

HEB

Deweyan Ethics of Democracy through the Lens of Ambedkar's India


CASS

Anisha Pal

Address for Correspondence: serviceheb@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Democracy, as John Dewey and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar would claim, has to be thought of as “associated life”. This paper attempts at highlighting the central conceptualizations of the American, pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s ideas regarding democracy and how Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the mercurial, Indian social reformer was influenced by it and appropriated it culturally and socio-economically in the Indian context. The paper also aims to exhibit where Ambedkar departs from Dewey and how he is ahead of Dewey in certain aspects. Throughout most of Dewey’s works, he has stressed upon individualism that coincides with Rawl and Habermas’s procedural theory of democracy, but For Ambedkar, it is important to look into the conflict among groups in the Indian context, rather than individual conflicts.

Keywords: caste, Ambedkar, Dewey, endosmosis, associated life, Habermas, Derrida.

Access this Article Online	
http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/05/2019 Accepted on 29/05/2019@HEB All rights reserved	

“Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.” — **James Bovard.**

The etymological meaning of the word democracy, ‘demokratia’ [‘demos’ (people) + ‘kratia’ (rule)] often translates as ‘rule of the people’. The OED has come to term it as ‘a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. As the term gains practical extension, the misapprehension of its theoretical construct lies bare in the very first quote of the paper. The people, or to be precise, certain sections of the largest democracy of the world, India, have been testimony to the fallacy of the theoretical construct, that is democracy. A country that has been laden with inequalities among its people, caste issues, untouchability, et al, since the Vedic ages, cannot just function on the political meaning of democracy. Democracy, as John Dewey and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar would claim, has to be thought of as “associated life”.

The paper is roughly segmented into three parts. The first part attempts at highlighting the central precepts of the American, pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s idea of democracy and how Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the mercurial, Indian social reformer was influenced by it, and appropriated it culturally and socio-economically in the Indian context. The second part aims at looking into the ideas of conflict and consensus in a democracy. To this end, it outlines John Rawls’s and Jürgen Habermas’s contributions to modern political theory, in particular, their recasting of the Kantian principle of autonomy and its political implications, how public reason lies at the heart of democratizing processes and is decisive to the survival of our political, social, and economic institutions in the coming centuries. It also outlines the controversies of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty who radically undermine the very basis of the dominant rationalist approach. Drawing on the concepts of conflict and consensus, the last section of the paper aims at pointing out where Dr. Ambedkar departs from his professor, Dewey and how he is somewhat ahead of Dewey in certain aspects.

The political concept of democracy is secondary to and derivative of social and ethical concepts since democracy “is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association” (Dewey, 240).” Democracy must also reach the regions of wealth, labor, and industry” (Dewey, 246–48). Based on this, Dewey could conclude, “Democracy and the one, the ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are to my mind synonymous. The idea of democracy, the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, represent a society in which the distinction between the spiritual and the secular has ceased ..., the divine and the human organization of society are one” (Dewey, 248–49). As this paper aims to exhibit, the term and its numerous elaborations in Dewey’s work became major conceptual tools for Ambedkar to decipher Indian society and thereby organize a plan of action to change it. Ambedkar, unlike many, is not only a philosopher, but also a political leader who fought extensively for the rights of the most marginalized people of India. Drawing upon Dewey, Ambedkar proposed a model for the governance of free India which would be based on the three democratic ideals of the French Revolution; liberty, equality and fraternity. In B.R. Ambedkar’s undelivered speech, *Anihilation*

of *Caste*, he proposes a civil religion instead of Hinduism, a religion based on these very ideals. The speech was to be delivered at the 1936 Annual Conference of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal (Organization for the Destruction of Caste) at Lahore. The event was cancelled because the organizers, belonging to the reformist Hindu sect Arya Samaj wished to reform Hinduism by going back to the teachings and ritual practices laid down in the Vedas and they could not accept Ambedkar's challenging of the Vedas. Ambedkar then published the speech as a book. Ambedkar also deploys another Deweyan term that is "endosmosis" while proposing his plan of an ideal society. Arun P. Mukherjee points out that this essentially biological term was first used by the French philosopher Henri Louis Bergson and later by American philosopher and psychologist William James, "to describe the interaction of the mind with nature". Dewey appropriated it to signify the interaction between social groups. Both Dewey and Ambedkar have used it in the sense of fluidity of communications among different social groups. Ambedkar repeatedly cites Dewey while he focuses on the importance of communication amongst social groups and how the exclusiveness of the high caste groups of India prevented the reorganization of Indian society because the purpose of the group was to protect the privilege that they enjoyed and not to reorganize society into a progressive one. Nietzsche might have had upheld Manu- Smriti while building his supreme being, but there is clearly a difference between Manu and Nietzsche. One is trying to build a supreme being, but the other wants to maintain the status-quo. Hence, caste is about 'equality of the advantaged'. It is about protecting the interest of people who are already advantaged.

Ambedkar also invokes the Deweyan concept of "associated life" and develops it into a political tool. Both Dewey and Ambedkar believed that democracy should not be restricted to the political realm, but should also manifest itself in other areas like education, industry and the public domain. To this end, he points out why a Hindu person is skeptical of help and assistance from other Hindus during a period of crisis whereas a Sikh or Mohammedan is not. He says, it is because of feeling of brotherhood that is lacking among the Hindus, it is in the difference in their associated mode of living. This difference surely arises due to caste. Dewey writes, "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? If we apply these considerations to, say a criminal band, we find that the ties which consciously hold the members together are few in number, reducible almost to a common interest in plunder; and that they are of such nature as to isolate the group from other groups with respect to give and take of the values of life." Ambedkar once again effectuates this idea of his mentor while answering the question of caste among Hindus and non-Hindus in *Anihilation of Caste* [19.3]. He goes on to say that caste among Mohammedans, Sikhs or Christians is fundamentally different because the ties which hold them together are many whereas among the Hindus, the presence of points of contact, possibilities of interaction are almost nil. Ambedkar not only took Dewey's idea of "associated life" seriously, but also made it into his prime political weapon, the basic argument for his demand for representation of the untouchables.

Ambedkar also adopts another Deweyan term that is "social efficiency" to address the question of

developing individual capacity to a level of competency and how it is violated by the Caste System in Hinduism which predetermines one's profession and assigns tasks even before birth, not on the basis of professional skill, but the caste and social status of parents. Ambedkar's words closely echo Dewey's which can be seen in the following excerpt, "A democratic criterion requires us to develop capacity to the point of competency to choose and make its own career. This principle is violated when the attempt is made to fit individuals in advance for definite industrial callings, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the wealth or social status of parents" (Dewey 139-40). For both Ambedkar and his mentor, the right to choose one's occupation is a major aspect of democracy. Following this argument, Ambedkar proposed to the Congressmen that caste was indeed a political factor and it prevented India's modernization and progress, as opposed to Gandhi who treated it as a discourse tinged with religion and dealt with it as sin and social evil. Gandhi's approach to caste as just a social evil and not a political problem can be argued to be faulted, as exemplified by the Irish Home Rule Movement. It is known that the Irish nationalists were divided on the lines of religion, thus the political can never be easily dissociated from the social as opposed to the dominant liberal assumption.

Towards the end of B.R. Ambedkar's address, he acknowledges his debt to his mentor and professor John Dewey. He draws upon Deweyan thoughts extensively. While arguing as to what the Hindus should conserve as their social heritage and transmit to the future generations, he quotes Dewey, "Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse...As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society." He sums up by stating that the Hindus have to stop drawing their inspiration from the past. Ambedkar quotes Dewey extensively to put forth his argument as to why Indians should not dwell in the past. Dwelling in the past makes the present act of living immaterial. The past is only significant when it can be carried forward into the present. He argues that looking back at the Vedas to deal with what is in the present is a futile task. "An individual can only live in the present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it. The study of the past products will not help us to understand the present. A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise" (Dewey, chapter 7).

As I hope to have shown by this comparative study of some of the works of Dewey and Ambedkar, it is evident that Ambedkar cannot be read in isolation, without paying heed to his borrowings from Dewey. In the penultimate section of the paper, I would like to emphasize on the theory of conflict and consensus in a democracy and thereby draw attention to Ambedkar's point of departure from Dewey when it comes to the politics of democracy in the Indian context.

Theorists like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas recognized the significance of procedures, but did not hold them to be enough on their own for a normative justification of democracy. Rawls recognized that political groups are inevitable in electoral arenas; however, he considered that a democracy which is merely based on a bargain among groups is not contiguous with democratic values because it

induces citizens to “take a narrow or group-interest standpoint,” instead of endeavoring at a realization of the common good. Somewhat more influential was Habermas’s critique, which identified proceduralism with Schumpeterian realism, and hence, with a method that was essentially cynical. For Habermas, although “public controversies among several parties” are an essential condition for democratic decision making, they do not assure results with “reasonable quality.” Therefore, Habermas proposed to classify the conditions under which independent negotiation could be achieved through democratic procedures in such a way that the latter could provide directions towards a “rationally motivated consensus.” Contemporary theorists of deliberative democracy have followed Habermas in that search. Although they defend democracy in procedural terms, deliberativists emphasize the substantive objectives that procedures should accomplish and pay attention to the (ideal) conditions under which they could be achieved. Rawls and Habermas call for public use of reason in finding a mutual ground, which, according to them, is the precondition of living together. John Rawls believes that there can be some common ground between different comprehensive principles. He calls this an “overlapping consensus”, an idea closely associated with his theory of public reason. What brings together people under this shared consciousness is their sensitivity about political justice, while a consensus on the basic political structure of society remains a possibility.

In order to contest Rawls and Habermas’s theory of consensus-building as the basic unit of political structure, I shall introduce the epistemological stances that Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty have taken in refuting Habermas’s claim that there exists an important link between universalism, rationalism and modern democracy, and that constitutional democracy signifies a moment in the unfolding of reason, connected with the advent of universalist forms of law and morality. They both deny the availability of a middle ground- such as Reason- that could ensure the possibility of a mode of argumentation that would have transcended its particular conditions of enunciation. Their opposition to Habermas lies not in political understandings but theoretical ones. They share his engagement with democratic politics, but they deliberate that democracy does not require philosophical foundations and that it is not through rational basis that its institutions could be made secure. Rorty is, most assuredly, extremely useful when he critiques the pretensions of Kant-inspired philosophers like Habermas, who want to find a perspective beyond just politics from which one could guarantee the supremacy of democracy. Surely, he is right to assert: ‘We should have to abandon the hopeless task of finding politically neutral premises, premises which can be justified to anybody, from which to infer an obligation to pursue democratic politics.’ Most liberal theorists are certain to miss the relevance of that kind of understanding because they operate within a metaphysical framework (which views the individual as prior to society, bearer of natural rights, ‘utility maximizer’ or ‘rational subject’, according to the brand of liberalism that they subscribe to) which, in all cases are abstracted from social and power relations, culture, language and the entire set of practices that make agency possible. A liberal democracy is primarily a pluralist democracy. Its innovation exists in its envisaging the diversity of conceptions as good, and not as something adverse that should be

suppressed, but something which should be esteemed and celebrated. This requires the presence of institutions that negotiate a specific dynamic between consensus and dissent. Undeniably, consensus is necessary, but it should be restricted to the institutions that constitute the democratic order. A pluralist democracy also needs to create space for the expression of dissent and for conflicting interests and values. In the process, these should not be seen as momentary hindrances on the road to consensus since in their absence democracy would cease to be pluralistic. Harmony and reconciliation, therefore, cannot be the objective of democratic politics, which cannot ever (or endeavor to) overcome conflict and division. Its aim is rather to establish unity in a framework of conflict and diversity; it is occupied with the formation of a 'we' as opposed to a 'them'. It is precisely for this reason that comprehending the nature of democratic politics presupposes a reconciliation with the dimension of antagonism/conflict that is present in all social relations. This antagonistic dimension—which I have proposed to designate as the political—is precisely what the consensus approach is incapable of acknowledging. This distinction is ignored by rationalists like Habermas, because their conception of democracy postulates the availability of a consensus without exclusion. In my view, a serious misunderstanding of the notion of democracy is represented by this privileging of the 'consensus' and all its different forms in the corresponding versions of 'deliberative democracy'. Thus, an epistemic approach like deconstruction, which exposes the impossibility of securing a consensus without exclusion is of fundamental importance when identifying what is at stake in democratic politics. Chaos and instability are irreducible, but as Derrida indicates, this is simultaneously a risk and a chance, since continual stability would signify the end of politics, ethics and dialectics.

In conclusion, this final section of the paper picks up from that very point, and tries to elucidate how Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, despite being greatly influenced by his mentor, departs from his line of philosophy while addressing the issue of caste in India. It is seen that throughout most of John Dewey's works, he has emphasized individualism, placed the self above the society which falls in line with Rawls and Habermas's procedural theory of democracy, which is to bring to the fore the co-originality of fundamental individual rights and of popular sovereignty. On one hand, self-government seeks to protect individual rights, and on the other, those rights provide the required conditions for the application of popular sovereignty. However, in Ambedkar's case, it is more about conflict than consensus building. For Ambedkar, it is important to look into the conflict among groups in the Indian context, rather than individual conflicts. Dewey's subject position in the West allowed him to lay stress on individualism, and take into account the liberties of individuals, but in the Indian context, a society suffering from the pathology of caste and group interests has to give precedence to individualism. John Dewey's understanding of social conflict, much like Rorty, is constricted because he is unable to come to terms with the implications of value-pluralism and accept that the conflict between fundamental values can never be resolved. It can be said that Ambedkar is somewhat ahead of Dewey in dealing with the 'we-them binary' because he clearly identifies that this particular binary can never be done away with as long as the caste hierarchies keep imparting fundamental values

through dogmatic and counter-revolutionary texts like the Gita in a way that only benefits the privileged ones. For Ambedkar, the 'we-them binary' is of utmost importance to address the inequalities that prevail among the various castes.

REFERENCES

1. Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji, et al. *Annihilation of Caste: the Annotated Critical Edition*. Navayana Publ., 2014.
2. Critchley, Simon, and Chantal Mouffe. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Routledge, 1997.
3. DEWEY, JOHN. *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*. SMK BOOKS, 2018
4. Dewey, John. *The Ethics of Democracy*. UMI.
5. Fritsch, Matthias. "Taking Turns: Democracy to Come and Intergenerational Justice." *Derrida Today*, no. 2, 2011
6. Mouffe, Chantal. "Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach." *PolíticaComún*, no. 20180419, 2016
7. Mukherjee, Arun P. "B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy." *New Literary History*, no. 2, 2009
8. Mouffe, Chantal. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Routledge, 1997.
9. Saffon, Maria Paula, and Nadia Urbinati. "Procedural Democracy, the Bulwark of Equal Liberty." *Political Theory*, no. 3, 2013.