal violence, and humiliation,[24] and even the Dalit children/students have become the soft target of caste prejudices in the schools/educational institutions. Taking education seems a tough task for Dalit students. They suffer from deadly harassment and humiliation in schools/

universities all over India. It has boastfully argued that in the era of globalisation and the modernisation of Indian society, the caste system and inequality have lost their significance and become obsolete phenomena. However, the prevailing heinous crimes of caste-based discrimination, cruelty, violence, and humiliation have been presenting that the victimhood of Dalits/ people from lower castes has further become worst. Dalits are being lynched and killed, assaulted physically for drinking water from the reserved pot for the higher castes, riding on a horse during wedding ceremonies/processions, or killing of Dalit youths for sporting moustaches, and even for playing ring tones/music praising Ambedkar on mobile phones. Therefore, the incessant caste discrimination and Dalits' humiliation made the Indian democracy fraught especially for Dalits. Even for that matter, the silence of liberal or progressive people of higher castes on the discrimination and atrocities of the marginalized is also problematic, and they fail in condemning such violence. Given the ingrained caste politics, Ambedkar wanted to 'address the scourge of caste discrimination and exclusion through the instrumentality of law', which he poetically described as 'the greatest disinfectant against inequality'.[25] Ambedkar believed that democracy was not just the right to vote, but the right to live with dignity. Contemporary modern India (as supposed) violated the dignity of Dalits. Even, the so-called representatives of Dalits/marginalised also failed in rising for the protection of the interests of these deprived people. Ambedkar had warned of such future possibilities and alerted the people to beware of politicians who are cheating their fellow community brethren. Moreover, these aggrieved people also failed to produce an efficient leader for their concerns in the contemporary crisis out of fear of the system's despotism.

In fact, given the prolonged inequality, Ambedkar had warned that 'those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy'.[26] However, Ambedkar's prescient of blowing up of the despotic system by the poor marginalised /Dalits, as it seems, impossible as they failed to stand up to blow the oppressive rulers and the political institutions despite the rulers' 'despotic governance' against them. Because these rulers strategically and cunningly devised 'a coercive mechanism' to keep various marginalised sections disunited and scared of the monstrous system. The politicians also play 'Dalit Cards' by dividing them. Moreover, the right of aggrieved people to protest against undemocratic practices appears to be dissolved; as a result, they seem unable to show democratic anguish against the undemocratic and coercive system. The downtrodden feel fortunate enough to be alive in the despotic realm.

Preconditions for the Successful Working of Democracy
With the paradigmatic shift in leadership and political ideologies, the working process of the government also witnesses the change generally in the liberal democratic setups. However, when the power falls in the hands of the majoritarians in socially diverse societies, the marginalised and minorities

face difficulties, and the nature of liberal democracy appears to be distorted. And the whimsical execution of authority leads to the weakening of democracy. Therefore, given the inclination of democracy towards possible distortion or perversion, Ambedkar, in the Constituent Assembly, had raised doubt on the future of democracy and the democratic institutions in India that;

"What would happen to her democratic Constitution? Will she be able to maintain it or will she lose it again?"[27]

Therefore, prophesying the future democratic disaster or perversion, Ambedkar suggested preconditions for the successful working of democracy that; there should be an absence of glaring inequality in the society as the 'deep cleavages between class and class that are going to be one of the greatest hindrances in the success of democracy', equality of treatment in law and administration, the observance of constitutional morality, absence of tyranny of the majority over the minority, moral order in the society, and strong presence of public conscience i.e. the existence of strong opposition (He said democracy means that nobody has any perpetual authority to rule, but that rule is subject to sanction by the people and can be challenged in the House itself; The opposition is a condition precedent for democracy, the opposition is the key to a free political life).[28] However, when strong opposition is missing, despotism in the name of democracy becomes absolute. Unfortunately, Ambedkar's idea of transforming political democracy into social and economic democracy could not be materialized, and the democratic project was reduced to just political democracy in India.[29]

The present-day nature of Indian democracy certainly recalls Ambedkar's predictions which were made in the Constituent Assembly and making him more relevant compared to his contemporary doyens of democracy in India. He believed that nationalism was not just shouting slogans, but comprehensively, it was the empowering of people and reclaiming of their dignity. Believing and practicing the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity remain the true and perfect nationalism that leads further to the strengthening of democracy. Ambedkar believed, 'Without fraternity, liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty, it is because at the basis of both, there is a fraternity. Fraternity is therefore the root of Democracy'.[30] Ambedkar held democracy as another name for equality. By and large, Ambedkar, the champion of egalitarian democracy, aimed at the comprehensive welfare, well-being, respect, and dignity of all citizens. Given substantiating the idea of constructive democracy, Parekh similarly opined that 'India needs to recommit itself to the ideals of equality, social justice, fraternity, human dignity and individual liberty that are so well set out in the preamble to our Constitution and form the core of our national identity'.[31] In a broader sense, 'Democracy is freedom from hunger, humiliation, and violence. Democracy is saying no to brazen arrogance. It's the rejection of caste and religious bigotry and every other form of human and non-human

indignity'.[32] The argument that the 'poor societies are unlikely to remain democratic' makes valid sense if the democratic problems remain unresolved.[33] Significantly, Ambedkar judged the success of democracy based on respecting fellow humans and the promotion of fraternity amongst diverse social groups. Given deliberately biased and discriminatory myriad socio-political practices based on caste, religion, region, culture, faith, income, and social status, the constitutional vision of fraternity appears as a chimera. Bridging the gap between political democracy and social democracy is the major challenge in consolidating India's democratic roots. Moreover, because of the lack of 'Dalit/marginalised Solidarity' and the leadership crisis in Dalit and other sections of marginalized communities, caste discrimination and prejudices against them are easily deliberated by the elites of higher social/political castes. Amongst many contemporary concerns of democracy, therefore, religious fanaticism, caste politics, political despotism, inequality, and massive poverty are rampages that mostly affect Dalits/marginalised. The violation of democratic values and morality lead to the death of democracy, and consequently, the creation of democratic fascism. By and large, empowering the people, reclaiming their dignity, and believing and practicing the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity potentially strengthen people's democracy. The development of humanism and fraternity amongst the masses of a diverse social group in a multicultural social structure is an urgent need of the distorted socio-political order. The various socio-political and economic problems take place because of evil democratic experiments. Therefore, in the sombre socio-political ambience, Ambedkar's democratic philosophy matters a lot that provides greater impetus towards the formation of healthy socio-political democracy. He was against the socio-political system that 'favours one class fully privileged and another class under privileged to carry the eternal burden of first-class.'

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