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Parliamentary Democracy in India: Ambedkar's Vision, Our Responsibility

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Abstract:

This paper examines parliamentary democracy in India from the perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's democratic vision. India is not only one of the largest democracies in the world but also among the oldest, with a long tradition of pluralism and collective governance. The Indian nation is marked by profound diversity in culture, rituals, languages, geography, and patterns of human settlement, all of which shape its democratic experience. Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the structure and evolution of India's parliamentary democracy through Ambedkar's critical framework. It argues that Ambedkar's conception of democracy extends beyond electoral politics and representative institutions to encompass social and economic equality grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity. Drawing on Ambedkar's writings, secondary literature, and data from official reports and scholarly studies, the paper highlights the limitations of formal political democracy in the absence of social democracy. It concludes that the sustainability of parliamentary democracy in India depends on addressing structural inequalities, particularly those rooted in caste, and on realising Ambedkar's vision of democracy as a way of life.

Keywords: Parliamentary democracy, Ambedkar, economic democracy, inequality, caste, fraternity, Indian Constitution.

Introduction

This paper examines parliamentary democracy in India through the lens of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision, with particular emphasis on the idea of collective responsibility in sustaining democratic values. People constitute the core element of any democracy, and democratic systems play a decisive role in shaping human society, civilisation, and processes of socialisation. The development of civilisation has occurred through continuous intergenerational change, with each generation contributing to social capital and institutional evolution.

In the contemporary period, parliamentary democracy has emerged as a critical concern, particularly as several countries in the Asian region have experienced democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the nature, structure, and development of parliamentary democracy in India. Although India is widely recognised as the world's largest democracy, the resilience of its democratic system rests fundamentally on its constitutional framework, which upholds the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice in social, economic, and political life.

The paper is organised into four sections. The first examines democratic traditions in ancient India. The second discusses the nature and development of parliamentary democracy in modern India. The third analyses Ambedkar's conception of democracy as a social philosophy. The final section reflects on the dimensions of democracy—political, economic, and social—and their implications for democratic sustainability. Methodologically, the study draws upon Ambedkar's writings, scholarly literature, and secondary data from official sources and national surveys.

2. Democratic Traditions in Ancient India

In the Indian context, from ancient times to the modern age, India has shared a rich legacy of practices that upheld democratic structures and principles. Long before the concept of democracy was formally articulated in Western societies, democratic values were deeply embedded in the fabric of governance in the Indian subcontinent. Today, India is recognised not only as the largest democracy in the world but also as one of the oldest, with enduring traditions that emphasised collective decision-making, fairness, and the participation of people in public affairs (Chowdhary, 2024).

During the early *Vedic* period (around 1500 BCE), institutions such as the *Sabha* and the *Samiti* played central roles in collective governance. The *Sabha* functioned as a council of elders, whose members were selected on the basis of wisdom, experience, and moral authority. The *Samiti*, by contrast, was a broader assembly that allowed wider participation from the community and facilitated collective consensus-building (Thapar, 2004; Chowdhary, 2024; Majumdar, 2022). Dialogue, deliberation, and consensus formed the foundation of decision-making in both institutions. Membership in the *Sabha* and *Samiti* was based on merit, wisdom, leadership, and a commitment to social unity rather than hereditary privilege (Sen, 2005).

Significant political transformations occurred between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE with the rise of the *Mahajanapadas*—large territorial units comprising both monarchies and republics in northern India. There were more than sixteen *Mahajanapadas*, each characterised by distinct forms of administration and governance. For the first time, these entities functioned as organised states. Among them, the *Vajji, Malla,* and *Sakya* republics stand out as prominent examples of republican governance, where rulers were chosen through elective processes rather than hereditary succession. In these *Ganasanghas*, councils of representatives elected by the

community governed public affairs, and collective decision-making based on debate and discussion constituted the core principle of governance.

The *Vajji* confederacy, in particular, is noted for its democratic traditions (Sharma, 2023; Chowdhary, 2024). Buddhist texts, especially the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, describe the *Vajjis* as a model republic distinguished by a strong sense of collective consciousness and participatory governance. The text praises their democratic practices, including regular and frequent assemblies, deliberation on public matters, and decision-making through consensus representing the collective will of the people. These practices ensured equitable representation in assemblies and reinforced the importance of dialogue in governance. Drawing on the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, scholars highlight a conversation between the Buddha and his disciple *Ānanda* in which the *Buddha* outlined seven conditions of welfare for the *Vajjis*: holding frequent assemblies, taking decisions in concord, preserving established institutions, honouring elders, protecting women, conserving shrines, and supporting the enlightened (Sharma, 2023; Chowdhary, 2024).

Similarly, the Sakya clan practised a form of democratic governance in which leaders, including the king, were elected by the assembly and remained accountable to the people. The democratic ethos of the Sakya republic is further illustrated by the episode concerning the sharing of the waters of the Rohini River between the Sakya and the neighbouring Koliya clan. As discussed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Siddhartha Gautama opposed the decision of the Sakya state to engage in war over the dispute and instead advocated peaceful resolution and the preservation of human values. This episode underscores the presence of democratic deliberation in decision-making processes concerning leadership, war, and peace.

The Gupta Empire (fourth to sixth centuries CE), often described as the 'Golden Age' of Indian history, also reflected elements of democratic governance alongside monarchical rule. While the period witnessed significant advancements in art, science, and literature, it was equally marked by administrative decentralisation and local self-governance. Institutions such as village assemblies and councils played an important role in administering justice and managing local affairs through dialogue and collective decision-making. Kosambi (1965) provides a detailed account of the functioning of the *Sabha* and *Samiti* during this period, emphasising their role in promoting fair deliberation and participatory governance at the local level.

3. Nature and Development of Parliamentary Democracy in India

Democracy is the most widespread form of government in the modern world. In Western political thought, its origins are often traced to ancient Greece, where democracy emerged as popular participation in governance. The term democracy derives from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule), signifying rule by the people (Held, 2006). Over time, political philosophers have offered diverse interpretations of democracy, emphasising participation, deliberation, accountability, and popular sovereignty.

Thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson viewed democracy as direct citizen participation, while Walter Bagehot famously described it as "government by discussion," highlighting the importance of debate and parliamentary deliberation. J. S. Mill, Harold Laski, and R. M. MacIver further developed democratic theory by emphasising liberty, political participation, and social responsibility. Abraham Lincoln's formulation of democracy as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" remains a foundational expression of democratic ideals.

In India, national leaders played a decisive role in shaping the democratic foundations of the newly independent state. Jawaharlal Nehru advocated a secular parliamentary democracy

influenced by democratic socialism, emphasising modernisation, industrialisation, and state-led development. Mahatma Gandhi articulated a moral and grassroots-oriented vision of democracy grounded in non-violence, truth, and village self-rule. He emphasised cooperation over competition and argued that democracy must be grounded in ethical values and community well-being (Gandhi, 1942/1998). Gandhi's vision of *Gram Swaraj* envisaged self-reliant village communities capable of governing themselves through participatory and cooperative democratic practices (Gandhi, 1958). His primary emphasis was on political democracy, premised on the belief that moral regeneration would lead to broader social and economic transformation. While their perspectives differed, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emerged as the principal architect of India's democratic constitutional order.

4. Ambedkar's Conception of Democracy: A Social Philosophy

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar offered a profound critique of conventional understandings of democracy that restrict it to electoral mechanisms or representative governance. He rejected the popular definition of democracy as merely a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," arguing that such a formulation captures only its procedural dimension. For Ambedkar, democracy was not simply a political system but a comprehensive social philosophy rooted in ethical relations among individuals.

Ambedkar conceptualised democracy as a mode of social living rather than a set of constitutional arrangements. He maintained that democratic institutions could not function effectively unless supported by a democratic social structure. In his view, democracy requires an environment characterised by mutual respect, shared moral values, and a sense of collective responsibility. Without these foundations, political democracy remains superficial and unstable.

A central concern in Ambedkar's analysis was the fragility of Indian democracy in the absence of social cohesion. He famously described Indian democracy as a "top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic," highlighting the contradiction between democratic political institutions and deeply hierarchical social relations. He warned that democracy without social unity would remain vulnerable and could not endure over time.

Ambedkar identified the caste system as the most significant impediment to the realisation of democracy in India. According to him, caste fundamentally undermines democratic values by fragmenting society into rigid, hereditary groups based on graded inequality. Rather than fostering social solidarity, caste promotes separation, exclusion, and hierarchy, thereby preventing the development of a shared civic identity.

He described caste as an institutionalised system of inequality in which each group is positioned above some and below others, creating a layered hierarchy that normalises discrimination. This system, he argued, denies individuals equal status and restricts their social mobility. Access to education, resources, and power is distributed unevenly, with those placed at the bottom—historically referred to as "untouchables"—being systematically excluded from basic human rights and dignified living conditions.

Ambedkar further explained that caste perpetuates itself through strict social controls, including internal disciplinary mechanisms that penalise deviation from prescribed norms. Social sanctions enforce conformity and discourage interaction across caste boundaries. As a result, everyday social life becomes segregated, limiting opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding among different social groups.

Drawing on sociological insights, Ambedkar observed that cultural transmission and imitation tend to occur within caste groups rather than across them. This inward-looking socialisation reinforces caste identity while preventing broader social integration. Individuals are recognised

primarily as members of caste groups rather than as autonomous persons, thereby suppressing individual freedom and agency.

Fraternity occupied a central place in Ambedkar's democratic thought. He regarded it as the moral principle that binds individuals into a cohesive society. However, in a caste-based social order, fraternity remains confined within narrow group boundaries and fails to acquire a universal character. Ambedkar argued that without fraternity, neither liberty nor equality can be sustained, and without these three principles together, democracy loses its substantive meaning.

Ambedkar also critiqued the structural foundations of Hindu society, which he viewed as organised around the principle of endogamy. Endogamy reinforces caste divisions by prohibiting inter-caste marriage, thereby preventing social mixing and integration. This rigid organisation obstructs the formation of a shared social life and undermines the conditions necessary for democratic citizenship.

For Ambedkar, democracy was a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed institutional form. He emphasised that democracy must extend beyond political representation to encompass social and economic dimensions. In his interventions during the Constituent Assembly debates, he repeatedly asserted that political democracy could not survive in the absence of social democracy.

He defined social democracy as a way of life based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. These values, he argued, must be embedded not only in constitutional texts but also in everyday social practices. Ambedkar insisted that unless social and economic inequalities were addressed, political democracy would remain fragile and incomplete.

Ultimately, Ambedkar envisioned democracy as a form of associated living that enables individuals to realise their potential through equal participation in social life. Justice, dignity,

and freedom were central to his democratic philosophy. His ideas continue to provide a critical framework for evaluating both the achievements and the limitations of democracy in India.

5. Dimensions of Democracy in Ambedkar's Thought

Democracy is commonly understood as comprising three interrelated dimensions: political democracy, economic democracy, and social democracy. The scope and effectiveness of these dimensions depend upon how a society recognises and practises the core democratic values of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, democracy was not merely a form of government but a comprehensive social ideal that must permeate all aspects of collective life.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar identified caste as the most destructive force undermining democracy in India. He argued that "the worst feature of the caste system is its anti-social spirit," as it prevents social mobility and communication across varnas, thereby obstructing the formation of fraternity. A society fragmented by caste hierarchies cannot cultivate brotherhood or shared citizenship. Ambedkar famously asserted that fraternity is the soul of democracy, and without fraternity, democratic morality itself becomes hollow.

Political Democracy

Political democracy occupies a central position in Ambedkar's thought, but he consistently warned that political rights alone are insufficient without corresponding social progress. He firmly believed that political empowerment must be supported by social equality to produce meaningful democratic change.

Ambedkar strongly upheld the principle of "one man, one vote, and one vote, one value," emphasising that every citizen must possess equal political worth regardless of social or economic status. In a genuine political democracy, each individual's vote carries equal

significance, ensuring that political power reflects collective public will rather than inherited privilege.

While universal adult franchise guarantees the right to vote and contest elections, Ambedkar maintained that formal political rights do not automatically translate into real empowerment. He argued that social status and material conditions significantly shape political agency. In this context, Ambedkar offered a powerful defence of parliamentary democracy, stating that:

"The parliamentary system of government is much more than government by discussion. It is a negation of hereditary rule. Whosoever wants to rule must be elected by the people from time to time and must secure their approval."

He further emphasised that parliamentary democracy rests on two essential pillars: a functional opposition and free and fair elections. An active opposition, Ambedkar argued, is indispensable for democratic vitality, as it ensures accountability, encourages debate, and safeguards political freedom. Without opposition, democracy degenerates into authoritarianism.

Ambedkar identified four fundamental premises upon which political democracy must rest (Nithya, 2018):

1. The individual is an end in themselves.

2. Individuals possess certain inalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

3. No individual should be compelled to surrender constitutional rights in exchange for privileges.

4. The state must not delegate governing power to private individuals or groups.

The peaceful transfer of power through elections is a key indicator of a functioning democracy. However, Ambedkar insisted that political democracy cannot survive in isolation; it must be accompanied by economic and social democracy to remain stable and meaningful.

Economic Democracy

Economic democracy refers to the fulfilment of basic material needs and the assurance of dignified living conditions for all citizens. It entails access to food, clothing, housing, and employment, ensuring that no individual is deprived of the means of survival. Ambedkar viewed economic security as essential for sustaining liberty and dignity in a democratic society.

Economic democracy, however, cannot exist independently of social democracy. Deep social inequalities inevitably translate into unequal access to economic resources. Contemporary research highlights the severity of this problem in India. Studies by Piketty, Chancel, and Bharti (2022) reveal a dramatic rise in income and wealth inequality, surpassing even colonial-era levels. They characterise present-day India as a "Billionaire Raj," noting that the top one per cent controls 22.6 per cent of total income and 40.1 per cent of total wealth—among the highest concentrations globally.

Further disaggregated data underscore the magnitude of inequality. The top 10 per cent of the population accounts for 57 per cent of total income, while the bottom 50 per cent receives only 15 per cent. Wealth disparities are even starker, with the bottom half holding a mere 6.4 per cent of total wealth. These figures demonstrate the deeply skewed distribution of economic resources in India and the urgent need for structural reform.

Ambedkar argued that such inequality is rooted in graded social hierarchies, particularly caste. Economic democracy cannot be realised in a society divided into oppressor and oppressed classes. To prevent the concentration of economic power, Ambedkar advocated strong state intervention. He proposed constitutional safeguards enabling the state to regulate key industries and agriculture, thereby preventing monopolisation and ensuring equitable distribution of resources.

Social Democracy

For Ambedkar, social democracy was the foundation upon which political and economic democracy must rest. He defined social democracy as a way of life that recognises liberty, equality, and fraternity as governing principles. These values, he argued, are interdependent: liberty without equality leads to domination, equality without liberty suppresses initiative, and without fraternity, neither liberty nor equality can endure (Nithya, 2018).

The reality of Indian society, however, falls far short of this ideal. The caste system continues to deny large sections of the population access to education, housing, employment, and social dignity. Persistent social exclusion has resulted in widespread poverty and marginalisation, undermining both social and economic democracy.

Ambedkar consistently argued that the state must take decisive action to dismantle graded inequality. He recognised that unregulated capitalism could further weaken democratic principles by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a few. In such a system, social and economic rights remain unprotected, and mass poverty coexists with elite prosperity.

Ambedkar warned that parliamentary democracy could easily transform into capitalist parliamentary democracy unless corrective measures were adopted. To prevent this outcome and safeguard individual liberty, he proposed the establishment of state socialism within a constitutional framework. In *States and Minorities*, he outlined a model of economic democracy that included state monopoly over insurance, nationalisation of agriculture and land, abolition of landlordism, and state-led industrialisation.

He further emphasised the role of social security and insurance as state responsibilities. Drawing on economic thought, Ambedkar advocated large-scale irrigation and multipurpose dam projects to enhance agricultural productivity and generate electricity. These initiatives

aimed to support industrial growth, absorb surplus labour from agriculture, and raise wages through productive employment.

Land nationalisation, elimination of exploitative tenancy systems, and equitable treatment of citizens were central to Ambedkar's vision of economic justice. Through these measures, he sought to ensure that democracy in India would not remain merely political but would evolve into a comprehensive social and economic reality.

6. Democracy and Social Transformation in India

Democracy is generally understood as encompassing political, economic, and social dimensions. The depth and sustainability of these dimensions depend on the extent to which a society internalises the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar approached democracy not merely as a system of governance but as a normative social ideal that must inform everyday social relations.

Ambedkar was critical of interpretations of democracy that confined it to electoral procedures or constitutional arrangements. He argued that democratic institutions could not function meaningfully in the absence of a democratic social order. For him, democracy was a way of associated living, sustained through shared values, mutual respect, and social responsibility. Political democracy, without corresponding social reform, remained fragile and superficial.

A central concern in Ambedkar's analysis was the contradiction between democratic political institutions and deeply hierarchical social structures in India. He warned that democracy imposed on a society characterised by inequality and exclusion would lack stability. His observation that Indian democracy was merely a "top dressing" underscored the incompatibility between caste-based social relations and democratic ideals.

Ambedkar identified the caste system as the most serious obstacle to democracy in India. Caste, he argued, fragments society into rigid, hereditary groups and institutionalises inequality

through a hierarchical ordering of social status. Rather than fostering social cohesion, caste promotes separation and exclusion, making the development of a shared civic identity impossible. In such a society, individuals are valued not as autonomous citizens but as members of predetermined social groups.

He conceptualised caste as a system of graded inequality in which each group occupies a position above some and below others. This arrangement normalises discrimination and denies equal social status to individuals. Access to education, economic opportunities, and political power is unequally distributed, with historically marginalised communities being systematically excluded from basic rights and dignified living conditions.

Ambedkar further explained that caste sustains itself through strict internal regulation and social sanctions. Deviations from caste norms invite punishment, reinforcing conformity and discouraging inter-group interaction. Everyday social life thus becomes segmented, limiting dialogue, cooperation, and collective problem-solving across social boundaries.

Drawing on sociological reasoning, Ambedkar observed that cultural learning and imitation occur largely within caste groups rather than across them. This inward-looking socialisation strengthens caste identity while restricting social integration. As a result, individual liberty is subordinated to group norms, and personal autonomy is constrained by inherited social status.

Fraternity occupied a central place in Ambedkar's democratic philosophy. He regarded it as the ethical bond that enables individuals to recognise one another as equals. However, in a caste-based society, fraternity remains confined within narrow social circles and fails to attain a universal character. Ambedkar emphasised that liberty and equality cannot be sustained in the absence of fraternity, and without the coexistence of all three values, democracy loses its substantive meaning.

Ambedkar also critiqued the structural foundations of Hindu society, which he viewed as organised around the principle of endogamy. Endogamous practices reinforce caste boundaries by restricting social interaction and marriage across groups. This rigid social organisation obstructs integration and undermines the conditions necessary for democratic citizenship.

For Ambedkar, democracy was not a static institutional form but a dynamic and evolving process. He insisted that democracy must extend beyond political representation to include social and economic transformation. In his interventions during the Constituent Assembly debates, he repeatedly stressed that political democracy could not endure without social democracy.

He defined social democracy as a way of life grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity. These principles, he argued, must be realised not only through constitutional guarantees but also through everyday social practices. Without addressing entrenched social and economic inequalities, political democracy would remain incomplete and unstable.

Ultimately, Ambedkar envisioned democracy as a collective mode of living that enables individuals to realise their potential through equal participation in social life. Justice, dignity, and freedom formed the moral core of his democratic vision. His ideas continue to offer a critical framework for assessing both the achievements and the limitations of democracy in India.

Conclusion

In a significant interview conducted by BBC journalist Aidan Crawley on 22 June 1953, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar offered a candid assessment of the prospects of parliamentary democracy in newly independent India. Although brief in duration, the interview provides deep insight into Ambedkar's understanding of democracy and his concerns regarding the mismatch between democratic institutions and India's prevailing social structure. His responses underscore the

distinction between democracy as a formal political arrangement and democracy as a substantive social reality.

Aidan Crawley: Dr. Ambedkar, do you think democracy will work in India?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: No, it will be just in name. That is, democracy, quinquennial elections, prime ministers, etc.

Aidan Crawley: Do you think elections are important?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: No. If this process does not produce good people, then elections are not important.

Aidan Crawley: I'm not going to talk about the party system, but when you say democracy in name,what do you mean?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Parliamentary democracy will not work here. Because the social system here is inconsistent with it.

Aidan Crawley: You mean it's based on inequality?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Yes. As long as the social system does not change, the current system is based on inequality. But someone has to try, right?

Ambedkar's responses highlight his belief that electoral democracy, when detached from social transformation, remains superficial. He viewed elections as meaningful only when they produce leadership committed to ethical governance and public welfare. More importantly, he identified social inequality—particularly caste-based hierarchy—as fundamentally incompatible with the functioning of parliamentary democracy. In his view, democratic institutions cannot flourish in a society that denies equality and dignity to large sections of its population.

At the same time, Ambedkar's concluding remark—"someone has to try"—reflects cautious optimism rather than resignation. It signals his conviction that democracy, despite its limitations, remains a necessary and valuable experiment. The responsibility for making democracy substantive, he implied, lies not only with institutions but with society as a whole.

In this context, the sustainability of Indian democracy depends upon the collective commitment to realise social, economic, and political democracy in accordance with constitutional values. Equality, liberty, fraternity, and social justice must be actively practised rather than merely proclaimed. Only through continuous social reform, ethical leadership, and active civic engagement can parliamentary democracy in India move beyond formality and evolve into an inclusive and meaningful democratic way of life.

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