



Research Article

Ambedkar's Idea of Substantive Social Justice and the Critique of Liberal Democracy

Dr. Ikhlaq Ahmed ^{1*} Dr. Rizvana Choudhary ²

¹ Assistant Professor, Dept of Political Science, BGSB University, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir, India

² Assistant Professor, Dept of Sociology, BGSB University, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Ikhlaq Ahmed

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Abstract

The political philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar provides a stringent criticism of the liberal democratic theory and describes an argumentative understanding of substantial social justice that goes beyond the actual delivery of formal equality. Although the traditional liberal democracy lays emphasis on the procedural right and legal equality, Ambedkar emphasises the need to eliminate historically established and structurally entrenched inequality that impedes the true freedom and dignity of socially marginalised sections of society. This paper questions the criticism of liberal democratic models by Ambedkar, assessing the benefits of the substantive paradigm of social justice on the limitations of legal equality and developing an agenda of transformative change to inclusive democracy. With three analytical prisms (i) epistemological premises of social justice articulated by Ambedkar, (ii) the limitations of liberal democracy, and (iii) substantive justice within the institutional means of democracies dealing with deep-rooted inequities, this paper summarises recent academic discussions to suggest that such a theory remains relevant today to provide valuable insights in fighting any form of entrenched inequities in democracies. The analysis concludes that substantive social justice does not represent a normative issue but also an operational requirement of democratic societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary liberal democracies entrench the three main principles of individual freedom, political egalitarianism, and the rule of law as the foundation of the social order. The power of the law and the principle of procedural fairness have been highlighted by the canonical liberal philosophers like John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls as the fundamental pillars of justice (Rawls, 1971). However, these structures tend to assume an even-ground where people have equal capacities to enjoy their rights- an assumption that hides the facts of vertical social stratifications and structural deprivation. The caste system in the Indian context has traditionally served as a system that has been deeply rooted in discriminating against large groups of citizens the chance to enjoy equal access to dignity, chance and liberty (Jodhka, 2015). Ambedkar, as a firm observer of the social inequity, the leading constitutional architect of India, raised the question of the adequacy of the liberal democratic models which only seek to promote formal equality but not the substantive social justice, which takes into consideration the social facts which determine the real-life chances of individuals.

The substantive social justice envisaged by Ambedkar anticipates the fact that legal and political rights are barren in those societies where caste, class and other tiers of stratification continue to deprive individuals of effective access to social goods, financial opportunities and social respect (Keer, 1954). His criticism of liberal democracy does not oppose the principles of democracy; on the contrary, he demanded that democracy be reflected by not only a universal suffrage and formalism of laws, but also the actual eradication of the stigmas that keep the excluded outsiders outside. This article explores the way in which this notion of substantive social justice by Ambedkar questions the traditional liberal democratic thinking and provides an alternative of reducing structural inequalities.

The central argument of the paper is that substantive social justice which is offered by Ambedkar offers a more substantial and stronger normative basis of democratic inclusion as compared to liberal formalism. Based on a systematic analysis of the philosophical background, the criticism of liberal democracy and the institutional prescriptions of Ambedkar, this paper is able to synthesise the current discussion in order to argue that his ideal is of significant relevance when dealing with the inequities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology that has been adopted in this paper is a qualitative, interpretative based on critical synthesis and textual analysis. Primary sources include both the seminal works of Ambedkar, i.e. *Annihilation of Caste* and the speeches that he delivered at the Constituent Assembly, and the little-known lectures on democracy and social equality. Secondary sources refer to academic interpretations of the political theory; literature of social justice and caste studies that are remain relevant today. The methodology gives priority to clarity of concepts and rigorous participation with argumentative scholarship that places Ambedkar in a discussion with liberal

democratic theory (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 2009) and criticism of equality at present (Young, 1990; Nussbaum, 2006). By applying the thematic analysis, the research explains how the concept of substantive social justice that is embodied by Ambedkar not only challenges the shortcomings of liberal democracy but also helps to develop a pragmatic model of the inclusive democratic change.

Epistemological Underpinnings of the Substantive Social Justice of Ambedkar

The conceptualisation of social justice by Ambedkar can be seen as a result of the deep epistemological disapproval of the formal equality, which is that the justice is realised when everyone is treated as the same before the law regardless of their social identities. Although in liberal democracies legal equality is an accepted axiom, Ambedkar argued that legal equality is a very weak thing in situations where the social structures are structured to systematically discriminate against certain groups. Ambedkar demonstrated in *Annihilation of Caste* that caste is not religious or cultural artefact, but a civilised hierarchy, which subjects' domination and exclusion to institutions (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). To him, the caste stratification destroys the very prospect of substantive equality since it pervades the daily life, influencing occupational prospects, social relations and the access to dignity.

This is an epistemological position that supports the current critical theories opposing the formal equality as just. The theory of justice proposed by Nancy Fraser argues that liberal systems have a predilection towards confusing recognition and redistribution and thus ending up giving unfair attention to symbolic parity and ignoring material forms of inequality (Fraser, 2009). On the same note, the ability approach of evaluation by Martha Nussbaum converts the legal rights evaluative criteria to the actual capabilities of individuals in the achievement of the valued functioning- activities and states of being individuals are actually capable of doing (Nussbaum, 2006). Even this tradition finds echo in the conception of substantive social justice that Ambedkar had, since it demands that justice be concerned with the conditions that determine the real opportunities of people, rather than with their legal rights.

The epistemological essence of the social justice by Ambedkar lies on the belief that we cannot abstract freedom and dignity out of the social context. Formalism without access to education, voice, or economic resources is meaningless. In turn, the project of Ambedkar is aimed at visualizing a democratic order that derails exclusionary structures instead of providing formal equality.

Limitations of Liberal Democracy Critique

Ambedkar did not specifically oppose the institution of liberal democracy instead; he provided a substantive critique of its own inherent limitations in alleviating structural inequalities. According to the liberal democracy in the context of the Western political thinking, the procedural protection is given the first priority such as free elections, rule of law, constitutional rights, etc. based on the assumption that those

mechanisms will automatically produce fair results. Ambedkar admitted the necessity of these safeguards but saw that in comparison with established structural stratification, procedural tools often recreated existing hierarchies rather than undermining them.

One of the bright dimensions of the critique of Ambedkar is concerned with his evaluation of caste as a system of graded inequality which, practically, undermines the formal rights by putting the hierarchy in the context of the daily social relations. He argued that legal equality presupposes very little meaning when one of the castes is socially ostracised or deprived of civil liberties in reality (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). This serves as a reiteration of the point that liberal democracy tends to assume some sort of racialised or stratified base which is a premise that liberal theory does not address (Mills, 1997). In the Indian context, the caste system played a similar role as the race in the American society, sorting social relations in such a way that makes formal equality inadequate.

The critiques of Ambedkar were precursors to later theoretical work on the shortcomings of procedural democracy. Iris Marion Young has stressed on how formal inclusion in the absence of substantive change within the social structure may continue power imbalance and hence creates democratic failures among marginalised groups (Young, 1990). The fact that Ambedkar urges that democracy should not be exemplified just by being able to vote but also by fair allocation of resources, education, and even social respect, is a predictor of such criticism and extends the scope of democratic responsibility.

Notably, the argument of Ambedkar does not rebuff the importance of liberal democratic institutions; instead, it requires the institutions to be overlaid by structural interventions in order to correct historical exclusions. The new understanding of democracy presented by him embraces political rights as well as socio-economic justice as two sides of the same coin.

Instant Social Justice as Practice Institutions and Mechanisms

The idea of substantive social justice provided by Ambedkar does not only remain an abstract philosophical theory but it is a practical institutional strategy aimed at abolishing structural inequality. His most controversial and influential recommendation is the affirmative action that was championed by the Indian Constitution provisions on reservations in education, state employment, and legislative representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and, later, Other Backward Classes. These actions were justified by Ambedkar in the debates of the Constituent Assembly and were necessary to have the participation of the marginalised groups in the life of the nation (Ambedkar, 1949/2015). He ignored the idea that equality would be attained without redressing past inequalities.

In the context of Affirmative action, there are several purposes to affirmative action (as proposed by Ambedkar). Firstly, it is used as a remedial tool to balance historical injustices; second, it is used as a tool of establishing representation that is diverse as the society; and thirdly, it is used as a tool of redistributing social and economic opportunities. The effectiveness of

affirmative action has been the subject of discussion among scholars, although there is evidence that reservations have boosted the representation of marginalised groups in public institutions and the access to the educational opportunities, which has led to social mobility (Deshpande, 2018). The opponents argue that the reservations risk breed reverse discrimination but the defense by Ambedkar was not an argument of privileging a group over another but rather equalizing the playing level at a place where historically some groups had been excluded systematically.

In addition to affirmative action, Ambedkar advocated land reform and access to education as the key points of substantive social justice. He realised that economic domination and the denial of knowledge are some of the ways through which social hierarchies are maintained. To Ambedkar, public education was the means of empowerment that broadens the potentials of individuals and helps them to exercise their rights efficiently (Omvedt, 2017). The inclusion of economic opportunity into the calculus of justice led Ambedkar to anticipate future criticism of liberal democracy which focuses on the inequality of life chances. The radical form of justice that Ambedkar has prescribed in his institutional prescriptions is not a content with reform under the current systems but is an organ of process to systems that will break the walls of barricades and redefine social relations on more equal footing.

CONCLUSION

The vision of substantive social justice theorized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands as a permanent challenge to the liberal democratic orthodoxy. Although the formal equality of liberal democracy offers some very important procedural protection, Ambedkar shed some light on its inability to correct structural inequalities that were inherent in the caste system, classes, and other social stratifications. His criticism is not a direct denial of the principles of democracy but rather an appeal to make democracy more profound, incorporate substantive equality, which is a justice that makes people truly free, dignified, and have access to opportunities. The epistemological criticism of the radical of liberalism proposed by Ambedkar is parallel to modern-day theoretical issues of liberalism that accentuate capabilities, redistribution, and structural transformation. His practical prescriptions such as affirmative action and access to education and economic resources are a road map to democracies who want to achieve authentic inclusion. Substantive social justice in the sense that Ambedkar has defined it is beyond the formal rights to address the lived experiences of the marginalised groups and requires institutional forces of democracy to be procedurally and substantively responsive. Ambedkar is seen as an international voice, whose wisdom is needed in the world of inequalities, which cannot be viewed as a world of abstractions but rather one of lived experience, which must be cultivated by the radical reform of structures. His legacy still serves as a strong tool of normative power in the unending fight to make sure that democracy does not only preach justice but also provides the material circumstances of the lives of people.

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About the Corresponding author



Dr. Ikhlq Ahmed is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at BGSB University, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir, India. His academic interests include political theory, governance, public policy, and contemporary regional politics. He is actively engaged in teaching, research, and scholarly discourse on democratic institutions and socio-political developments.